

Eucharistic Sacrifice
(The Rev. Julian Charley)

Significantly the New Testament never used the language of sacrifice to describe the Eucharist nor priestly terms for the Church's ministers, when the opportunity was certainly not lacking. Yet the Church is a holy priesthood (I Pet. 2.5.) and offers spiritual sacrifices - praise and thanksgiving, a sharing with others etc. (e.g. Heb. 13. 15-16). How then did this use of 'eucharistic sacrifice' originate historically?

The second century writers who employ the language of sacrifice in relation to the Eucharist all draw upon Mal. 1.11. "...in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering" (Midache 14, Justin Dial. with Trypho 41, Irenaeus adv. Haer. IV 17.5.). Irenaeus explicitly associates it with the cereal offering, which was not expiatory but a thank-offering. In none of these contexts does it relate specifically to the sacrifice of Christ, at most to the bread and wine. No doubt such language had occurred earlier than these writers, similarly without any particular theological overtones. What does not seem to have been adequately noted is that the writers were historically conditioned. They used this language in the context of an anti-Jewish polemic, for which the quotation from Malachi is particularly appropriate. This may even be reflected in certain features retained in the Canon of the Mass to this day, if G.A. Nichell and E.C. Ratcliff are correct in tracing the Anamnesis and Supra quae back to a date in the second century (vid. "New Eucharistic Prayers" III). For instance, 'oblations' is the term used throughout the canon, before as well as after the consecration. Similarly the Supra quae contains reference to the offerings of Abel, Melchisedec and Abraham, none of whom was of the Levitical line. Christian offerings were pure, which the official Jewish were not. That is to say, the second century is not a legitimate source for the mediaeval concept of eucharistic sacrifice, which begins rather with Cyprian.

The language of eucharistic sacrifice is too often ambiguous and the possibilities need to be spelt out. What does it mean 'to be united with the sacrifice of Christ'? Union must be with (i) the offerer or (ii) the thing offered or (iii) the benefits derived.

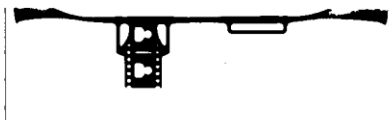
(i) means repetition and denies the once-for-all nature of Christ's sacrifice (cp. the phraseology of Lambeth 1958 2.84 "and so present again").

(ii) means addition and denies the completeness of Christ's sacrifice.

Both savour of Pelagianism. But the imagery of the Hebrews does not envisage an altar in heaven. Christ's High Priestly work is to guarantee for ever our acceptance by his presence there, because his atoning work has been completed. (Heb 7. 24-25, 8:1). Rather, our union with his sacrifice is as beneficiaries. Yet theologically it is true that we receive both the benefits and the challenge of Christ's fresh claims over us simultaneously, however we may express it liturgically. In the sacrament God is both conveying comfort and re-apprehending us for his service, knitting us together afresh as members of his Body (vid. "Growing into Union", pp 59-60)

If sacrificial language is to be used in the Eucharist, then there should be three safeguards clearly written into the liturgy. (i) It is in the act of communicating, the Church, reintegrated and reappropriated by the one means of grace, is made a living sacrifice to God ("Growing into Union" p. 191) This is the vital issue. (ii) The retention of the epiphapax emphasis of Hebrews, as in the Cranmerian Liturgy. (iii) The desirability of retaining the 1552 position of the 'prayer of oblation', as advocated even by Dix ("Shape of the Liturgy", p. 666). It prevents misunderstanding and preserves the logical dependence of our sacrifice upon Christ's.

A.S. How many of the crossed lines on Eucharistic Sacrifice stem from divergent interpretations of the nature of sacrifice - was the death of the victim essential or incidental? Is the emphasis in the Eucharist the death of Christ or his life of obedience culminating in death? i.e. Why do we regard the sacrifice of Christ as unique?



1. All christians would agree that the death of Christ is a unique event, never to be repeated or even imitated. At a certain moment in history, Christ, the Word of God, became incarnate, lived as man amongst us, was crucified, died, was buried and rose again. This is the event which forms the basis, and always has formed the basis, of all christian life and hope. For it is this act of God in Christ which has won salvation for all men; by the Christ event, man is ransomed and made free, (from sin, from the law), pronounced righteous (i.e. justified), sanctified (some theologians would say 'deified'; or again 'justified'; cf. Hans Kung, 'Rechtfertigung' who notes that when God by his Word pronounces, then what he pronounces comes to pass; hence when a man is pronounced righteous, the work of making him righteous begins.) By Christ, man is 'illuminated', given an example to follow and the strength to follow it.

2. Most christians would agree that Our Lord Jesus Christ not only was, but is today, the personal saviour of all who accept him as Lord and to whom it is given to have faith in him. The event in the past somehow has a present effect; Our Lord's saving work may be appropriated now; and even now we may know that our sins are forgiven, that we have peace with God, the assurance of salvation and a sense of newness of life - all through the free gift of God in Christ and his saving work.

3. And yet the Christ event is unique; it happened once, at a moment in history. Does this therefore mean that at the moment when it took place, there was a change in the cosmic order, after which God enters upon a new relationship with man, and man with God? In one sense of course, the coming of Christ did open the way to a new relationship of God with man. The God, who had called Israel into fellowship with him, in Christ called all men to know him and to serve him; but on the other hand this unique event which happened 'ephapax' i.e. once has still to be appropriated by the individual christian today, if he is to be saved. The question is, how?

4. Oscar Cullman in his book 'Christ and Time' notes that there are two possible interpretations of 'ephapax'; it can either mean 'once, at a moment in history' but it can also mean 'decisively unique for the salvation of all men and all times'. It is this second meaning, he notes, which pervades the New Testament writings. The coming of Christ is an eschatological 'happening'; in the light of this event the whole of past history is to be interpreted as leading up to it; and similarly the whole of history yet to come is to be seen in this light. We live between the first and the second comings of Christ; and yet it is the same Christ who will judge us in the Last Day as judges us now and indeed judged christians and all men in the time when the Fourth Gospel was written. Christ therefore (Cullman would assert) stands at the mid-point, illuminating all that went before and all that is now and all that is to come.

5. Most christians would agree that we encounter Christ now, in the present and do not simply look back to a historical person (though we do this as well). I don't suppose many would limit the presence of God in the world today to the activity of the Holy Spirit though I suspect that the mode of God's presence in the world may be a subject on which there can be disagreement. Not many would hold that God is wholly transcendent, waiting to rescue man out of his involvement in matter. Most would agree that God is, by virtue of his being the Creator, both immanent in his creation and at the same time transcends it. If then a further step may be taken to suggest that God manifests himself to man now through the tangible and the visible (as he did in Christ) then it would seem reasonable to suggest that since Christ's redeeming activity is 'once, decisively unique for the salvation of all men at all times', then there is today some visible and tangible manifestation of Christ at work amongst us today. If on the other hand it is felt that God's activity among us is essentially invisible and intangible, like the wind which 'bloweth where it listeth', then the notion of a 'sign' or 'sacrament' must be dismissed.

