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THE SACRAMENTAL AND SACRIFICIAL NATURE OF THE EUCHARIST

Otto W. Heick

In the night in which he was betrayed, Jesus prayed that all who would believe in him through the word of the disciples may be one as he and the Father are one (John 17:20 f.) and instituted the Eucharist as a visible sign of the oneness of all believers with him. All who eat his flesh and drink his blood abide in him and he in them (John 6:56). Yet the history of the church presents a different picture. The teaching about the Eucharist and its administration became the most divisive factor among Christians. Catholics deny Protestants altar fellowship. The unity of the Reformation movement was terminated in the conflict between Luther and the "Sacramentarians", as Luther called Karlstadt and Zwingli. Altar fellowship is even today a thorny issue between the Lutherans themselves on this continent.

Under the influence of the Ecumenical Movement the "ugly ditch" separating the churches has fortunately been levelled or even filled up. In Europe the churches of the Reformation (Lutheran and Reformed) and the pre-Reformation churches (Waldensians and Bohemian Brethren) issued a joint statement, the so-called *Leuenberger Konkordie*, 1973, in which they said that in the Eucharist the risen Lord offers his body and blood under the emblems of bread and wine to all participants, to believers for salvation, to unbelievers for judgment. They added that all speculations of the presence of Christ in the Supper apart from the act of eating and drinking obscure the meaning of the sacrament.

As Lutherans of North America we are especially interested in the Dialogue carried on between Lutherans and Catholics (1964-1978). In this article we shall examine

Volume III on "The Eucharist as Sacrifice".¹ In addition, an essay by Gunther Wenz on "Die Lehre vom Opfer Christi im Herrenmahl als Problem oekumenischer Theologie" in *Kerygma und Dogma*, January/March 1982 will also be considered.

The controversy over the Eucharist revolved around the question of the mode of the presence of Christ in the sacrament and its sacrificial nature. Concerning the former, Rome and Wittenberg maintained the Real Presence over against Zurich and Geneva; on the other hand, all Reformers denied the Catholic teaching of the Eucharist as a propitiary sacrifice for the living and the dead. In the earlier period of the Reformation Luther launched a sharp attack on the Catholic teaching but he soon found himself engrossed in a fierce conflict with Karlstadt and Zwingli over the Real Presence. Throughout his career Luther emphasized that the sacrament is valid as an ordinance of Christ, yet efficacious for salvation only if received in faith. Hence he felt offended by the Roman teaching that the sacrament is effective *ex opere operato* apart from faith. "Not the sacrament but the faith in the sacrament justifies." He also maintained that the sacrament is valid independent of the subjective condition of the priest and the recipient.

The sacrificial aspect of the mass became the main target of his criticism in the *Treatise on the New Testament* (1520).² He was not opposed to the term "sacrifice" in relation to the mass; his opposition was solely directed against the mass as a propitiary sacrifice. The celebration of the mass, he said, should incite us to surrender ourselves as a living sacrifice to God. It cannot be a "work" to appease God. The mass is a receiving not a giving, it is a testament not a sacrifice. Luther continued his criticism in *On The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. Yet his vocabulary in the former writing is fluid to admit that in a certain sense the mass could be called a sacrifice. In the mass, he says, "I also offer Christ in that I desire and believe that he accepts me and my prayer and praise, and presents it to God in his person. And in order to strengthen this faith of mine he gives a token that he will do it. This token is the sacrament of bread and wine. Thus it becomes clear that it is not the priest alone who offers the sacrifice of the mass; it is the faith which each one has for himself. This is the truly priestly office through which Christ is offered as a sacrifice to God, an office which the priest, with the outward ceremonies of the mass, simply represents. Each and all are therefore equally spiritual priest before God."³ In faith then we take the sacrament believing that all sin has been forgiven by Christ's death on the cross.

The word "sacrifice" does not occur in the Latin text of the *Augsburg Confession*. The criticism of the mass expressed in Articles XXII and XXIV deals simply with the abuses of the mass in the life of the medieval church; withholding the cup from the laity, private masses for the living and the dead, turning the mass into a sort of fair, etc.⁴ But because the Roman *Confutation*⁵ defended the practice of the day, Melancthon felt obligated to speak at considerable length on the subject in the *Apology*

1. Published jointly by representatives of the U.S.A. National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation and the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. 1968.

