

NOTE

LATE-MEDIEVAL EUCHARISTIC THEOLOGY: ORTHODOXY OR CORRUPTION?

These comments are prompted by a passage in the Lambeth Conference Report for 1958, the full text of which is of importance to any Catholic theologian:

The Committee [on Progress in the Anglican Communion] endorses the words of Dr. A. G. Hebert, S.S.M.: "The Eucharistic Sacrifice, that storm-centre of controversy, is finding in our day a truly evangelical expression from the 'catholic' side, when it is insisted that the sacrificial action is not any sort of re-immolation of Christ, not a sacrifice additional to His one sacrifice, but a participation in it. The true celebrant is Christ, the High-Priest, and the Christian people are assembled as members of His Body to present before God His Sacrifice and to be themselves offered up in Sacrifice through their union with Him. This, however, involves a repudiation of certain medieval developments, notably the habitual celebration of the Eucharist without the Communion of the people, or the notion that the offering of the Eucharist is the concern of the individual priest rather than of the assembled church, and, above all, any idea that in the Eucharist we offer a sacrifice of propitiation to God. We offer it only because He has offered the one Sacrifice, once for all, in which we need to participate."¹

The phrases which made one pause to meditate were those concerning the "repudiation of certain medieval developments," especially the last example quoted, which would certainly imply a medieval heresy, not a mere development. As one brought up in the tradition of the English martyrs, who gave their lives to preserve the Mass in England, the immediate reaction was a violent rejection of the thought that they might have been hanged, drawn, and quartered almost by mistake, as it were, and in defense of a doctrine which they thought fundamental, but which was really a medieval mistake.

On further meditation, however, the position became clearer. On the one hand, the writings of such Anglicans as B. J. Kidd, C. W. Dugmore, and E. L. Mascall have obviously had their effects on the body as a whole: the blame for the Reformation—or at least for the English part in it—is to be laid at the door of medieval theology, while the Reformers are to be regarded as zealous defenders of an orthodoxy which had been obscured by speculative theology at its worst.

The main question, however, remains. Was this actually what took place at the time of the English Reformation? Were both orthodox Catholic

¹ *The Lambeth Conference, 1958* (London: S.P.C.K., 1958) pp. 84-85.

theologians and English Reformers so stupid that they really could not see the wood for the trees? Had the Catholic theology of the time reached such a point in its decadence that the Reformers found themselves faced with opponents divided against themselves, whose theological language was, even in Trent itself, as ambiguous as their thoughts?

Obviously, the only way to answer such questions is by a return to the sources themselves, including the pre-Tridentine theologians, the decrees of the Council itself, and the writings of a later period. Particular attention must be given to the fashioners of the Protestant teaching on the Mass, even though, as the historians Kolde and Maurenbrecher insist, their writings are of very little use as accurate sources for the theology of their time. However, the attempt must be made, because only thus can we hope to discover the real facts and see clearly what it was that men like Zwingli, Calvin, Hooper, and Cranmer set out to attack, deny, and reform.

On the other hand, a study of the writings of the apologists for the Catholic side should at least give us an idea of the issue at stake. We shall then be in a position to separate orthodoxy from unorthodoxy, doctrine from its explanations. It is important that this task should be undertaken with a clear realization of what is at stake. The issue, as we shall see, is a fundamental one, nothing less than the concept of the whole Christian dispensation, especially where it concerns justification, grace, sin, and soteriology. It is Christ's notion of redemption and its application which was the real point at issue at the time of the Reformation. To forget that is to be misled from the start.

There can be little doubt about the fact that Trent, in its decrees on the Mass, set the seal of infallibility on the orthodox Catholic doctrine at the time. Those decrees are, therefore, the very touchstone of orthodoxy, and we may be excused if we give a brief summary of them here.

In the Mass there is offered a real, true sacrifice, which neither implies that anything is wanting in the sacrifice of the Cross nor detracts in any way from it. Christ's purpose in instituting the sacrificial priesthood was to perpetuate for all time on earth His own eternal and unique sacrifice on Calvary. This earthly sacrifice cannot, of its very nature, be independent of the sacrifice of the Cross, but neither can it be a mere commemoration of it. Christ is really and truly contained in the Mass, and in it His body and blood are offered to the Father as a true propitiatory sacrifice for the benefit of the living and the dead, in which and through which all men are able to share in the graces and benefits of the redemption won for them by Christ.

