

SACRIFICE UNVEILED OR SACRIFICE REVISITED: TRINITARIAN AND LITURGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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[Recognizing that the Christ event has done away with sacrifice in the history-of-religions sense of the word, this article attempts to unveil the true meaning of Christian sacrifice from trinitarian and liturgical perspectives which enable us to see that sacrifice is, first, the self-offering of the Father in the gift of the Son, and then the free self-offering response of the Son in his humanity, and in completion, the faithful, in the power of the Spirit, being taken up into that Father-Son relationship.]

IN ONE FORM OR ANOTHER, sacrifice plays an important role in all the major cultures and religions of the world. Because of this, general treatments usually survey the history of religions, extract from this data some basic characteristics of sacrifice, and then see how these are found in the biblical and Christian practice and understanding of sacrifice. But such a “scientific” or “phenomenological” approach tends to establish a bias that makes it difficult to do justice to the specifically Christian concept of sacrifice. This approach has, in fact, left the idea of sacrifice freighted with such negative meaning that the word itself has become almost unusable in a pastorally sensitive religious context. Yet Christians, especially Catholic Christians, do not have much choice in the matter. Without the use of sacrificial language something central would probably be lost. My approach, in attempting to remedy the situation, will begin with trinitarian and eucharistic theology. This will insure at least that the primary bias of my work is Christian.¹

The history of doctrine on the theme of Christian sacrifice includes some striking examples of starting from the wrong end, or beginning with the

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¹ I am assuming agreement with the contemporary hermeneutical commonplace that no investigation of this kind is, or can be, without bias, and that the bias largely controls the outcome. The real challenge is to be as aware as possible of one’s bias or biases in order to make the best of their respective advantages and disadvantages.

wrong question. One of the saddest of these examples is the controversy over the Sacrifice of the Mass in the second half of the 16th century.² Following Luther, the Protestant reformers vigorously rejected the possibility that any human work can bring about or contribute to justification, and they excoriated the Roman Catholic understanding of the Sacrifice of the Mass as a pernicious example of attempting to do just that. In response, the Council of Trent defined that the Mass is a “true and proper sacrifice,” but it never gave a clear definition of sacrifice.³

The battle was on. Ironically, both sides agreed on the terms of the battle. But the bad news was that, as can be seen in hindsight, starting from the wrong end and with the wrong question, both had it wrong. Instead of trying to learn from the Christ event what it was that Christians were trying to express when, at first quite hesitantly in earliest Christianity, they began to speak of the Christ event and its special presence in the celebration of the Eucharist as sacrificial, they instead looked to the practice of sacrifice in the different religions of the world, drew up a general definition of sacrifice, and then looked to see how it was present or not present in the Catholic Sacrifice of the Mass. The definition, which unfortunately they both took for granted as the one to be applied, ran something like this:

Sacrifice is a gift presented to God in a ceremony in which the gift is destroyed or consumed. It symbolizes the internal offering of commitment and surrender to God. The purpose is primarily for the offerers to acknowledge the dominion of God, but also to bring about the reconciliation of themselves (and possibly others) with God, to render thanks for blessings received, and to petition for further blessings for oneself and others.

This was at that time, and still is, reasonable enough as a general definition of sacrifice as practiced in the different religions of the world. But when applied to the Eucharist, the central sacrament of Christianity, it is disastrously inadequate.

The main problem was the emphasis placed on the destruction of a victim as an essential element of true sacrifice.⁴ Some tried to make do with a mere symbolic destruction, but for most, a real sacrifice meant a real destruction of a victim. In argumentative terms, one can easily see why the Protestants quickly gained the upper hand. From early on, Christians had

² For a detailed account, see Robert J. Daly, S.J., “Robert Bellarmine and Post-Tridentine Eucharistic Theology,” *Theological Studies* 61 (2000) 239–60.

³ Edward J. Kilmartin, S.J., *The Eucharist in the West: History and Theology*, ed. Robert J. Daly, S.J. (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1998) 198 pointed out that Trent seemed to shift back and forth between at least two different ideas of sacrifice (see below, n. 11).

⁴ It is no longer universally agreed that the destruction of a victim is an essential element of sacrifice. See, e.g., Joseph Henninger, “Sacrifice,” *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987) 12.544–57, at 544.

recognized that Christ was both the priest and the victim in his perfect and (as the Protestants rightly insisted, following the Epistle to the Hebrews) once-for-all, unrepeatable sacrifice.⁵ How, could the sacrifice of Christ be really present here in the Sacrifice of the Mass, since Christ, now glorified, was beyond suffering. Where was the destruction of a victim in the celebration of the Mass? Was it in the *separate consecration* of the bread and the wine, or in the *breaking of the host*, or in the *consumption of the species* in the priest's communion, etc.? No satisfactory solution was possible, because the wrong questions were being asked.

In my attempt to ask the right questions, I first try to develop a concept of sacrifice by looking at the Christ event from a specifically trinitarian perspective. I then see how this is confirmed by a careful reading of the classical Eucharistic Prayers of the Christian tradition. Finally, I then try to suggest some practical and pastoral conclusions.

