

'OFFERING/SACRIFICE' IN EUCHARISTIC PRAYERS

OFFERTA-SACRIFICIO
NELLA PREGHIERA EUCARISTICA

Contemporary theological studies are choosing to emphasise particular features of the Eucharist at the expense of others, and this tendency demonstrates the inevitable conditioning of theological thought by the historical-cultural context in which it is necessarily located.

This swing from one theological emphasis to another in studies on the Eucharist is in fact the experience of every period of history. At one time we find eucharistic theology preoccupied with the paschal/ eschatological Supper of the Lord; at another, with the spiritual/real character of the sacramental body of Christ, or with the Real Presence and Transubstantiation, with Communion, with the contrast between the sacramental and the mystical body of Christ, and so forth. The fact that one emphasis yields to another is no direct proof that the former is being put in doubt. Usually it indicates that what has been of particular interest has now ceased to be so, and the sign that there is now a different overall theological preoccupation (the Italian word is richer = "impostazione", which could be translated by the German "problematik" etc.)

This is the context in which to approach an inquiry which aims at discovering the theological reasons for the omission of the idea and term "Offering/Sacrifice" in many improvised Eucharistic prayers. It may well be a question of a certain "fragmentation" of theological perspective regarding the Eucharist while continuing to maintain, following the practice of older theology, as 'given' and proven in isolation ("assolutizzata"), realities and facts which really form part of one inter-related system ("che sono invece intimamente 'relativi' tra loro"), when their point of reference is essentially the 'unicum' which is "the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross". The result of this has been - especially because of the lack of biblical perspective - that those elements which should have been different "moments", (1) accepted as inter-dependent, of the history of salvation, threaten to be absorbed into an ideology only generically Christian.

While, therefore, accepting the "theological legitimacy" of positions like those which identify the Mass with the Lord's Supper, with the Fraternal Meal or with the Gift of Christ of Himself, and at the same time positing that none of these positions excludes all the other realities contained in the Eucharist, my opinion is that it is untenable to omit or regard as of secondary importance the fact and the terminology of oblation-offering-sacrifice in presenting the Eucharistic celebration.

(1) I take this undefined word 'moment' to be, perhaps, "levels of understanding" or "stages of understanding".

The reasons for this negative judgment

All these three features of the Eucharist emphasise, though in differing ways, the "presence" in the celebration of the Eucharist. In the Lord's Supper the "presence" of Christ is thrown into sharp relief in so far as this comes about by the 'breaking of bread' so that he may be recognised as alive by those he has invited to his own table. The Fraternal Meal emphasises the aspect of "binding together" (= "connettivo-unitivo") of the Eucharist in the context of "community" which is constituted precisely by the communal sharing - through the body and blood of Christ - in the Spirit of love which is the Lord's, the same Spirit whereby he has become the brother of all mankind. The self-giving of Christ, considered as "the sacramental form in which is manifested the event (of the historical death of Christ on the Cross) in the self-giving of Christ to the Father under the form of his self-giving to men" (cfr. Schillebeeckx, La presenza eucharistica, ed. Paoline, p.149), indicates "the presence of the love" with which Christ redeemed man by giving himself for them and to them.

It is clear that these three conceptions (= "momenti") of the Eucharist, taken solely at the level of "supper-fraternal meal-gift" do not explicitly imply either the idea or the existence of an offering of Christ within the celebration (= "un offerta di Cristo da farsi attraverso la celebrazione"). Consequently a Eucharistic Prayer, based on one or even on all three of these conceptions - or on similar considerations - cannot be made to express the offering in any direct way, but only the p r e s e n c e of Christ, even if the words of consecration (given that they are retained) could rightly be interpreted as indicating that the presence of the body and blood of Christ is sacrificial or 'oblative' in character.

Furthermore, by the very fact that they are retained - without, however, comment (cfr. I Cor. 11:26) - the words of consecration, unless they reflect their sacrificial content, would appear to suggest that all attention is to be focussed on the idea of the "real presence" of the P e r s o n of Christ (= "Cristo-persona") in order to give most stress to the "interpersonal" relationship of the Eucharist. The re-discovery of this relationship has certainly been a notable enrichment of our understanding of the s a c r a m e n t ; but this does not make it legitimate, one would think, to forget that the s a c r a m e n t , in that it is essentially related to a "salvific event", most clearly signify the presence of the a c t i o n of the person who is Christ.

But, quite apart from the considerations that have gone to making the idea of "supper-fraternal meal-gift" the principal meaning of the Eucharist, it is my opinion that the omission of the (note of) o f f e r i n g in its celebration is to be explained by the failure to include with these perfectly legitimate aspects the twofold liturgical dimension of the Eucharist - the p a s c h a l dimension, and the e c c l e s i a l dimension located in w o r s h i p .

