

Reflections on the Eucharistic Sacrifice
(by Bishop D.C. Butler)

This is one of those matters which has, for us, got unfortunately tangled up in the general Reformation controversy, so that the very term 'eucharistic sacrifice', and particularly the suggestion that it is a PROPITIATORY one (defined by Trent), raises such emotion and opposition. My impression is that the Anglicans are in a special difficulty here, because of the hesitations of their evangelical wing.

I propose that we seek to solve the problems by going right back behind the particular issues to the wider question of "sacrament". And here I would argue that in good Catholic theology it is not merely the consecrated elements in the Eucharist, seen as means of communion, and incidentally, as objects of adoration, that are "sacrament". The Eucharist, as whole, is sacrament, so that the eucharistic sacrifice is a sacramental sacrifice.

Anglicans and Catholics are agreed that the eucharist and baptism are sacraments. Catholics say that there are five others, which Anglicans might prefer to call dominical institutions; but this could be a matter of language-usage rather than a difference of substance. It is well known in any case, that the designation of these, and only these, seven rites as sacraments is a relatively late precision of language.

I suggest that the use of the word sacramentum in this context of ideas in the Western Church is as Latinisation of the Greek word mysterion, still applied I think in the Oriental churches in this sense. And I further suggest that this Christian use of the word mystery is to be connected with the Pauline (rather than the Synoptic) use of the same word. And if what follows seems at first rather remote from our subject (the sacraments) I may remind you that it is becoming familiar to theologians to talk about Christ as the "sacrament of God" and about the Church as the "sacrament of Christ". Paul writes: "I became the servant of the church when God made me responsible for delivering God's message to you, the message which was a mystery hidden for generations and centuries and has now been revealed to his saints.....The mystery is Christ among you, your hope of glory; this is the Christ we proclaim." (Col. 1: 25-28). The note on Rom. 16: 25 in the Jerusalem Bible says: The idea of a "mystery" of wisdom, long hidden in God and now revealed, is borrowed by Paul from Jewish apocalypse, but he enriches the content of the term by applying it to the climax of the history of salvation; the saving cross of Christ; the call of the pagans to this salvation preached by Paul; and finally the restoration of all things in Christ as their one head. (It may be that the application of the term to the calling of the pagans springs from the fact that this call meant that Christ was the UNIVERSAL Saviour, and so not merely the climax of Israelite history, but the climax of all history; in that case, this use of the term merges easily with its application to the cross of Christ and the final eschaton).

It will be noticed that in Col. it is **first** the logos of God which is called the mystery; and this mystery is then identified with 'Christ in you, the hope of glory', whom "we announce". It is one of the normal but fascinating developments of the New Testament that Christ preached the gospel of the kingdom of God (which is probably called the logos of the kingdom in Matt. 13.19, and the logos of God in Jk. 8:11 et.al.) whereas the church preached the gospel, or the cross, or just preached "Christ", and in the end - e.g. in John, Christ is identified as the logos of God.

This mystery is first "hidden" and then "revealed", just as in John, the logos was with God from the beginning and then was made flesh. In more modern terminology, we could say that the word mystery means "the economy of salvation", viewed both as predetermined in the eternal counsels of God and as actualised in salvation history, supremely of course in Christ and his death.

I conclude that the moderns who speak of Christ as the sacrament are in line with Paul.

One may add: Traditional theology sees in the sacraments "signs" of grace. A sign, roughly speaking, is one thing that "stands for" or refers back to another (e.g. road signs), though some signs are "tokens" or "pledges", e.g. first fruits which are the nature of what they betoken and stand for. One of the most universal modes of "signifying" is of course language, and a logos is a sign of what the logos refers to. It is interesting that the supreme mystery, Christ, is the logos of God and is precisely as such the mystery revealed and actualised. Of course he was an efficacious sign for faith; whoever believes in him has eternal life; and he is a sign through fellowship with whom we have fellowship with his heavenly Father.

Our effort to understand the term sacrament has thus brought us back to Christ, incarnate and crucified. But Christ in his first coming is not to be understood without reference to his second coming - this is one of the great lessons brought home to us by modern biblical study. Salvation history is orientated to the eschaton in somewhat the same manner - mutatis a good may mutandis - that Aristotelian physics presupposes metaphysics. In other words, while eschatology is "realised" in salvation history, there is still a final consummation to be looked forward to, and it is only in the light of that consummation that the salvation history can be understood; for what is ultimum in executione is primum in intentione. If then Christ is the sacrament of God, I suggest that he is the sacrament of the eschaton (hence Paul can call the consummation "mystery"). Christ is the efficacious sign of that eschaton, inasmuch as the Son of Man coming in glory is identical with the Son of Man who suffers; it will be the Jesus whom we have known on earth who will judge us at the last day, judge us by the charity which he proclaimed and exemplified (and on the other hand, for John, the judgement is already present in "the Jesus of history"). And it is by coming into the kingdom of Christ that we are sealed for entry into the final kingdom of God.