It is important to note that an attempt such as this was not possible before the so-called Golden Age of patristic theology that began in the late fourth century. The theological vision I am attempting to outline presumes the maturation not just of Christology, but also of the theology of the Trinity and of the Holy Spirit, and then, in confirmation thereof, the appropriation of that theology in the classical Eucharistic Prayers of the Church. The *lex orandi lex credendi* axiom—trying to educe the doctrine of the Church from its life of prayer—is in full play here. The relative novelty of the attempt is indicated by Bernhard Meyer's comment that Edward Kilmartin was the first to attempt a full-scale liturgical theology from a trinitarian perspective.⁶

SACRIFICE FROM A TRINITARIAN PERSPECTIVE

We begin with Jesus Christ, the Christ event. Both the mimetic anthropologist, René Girard, and the liturgical theologian, Edward Kilmartin, independently of each other but almost in the same words, observe that the Christ event did away with sacrifice in the history-of-religions sense of the

⁵ For example, this was clearly taught by Origen (*Homily on Leviticus* 9.9) as early as the third century, as well as by Augustine (*City of God* 10.6) in the early fifth century. See Robert J. Daly, S.J., "Sacrifice in Origen and Augustine: Comparisons and Contrasts," *Studia Patristica* 19 (Leuven: Peeters, 1989) 148–53, at 152.

⁶ "In our opinion no book of similar scope has yet appeared that on the basis of the theological tradition of East and West offers such a systematic, consistently structured Trinitarian theology of Christian worship and sacrament" (Hans Bernhard Meyer, S.J., "Eine trinitarische Theologie der Liturgie und der Sakramente," *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 113 [1991] 24–38, at 37, as quoted/translated by Michael A. Fahey, S.J., "In Memoriam: Edward J. Kilmartin, S.J., [1923–1994]," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 61 [1995] 5–35, at 17–18. Meyer is referring to Kilmartin's *Christian Theology: Theology and Practice*. Part I: *Systematic Theology of Liturgy* [Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1988]).

word.⁷ Gil Bailie's *Violence Unveiled* is one of the more brilliant expositions of this from the Girardian point of view. My own exposition of Edward Kilmartin's work is attempting to do the same from specifically trinitarian and liturgical perspectives.⁸

Beginning with the New Testament, at first somewhat hesitantly, but then ever more explicitly, Christians referred not only to the Christ event but also to their primary celebration of that event, the Eucharist, in sacrificial terms.⁹ What was it, then, that the Christians insisted on referring to as sacrifice? What is the core reality, the prime analogate of Christian sacrifice? Kilmartin answered with a singular directness. Sacrifice begins, he emphasized, not with human, but with divine activity:

Sacrifice is not, in the first place, an activity of human beings directed to God and, in the second place, something that reaches its goal in the response of divine acceptance and bestowal of divine blessing on the cultic community. Rather, sacrifice in the New Testament understanding—and thus in its Christian understanding—is, in the first place, the self-offering of the Father in the gift of his Son, and in the second place the unique response of the Son in his humanity to the Father, and in the third place, the self-offering of believers in union with Christ by which they share in his covenant relation with the Father. . . . The radical self-offering of

⁷ My emphasis on not starting with the history of religions is not intended to downplay the importance of that discipline. Without its findings, my article could not have been conceived, let alone written. But it is clear that such a “scientific” approach is not “faith seeking understanding.” Even less can it be “understanding seeking faith.” In addition, a survey of the most common general treatments of sacrifice in the great theological, religious, and general encyclopedias of the Western world shows that they almost invariably begin with the history of religions, or structure their presentations according to history-of-religions principles. This is true even of the most recent “Catholic-theological” of these works, the *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 3rd ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1998) 7.1061–72. Admittedly, Karl Heinz Menke in his *LThK* article (1069) comes impressively close to the trinitarian theology of Christian sacrifice that I am trying to develop here, but it tends to get lost among all the details instead of being highlighted as the core insight around which all else should be organized.

⁸ Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroad, 1995). The most convenient access to René Girard's many works is through *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 1996). Girard's most recent work is *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2001). For Kilmartin, in addition to his *Christian Theology* and *The Eucharist in the West*, see also his “The Catholic Tradition of Eucharistic Theology: Towards the Third Millennium,” *Theological Studies* 55 (1994) 405–57.

⁹ See Robert J. Daly, S.J., *Christian Sacrifice: The Judaeo-Christian Background before Origen*. Studies in Christian Antiquity 18 (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1978) and *The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

the faithful is the only spiritual response that constitutes an authentic sacrificial act according to the New Testament (Romans 12:1).¹⁰

This is the central reality and meaning of Christian sacrifice. It is, I think, what Trent was groping toward, but was unable to express, when it declared the Mass to be a true and proper (*verum et proprium*) sacrifice.¹¹

Following Kilmartin, I now expound the three “moments” of this reality, namely: the respective self-offerings of the Father, of the Son, and of the Christian faithful. These are not totally separate actions since they flow into each other forming one unifying dynamic.

The Self-Offering of the Father

In attempting to understand Christian sacrifice, my focus is not on a concept or theory but on an event. This event is not a God-directed action of human beings, nor is it something that fits comfortably into broad history-of-religions categories. Rather, it is an event that begins with the initiative of God the Father, with “the self-offering of the Father in the gift of his Son.” This will help us to avoid repeating a whole series of misconceptions that in the past have led to serious theological, ecumenical, and pastoral dead-ends. For the originating reality of sacrifice is not just the *initiative* of the Father, but the Father’s *self-offering* initiative in the gift of his Son whose “response,” in turn, is also a self-offering. In plain terms, sacrifice is not something that the Father does to the Son; and thus, since all authentic sacrifice begins here, authentic sacrifice can never be something that someone does to someone else. At its core, sacrifice is *self-offering/self-gift*—in the Father, and in the Son, and in us. In theological terms, I am attempting to say something about the central, core event of the economic Trinity, the action of the triune God outside of God, i.e., in our human world of existence. What is being stated is: the Christ event, the simultaneously historical *transitus*, and the eternally transcendent relationship of Christ to the Father, and how humans are taken up into that reality.

