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Eucharistic Sacrifice : Blessing or Blasphemy ?

BY JOHN RODGERS

BEFORE turning directly to the theme of this short article which is concerned with our understanding of the respective rôles of God and man with respect to offering in the Lord's supper, one fundamental assumption must be stated. It is the conviction of the author that the very existence of God's people and all that they do as His people rests upon the unmerited love which God has to usward. If there is any basic theme to the biblical writings it is the theme of a gracious God seeking His wayward people ; it is the theme of grace. Therefore if we apply this to divine service, we must say that divine service is fundamentally and initially the service which God renders to man, and only then is it the response of repentance, praise, and thanksgiving which man renders to God and which is but a function of His grace. I am convinced that a survey of the biblical passages dealing explicitly with corporate worship makes this clear. In relation to the Lord's supper, for example, does not John's foot-washing scene say precisely this ? The fundamental assumption of this article, then, is that in all things and particularly with regard to Christian worship the primary act is God's—His washing our feet, His forgiving, cleansing grace.

Now we must turn to the specific issue of this paper. We seek to understand and fairly to evaluate the doctrine of the "eucharistic sacrifice". Here we find ourselves involved in discussion with one of the central doctrines of the current liturgical revival. There have been literally mountains of literature written upon this theme. However, if we are to do justice to the contemporary scene, if we are to be able to take a responsible rôle in today's discussion, we must get some historical perspective.

* * * *

We can pose our question as follows : is the holy communion or Lord's supper God's offering to us, or is it the Church's offering to God, or is it a combination of both ? This question was posed in dramatic fashion at the time of the Reformation. It was one of the issues which split the organized Western Church.

What was the Roman view ? Thomas Aquinas writes of the Lord's supper as follows : "The Sacrament is not merely a sacrament, but also a sacrifice . . . in so far as in the Sacrament the passion of Christ is represented".

Aquinas goes on to speak of a twofold completion or perfection of the mass. The first perfection, and the one necessary to the sacrament, is the act of elevation and consecration—the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ—which is at the same time the meritorious representation of Christ's sacrifice

to the Father by the Church. The second perfection is the act of communion or reception of the elements by the faithful, but this was not essential and often omitted except in so far as the priest received. By the act of re-offering Christ (bloodlessly) the Church procured merit which she then apportioned as she saw fit. In popular piety, the adoration of Christ under the forms of bread and wine was far more impressive than the seldom offered and accepted privilege of receiving the wafer, the wine having been earlier withdrawn from the laity.

Later, in response to the reforming efforts of the Protestant Reformation, the Council of Trent wrote the following "infallible" assertion :

If anyone says that a true and real sacrifice is not offered to God in the mass . . . let him be anathema . . . If anyone says that the sacrifice of the mass is only one of praise and thanksgiving . . . but not of propitiation . . . or that it ought not to be offered for the living and the dead . . . let him be anathema.

Perhaps there is room for present day Roman liturgiologists such as Dom Odo Casel, O. S. B., or Jungmann, S. J., to debate the nature of the relation of the sacrifice in the mass to that on Golgotha, but there can be no doubt that in Roman doctrine it is and remains to this day the act of the Church offering the mass to God and thereby obtaining merit.

Against this our Reformers took a strong stand. Cranmer wrote as follows, in his treatise *A Defense of the True and Catholic Doctrine of the Lord's Supper* :

The greatest blasphemy and impiety that can be against Christ, and yet universally used throughout the popish kingdom, is this, that the priests make their masses a sacrifice propitiatory, to remit the sins of themselves as well as of others.

(Cranmer then goes on to quote Hebrews at length. The primary argument of his quotation is that the perfectness of Christ's sacrifice lies precisely in the fact that it is not repeated—as was the inadequate sacrifice of the blood of bulls and goats. Nor can we say, if we follow the thought of the epistle, that Christ's intercession in heaven is an eternal or a continuing sacrifice, for the Epistle to the Hebrews clearly distinguishes between them. Christ's sacrifice is once offered, "εφάραξ".)

In the light of this statement the meaning of Cranmer's articles is clear :

Article XXXI : The offering of Christ once made is the perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual ; and there is none other satisfaction for sin, but that alone. Wherefore the sacrifice of the masses in which it was commonly said that the priest did offer Christ for the quick and the dead, to have remission of pain or guilt, were blasphemous fables and dangerous deceits. . . .