To sum up what I have been trying to say: The Pauline mysteries, which I propose to identify with the Latin sacramentum in the latter's widest technical extension, is salvation manifested (to borrow a word of Cyprian), realised, or as I should prefer to say, actualised, in the order of creation in and as a public and efficacious sign; ultimately in the final consummation, when all things will be recapitulated in Christ, and originally (talking of temporal originality; perhaps I would better say "initially") in saving history as it reaches its climax in the "Paschal mystery" of the cross and the resurrection of Christ.

And if it be asked: Why should salvation be actualised in a SIGN, the answer, I think, may be that salvation is atonement, reconciliation of man with God; and the gap between creaturely man and his Creator can only be bridged by a divine initiative of "condescension", which involves that God should give himself in "terms" which make him communicable to man. Quicquid recipitur secundum modum recipientis recipitur. There are no human terms which can communicate God to us except such as are signs, because the divine essence is not immediately within our apprehension. (There was wisdom in the apocalyptic "folly" of "mysteries" which yet had to be interpreted).

Now the "time of the Church" is an interim between the initial and the consummating manifestation-actualisation. And what is the church's function (in this interim)? It is to take the gospel, the word, Christ the sacrament of God, to all mankind, to every man, and to the whole historical order, in order that in and by this sign, the redemption already totally won for us may be actualised in each of us and in the whole realm of history. How does the church do this? By virtue, I suggest, of the fact that she is the body of Christ. To understand this notion, it may first be pointed out that Christ=Messiah, and the notion of Messiah is impossible without the notion of the Messianic community. The two are correlative. Similarly, and moving to a more "universal" image, the second Adam is a meaningless expression except when we view the second Adam as representing and including the whole of humanity as redeemed and "recreated" (in Christ there is *kaine ktisis*). The church is thus the body of which Jesus is the head, and it lives by the Holy Spirit with whom Jesus was plenarily endowed; by, in fact, the Spirit of Christ. As Christ was initially present in history by the mediation of his natural body, so he remains present, or as I should prefer to say he continually "comes", in this interim by the mediation of his body the church. And as the body of Christ, the church is an efficacious sign

of Christ - not only, by the way of the "initial" Christ of Palestine, but of the consummating Christ of the second coming. (It may be said that Christ comes to us today in the pages of the Bible. But the Bible is a constitutive element of the church, by and in and for whom the New Testament was written and the Old Testament adopted and both canonised). We hear much about "tradition" but what is handed on in Christianity is Christ and the agent who hands on is the Church. The church I suggest, is "the sacrament of Christ", and is included in the *Christus totus* of whom Augustine wrote. Because of this close interlocking, the church is mentioned in the Creed, not indeed as something in which we believe, but yet as something we believe.

In other words, the mysterium did not just come and go, but it came to stay; to stay in an efficacious signum of its coming, and in a real anticipation of its second coming.

And now at last I think we can turn to the Eucharist.

Christ said: "This is my body", referring to the element of "bread" which he was distributing. Paul says that the church is Christ's body. Some might hesitate to connect these two statements, were it not that Paul himself connects them: The loaf which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because the loaf is one, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf (I Cor. 1:16ff). In subsequent Christian tradition the word "communion" is used both of the fellowship of Christians in the church and of their participation in the eucharistic meal. And from early days, the latter has been seen as a symbol and realisation of the former, so that exclusion from the eucharistic meal was equivalent to exclusion from the church fellowship. It does not seem too much to say that the eucharist is the centre and focus of the corporate public life of the church, the event in which the church becomes fully actual as a group united in the bond of mutual charity and corporately coming into actual fellowship with God (cf. I Jo. first verses). Origen goes so far as to see the eucharistic body of Christ as the antitype of which his natural body is the type, i.e. as the goal for which he was incarnate. And between these two the church plays her role. Aquinas, seeing this complex reciprocity from another angle, says that the unity of the church is the result, or as we might say, the fruit of the eucharist.

But if the eucharist is central in the Church's life, and if the church is most fully herself in the eucharist, then we can see why the eucharist is not only called a sacrament, but is THE sacrament, towards which, according to Catholic theology, the other sacraments are all orientated. I suggest that what can be said truly of the church can be said *par excellence* of the eucharist.

But I have argued that the Church is the sacrament of Christ; that, as the body of Christ, the Church is the medium by which Christ is actually operative in the world which he has once and for all redeemed, but to which redemption is to be progressively "applied". The eucharist, then, in its turn is the sacrament of Christ, the mode by which he is actually present among us in our fellowship with one another; and the mode by which we are in fellowship with Christ and through him with the Father (I Jo. 1).