The Self-Offering “Response” of the Son

I am speaking here of the unique “response”¹² of the Son to the Father, in his humanity and, of course, in and through the Holy Spirit. *In his*

¹⁰ *The Eucharist in the West* 381–83.

¹¹ See canon 1 (DS 1751) of the 22nd session of the Council of Trent, promulgated in 1562. With “sacrifice” (*offerre*), as Kilmartin pointed out (*ibid.* 198), Trent referred both to the transcendent Christ-event, the self-offering of Christ, and “the liturgical-ritual sacrificial act of the eucharistic celebration” which it tended to see in history-of-religions types of categories. This confusion, as already noted, was resolved for the worse in the post-Tridentine Protestant and Catholic polemics.

¹² I place the term “response” in quotation marks because here, language begins to veil rather than unveil. “Response” can suggest otherness, tension, or, still worse,

humanity refers specifically to the human living of Jesus—his life, works, death, Resurrection (and subsequent sending of the Spirit)—as (so Aquinas) the instrumental cause of our salvation. Within this series of events as constituting the “historical” Christ event, the death of Christ is usually seen as constituting the central sacrificial moment. Thus, the term “sacrifice of Christ” is generally taken as referring specifically, and perhaps exclusively, just to his death on the cross. In its tendency to overlook the Resurrection and sending of the Spirit, this can be too narrow a view, as has become clear in the theological developments of the second half of the 20th century. But even after all correctives, the cross remains central to what Christians mean by the Christ event, the sacrifice of Christ, and the Sacrifice of the Mass.

This requires some careful distinguishing, nuancing, and balancing, especially because of the long Catholic tradition of bringing together, even identifying, these three moments or aspects of the Son’s response to the Father. First, one must make sense of, and not be methodologically overwhelmed or led astray by, the fact that in the crucifixion of Christ are found most of the essential elements or characteristics of a history-of-religions concept of sacrifice: (1) the sacrificial *material* to which something is done; (2) the *agents* of the sacrificial action; (3) the *recipients* of the sacrificial action; (4) the *purpose* for which the sacrificial action is performed. Keeping in mind the traditional “identification” of the sacrifice of Christ and the Sacrifice of the Mass, let us see what happens when one tries to “apply” these four history-of-religions elements to the Christ event that is present in the eucharistic celebration.

(1) In terms reminiscent of human sacrifice and of the various material offerings found in the religions of the world, the sacrificial *material* (victim) is the bodily person of the human Jesus offered/destroyed on the Cross. Fixation on this aspect led to the fruitless polemics of post-Tridentine theology on the Mass as sacrifice (Protestants attempting to deny, Catholics attempting to find a “destruction of the victim” in the celebration of the Mass). But what would be the material of the offering when one looks at Christ’s death as a central event in the working of the economic Trinity? It is first and foremost the perfectly free, responsive self-giving self-communicating, en-Spirited love of the Son to the Father—and also to and for us. (Note that this could begin to serve as a definition of the second Person of the Trinity.) This is the transcendent essence of the sacrifice of Christ. This is its transhistorical or eschatological reality. This is, then, what is clearly present in the Sacrifice of the Mass. It is at the heart of what theologians through the ages have sought to express by speaking of the

something that someone does to someone else. This is precisely not what is going on here in the workings of the economic Trinity.

presence of the sacrifice of the cross in the Mass as “unbloody,” “sacramental,” “metahistorical,” etc. But while this transcendent essence of the sacrifice of Christ must be kept central in our focus, along with it must also be kept, in equally central focus, the concrete, historical, incarnational dying and rising of Christ.

(2) In categories accessible to history-of religions analysis, the *agents* of the sacrifice are, for the death of Jesus, the Roman government of Judea and its soldiers, certain Jewish religious authorities, and even Jesus himself “staging” his own death. If one extends history-of-religions analysis to the New Testament text: “He who did not spare his own Son” (Romans 8:32), the agent can be seen to be God the Father sacrificing his Son. For the Eucharist, the agents are the priests or ministers (and, with liturgical renewal, participating assembly) celebrating the Eucharist. But if one’s point of view is, as just noted, the “transcendent essence of the sacrifice of Christ” the “historical” agents become more secondary. The sacrificial death of Christ becomes the hinge-point of the *magnalia Dei*, the turning point of salvation history. It is something that, with full due given to its human actors, is primarily the saving action of God brought about through the instrumentality of the human living, dying, and rising of Jesus. From this same transcendent viewpoint, the Eucharist becomes the action of the Church, the Body of Christ, and of a particular assembly of that Body, that is acting in the power of the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that was in Jesus,¹³ actualizing the most intimate relationship with the Church’s divine partner of which the two are capable—i.e., entering eschatologically and proleptically into that event in which the self-offering initiative of the Father in the gift of his Son is, in the Spirit, responded to in the mutually self communicating love of the Son.