Article XXV : The sacraments were not ordained of Christ to be gazed upon, or to be carried about, but that we should duly use them. And in such only as worthily receive the same they have a wholesome effect or operation ; but they that receive them unworthily purchase to themselves damnation, as St. Paul saith.

As if this were not clear enough, in the 1552 Book of Common Prayer

Cranmer changed the place of the prayer of oblation from its medieval position prior to the consecration to a position *after* the communication of the faithful. He also assiduously removed the word "altar" and replaced it by "Holy Table" or "the Lord's Table". This was to make crystal clear the fact that it is Christ who is offering at His supper and that He is offering Himself, His broken body and blood, His reconciliation, *to the children of men*, and that our lay offering is only a response of praise and thanksgiving and the service of obedience which embraces all our daily lives.

Luther broke the rhythm in much the same fashion. In his *Formula Missae* he removed the offertory altogether. Further, he would not allow the word "sacrifice" to be associated with the sacrament of the altar but replaced it by the word "testament". Thus in England and on the Continent there was a radical break with the liturgical doctrine and rhythm as it had grown up in the West, designed to make clear that God in grace is offering forgiveness to man and that man's offering is the fruit of grace.

As a matter of fact, "offering" is not a primitive term for the believer's participation in the Lord's supper. We first hear of offering the eucharist to God in the late 300's in a writing of Jerome. This reversal of the movement of grace is not yet to be found either in Justin Martyr or in Hippolytus. We can say that the western liturgical rhythm achieved its form at a time when the Church was increasingly coming to view the service of holy communion as *its* offering to God. Which came first, the doctrine or the liturgical form, we cannot tell. As we noted, Cranmer and the Continental Reformers broke with both the doctrine and the liturgical form of rhythm.

The grounds were simple. In the Lord's supper God offers His Son, His reconciliation and communion, to man; man does not offer the Son to the Father. This is surely more faithful to the New Testament witness to the Lord's supper in which Christ consecrates bread and wine by a prayer of thanksgiving to the Father and then administers or offers the bread and wine *to the disciples* with the words of administration, "This is my body, this is my blood".

If I might be allowed a side remark at this point, it would seem to me on the basis of our above conclusions that we cannot countenance the contemporary argument which runs as follows: "Cranmer's 1549 Book of Common Prayer is superior to his 1552 Book of Common Prayer for the earlier book more closely approximates to the traditional movement of the western liturgies". This misses the whole point—it was just this liturgical structure which Cranmer had come to see was wrong. It was just this movement which had its emphasis in man's offering the mass to God, instead of in God's offering costly reconciliation to man. Also in the light of this I cannot but feel sorry that our American Book of Common Prayer has fallen back to the level of Cranmer's earlier and less mature work. Nor does it seem to me a good sign that the word "altar" comes so easily to our lips today. Here, too, we seem to be repudiating the basic concern of Cranmer's 1552 revision. The following statement by Dr. Massey Shepherd supports me in seeing this radical difference between the 1549 and 1552 books:

Our communion, with its two types of liturgy, expressive of two

approaches to the problem (of the eucharistic sacrifice) may be able to hold its various facets in tension. Sooner or later, however, it must be resolved.

We might sum up the results of our Reformation with regard to the matter at hand by saying that it clearly affirmed that God in Christ is the Host of His supper giving to man the forgiveness of sins won for man by His atoning Cross. It clearly denied that man offered Christ to God, and that Christ's sacrifice was bloodlessly repeated. The holy communion was no sacrifice but the bestowal of the benefits of *The Sacrifice* once offered for Christ's Church, His Body. The biblical language referring to man's sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving was kept, but clearly as referring to the fruit of grace and not to man's effort to procure grace. In answer to the question we posed at the beginning of this article we must say that at the Reformation we affirmed as a church that the offering basic to the Lord's supper is God's offering to man—the remission of sins.

* * * *

This whole question of the Church offering the holy communion has been raised in a new and different form by the present liturgical revival. In order to be fair and responsible we must take note of the differences in the present doctrine from the way the issue was posed at the Reformation. And then we must ask if this is, as is being claimed, truly an enrichment of our eucharistic worship, one which now transcends the differences between Protestant and Roman Catholic, or Reformed and Anglo-Catholic.

In 1958, the present Archbishop of Canterbury (then of York) addressed the Eucharistic Congress and declared :

The Tractarians recovered the doctrine . . . that in the eucharist the sacrifice is that of Christ Himself. Having nothing of our own to offer, trusting only in Christ's one offering of Himself, it is that which we represent to the Father as ourselves members of Christ's body, accepted only in Him.

