

Sacrifice: A Metaphor Reconsidered

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|---|-----------|
| Sacrifice: A Metaphor Reconsidered | 1 |
| Introduction | 2 |
| The History and Meaning of Sacrifice in the Judeo-Christian Tradition..... | 3 |
| Sacrifice: The Problem of Literal Interpretation | 7 |
| Sacrifice: A Metaphorical Twist..... | 10 |
| Conclusion..... | 14 |

The scandal of Christianity turns the nature of sacrifice upside down: instead of God accepting us and our gifts, we have to accept God's gift to us. It is utopian from our point of view - more than, and different from, anything we can do; that is why it is our only true liberation. Sacrifice is a means of propitiation; it is a means of drawing near. But in the life and death of Jesus, God is the one who draws near to us; we are the ones propitiated! ¹

¹ Arthur Vogel, *Radical Christianity and the Flesh of Jesus: The Roots of Eucharistic Living* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1995), 56.

Introduction

This column addresses how the time-honored metaphor of sacrifice still speaks to the Catholic religious imagination as it grapples with the significance of Christ's Paschal Mystery for the sake of the world. Current Catholic sacramental theology, particularly that of David Power and Louis-Marie Chauvet, and Protestant scholars such as Ian Bradley have taken up the topic of sacrifice and have offered the Church a way of reappropriating this traditional metaphor by which Christians interpret their Eucharistic celebrations. Since St. Paul Christian theology has assigned this metaphor first to Christ's death on Calvary, then to the life of discipleship in general and in some qualified manner to the Eucharist itself. This column will consider how our liturgical ministry can be informed by this metaphor as foundational for a contemporary Eucharistic piety. I begin by exploring the history and religious meaning of sacrifice. I then examine how the Church moved from a metaphorically understanding of sacrifice to a literal interpretation. The column closes with a contemporary reappropriation of this metaphor which can inform a liturgical spirituality for those who minister in the celebration of the Eucharist.

In the Church's use of this metaphor we acknowledge that through the medium of the elements of bread and wine, God offers self in the Paschal Mystery of Christ. It is in the Church's thanksgiving over simple gifts, in the eating of fragments of bread and sips of wine, that the community confesses that transformation will take place for the life of the world. In approaching the Christian liturgy, we acknowledge the ancient practice of sacrifice so as to reinterpret it as metaphor; in doing so we claim that sacrifice is the vehicle for our radical change in Christ.

The History and Meaning of Sacrifice in the Judeo-Christian Tradition

The term sacrifice in a religious context usually conjures up images of bleating animals, bloodletting, charred flesh and smoking pyres. More often than not sacrifice as a religious phenomenon is associated or understood particularly as the thing offered such as grain, wine, incense, and animal or in the case of ancient Canaanite practice, the first born child. Sacrifice, as an act of worship must be reconsidered first and foremost as an **action** which establishes and maintains a relationship between humankind and divinity mediated through material things. This action which binds God and worshipper in a relationship can be interpreted anthropologically as a highly symbolic form of gift-exchange. The sociologist Marcel Mauss suggests that symbolic gift-exchange in traditional societies was developed for the cohesion of social order, and has its roots in religious observance where gifts are offered in hope of communion, in thanksgiving or to propitiate the gods.² Mauss did a landmark study of this social phenomenon in the early part of the twentieth century. He observed that the exchange of goods in the market place, later replaced by currency exchange for food stuff and other necessities, often coexisted with other kinds of exchange which were highly symbolic in nature. Often the exchange of such symbolic goods as gifts among members of many traditional societies is what bound the community together emotionally and morally rather than economically and materially.