(3) When one asks about the *recipients* of the sacrificial action, still more nuance is required. For the history of religions (or its historical and philosophical antecedents in the ancient world) probably would not have seen the death of Christ as sacrificial were it not for the witness of the New Testament and subsequent Christian reflection on that witness. But on the basis of that witness (see especially Romans 8:32)¹⁴ one could think of God the Father as the recipient of the sacrifice, until one recalls that Greek philosophy had already established the illusory absurdity of trying to offer

¹³ One cannot say “that the Father is in the strict sense one and the same in the Son, in the Holy Spirit, and in us. The Holy Spirit, however, is, in the strictest sense, one and the same in the Father, in the Son, in the human nature of Jesus, and in us!” (Heribert Mühlen, *Una Mystica Persona: Die Kirche als das Mysterium der Identität des heiligen Geistes in Christus und den Christen: Eine Person in vielen Personen*, 2nd rev. ed. [Munich: Schönigh, 1967] §§ 11.70–11.82, at 11.77). See also Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West* 357–58.

¹⁴ For details on the New Testament witness, see the works cited above in n. 9.

anything bodily or material to a spiritual god. Some of the Church Fathers also speculated about the devil being the one to whom the sacrifice was offered, but that, for obvious theological reasons never really caught on in authentic Christian circles. To whom, then, is the sacrifice of Christ—let alone its commemoration or re-presentation in the Sacrifice of the Mass—offered? If authentic sacrifice is “in the first place the self-offering of the Father in the gift of his Son . . . etc.” as argued above, there really is no proper recipient either of the sacrifice of Christ or of the Sacrifice of the Mass. In authentic Christian sacrifice, no *thing* is being given. What is *happening* is that persons, in full freedom are giving/communicating themselves to each other. All the more reason to question the appropriateness of beginning a treatment of Christian sacrifice with the history of religions.

(4) Analysis of the *purpose* for which the sacrifice is performed offers more interesting results. The affirming, the deepening, or the setting aright of the relationship between God and human beings describes, if one must do so in a few words, the purpose of sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible and, analogously, in the other sacrificial religions of the world. It seems clear that the New Testament references to Christ as Lamb of God, Passover Lamb, and sin offering, and the overall thesis of the Epistle to the Hebrews share in this view. In this instance, a history-of-religions approach seems to be neutral. It does not help much, but neither does it get in the way, as long, of course, that it does not try to exclude from consideration data or claims that transcend its own limits.

The Self-Offering of Believers

As I have already pointed out, authentic Christian sacrifice does not begin with human beings, and then get accepted or rejected by God. It is a responsive, interpersonal, self-communicative activity that has begun with the initiative of the Father. It is a self-offering response, just as was the self-offering response of the Son with which it is in union. It is a response that explicitly commits Christians to emulate and to make their own the virtuous dispositions of the human Jesus in his response to the Father. And finally, it is a response that believers make, and indeed are enabled to make, only in the power of the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that was in Jesus¹⁵ and that empowered his perfect loving response. This empowering by the Holy Spirit is what enables the faithful to share in Jesus' covenantal relation with the Father. This clarifies Kilmartin's conclusion that “the radical self-offering of the faithful is the only spiritual response that constitutes an authentic sacrificial act.”

This is the basic reality, and thus the foundation of the basic concept, of

¹⁵ See above, n. 13.

Christian sacrifice. The rest, to paraphrase a famous saying of Einstein, is just details. But since, to quote another famous saying, “the love of God is in the details,” one cannot simply stop here. One needs to continue theologizing, hoping that one is unveiling rather than veiling the mystery.

THE SACRIFICE OF THE MASS

One of the principal sources or confirmations of the concept of Christian sacrifice that I have been developing is theological reflection on the Eucharist. This is to be expected not only because Christians, even in the New Testament, had begun to refer to the central moments of the Christ event as the sacrifice of Christ, but also because, soon after that, they began to refer to the liturgical commemoration/re-presentation of that event in sacrificial terms and eventually, in its Catholic development, as the Sacrifice of the Mass. To begin to understand this development, I again take my cue from Kilmartin. With regard to the key source for an adequate theology of the Eucharist, he writes: “If the law of prayer, the Eucharistic Prayer, determines and explicates the law of belief, and if this is indeed the doing of theology, then the voice of the Church should be heard when she speaks to her divine partner in that moment of maximum relative tension of which the one and the other are capable.”¹⁶

One is now in a position to ask why it is proper to call the Eucharist a sacrifice. One looks primarily to the Eucharistic Prayer in its classical patristic formulations. These prayers provide the basic models for practically all the fully developed Eucharistic Prayers that have come to be used in the Christian churches.¹⁷ Also they have already provided the basis for an astonishing convergence in eucharistic theology among the mainline sacramental Christian churches. The full context of my analysis is, of course, the whole liturgical celebration, and that, in turn, in the context of the whole of Christian life. In addition, I am attempting to do this from a transtemporal and transtraditional point of view. That is, even though some eucharistic celebrations in some contexts may tend to obscure the reality being celebrated, I am trying to keep my analysis faithful to the various ways in which Christians have celebrated the Eucharist both across the ages and across cultures and traditions. Modern hermeneutics, of course, reminds one of the relative impossibility of stepping out of one’s own time and culture. So, mindful of all these caveats, one focuses one’s attention on the ritually celebrated Eucharistic Prayer of the Christian assembly, specifically from the dialogue preface through to the communion

¹⁶ Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West* 324.

¹⁷ By “fully developed” I am excluding those instances where the prayer is reduced just to a proclamation of the words of institution.

of the assembly. This is done by attending to three questions: Who is doing what? Who is saying what? What is taking place?

