

*'That they all may
be one'*



THE SACRIFICE OF GOD - Exploring Eucharist

Sacrifice is taboo for the modern Western mind, suggestive as it is either of personal costliness or the barbaric killing off of defenceless animals in lieu; all this, in addition, to placate a vengeful deity. It's not on in a society schooled in self-affirmation and molly-coddling, with the protection of animal rights topping its agenda. And God, if there is one, has to come out on the self-affirmation side if there is to be any truck with him at all.

But God and the Christian believer are bound up with sacrifice from the word go. Witness to this by believers is essential if a half-crazy world is to be halted in its rundown to self-destruction. It would hardly be the time, then, for liturgical renewal to be letting the sacrificial aspects of the faith slip out of consciousness, vital though it might be to hold together a myriad other emphases as well. The Eucharist is the centre of Christian worship, firstly as a response to the Lord's explicit injunction: **do this**, but also because the very doing is itself God's appointed means of bringing each successive generation in touch with the complete redemptive work of Christ.

Without the sacrificial life and death of Jesus there would be no salvation. Incarnation, Calvary, the descent into hell, followed by resurrection and ascension and the sending of the Holy Spirit are precisely what sacrifice is about. It is that whole **mystery** which we 'remember' in our eucharist, which we 're-enact' at our Lord's own behest and which, in consequence, is brought again into the present for believers to share in and mete out to others. The technical name for this (from the Greek) is **anamnesis**.

Moreover, **anamnesis** is not some modern trumped-up jargon to express a novel emphasis. It is rooted in scriptural tradition. For generations before Christ, and still today, the Jewish people at Passover have re-lived the events of the exodus from Egypt in their worship. By so doing, under God, they bring the spiritual reality of the past event into the present, to be experienced

again for all its deepest implications to be appropriated. At the Last Supper Jesus gave his very self to his followers in the bread and wine, the new passover in his body and blood. The next day's sacrifice was anticipated then. It is re-enacted now, the same unique, unrepeatable sacrifice, as a present reality, each time we celebrate the Eucharist in his name. Our traffic is with eternity and not with our limited concepts of time.

But why are we so fearful of sacrifice? In its root meaning it implies making something holy, dedicating it by setting it aside for God. In that sense every baptised Christian is already a sacrifice, destined for ultimate sanctification, for union with God the blessed Trinity in the kingdom of heaven. There *is* cost, obviously, the overcoming of sin and evil in our lives, and the reality of physical death itself to pass through. But the true end of sacrifice is overflowing life, just as the purpose of the Eucharist is holy communion, participation in the risen life of Christ - after the cross and blood-shedding comes the resurrection.

As is well known the word *Eucharist* in itself means thanksgiving. So here again we have a link with sacrifice, the thanksgiving sacrifices of the ancient Jewish religion as described in the Old Testament. (*See for instance Leviticus 7: 11-12; Jeremiah 17:26*) In the New Testament writings, and in subsequent Eucharistic rites, the sacrificial offering of praise and thanksgiving has come into its own, together with the spontaneous self-offering of the worshipper to God in adoration and love - 'we offer unto thee ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a living sacrifice . . .'.

Why then *is* there a contemporary fear in some circles of the notion of sacrifice in the Eucharist? In short the answer is because of our Christian divisions and consequent misunderstandings. It has not always been so and, in fact, the Eastern Churches have remained consistently untouched by such controversies, anchored as their Eucharistic liturgies still are in the earliest tradition of the Church.

Happily, twentieth century liturgical study has enabled the West to start going back again behind apparent differences and so to rediscover common roots. There is a noticeable convergence of form in the revised Eucharistic rites of the Western Churches and that implies a growing consensus in theology too. Old controversies, then, are being seen in new light, not least as a result of ecumenical dialogue. The knotty question of sacrifice is a vivid case in point. Two of the most significant ecumenical dialogues and documents of recent years ARCIC and BEM* might be cited by way of illustration.