The religious act of sacrifice is seen as a form of symbolic gift-exchange where the individual or group offers to the divinity gifts which secure communion, appease anger or offer thanksgiving. It is the offer of self – individual and corporate - mediated

² Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York/London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1967), 29.

through things – often through things which in themselves are of questionable or little market value i.e., grains of cereal, a libation of wine, a spotless lamb, which symbolically carries the weight of divine/human interaction. It must be acknowledged though that rather than offering gifts to thank or commune with divinity, sacrifice often masked less noble intentions. The theologian Ian Bradley claims that often the human anxiety or unease concerning passivity or receptiveness in the face of Mystery is expressed in the human propensity to control, dominate or exploit divinity as it is manifested in sacrificial propitiation.³ According to Arthur Vogel's usage propitiation is understood as an act which brings God and humankind together. Ian Bradley defines the word pejoratively as an act of offering by a worshipper who seeks to manipulate the divinity for personal gain. Such an attitude expresses a religious imagination in acts of worship which bargains with, demands from, or wishes to appease divinity. Sacrifice as manipulation or propitiation was achieved by interpreting gifts as substitutions for the worshippers, i.e. a commodity produced by the offerer to bargain with divinity rather than as symbolic representation of the individual who seeks partnership with God. Sacrifice as substitution for the worshipper allows for a distancing of the partners determined and negotiated solely by the human party. The difference between substitution and representation is that the latter allows for the possibility of relationship and therefore personal transformation while the former prevents it.

Sacrifice as substitution prevents the human spirit from responding to the call to be Godlike in actions of self-donation for the sake of the other. If sacrifice is seen through the lens of the market place where goods are exchanged in kind, or money is exchanged for goods, worship is seen as a transaction which secures rights over a particular

³ Ian Bradley, *The Power of Sacrifice* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 1995) 278.

commodity, whether that commodity is good health or abundant harvest. Sacrifice as gift-exchange where one party gifts another with personal presence through the mediation of things – an affirmation of the principle of sacramentality - secures a relationship characterized by hope, freedom and gratitude. The best of sacrificial religion interpreted by Christian faith understands worships not as a bribe, bargaining chip or commodity but as an act of receiving from God the gift of life through Jesus Christ. Authentic worship is not negotiation but reception. It is grounded in a humble heart which receives the presence of God so as to share that love with others. It is this receptivity on the part of the Christian assembly which grounds in theory and in practice the Eucharist and its role in our sanctification.

. . . the sacrifice of Christ is potentially but most really the sacrifice of humanity. Our task is, by his Spirit, to take our place in that sacrifice. In the strict sense there is only one sacrifice – the obedience of the Son to the Father, and of Humanity to the Father in the Son. This was manifest in actual achievement on Calvary; it is represented in the breaking of the Bread; it is reproduced in our self-dedication and resultant service; it is consummated in the final coming of the kingdom.⁴

In using the religious act of sacrifice as metaphor to interpret Christ's death, the life of the discipleship and the Eucharistic meal, the Church did so to intentionally undermine human arrogance by claiming that God is the author of all sacrifice – it is God's action of vulnerability before humankind in *kenosis* which grounds all religious theory and practice. The less noble aspect of viewing sacrifice from the perspective of the market place has been turned on its head as Christian metaphor.

In Jewish sacrificial religion, there appears a progression first from child sacrifice – a practice which no doubt provides the cultural context of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, a practice prevalent among his Canaanite neighbors, to animal and vegetable

sacrifices, until finally sacrifice is understood as primarily a conversion of heart represented symbolically through gifts interpreted through ritual prayer. In Isaiah, this sacrifice of a righteous life is exemplified by the *Ebed Yahweh*, the suffering servant that has been applied to Jesus Christ in the Christian tradition. The sacrifice which is now acceptable to God is the way of peace as lived by Jesus who was murdered for being righteous; in the crucifixion of Jesus the gift of Godself in Christ's person, an embodied - material gift, was rejected by both Jew and gentile, in other words by all of humanity. The offering of Godself to us in this gift or "sacrifice" of Jesus Christ, deconstructs the ancient religious impulse so as to radically reinterpret it.