Who Is Doing What?

When one examines the Eucharistic Prayer on its own terms, when, independent of preconceived notions, one looks to what, in that ritual context, is being said and done, it is clear that the primary ritual agent and speaker (i.e., what is being said and done in this here-and-now time and space) is the liturgical assembly. To take the currently used Eucharistic Prayers of the Roman Catholic Church as an example, the presider never speaks in his own voice or for himself alone (except for some “private prayers of the priest” that have crept in here and there). According to the internal logic of the Eucharistic Prayer, the presider never speaks as one above or apart from the assembly, nor does the presider speak or act as a mediator between God or Christ and the assembly. The presider’s words and actions are never spoken in his own name, or from his own power, but always, in the first person plural, as one of the assembly. To my knowledge, the same can be said about all the fully developed Eucharistic Prayers used by the main Christian churches.

Notice how different this is from the popular Roman Catholic idea of personal “priestly power” that reigned from the Middle Ages and still dominates much traditional Catholic thinking. One used to think that the central moment of ordination occurred when the bishop handed over the paten and chalice (*traditio instrumentorum*) to the ordinand with the words: “Receive the power of offering sacrifice for the living and the dead.” Thus, the famous medieval case problem about a renegade priest who consecrates all the bread in a bake shop assumed that it was a real consecration. It was not just a sacrilege, but also a justice case, since the baker could not sell what was no longer bread but the body of Christ.

Who Is Saying What?

The prayer of the assembly is addressed to God the Father. It gives praise and thanks for the gifts of creation and salvation history, and most especially for the coming into our world of the Son who, the night before he died At this point, the presider breaks out of the first person plural to quote a conflation of the four New Testament accounts of Jesus instituting the Eucharist. The presider does not speak these words in his own voice, nor, if remaining true to the logic and dynamic of the prayer (and the rubrics), does he speak these words as if acting out the role of Jesus. These words of institution (of “consecration” as the Catholic tradition somewhat misleadingly calls them) are not performative. The eucharistic transformation does not take place “by the action of the priest” as, until recently, a

popular Catholic eucharistic hymn used to put it. Rather, the eucharistic words of institution have a decidedly epicletic or, if you will, petitionary cast.¹⁸ In the dynamic and structure of the Eucharistic Prayer, the instituting words of Jesus are also an embolism, an insertion into an already existing prayer structure, a basically Jewish, but now Christianized table-prayer of blessing. As such, the words of institution not only constitute the key element that gives specifically Christian meaning to what is fundamentally a Jewish prayer, they also take their meaning from their place and function within that prayer.

But can an analysis such as this be done in a way that remains faithful to the Christian tradition, even the Roman Catholic tradition, at least as it is broadly understood? For my analysis suggests that even the wide variety of classical Eucharistic Prayers supports an interpretation of the words of institution as primarily epicletic or petitionary rather than performative. The most significant point of difference is between Eucharistic Prayers that place an epiclesis over the gifts to be sanctified *before* the words of institution (like the current prayers of the Roman Rite), and those that place the epiclesis *after* the words of institution (like most of the Eastern and modern Protestant Eucharistic Prayers).

The Roman Eucharistic Prayer I, basically the Eucharistic Prayer of the historical Mass of the Roman Rite, has only an implicit invocation of the Holy Spirit immediately before the words of institution when it prays: “Bless and approve our offering; make it acceptable to you, an offering in spirit and in truth. Let it become for us the body and blood of Jesus Christ, you only Son, our Lord.” Then, after the words of institution and the ensuing memorial prayer, before the prayers for the living and the dead, there is an even “softer” i.e. much less explicit epiclesis over the assembly:

¹⁸ The epiclesis is the place in the Eucharistic Prayer where the assembly appeals to the Holy Spirit to come and sanctify the gifts and the assembly. In most of the Eastern Eucharistic Prayers (whose validity is unchallenged by the Western Roman Church), this epiclesis takes place after the recitation of the words of institution. In some of these prayers the order is reversed: the Spirit is invoked to come and “sanctify us and these gifts.” This demolishes the traditional Western “moment of consecration” theology which assumed that the Eucharist and the presence of the sacrifice of Christ were essentially complete as soon as the priest pronounced the words of institution. Cesare Giraudo has suggested that what may be most effective in helping Roman Catholicism to break out of its theologically debilitating fixation on the “moment of consecration,” and thus move toward a more fully catholic Eucharistic theology, might be the official adaptation of a Eucharistic Prayer which has the epiclesis in the classical Antiochene position *after* the words of consecration. See “Anafore d’Oriente per le Chiese d’Occidente,” in *The Christian East, Its Institutions and Its Thought: A Critical Reflection: Papers of the International Scholarly Congress for the 75th Anniversary of the Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome, 30 May–5 June 1993*, ed. Robert F. Taft (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1996) 339–51.

“Then, as we receive from this altar the sacred body and blood of your Son, let us be filled with every grace and blessing.” The 1969/1970 Missal of Pope Paul VI with its new Eucharistic Prayers, taking its lead from the classical patristic Eucharistic Prayers still in use in the Eastern churches, made these epicleses fully explicit. For example, in Eucharistic Prayer II, just before the account of institution we pray: “Let your Spirit come upon these gifts to make them holy, so that they may become for us the body and blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ.” Then, after the account of institution, and as the conclusion of the memorial prayer we pray: “May all of us who share in the body and blood of Christ be brought together in unity by the Holy Spirit.” Explicit epicleses of this kind, first before the words of institution over the gifts, and then after the words of institution over the assembly, are clear features in all the new Roman Eucharistic Prayers.