Similar thoughts have been expressed by many Anglicans—for example, by Norman Pittenger in his book *The Christian Sacrifice*, and in the report of the 1958 Lambeth Conference. I quote a portion of the Lambeth report ; note especially the thought of Dr. A. G. Hebert who supports, as does the whole report, a doctrine of eucharistic sacrifice.

Christ's sacrificial work on the Cross was for us ; he died as our Redeemer. He who once died and is now alive for evermore is also in us ; he dwells in our hearts by faith. And in virtue of this union, we are now identified with him both in his death and passion, and in his resurrection life and glory. There is but one Body, of which he is the Head and we are the members ; and we are made one with each other because we are one in him.

In our baptism we were united with him by the likeness of his death (Rom. 6: 5) and in the eucharist we abide in him as we eat his Body and drink his Blood (John 6: 56). So we come to the Father in and through Jesus our great High Priest. We have nothing to offer that we have not first received, but we offer our praise and thanksgiving for Christ's sacrifice for us and *so present it again*, and ourselves in him, before the Father. We are partakers of the sacrifice of Christ (1 Cor. 10: 16), and this is shown forth by our sacrifice of praise to God continually through

Christ (Heb. 13: 15), and by our life of service and suffering for his sake in the world (Phil. 3: 9, 10). *We ourselves*, incorporate in the mystical body of Christ, *are the sacrifice we offer*. Christ with us *offers us* in himself to God.

Accordingly the Committee endorses the words of Dr. A. G. Hebert, S.S.M. : " The eucharistic Sacrifice, that storm-centre of controversy, is finding in our day a truly evangelical expression from the ' catholic ' side, when it is insisted that the sacrificial action is not any sort of re-immolation of Christ, nor a sacrifice additional to His one Sacrifice, but a participation in it. The true celebrant is Christ the High-Priest, and the *Christian people* are assembled as members of His Body to *present before God* His Sacrifice, and to be themselves offered up in Sacrifice through their union with Him. This, however, involves a repudiation of certain medieval developments, notably the habitual celebration of the Eucharist without the Communion of the people ; or the notion that the offering of the Eucharist is the concern of the individual priest rather than of the assembled church ; and above all, any idea that in the Eucharist we offer a sacrifice to propitiate God. *We offer it* only because He has offered the one Sacrifice, once for all, in which we need to participate. (Italics mine.)

It would seem only fair at this point to add a paragraph from A Prayer Book Manual which has been prepared in America by the Episcopal Evangelical Fellowship and which contains some surprising words :

The Holy Communion is the feast at which the Lord is the unseen Host. As they eat of the bread and drink of the cup, believers commemorate Christ's cross and resurrection and *offer themselves to God in union with Him* Who gave Himself on the cross ; they commune with Christ, spiritually receiving His body and blood ; they renew their fellowship with one another in Him, offer their sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving for all His benefits, and express their confidence in His final victory over all His enemies. (Italics mine.)

This recent view of doctrine which is presently referred to as the doctrine of the " Eucharistic Sacrifice " is central to the whole world-wide Roman and non-Roman liturgical movement. Mr. Shands, a graduate of Virginia Theological Seminary, writes in his book *The Liturgical Movement and the Local Church* :

The liturgical movement sees that the Christian doctrine of the priesthood of Christ is the key both to the re-integration and wholeness of life and to participation in the body of Christ. The Priesthood is the offering of Christ to the Father which is carried on to the end of time in His Body. It is the offering of ourselves, our souls and bodies, through the eternal offering of Christ on behalf of the world. The Priesthood is the action of Christ which bears our action through Him.

What is new here? Wherein is the old, unfortunate, and ugly wound between Roman piety and Protestant faith overcome in this doctrine of the " Eucharistic Sacrifice " ? Precisely, it is asserted, in the fact that the Church no longer simply offers Christ. We have become more aware of the divine initiative, now we offer ourselves in, with, and under the continuing offering of Christ to the Father which He continues with and through us. It is suggested to us that this is the best of both worlds.

What can we say to this doctrine which is one of the central religious

drives of the liturgical movement? There is much that should be said. In essence, however, I suggest that we must say that the doctrine of the "Eucharistic Sacrifice" is no bridge at all but a re-expression of the same piety which took offence at the fulness of grace at the Reformation. It fails to see the truth that worship is fundamentally God's gift to man, before it can be man's response to God; it is a piety which still seeks to give along with Christ instead of receiving all from Christ and then, in response, in new freedom, to give all in gratitude. It fails to hear the witness of St. John as he sums up the whole biblical witness that Jesus Christ is the only possibility of true worship and His coming is its primary direction and foundation (Jn. 4 : 1-30).