It is quite true (and this finds support in the history of theology) that the sacrament, even without this double dimension, still retains intact its relation of "sign/reality". But it is also true that, considered in this way, the Eucharist gives the impression of being self-explanatory (= "un fatto visto in assoluto"), "per se stans", without any relationship to, or with only a somewhat external relationship (at a purely institutional level, in the sense of being the free

decision of Christ in its institution) to the history of salvation in its two constitutive features of "mystery of Christ" and "mystery of the Church". This needs explanation.

1. THE PASCHAL DIMENSION

The paschal dimension of the Eucharist does not mean that Christ on the occasion of the Jewish Passover Meal decided to arrange a supper with his disciples, a supper with eschatological overtones (of the coming of the kingdom). Neither does it mean that he gave a fraternal meal or banquet in farewell with the intention of binding himself in "permanent brotherhood" with his disciples. Nor does it mean that it was his intention to proffer the gift of himself to them at the same time as, representing and accepting his death, he gave himself of his own free will to the Father.

Quite the contrary. The paschal dimension - central to the Eucharist even at the level of "supper-fraternal meal-gift" - far from being the result of contingent circumstance ("occasionale"), belongs to the actual content of the Eucharist. It consists precisely in the complete fulfilment - the "reality" succeeding to the "figure" - of the redemptive meaning of the ancient Passover ritual. The sacrifice of salvation, achieved "at a new level of reality" (= "nuovo") in and through Christ once and for all, is not to be limited to one static moment belonging to one point of historical time, if this is to mean that the universal salvation of mankind is achieved solely through its dependence on this distant source without the need for the mediation of the paschal ritual (i.e. through sacramental mediation). No, it was given into the hands of the disciples ("Do this") in order that they should possess it in the form of "the sacrament of the sacrifice of Christ" and therefore as a dynamic reality - in other words, as evocative of the sacrificial action of Christ. (Note: I take it, from the context, that the author uses "evocative" in a strong, sacramental sense). In fact, if, as is always said, a sacrament is by its very nature an 'efficacious sign' not of the divine Person qua talis but of his intervention in the working out of salvation (= "del suo intervento-evento di salvezza", which I regard as jargon gone mad!), this sacrament is the sign of the sacrifice and the sacrifice must be expressed in an offering. Otherwise, the sign would be presented in a deficient form and could be ambiguous. It must therefore contain ("efficacious sign") the sacrifice and also give it concrete expression, if it is to be a sign in the full sense of the term. "Adde verbum et fit sacramentum", i.e. it is the word which makes a sign a sacrament. Christ's death could never be understood as a sacrifice if we did not have his words in which he declares he is giving his life for us, "giving it as a redemption", "sacrificing himself for men" (John 17:19).

"To take and eat" the sacrifice of Christ is quite insufficient, as though it were nothing more than a "supper-fraternal meal-gift". Our taking part in this must signify and express the fact that the "sacrifice" of Christ is the "sign" of a death offered to God. This is the heart of the paschal dimension of the Eucharist and this becomes all the more apparent if it is objected that the Jewish Passover Meal - understood at the level of "supper-fraternal meal-gift" - has in fact no rite of offering. The Hebrew "supper" was in fact only an act of sharing in a "sacrifice" which has already been offered! With the Eucharist it is quite different. This is not just the sharing in the Paschal banquet. It is the total sacramental reality of the Pasch, even though it is both possible and necessary to distinguish two successive moments: the offering of the victim and the eating of the victim. Christ, as we know, whose sacrifice was still

in the future, by giving himself in its "sacrament", gave special prominence to its value as offering precisely at the moment he gave his body and blood to be eaten and drunk: "Take and eat my body given (sacrificed) for you: take and drink my blood of the New Covenant shed for the remission of sins".

Because of this, I Cor. 11:26 emphasizes that there is 'a proclamation (katanghellete) of the death of the Lord every time we eat and drink the supper of the Lord'. In this statement of Paul both the object and the fact of the proclamation are to be noted.

The object: Christ says: "do this in memory of me". Paul goes beyond the 'person' ("me") to the 'event' or 'fact' (the death of Christ), and shows that he is well aware that the 'death' of Christ is 'sacrifice offered' by Christ. The proclamation refers therefore to the 'sacrifice'.

The fact: the proclamation is here "the verbal proclamation" of the death as the sacrificial offering of Christ. All liturgies are evidence of this interpretation. Schniwind (cf. ThWNT I, 69-71), in his investigation into the meaning of 'solemn proclamation' expressed by the verb katanghelle whenever it is used in the New Testament, writes regarding its use in I Cor. 11:26: "the verb is not used to describe the celebration of the supper in terms of action (Tathandlung) as is quite clear both from the analogy and the use of katanghellein in the Jewish Passover and in the mystery cults". Consequently, the idea must be to indicate "words proclaimed in the celebration to solemnly announce the death of the Lord" - and this not just as a factual statement but also one with a particular significance.