The question which is addressed in a religion of sacrifice as gift-exchange is an existential one: what should our posture be before a personal presence which is experienced as threatening and benevolent – distant and near – transcendent and imminent – radically Other and intimately familiar? Sacrificial ritual tried to address this question by actions which would make divinity kindly disposed towards us. The best of traditional religion recognized the connection between the gift and the giver; the gift which was sacrificed was seen as a symbolic extension of the one sacrificing. The gift was not to a substitute for the worshipper – a commodity to be exchanged - but a symbolic representation which enabled personal transformation. The prophetic religion of ancient Israel was adamant in condemning any discrepancy between gift and giver. The sacrifice whatever that might be, was only acceptable if it was the manifestation of a humble and contrite heart vulnerable before a gifting God. It is in this understanding of sacrifice that the Church's faith in God's gift of Jesus Christ is grounded as it celebrates the Eucharist.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 210.

Sacrifice: The Problem of Literal Interpretation

What happened early in the development of Eucharistic theology by the time of the bishop and theologian Irenaeus of Lyon (d. 202), was the Church's understanding that it offered praise and thanksgiving along with the gifts of bread and wine. Once this development took root, it was only a logical but misguided step to claim that the Church offers the transformed body of Christ somehow to the Father in the Eucharist.⁵ Such an interpretation is expressed in our own day through suggestive phrases in contemporary anaphoras. We find such a provocative phrase in the Third Eucharistic Prayer which proclaims the following after the epiclesis and institution narrative: "we offer you in thanksgiving this holy and living sacrifice." If we can tentatively claim that the Church offers to God the work of human hands in the bread and wine, it must always acknowledge that it is God who is author of creation. Even if it can be claimed with much reservation that the Church offers to God the Body and Blood of Christ it does so because of the identification of the Church with Christ's offer of self to the Father. In doing so the Church must always acknowledge that it is the power of the Spirit of Jesus which is anticipatory to any response by the Church.⁶ In classic theology this transformation in Christ is grounded in the kenotic action of the pre-existent Word of God taking on human nature in Jesus of Nazareth. It is this taking on of human nature, it is this exchange of identities which is offered in Christian Initiation and is sustained in the Eucharist for our very life.

We cannot altogether escape from the echoes of primal and pre-Christian rites that the Eucharist evokes. Nor should we. At the heart of primal religion . . . was an understanding of sacrifice as communion. It was on the sacrificial altar that time and eternity met and human beings encountered the gods as the ascending odour of fresh blood and burnt flesh mingled

⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

with the descending fragrance of divine approbation. This primal metaphysical encounter between earth and heaven also takes place at the Christian communion table. The great difference is that now God has come down to earth and it is his Son, at once the sacrificial victim and the eternal high priest, that we meet there. Once again, we are brought back to the key feature of the Christian understanding of sacrifice over against the pagan view. The initiative lies firmly with God. The sacrifice is his through Christ and it is his real presence that we encounter when we partake of the Eucharist.⁷

We can claim that when the Christian tradition appropriated the notion of sacrifice as metaphor, of expressing a new religious insight and reality, it opened itself up to all kinds of misunderstandings and abuse regarding Christ's death and how this death was memorialized in the Eucharist. It was a creative and innovative step to do so, in that it allowed for a new and radical reinterpretation of both Jewish and Greco-Roman religious experience. Unfortunately through the vagaries of time, in the process of inculturation and theological and catechetical laxity, the metaphor of sacrifice as gift exchange lent itself to a literal interpretation so that the Eucharist was seen as something offered by us to obtain favors – the marketplace had replaced the giving and receiving of gift. The offering of the Eucharist as a commodity to secure favors demanded more priests who were dependent on stipends for their livelihood. Substitution had replaced representation in much of the medieval celebration of the Eucharist. The metaphor no longer represented the yoking of two dissimilar realities but was again understood as the attitude and gesture of offering something to propitiate God. Rather than expressing a new horizon of religious meaning, the use of metaphor as it was applied to the death of Christ, to Christian discipleship and to the celebration of the Eucharist, led to a rather skewed understanding of the divine/human relationship particularly as it developed in the Medieval Church. Sacrifice as a “live” metaphor which

⁷ *Ibid.*, 283.

expressed in figurative language a revolution in religious experience became “dead” or a literal way of expressing the Christ event. The metaphor became literal and descriptive and therefore shaped the Christian religious imagination to interpret the Eucharist as a propitiatory act seeing the Eucharist as a substitute rather than a symbolic representation of the Christian’s life in Christ.