The only difference between the Mass and Calvary is in the manner of offering. The Mass is an unbloody sacrifice, in which the Church brings and immolates Christ, through the ministry of her priests, under visible signs,

The fruits of the bloody sacrifice of Calvary are received in superabundance by means of this sacrificial immolation in an unbloody manner. Because of this difference, Christ does not suffer change, or pain, or death in the sacrifice of the altar.

It need not surprise us to find that even a superficial study of the medieval theologians reveals their complete agreement with these decrees. No matter to what school they may belong, all of them, Thomists, Augustinians, Scotists, preserve with an unerring instinct the traditional purity of this doctrine summed up by Trent. They may differ in their view about the intimate manner in which the sacrifice of Calvary is related to the sacrifice of the altar, but they could all, without one exception, hold the same doctrine which Trent canonized. We have only to cite such opposites as Cajetan the Thomist and Gabriel Biel the nominalist to realize the truth of this statement. And Luther was intimately acquainted with the latter's views on the subject.

It has been suggested more than once that the use of the word "immolation" by these theologians in connection with the Mass was dangerous and a source of possible error for the future, since it would seem to imply a continued "killing" of Christ.

What many people do not seem to realize is that this interpretation of the word "immolation" is a relatively modern one. The Reformers themselves certainly did not base their attacks on the Catholic teaching with regard to the Mass on this interpretation. They did not even think the Catholics capable of such an idea and said so in no uncertain terms in their writings—as can be verified from the writings of Cranmer, Hooper, Calvin, Zwingli, and others.

The fact of the matter is that to deny the use of the word "immolation" as it was understood by medieval theologians with reference to the Mass would at once imply, not merely a denial of the central doctrines on that sacrifice, but also a false notion of the whole meaning of redemption. In other words, the meaning given to the word by medieval theologians is that of Paul's "Pascha nostrum immolatus est Christus" (1 Cor 5:7) and of Augustine's remarks to Bishop Boniface.² Let one of them speak for them all, Alger of Liège: "The immolation of Christ at the altar is so called, not because Christ is killed again, but because the true immolation therein represented works the same effects now at the altar that it worked formerly on the Cross."³ Albert the Great gives the same explanation of the use of the word

² Cf. *Ep.* 98, 9 (*PL* 33, 363; *CSEL* 33/2, 530).

³ *De sacramento* 1, 16 (*PL* 180, 788).

in Catholic theology, and Gardiner uses it in his *Confutatio* against the doctrine of the Reformers.

A study of the apologetic literature of the Counter Reformation leads to exactly the same conclusion. There was a solid body of orthodox doctrine about the Mass, founded on traditions of the past, which was independent of any speculation and which was regarded as part of the deposit of faith, without which no one could be a true son of the Church. There also we discover abundant evidence that the word "immolation" had a very definite and orthodox meaning, which excluded the idea of a new "killing" of Christ. Let one, a layman, speak for them all. In one of his controversial tracts St. Thomas More writes: "Who saith that Christ is daily new crucified? Truth it is that the Church saith that Christ is at the altar every day offered, His own blessed body in the sacrament. This is of truth, the Church saith that Christ is our daily sacrifice. But no man saith that He is daily crucified of new and daily put to new pain. . . ."

A study of some of these works has led the present writer to the conclusion that no orthodox theologian in medieval times would have countenanced for a moment the idea of a bloody mactation of Christ in the Eucharist. In fact, with one voice they exclude such a crude notion.

On the other hand, the writings of the Reformers themselves show clearly that their main intention was to eliminate, not errors concerning the Mass, but the very notion of the Mass as a sacrifice. It is also obvious, especially in the case of some of them in particular, that they were led to this almost reluctantly, through the logical development of their ideas concerning justification, grace, sin, and redemption. Quotations, at this stage, would be superfluous after the decisive words of Leo XIII in *Apostolicae curae*. Speaking of the Edwardine Ordinal, he says: "In the whole Ordinal not only is there no clear mention of the sacrifice, of consecration, of the *sacerdotium*, and of the power of consecration and of offering sacrifice, but, as we have just stated, every trace of these things, which had been in such prayers of the Catholic rite as they had not entirely rejected, were deliberately removed and struck out."