We are therefore of the opinion that it is insufficient to say, at the level of faith ("fatto creduto reale" - almost untranslatable!), that we believe the sacrifice of Christ to be present in the Eucharist. This truth must be made completely clear by the "sign" which in a form of words specifies that Christ's sacrifice is offered today by the Community. Without this declarative sign the "sacrifice" easily remains, at the psychological level, "something from the past", and not "a once-and-for-all event made present today" with all its effects, and this not only objectively but also subjectively (i.e. for all to comprehend). By omitting the offering, it is quite possible - at least at the psychological level - for the "supper-fraternal meal-gift" to become solely and exclusively a presence of the Kyrios in an eschatological banquet, of the 'brother' around whom is gathered the Community, of the 'friend' who gives himself in order to forge an intimate relationship with that Community. This would have the effect of pushing into the background any content to the real presence of the Eucharist: the real presence of the sacrifice of Christ which the community gathers together in order to offer.

2. THE ECCLESIAL DIMENSION IN THE CONTEXT OF WORSHIP

Every liturgical celebration is "a public action which belongs to the Church as the sacrament of unity" (SC 26). But the ecclesial character of a particular celebration is proportionate to the "sign-content" of the celebration itself.

The ecclesial dimension inherent in the Eucharist conceived as "supper-fraternal meal-gift" is already clear from the terms used. But, if limited to this particular understanding of the Eucharist, its ecclesial dimension would be verified in terms of a community

gathering around a 'presence'. (Cfr. the pertinent comment of Schillebeeckx: op.cit. p.152).

But the reality of the eucharistic celebration is not limited to the action of "eating". This action, in so far as it is designed to "signify" and express sacramentally the real and reciprocal presence of Christ and the Church, is the result of the existence of two mysteries (which must be 'given' before the sacramental eating is possible? - my own comment!) - the existence of Christ in sacrament, the existence of Church in sacrament. (NOTE: this is a highly condensed sentence: "questa (manducazione) parte da due grandezze gia esistenti (sacramento di Cristo-sacramento della Chiesa)"). It is precisely the scope of the sacramental celebration to make present here and now these two great realities. The Church, while it is the Body of Christ, is not yet fully so. It must become more and more identified with It by progressively taking hold of the mystery of salvation already existing in all its fullness in Christ. The sacrament is the moment of mediation between Christ and the Church, in the sense that Christ 'makes' the sacrament in order to 'make' the Church, but does this precisely at the level of the reality contained in the sacrament. And so, in the specific case of the Eucharist, in so far as this is the "sacrament of the sacrifice of Christ", it is not exclusively nor even principally limited to being "offered" by the Church, but is necessarily directed to the making of Church which is offered in sacrifice to the Father, like Christ and in Christ.

This is the meaning, for example, of Augustine when he says that Christ offered himself once in his Passion for us in order that we should become the body of which he is the head (cfr. De civ. Dei, 10,6). But he (Christ) desired that the Church's daily sacrifice should be the sacrament of his offering, for the Church "being the body of him, the head, learns to offer itself in him" (ibid 20)" (the author develops A's thought in the ensuing lines which need not be quoted here). "It is clear that the sacrifice of Christ brings the Church into its ambience and, transforming it, makes it more and more a worshipping community, because it offers itself and is offered by Christ to the Father. Cfr. the splendid formula of the VEREONESE ed. Mohlberg 818, in which the Church celebrates its own sacrifice on the altar by its commemoration of the blood shed by the martyrs, which is the blood of the Church.

In the light of this dimension of the Church, which "becomes" (= "si fa" = "fit") in the sacrifice of Christ, the eucharistic celebration finally attains its full significance. Theology has always recognised, from the time of Augustine till that of St. Thomas (but much less afterwards), that the ultimate 'reality' ("res") of the Eucharist is not the sacramental body of Christ but the "Church-Body of Christ" - because the purpose of the Eucharist is to create the Church, in that this sacrament united the Church to the Cross of Christ in so far as the Church is "a holy and pleasing victim to God" (Rom. 12:1) in the circumstances of its daily life. Alger of Liege was correct to write on this theme of the 'making' of the Church into the total Christ: ibi super altare non conficitur Christus nisi conficitur universus (DE SAC. CORP. ET SANG. DOMINI, 3,12).

In conclusion, in the words of De Baciocchi, who regards as 'fidei proxima' the proposition that in the Eucharist "the whole Church is offerer and offered together with Christ", we can say:-

"The supreme act (the sacrifice of the Cross of the priesthood of Christ is designed to establish us in the exercise of a participated priesthood ... through which the Mass is the sacramental link between the bloody immolation of the Head with the 'spiritual sacrifices' of the Mystical Body" (L'Eucharistie, Tournai 1964, p.59).

But this 'sacramental' reality implies and demands that the sacrificial meaning contained in the celebration and which qualifies both Head and Body simultaneously should be rendered as explicit as possible, so that the sign-value be better understood, and it should be made abundantly clear that the Church is progressively created in proportion as it exhibits in itself the offering inherent in the sacrifice of Christ.

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