In the Eastern Eucharistic Prayers, the structure is different but the dynamic and the meaning are the same. For here one finds a unified epiclesis, over the assembly and over the gifts, after the memorial-offering prayer that follows the words of institution, and before the solemn prayers for the Church. In the Byzantine form most commonly used in the Orthodox churches of the East, the assembly, through the voice of its presiding priest, prays more or less in these words (here, as adapted for use in modern Eucharistic Prayers such as the Methodist Great Thanksgiving): “Pour out, holy God, your Spirit on us and on these gifts of bread and wine. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we, through them, may be his true body, redeemed by his blood. Look, then, upon this offering of your Son. Look upon this body which your Spirit has made us. Hear us as we pray that we may be more fully one with Christ in his sacrifice, and with each other, and in service to all the world.”¹⁹

In each case, the assembly, in words solemnly proclaimed by the presider, prays that the Holy Spirit come and sanctify these gifts and make them become for us the body and blood of Christ. Thus, *it is not the presider who consecrates*. The presider, speaking solemnly in the name of the assembly, prays that the Holy Spirit consecrate the gifts and also consecrate us, the assembly, so that we may become the true Body of Christ offering ourselves with Jesus (for the force of this prayer is to make us one with and part of Jesus’ self-offering) to the Father.

What Is Taking Place?

One can tie all this together by attending to the third question: “What is taking place?” One can answer on three interpenetrating but distinguish-

¹⁹ *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville, Tenn.: United Methodist Publishing House, 1992) 57 and passim.

able levels: (1) the here-and-now level of human ritual action; (2) the transcendent level of divine action; and (3) the eschatological level that combines these two levels in the already/not yet of the eucharistically celebrated Christ event.

(1) On the *here-and-now level of human ritual action*, it is clear that the one speaking and acting is the Church, specifically a particular local assembly of the Church, speaking and acting under the “presidency” of one chosen (ordained) by the Church to lead the assembly in this its central prayer and action. This needs to be particularly stressed in the Roman Catholic tradition because of its strong traditional emphasis, especially since the 12th century, on the “prayer and action of the priest.” The narrow application of the *in persona Christi* axiom tended to exacerbate this overemphasis because of the frequent neglect of the completion of the axiom: *in persona Christi capitis ecclesiae*. The full axiom sees the presiding priest acting not just *in the person of Christ* but *in the person of Christ the head of the Church*. This points to the ecclesiological fullness of the eucharistic celebration as the prayer and action not just of the priest but of a particular assembly of the Body of Christ. The role of the priest is not that of a mediator between Christ and the Church, the role of the priest is embedded in the Christ/Church relationship that brings about the Eucharist.

(2) The picture becomes clearer when one looks to *the transcendent level of divine action*. In faith one knows that the Church is speaking to its divine partner, which it can do because its members have already been empowered to do so in baptism, and the Church already has experience as partner to the divine from previous Eucharists and from ages of practical eucharistic living. The Church praises and thanks God the Father for all the gifts of creation and salvation history, past, present, and still to come. At the heart of this praising and thanking, it recalls the central events of the Christic Paschal Mystery, but it does this in a particular and unique way. The Church, in supreme confidence—it knows it is the Body of Christ, indeed the Bride of Christ—asks God the Father to send his Holy Spirit to sanctify the eucharistic gifts and the eucharistic assembly, in order to make them, together, the true Body of Christ. Then, continuing in its supreme confidence that God has indeed done (and is actually doing) this, the Church then goes on to pray for the needs of all the people of God and all the members of the human family. The Church does this, it seems, with the same kind of confidence that Mary had at Cana when she told the servants to follow the instructions of her Son. Then, after the concluding doxology, the members of the Body come forward to receive sacramentally what by virtue of their baptism they already are: the Body of Christ.

For deeper understanding of this reality, one needs to ask: what, on the transcendent level of divine action, is actually happening? There are two interrelated transformational happenings: the eucharistic elements be-

come, by divine action, the body and blood of Christ; and the participating faithful become, also by divine action, more fully members of the Body of Christ. Both of these happen, and indeed ontologically, in space and time; but each of them is, strictly, a “divine” rather than a space-time event. They are not events that are capable of detection and analysis by human, this-worldly means. God is the principal cause but not the only agent in the eucharistic event. The eucharistic celebration involves both eternity and time; it is a conjoined divine/human operation.

When raising a further question: *why* these events are taking place, a very important fact becomes strikingly clear. One of these transformational events is subordinated to the other. That the eucharistic elements become the body and blood of Christ is not an end in itself. The final purpose of eucharistic transformation is not that the eucharistic body of Christ become present on this or that altar. This happens for us, that we may become more fully and more truly the Body of Christ. Eucharistic real presence exists not for its own sake—it is not happening just so that the body of Christ can be found on this or that altar—but for the purpose of the eschatological transformation of the participants. Take that away and the Eucharist becomes (even blasphemously) meaningless. Remembering that modern philosophical thinking tends to identify meaning with reality, this seems to suggest that if the transformation of the eucharistic elements is not having its effect in the virtuous dispositions of the participants, if the participants are not at least beginning to be transformed, at least beginning to appropriate the self-offering virtuous dispositions of Christ, then there is no eucharistic presence. This conclusion must be examined closely, for it seems to be, on the one hand, “theo-logically” impeccable, and, on the other hand, at odds with solemn Catholic teaching on the Eucharist.