How well this summary of the facts coincides with that of the Anglican historian of the Eucharist, Darwell Stone, who declares, speaking of Cranmer: "He denies Transubstantiation both in its more carnal and more spiritual form; he rejects the belief that the consecrated bread and wine are the body and blood of Christ; and he repudiates any sacrifice of Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist."⁴ It would appear that the English martyrs

⁴ *History of the Doctrine of the Eucharist 2* (London, 1909) 127.

did not die for a mere medieval development, but for something which was a fundamental part of divine revelation.

In view of these facts—and facts they undoubtedly are—what should be the reaction of the modern Catholic theologian when faced with the present trends in Anglican theology, which tend to make the medieval theologians the culprits against whom the Reformers delivered an unfavorable verdict? The present writer might have replied that the correct attitude should be one of polite skepticism until a further study of the sources had been undertaken, but such a vague reply would now be out-of-date, after the recent publication of a Catholic work entitled *Eucharistic Sacrifice and the Reformation*, by Francis Clark, S.J.⁵ Here the unbiased reader, no matter to what school or denomination he may belong, will find the evidence for the truth of what the present article has tried, very defectively, to defend. The sources are there, and the proofs. The collection of evidence is overwhelming, so much so that at times one is inclined to think that the author spends too much time in proving something which he has already demonstrated fully. But that is a good point rather than a bad one.

The book outlines the Anglican views in detail and with the greatest objectivity, so much so that not one of the opponents could say that he has been misrepresented. The case for orthodoxy is also fully dealt with, and abundant quotations from all sources make the book a formidable piece of modern research. It also has the merit of being extremely well written—not usually the strong point of the Catholic theologian. Perhaps it will be enough to demonstrate the importance of this book if it is pointed out that even such a Protestant expert as E. L. Mascall has confessed that his own conclusions with regard to late medieval errors will have to be revised if Fr. Clark's conclusions prove to be correct. No theologian, be he Catholic or Protestant, should dare to put pen to paper on this subject without first studying most carefully what Clark has written, especially the abundant evidence he supplies.

One non-Catholic commentator says of this work: "This monumental contribution to clear ecumenical counterpoint is a book most warmly to be welcomed, and most earnestly to be studied." Another writer says: "[Clark's] work is one of patient scholarship, thoroughly documented; it avoids no difficulties and neglects no theological or historical explorations, and it covers the whole ground."

However, this article is not the place for any kind of review of Fr. Clark's monumental contribution to the studies on this difficult subject. Therefore,

⁵ Westminster, Md.: Newman; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1960. Cf. review by E. J. Kilmartin, S.J., in *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 23 (1962) 134-38.

to continue the musings of the present writer—with some of which Clark may not agree—it would appear that the failure of theologians to deal with the errors of the Reformers came about in a really simple fashion. Sure of their ground as they were, the Catholic theologians did not seem to understand that their real opponent in the dogmatic field was not an error against the Mass, but rather a logical conclusion from a completely false view of redemption as it was effected by Christ. In that sense perhaps they did not see the wood for the trees. I am not stating that this is what actually happened, but it is the impression one receives from a study of their writings. They could not imagine that anyone would be so foolish as to attack the doctrine of the Sacrifice of the Mass when it was so well founded on previous traditions and when it was so abundantly taught in all the schools of theology.

This, and this alone, may easily be the real point in which they failed in their duty as theologians. But perhaps they are not alone in this, because some of the modern trends in Catholic theology have demonstrated a like failure to understand the real point at issue. Yet, in view of the coming council, and especially if we take into consideration Cardinal Bea's very pertinent observations on the question of Church unity, this factor is one of prime importance. If there is to be any basis of common agreement between Catholics and Anglicans, it can only come about through a mutual understanding of one another's language and ideas. It might be as well to remember that the Eucharist is the "sacrament of unity," and just as the issue in the fifteenth century was decided on this point, even though it had other foundations, it may easily be that the difficulties of the twentieth century may be decided and solved by means of a mutual understanding on this problem.

Any and every contribution on this matter is of value, but only provided that it rests on solid, documented foundations, which preserve the deposit of faith intact. It would be a betrayal of our inheritance were we to attempt a solution in any other way.

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