Having related the Eucharist to the concept of *anamnesis* (see above) the ARCIC report continues;

In the eucharistic prayer the Church continues to make a perpetual memorial of Christ's death, and his members, united with God and one another, give thanks for all his mercies, entreat the benefits of his passion on behalf of the whole Church, participate in these benefits and enter into the movement of his self-offering.

And a little later it is said of Christ that he, 'gives himself sacramentally in the Body and Blood of his paschal sacrifice'.

So Eucharist is sacrifice, shared in by all who are present, but it is not in any sense a repetition or a superseding of the one, unique, sacrifice of Christ. This is made clear in a later publication from ARCIC (*Elucidations, Salisbury 1979*) clarifying some of the issues:

It is possible to say at the same time that there is only one unrepeatable sacrifice in the historical sense, but that the Eucharist is a sacrifice in the sacramental sense, provided that it is clear that it is not a repetition of the historical sacrifice The Church in celebrating the Eucharist gives thanks for the gift of Christ's sacrifice and identifies itself with the will of Christ who has offered himself to the Father on behalf of all mankind . . . Christ in the Holy Spirit unites his people with himself in a sacramental way so that the Church enters into the movement of his self-offering . . .

The BEM report says similar things:

What it was God's will to accomplish in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, God does not repeat. In the memorial of the Eucharist, however, the Church offers its intercession in communion with Christ, our great High Priest . . . (and then, in commentary, the text continues:). . . The understanding is that there is only one expiation, that of the unique sacrifice of the cross, made actual in the Eucharist and presented before the Father in the intercession of Christ and of the Church for all humanity . . .

Are there still fears that the concept of Eucharistic sacrifice somehow makes Calvary insufficient and incomplete? Listen to the words of a Roman Catholic writer, back in 1950 before the renewed understanding of traditional teaching which stemmed from the Second Vatican Council of 1962-65:

The Mass does not detract from Calvary because, through its ritual action it does no more than utilize the inexhaustible riches of Calvary. There is no new immolation, and yet there is one - that of Calvary itself. The sign fulfils its promises. It makes us participate in a mystery without which it would itself be meaningless, a mystery whose sufficiency, transcendence and oneness it unceasingly proclaims. (Canon Eugene Masure: The Sacrifice of the Mystical Body)

So it is that theologians of recent years, and from varying Christian traditions, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, have been drawn back to the early foundations of Eucharistic understanding and have imparted the teaching to us. How sad if we should choose to go behind this current teaching again to a more recent past of polemical misunderstanding and so seek to defend our inherited prejudices and misconceptions. The Church does sometimes wander off into by-ways. Let us be tractable enough to be led back to the safe highway of the original tradition if we hope to be sharers in Christ's mission to a sceptical world.

Finally, lest we should still be apprehensive that these notions are somehow unscriptural, we might glance at one or two things that Professor John MacQuarrie has to say in his masterly *A Guide to the Sacraments* (SCM Press 1997). There he reminds us that the Book of Revelation speaks of Jesus as the Sacrificial Lamb 'slain before the foundation of the world'. (Rev. 13:8). Calvary as sacrifice is eternal and thus perpetually granted to us sacramentally in the Eucharist - there is no renewal or repetition but permanent actuality.

Moreover, Jesus, as our living and glorified Intercessor, continually offers his own sacrifice to the Father in heaven (Cf. *Epistle to the Hebrews* 7:25; 9:24 et al). Each Eucharist is an *anamnesis* of that as well. Our own intercession is offered, with Christ's to the Father as a continuous reminder, humanly speaking, to him of our utter dependence on the Son of Man's atoning sacrifice on our behalf.

There *is* no other name given under heaven by which we, or any single part of our half-crazed world, can be saved. Let us not then hinder others by our disputations, or ourselves by our groundless fears, from drinking at the God-given well of sacramental salvation.