2. *American Edition*, Vol. 35, pp. 75-111.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

4. T.G. Tappert, editor, *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959).

5. H.E. Jacobs, *The Book of Concord*, Vol. 2 (Philadelphia: G.W. Frederick, 1883), pp. 209-241.

of the *Augsburg Confession*.⁶ In brief he maintained that the *ex opere operato* work-mass concept of Rome is contrary to Scripture. The ceremony of the mass is a picture or seal showing forth the promise of the word "given for you".⁷

The authors of the *Confutation* maintained that no Catholic had ever taught that Christ by his passion made satisfaction for original sin and that he instituted the mass for actual sin. For the mass is not a means to abolish sins which are destroyed by repentance; it is a rite to abolish the punishment due to sin, supplying satisfaction and an increase of grace.⁸ However, the Council of Trent (Twenty-Second Session, Sept. 17, 1562) seemed to uphold just that what the *Confutation* rejected, saying that what Christ accomplished on the cross may be represented in the mass and applied in the mass for "those sins we daily commit".⁹ "In the mass Christ is contained and immolated in an unbloody manner" and "this sacrifice is truly propitiatory." By its oblation the Lord is "appeased" . . . "the victim is one and the same, the same now offering by the ministry of priests, who then offered himself on the cross, the manner alone of offering being different."¹⁰

The situation remained frozen for centuries. The opinions of both churches were fixed. The Roman teaching of the mass and the doctrine of papal infallibility seemed to be the greatest stumbling block for mutual recognition. The revival of interest among Lutherans in our times can most likely be traced to Yngve Brilioth's seminal work, *Eucharistic Faith and Practice, Evangelical and Catholic*, 1926.¹¹ He tried to restore the communal character of the Eucharist in favor of a strident individualism. The movement gained momentum at the Faith and Order Conference at Edinburgh, 1937. The trigger was the book *The Fullness of Sacrifice* by the Anglican bishop of Gibraltar, F.C.N. Hicks.¹² In the incarnation Christ made himself one with us, Hicks says, we crucify him. He then takes his blood, i.e. his life, which by identification with the incarnation is our life, brings it to God and atones for us. He is also the risen and exalted Lord. The sacrifice is thus a name for the whole action from the incarnation to the exaltation. He is the head of the church which is his body. In the Heavenly Sanctuary we offer ourselves together with him as a sacrifice to God. This sort of argument comes close to what Luther is saying in *The Treatise on the New Testament* as outlined above.

The article on the Mass in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* contains the following statements: Christ temporizes in the mass what is forever actual in heaven. The mass re-enacts sacramentally what it communicates. The mass is numerically the same act as that of Calvary. Man presents God with an object that stands for himself, it is an act of self-surrender to God. It is the family meal of God's children. It is the most public and social function of the church, God speaking and man answering.¹³

In the joint statement on the *Eucharist as Sacrifice* we read: "Lutherans and

6. Tappert, pp. 249-268.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 262.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 230.

9. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. II (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1919), p. 177.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

11. Yngve Brilioth, *Eucharistic Faith and Practice, Evangelical and Catholic*, translated by A.G. Hebert (London: S.P.C.K., 1930).

12. F.C.N. Hicks, *The Fullness of Sacrifice* (London: S.P.C.K., 1953).

13. *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 19, pp. 414-426.