Historically, this is a revisiting of the traditional question of the relationship between the sacrifice of the cross and the Sacrifice of the Mass. The “fact” of the real, ontological “presence” of the one to the other is not what is in question. The “how” is the question. How, precisely, is the historical sacrifice of the cross present in/related to the sacramental sacrifice of the Church? If, by “precisely” one means a clearly achieved doctrinal and theological position that is held in peace by the Church and its theologians, there is no clear answer. Within the sacramental traditions of Christian theology there seem to be two basic approaches. The first and most common approach is to see *the sacrifice of Christ as made present to the faithful*. The second approach is to see *the faithful as made present to the sacrifice of Christ*.²⁰ Each approach supports the core Catholic belief of the real ontological “presence” to each other of the sacrifice of the cross and the

²⁰ For example, Giraudo, followed by Kilmartin, points out that it is more reasonable to say that the Church is represented liturgically to the sacrifice of Christ

Sacrifice of the Mass. The delicacy of the theological problem is that many see the first approach as the only theological position that can do justice to traditional Catholic faith, while some see the second approach as the only one that can adequately begin theology's job of trying to understand Catholic faith.

The first approach, that sees the sacrifice of Christ as (somehow, but in any case really, e.g. transhistorically or metahistorically) made present in the celebration of the Eucharist, now seems to hold pride of place in Catholic theology and much contemporary high-church theology. Since the last half of the 20th century, because of the gradual acceptance in the sacramental churches of the main tenets of the "mystery theology" of Odo Casel, this presence has come to be understood not merely as a psychological remembering of the sacrifice of Christ (against a spiritualizing reductionism), but also not as a repeating or re-enacting of the unique and unrepeatable historical sacrifice of Christ (against a naïve realism), but as a making present, a re-presentation (*Vergegenwärtigung*) of the perfect, once-for-all (as the Epistle to the Hebrews emphasized) sacrifice of Christ.

This theological theory constituted a major theological and ecumenical advance in the 20th century. It has the merit of strongly supporting the doctrine of real presence as understood in traditional Catholic teaching. But it also has some notable weaknesses that suggest to theologians that they must continue to search for a better theory. First, it is neither particularly supported by nor required by biblical revelation. Second, although aspects of it may be found in this or that Father of the Church, it does not rest on any significant convergence of patristic teaching. Third, significant support for it cannot be found in Thomas Aquinas, or in Scholastic teaching generally, right up to and including Pius XII's 1947 encyclical *Mediator Dei*. And finally, it is an explanation that itself requires a further explanation that does not seem to be forthcoming. For theologians and philosophers are unable to come to agreement on just how a past historical act can become present in another age and time.²¹ There is no denial that this is within the miraculous power of God. But there is a strong tradition in Catholic theology that avoids appealing to miracles for explanations when other possible theological explanations have not yet been fully explored.

The second approach, that sees the participating faithful as being made present to the sacrifice of Christ, has been proposed by several Catholic theologians in the final years of the 20th century. It is much more reason-

through the medium of the Eucharistic Prayer (Cesare Giraudo, *Eucaristia per la chiesa: Prospettive teologiche sull'eucaristia a partire dalla "lex orandi"* [Rome: Gregorian University; Brescia: Morcelliana, 1989] 563–64; Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West* 176).

²¹ See Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West* 268–76.

able, as Kilmartin pointed out, in agreement with Giraud and Meyer, to say that the Church is represented liturgically to the sacrifice of Christ through the medium of the Eucharistic Prayer.²² Philosophically and theologically, this is a more satisfying approach. It does not postulate a philosophically questionable transporting of a past historical event to later times. It is also much more respectful of Thomistic metaphysics in locating the effect of the divine action—i.e. the most important transformation that now takes place in the Eucharist—precisely where it belongs: in the participating faithful. In other words, Christ is not changed, God is not changed, *we* are changed. In addition, but without going into detail, it is much more consistent with basic Catholic doctrine and theology in the other major areas of theology: prayer, spirituality and grace, Christology, soteriology, pneumatology, and trinitarian theology. In other words, it *totally excludes that sacrifice can mean that something is done to something or, even worse, that something is done to someone. It sees sacrifice as a totally personal—indeed the person-constituting event par excellence—interpersonal event.* The claim can be made that, theologically, this is the most satisfying approach to an adequate and faithful Catholic understanding of the Eucharist. But the matter is far from settled for, in comparison with the first approach, it is not as supportive of traditional Catholic teaching on the real transformation (transubstantiation) of the eucharistic gifts, on the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and traditional devotional eucharistic practices.