Hence the question whether the eucharist is a sacrifice (but of course a sacramental sacrifice) is answered by the answer to the question whether Christ offered himself in sacrifice. Both Paul and the *actor ad Heb.* say that he did. Christian tradition endorses this scriptural teaching, and sees Christ's self-sacrifice as satisfactory, propitiatory, etc. One fails to see why any distinction should be made as though the eucharist is "at any rate not a propitiatory sacrifice"; and I think the right answer is that the eucharist is a (sacramental) sacrifice in every respect in which Christ offered himself in sacrifice.

But here some words of caution seem to be in place.

(1) Seen by itself, what happened on Calvary was certainly not a cultic sacrifice; there was nothing ritual about it. Rather it was "self sacrifice" in the sense suggested by our use of the term concerning e.g. Captain Oates of the Scott expedition. Some theologians have tried to link it with the Last Supper as a single act, and have thus imported a cultic element into it from the Last Supper (I don't necessarily accept this view)

(2) It is, in my view, extremely dangerous to construct one's idea of sacrifice from the Old Testament sacrifices (the more so, if we also seek light from pagan sacrifices), and then apply the idea univocally to Christ. Christ came to "fulfil" the law; but in being fulfilled, the law was also transcended, or rather lifted to a higher level, at which in fact it becomes more intelligible than before it was thus elevated. It follows that it is not enough to take Old Testament concepts and apply them to Christ's sacrifice; it is also necessary to understand Christ's sacrifice intrinsically, and then re-read the Old Testament sacrifices in this light and as foreshadowings of something higher than themselves. In particular, any pre-Christian idea of "propitiation" requires such treatment. I personally find it hard to conceive of Calvary as propitiatory unless I think of Calvary as a kind of lived prayer.

(3) Perhaps it is as well to repeat that the notion of the church as "sacrament of Christ" (and therefore of the eucharist as the Church's sacrament par excellence) radically excludes any idea that the Church (and/or the Eucharist) adds anything to the all sufficiency of Christ and his sacrifice. Anything added would be a corruption, since the purpose of a sign is purely to signify (though in the case of a sacrament, to signify efficaciously).

(4) It may be asked, on the basis of the general argumentation above, whether ALL the sacraments are not "sacrifices"; and if so, why apply sacrificial language specially to the eucharist; and in fact, why apply "real presence" language specially to the eucharist? I think I should say that every sacrament in so far as it signified Christ, must be sacrificial. But (a) the eucharist is the sacrament par excellence; (b) some assimilation in history of the eucharist to Old Testament cult, not to say to pagan cult, may have played its part linguistically here; (c) the theology of the eucharist cannot but be dominated by the "words of institution", and the "body given" and the "blood poured out" more or less compel one to develop sacrificial language specially in a eucharistic context. (So too these same words give a depth to the idea of "presence" such as to set the eucharist on a pinnacle, compared with the other sacraments.) (d) what has been said in our discussions and by tradition, about the eucharist as a "memorial" of the Lord seems to me to fit in well with what I have written about the Church as a sacrament of Christ. The Church sacramentally actualises the coming-and-presence of Christ by, inter alia, "remembering" him. Cf. C.L. Dodd, in *The Founder of Christianity*. Speaking of the eucharist, and after pointing out that at it the "words of institution" are recited, he says: "When these words are recited, it is understood that the whole service is placed within the context of what Jesus said, did and suffered on the occasion referred to, and is to be understood on that basis. The depth of meaning which Christian people find in those words it is not necessary here to attempt to set forth. But it is important, for our present purpose, to observe that in this central act of Christian worship - in this act, therefore, which more than any other expresses all that Christianity is - there is included an act of remembrance. The Church - every gathering of the Church, everywhere, under every form - remembers that on a certain night its Founder said and did certain things, briefly reported; that on the same night he fell into the hands of his enemies; and that he suffered a violent death (for the broken body and the shed blood can mean nothing else)...The remembrance goes back to a continuous chain. At every service there are present elderly people who fifty or sixty years ago heard those words spoken by or in the presence of, men old enough to be their grandparents; there are young people who, it may be, will repeat them in the hearing of their grandchildren. And so the endless chain goes on. For nineteen centuries there has not been one single week in which this act of remembrance was not made, one generation reminding another..A corporate memory handed down from generation to generation becomes what we know as tradition. Our knowledge about the origins of the Church and about its Founder, rests primarily on a living tradition, which had its beginnings in the actual memories of those who had witnessed the events and had personal dealings with the principal actor in them...The New Testament contains the deposit, in writing, of the continuous tradition about Jesus at various stages of its transmission during the first century of the Church's existence. The event to which we have been led back by all lines of approach..is not some remote forgotten episode of the past..It is something that has never dropped out of the memory of the oldest surviving society in the western world".