Sadly, the post-Augustinian Western Church lost the biblical and patristic view of sacrifice as something that originates with God and saw it as something done by humans to God. The element of reciprocity and participation were lost and the idea of propitiation become dominant. The Eucharist became increasingly detached from the invisible sacrifice of a broken heart to stand on its own as a cultic ritual with its own inherent and self-sufficient efficacy, resting on the mechanical actions performed by the priest rather than the inner disposition or outward behavior of the worshippers . . . Sacrifice was narrowly related to the removal of sin and its wider significance as the animating principle of creation was all but forgotten.⁸

To understand the liturgy as only the means to secure a product, i.e., “grace,” is to ignore how the relationship between humankind and the divine are established and maintained through symbolic linguistic activity. The Church claims that prayer is a linguistic reality composed of narrative joined explicitly to the image. In the case of initiation this image is water and oil; in the case of the Eucharist, it is bread and wine. We have a metaphor or linguistic layer (This is my body; this is my blood) wrapped around a core of material elements which expresses much more than foodstuff – an image penetrated radically through the Word which mediates relationship. The mutual regard of an I/Thou relationship between creator and created in Christ - God becoming human so that we can become Godlike in our love for one another - is true gift which is free and which is wholly dependent on God. The metaphor of sacrifice as gift-exchange

⁸ *Ibid.* 150-51.

interprets the death of Christ on the cross, the Christian life of discipleship as response to this offer through sacrament. Historically, as the Church moved from a metaphorical to a literal interpretation of Eucharist as sacrifice, Christians effectively distanced themselves from God by seeing God as a purveyor of goods both spiritual and temporal rather than the One who gifts freely.

Sacrifice: A Metaphorical Twist

David Power suggests that this hallowed religious tradition of sacrifice as practiced in ancient Judaism was used intentionally by the Church to highlight the radical difference between a gift offered to God and a gift offered by God. In doing so, the Church was deliberately yoking together two “unlikes” to express a new religious insight made possible in the death and resurrection of Christ.⁹ In David Power’s seminal article, “Words that Crack: The Uses of ‘Sacrifice’ in Eucharistic Discourse,”¹⁰ he highlights the historical development of the concept of sacrifice as the Church employed this metaphor in understanding the Eucharist in particular. For Power, to use the concept of sacrifice as metaphor is to use that image as an interpretive lens by which the significance of Christ’s death is appropriated by the Church. The Church is then the heir of a more expansive religious horizon made possible by employing the metaphorical twist of sacrifice to interpret Christ’s death as a gift given by God to us. In the theology of David Power, the Church’s role in the transformation of the world is participation in the Eucharist; from this perspective, it is a matter ultimately of first and foremost taking and receiving not giving or offering.¹¹

. . . what we find in the New Testament and in the early writers of the Church, as indeed even before Christ in some sectors of the Jewish

⁹ *Living Bread, Saving Cup*, ed. R. Kevin Seasoltz, O.S.B., “Words that Crack: The Uses of ‘Sacrifice’ in Eucharistic Discourse,” David Power (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1987), 159.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

community, is a substitution of a metaphorical and spiritual sense of the word for the ritual meaning and practice. It is in this sense that *thusia* is apparently used of [a] the Christian life, [b] the Eucharistic banquet, and [c] Christ's death. It is not implied, in any of the three cases, that a gift is offered to God, whether it be person, animal or thing. What is rather suggested is [a] that a life lived in obedience and faith outweighs sacrifice, [b] that because of Christ's death no sacrifices are now necessary, and the praise and thanksgiving of the redeemed people is acceptable worship, and [c] the willing witness to the Father's love which Jesus Christ gave in his death renders absurd and obsolete and further offering of sacrifice.¹²