(3) Attending to *the eschatological level of this eucharistically celebrated Christ event* can help reveal more clearly the different interrelationships of the divine and the human, the eternal and the temporal in this event that is called the Sacrifice of the Mass. As already noted, two transformations take place in the Sacrifice of the Mass, the transformation of the gifts and the transformation of the participating faithful, the former subordinated to the latter. This subordination, however, does not imply unimportance of the one in relation to the other. The transformation of the gifts is the real foundation and condition of the transformation of the participants. Nevertheless, the relationship between the two transformations is not, in every respect, necessary or absolute. For most human beings, their transformation (i.e., ultimately, saying yes to the self-giving love of God in their lives) has obviously not been preceded by or accompanied by participation in the Eucharist. But does, on the other hand, the transformation of the eucharistic gifts always result in the transformation of the participants? The

²² Ibid. 176. Kilmartin is here following the lead of Cesare Giraud, *Eucaristia per la chiesa* 563–64. Hans Bernhard Meyer also agrees and acknowledges his debt to Giraud in *Eucharistie: Geschichte, Theologie, Pastoral: Gottesdienst der Kirche*. Handbuch der Liturgiewissenschaft, Teil 4 (Regensburg: Pustet, 1989) 448–49.

transformation of those who actually participate in faith is not in question. But in the hypothetical case of a Eucharist celebrated without at least an initial transformation of at least some participants, can one claim that the transformation of the gifts has taken place? This question has to be raised in both postmodern and premodern traditional terms. A Eucharist without transformation of participants is a Eucharist without meaning; in postmodernity, where there is no meaning there is no reality. But this also seems to be true from the premodern, traditional trinitarian perspective outlined toward the beginning of my article. If Christian sacrifice means the conjoined self-offerings of the Father, the Son, and human beings, can the sacrifice of Christ be present if there is no self-offering “response” from the human side?

This is precisely where an eschatological understanding of the eucharistic event, the Sacrifice of the Mass, is of critical importance. The transformation of a human being, and therefore of participants in the Eucharist, can never be complete in this life. Of the three interrelated self-offerings (Father, Son, and human beings), the first two, as divine actions, are essentially perfect and complete; but the third, clearly, is not. The liturgical assembly is praying for and beginning to appropriate in itself the self-offering virtuous dispositions of Christ. But this is a process that will be completed only on the Last Day. The beginning of this appropriation is something that has a unique symbolic intensity as well as actual reality in the worthy celebration of the Eucharist. And unless one chooses to follow the theologically dubious path of postulating radically different ontological paths to salvation for those outside the Christian communion, this inchoative transformation of participants is found (analogously but really) in all situations where human beings respond positively to self-giving love. All this is sacrifice in the authentic sense of the word.

CONCLUSION

“Have you found out what sacrifice is,” asked the pastor when the children had clambered back into their places in the front pews? “Yes!” triumphantly answered the religious education teacher. “Sacrifice means to give up what you love.” The pastor nodded approvingly, added a few more words, then moved to the altar to celebrate the Sacrifice of the Mass. The first reading had been from Genesis 22, the sacrifice of Isaac. This happened in a parish church in Germany a few years ago, but it could have happened in any number of churches throughout the world. It strikingly illustrates the theological and pastoral challenges one faces, even from the Church’s own pastors and teachers, when one talk about “sacrifice.” It is overwhelmed with negative connotations. For if we are correct in seeing the essence of Christian sacrifice as our participation, through the Spirit, in

the transcendently free and self-giving love of the Father and the Son, and if Christian sacrifice is our inchoative, but already real, entering into the fullness of the totally free, self-giving, loving personal life of God, then it is obvious that the common understanding of “sacrifice” does not reveal, but rather effectively veils this reality.

The theological response is, in contrast with an effective pastoral response, relatively easy. The basic approach to a trinitarian understanding of Christian sacrifice and its real but still inchoative actualization in the eucharistic celebration of the Christian assembly that I have outlined here, has become, by this stage of doctrinal and liturgical-theological development, relatively accessible, at least to theologians. Whether or not all the nuances of my presentation, or all the theological implications and consequences I suggest turn out to be valid, the basic theological trajectory I am following seems to be sound.

Pastorally, however, the challenge from a direct, frontal approach seems insurmountable. There has been so much incorrect thinking connected with “sacrifice” that a realistic pastoral strategy suggests that the word should be avoided. For even when, in common usage, sacrifice refers to the most gloriously generous of self-giving human activity, the negative usually remains dominant. Even Jesus’ crucifixion can veil, as much as in faith it unveils, his divinity.

But there is another pastoral approach that is accessible to most and that promises to do a better job of unveiling the transcendent glory of authentic Christian sacrifice. Every human being who has had some, however fleeting, experience of genuine human happiness, has already experienced Christian sacrifice or, more precisely perhaps, the reality of what we refer to as Christian sacrifice. From parents and spouses, from caregivers, co-workers, friends, and teachers, in other words from other human beings who have played a role in their lives, most people have at least occasionally experienced totally free, totally loving, totally self-giving love. However transitory these experiences, they are real enough in people’s memory, imagination, and longing that they can be appealed to. When that happens, one begins, independently of technical theology, to understand and to know Christian sacrifice.

Pastorally, this would seem to be the first point from which preaching and teaching about sacrifice should start. Such an approach also enable us to put the suffering and negativity that characteristically accompanies sacrifice in its proper perspective. Growing up means coming to know what mature people already know from experience, that genuine self-giving love is not without its costs, costs that are sometimes very dear. And they know that it is the love and not the suffering that is the defining, eternal reality that will never pass away. In that knowledge, they also know that suffering,

however subordinate to the defining reality of love, is still somehow “necessary,” as Jesus explained on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:26).

I have attempted to unveil Christian sacrifice. To the extent that I may have succeeded, I have also described the universal path of salvation: the path of personal self-giving response to one’s personal experiences of self-giving love from others. As recent discussions and controversies have shown, Christian theology and Catholic magisterial teaching have only just begun to try to make sense of this in terms both of its own traditions and the traditions of the other religions of the world.