Let me be more specific. It is true that we are deeply involved and indeed offered in the Cross of Christ in and with Christ. But we did not do the offering. Christ came and died in our place—He offered us without our permission, by sheer grace. It was God's own doing that He hung and suffered there. And that has been done; it cannot be repeated. Let us be clear: all that we *willingly offered*, our sole contribution to Christ's sacrifice, was the revealing cry "crucify Him", and we hurried to supply the wood, hammer, and nails lest it fail to come to pass. It was God's objective atonement, finished and complete, and not our worship that made that Friday a blessing and not a curse for us.

And as it was the decisive victory of grace done for us and in spite of us on Golgotha, so, too, every celebration of the Lord's supper commemorates the same event of grace. But it is no reminding of the Father—it is not He who needs to have His eyes opened to the Cross, but we—we are the blind ones who are reminded. It is not God who receives our offering but we who receive afresh from His hands the blessings which flow from that sacrifice once offered. It is we who receive anew in order that our lives and words might show Him forth in all the world till He come again.

It is of primary importance that we do not confuse Christ's final, perfect, and completed offering upon the Cross with the supper during which He, the Crucified One, presents the reconciling benefits of that Cross to us on behalf of the whole Godhead. Nor dare we confuse the response of praise and thanksgiving, the response of a new life lived for our neighbour, with the very gift which makes all that possible, and which forgives its imperfections, which gift is the Grace of God given us in memory, taking, eating, and drinking within the Covenant People of Christ.

It is with heavy heart that we must disagree with some of the brethren, but for their sakes, and for our sake, yes for the sake of His Name, we must agree with a statement written by Martin Luther: "With unheard-of perversity, we mock at the mercy of the Giver; for we give as a work what we should be accepting as a gift, till the Testator now no longer distributes the largesse of His own good things, but becomes the recipient of ours. Alas for such a sacrilege!" May God by His mercy excuse us and deliver us from such blasphemy and may the Lord's supper, the holy communion, become to us a eucharist of praise and thanksgiving for what He gives us therein. Amen.

Postscript :

Discussions following a talk in which this material was first presented, have convinced me that a final word about the reality and necessity of man's response must be said lest we be misunderstood (i.e., Rom. 6 : 1). There is no greater moral power given to man, and there is no greater moral claim placed upon man than by the *grace* of God. This means that grace cannot be spoken of without at the same time speaking of man's response and his responsibility. It is however *grace* which frees fallen and enslaved men for a life in the service of God and man. Any piety or doctrine and any liturgical action which obscures the centrality and reality of God's grace, putting in its place, even partially, man's innate moral sensitivity and power, does not arise from the Cross of Christ and His offering. In the long run such doctrines yield an "immoral" harvest ; they lead man into the paths of self-deceptive moralism or paralyse him in the chains of cynicism, pessimism, and despair.

The Geneva of John Calvin

BY THE EDITOR

IT was only late in 1546, more than ten year's after Calvin's first arrival in their city, that the pastors of the Genevan Church started to keep a register of their affairs and transactions. Those ten years had seen not only Calvin's coming in 1536, but also his expulsion in 1538 and his return in 1541, now to remain and lead the Reformation in Geneva for the remaining twenty-three years of his life. Unfortunately, the register was not as faithfully kept as one would have wished. It seems to have been written up somewhat spasmodically, with the result that there are numerous gaps and omissions, sometimes at points where we should very much like to have more information. Had the secretaries of the Company of Pastors been aware that what they were writing up was to become a historic document, they would doubtless have left us a fuller and more detailed record. As it is, however, it provides only a partial account of the doings and deliberations of the Company of Pastors in Calvin's time. Fortunately, there are other sources of information by which the record can be supplemented and filled out. But in itself the Register of the Company of Pastors is, none the less, a document the importance of which it would be difficult to exaggerate. The publication of its text makes available an indispensable work of reference for all serious students of Calvin and the city which adopted him.

It is a popular fantasy that the Frenchman John Calvin descended on Geneva as a religious tyrant whose aim was to dominate and subdue the unwilling populace of this city of no more than moderate importance and size. (It numbered some 20,000 souls in his day, which is comparable to the population of a large city parish of our day.) The fact is that nothing was further from his mind than to remain and make