Catholics alike acknowledge the one-for-all sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Both traditions agree that the celebration of the Eucharist is the church's sacrifice of praise and self-offering or oblation. Though Trent affirmed the unrepeatable character of the cross, Lutheran doubts about the Catholic position were not resolved. Today, however, they find no reason for such doubt. What God did in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus he does not do again. These 'events are unique; they cannot be repeated, or extended or continued'. Yet in the Eucharist God makes them present through the Holy Spirit, thus making us participants in Christ." (I Cor. 1:9).¹⁴ According to the Catholic theologian Odo Casel, the mass is a symbolic-real representation of Christ. It is symbolic because Christ did not give the disciples to eat pieces of his flesh nor drops of his blood to drink; rather he offered them these gifts under the emblems of bread and wine. In Biblical thought (Exodus 25:40, 28:30, Hebr. 8:5, 9:23) the *Urbild* (the original) is objectively and really contained in the *Abbild* (image).¹⁵ Concerning the Catholic affirmation that the church "offers Christ" in the sacrament which in the eyes of the Lutherans turned the mass into a human work, the statement practically repeats what Luther and Hicks had been saying on the unity of the church with Christ. Through this union "the Eucharistic assembly 'offers Christ' by consenting in the power of the Holy Spirit to be offered by him to the Father." Both agree that the propitiary sacrifice of the cross is unique hence Lutherans reject what they think Trent said about propitiary masses for "the living and the dead" even though the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* concedes with respect to prayers for the dead that we "do not forbid them".¹⁶ They likewise realize that there is significant convergence in the actual practice of eucharistic worship. The Second Vatican Council in its Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy declared that the nature of the mass is such that communal celebration is to be preferred to individual and quasi-private celebration. It is to be celebrated in the vernacular with active participation of the laity. In some cases Rome now permits the laity to receive both elements.

The question of eucharistic sacrifice is closely related to other issues, the *Dialogue* concludes. Foremost is the problem of the "real presence." Both confess a manifold presence of Christ. He is present in his body the church, the people of God, in the proclamation of the Gospel and in the Lord's Supper. The Lutheran Confessions affirm that Jesus Christ is "really", "truly" and "substantially" present in the sacrament. They hold that his presence does not come about through the faith of the believers as Zwingli and, with some modification, Calvin maintained. Yet his presence is not spatial or natural but "sacramental", "supernatural" and "spiritual".¹⁷ The mode of Christ's presence is not mentioned. Lutherans have followed Luther's teaching of the majestic *genus* "by which the Son of God truly and really communicates the properties of his divine nature to his human nature." Christ is omnipresent in both natures. But the communication of properties from nature to nature, has been accepted neither by Catholic nor Reformed theologians. But if after the manner of a body the

14. *Dialogue* III, pp. 187-191.

15. Odo Casel, *The Mystery of Christian Worship*, translated by B. Neunheuser (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1962). The biography of Casel on p. 210 shows his other writings on the subject.

16. Tappert, p. 267.

17. Formula of Concord, Articles on VII and VIII. Tappert, pp. 481-492 and 568-610.

body of Christ is spatially contained in heaven, how can it be present upon the numerous altars on earth?¹⁸

The Scholastics of the Middle Ages referred to the analogy of light. While the sun occupies a definite place in the firmament, the light radiating from the sun is present everywhere in the universe. A beam of light is not a multiplication of the sun; instead it is a manifestation of one luminary body. Thus the eucharistic body is a manifestation of the glorified body of Christ. A rationalistic attempt to explain the mystery of Christ's presence in the Eucharist is to be rejected. A definite commitment to either framework is thought to be untenable, the document concludes.¹⁹ The Catholic teaching of transubstantiation is not to explain how Christ becomes present in the sacrament. If thus explained Lutherans find that teaching "is a legitimate way of attempting to express the mystery" though they believe that the concept associated with "transubstantiation" is misleading and therefore prefer to avoid it.²⁰

In conclusion, the unity we seek is not uniformity in theology which does not even exist in the New Testament, for faith and theology are two different categories. Faith is primary, theology as interpretation is secondary. The one partner may not always be comfortable with the theological terminology of the other. Lutherans, as stated, prefer not to speak of transubstantiation in the sacrament though they share with Catholic believers the faith in the Lord of the sacrament.

18. Cf. the writer's article "Consubstantiation in Luther's Theology," *Canadian Journal of Theology*, Vol. XII (1966), No. 1, pp. 3-8.

19. The Lutheran teaching is rejected in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 14, p. 361. The Presbyterian scholar, Charles Hodge, presents a distorted picture of Lutheran teaching when he says that they teach a "communio idiomatum" and a "communicatio naturarum." *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, and Co., 1874), p. 407. According to Luther the union of the two natures in Christ is so intimate that he is always and everywhere present as the God-Man. His body, too, is ubiquitous. Yet the problem is unsolvable. Bonhoeffer remarks we should be satisfied WHO Jesus is, the HOW is beyond the reach of human reason. *Christ the Centre*, English by John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 59.

20. *Dialogue* III, p. 198.