The religious imagination is given a new insight by this metaphorical twist that can be summed up in the following way. The human religious sensibility has from the very beginning struggled with the question of the human stance before the divine. Our question as humans has been one of becoming vulnerable before a presence which is experienced as both threatening and benevolent. This vulnerable stance is both attractive and repellent to the individual and the community. The ritual practice of sacrifice was an attempt to answer the question, "How can we make the divine presence more kindly disposed to us?" The practice of sacrifice was therefore fueled by our anxiety in the presence before the Other who could not be bargained with or who needed anything we could ever give. Whether the gift we exchange or the sacrifice we offer is our first born, an animal or vegetable offering, a song or prayer of thanksgiving, the religious impulse has been concerned with our disposition before God. But the revolutionary insight of the Judeo-Christian religious imagination is of God's vulnerability before us who gifts us first so that we might share in God's life in sharing that same love with others.

Sacrifice points to the fear of the holy which coexists with the desire to commune with it, to the close relation between holy and impure, between beneficence and malevolence, and to the search for the sources of life and

¹² *Ibid.*, 158.

power which goes on in social groups. Hence, when we commemorate the death of Christ through the metaphor of sacrifice we are not only dealing with a rather innocuous demand to be obedient to God even in suffering, but to recognize his dominion over us by renunciation, and to follow Christ's example, united with him in love.¹³

In Christ, God has offered Godself to us and so it is a question of God becoming most vulnerably present to us so that we might be kindly disposed to the divine as expressed in our love for others. In the Eucharist, God's initiative of self-gift through Christ is offered sacramentally through eucharistized bread and wine. Our presence to God is therefore a response to that initiative which leads to human transformation. God offers Godself to us in Christ through the mediation of the Eucharist; we in turn offer ourselves to God through Christ in our praise and thanksgiving over simple gifts of bread and wine which then invites us to service.

The presence of a personal God is offered in the Sacrament and that presence is gift indeed: a gift free and unmerited. It is God who initiates the encounter with us, be it in the liturgy or in private moments of prayer and devotion. This presence is given freely and the response to that gift is the desire to share, not hoard, that gift. The revolutionary development of Christianity recognized in the death and resurrection of Christ the gift which could never be repaid. In the words of the Eucharistic prayer, it is our humble gift of praise that acknowledges that it is God who gives and we who receive. The stance of thankfulness before this personal presence in the sacrament acknowledges that the gift precedes us. There is nothing we can do to achieve our very existence in this world or to rescue ourselves from sin and death; God is the author of life, physical and spiritual. The tradition which is embedded in the language of prayer – the language of imagination

¹³ Ibid.

and embodiment - a language which is metaphorical rather than descriptive or literal, has been employed by the Church from the very beginning to express this new development in sacrificial religion. By using the metaphor of sacrifice as gift-exchange to bring insight into the work of God in Christ, the Church found itself rooted in the ancient religious sensibility of humanity, a sensibility characterized by both awe and fear. The radical development in the faith of the Church was that in Christ, it is God who offers a gift to appease us or to draw near to us as Vogel states. In the words of hope found in the Eucharistic prayer, we may now trust that in our reception of God's gift of presence in the Risen Lord, violence and divisiveness will give way to loving communion.

While the Church employed the concept of sacrifice in approaching the death of Christ, the Lord's Supper, and the Christian life, the use of metaphor inverted the whole meaning of sacrifice as first and foremost the humble posture of a God who "descended" into creation in order to offer us the way of peace. Cultural values such as unlimited self-fulfillment, self-realization, and self-awareness work to undermine the Christian value of kenosis in imitation of God's love for us in Christ.¹⁴ Our initial stance before this mysterious gift of personal presence in the Eucharist is one of awe and thanks which in turn is embodied in restraint, surrender and self-limitation for the sake of the other – God's sacrifice becomes our sacrifice mediated through the Eucharist. To set aside a literal interpretation of sacrifice so as to reappropriate it as metaphor moves us out of the marketplace. Negotiating for our salvation on our own terms is left behind as we humbly receive a gift which is to be shared as freely as it was given.

¹⁴ Bradley, *The Power of Sacrifice*, 4.

Conclusion

Sacraments can be defined as actions that utilize a series of symbols in a ritual pattern to communicate a religious narrative that for Christians is the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ. The Church professes that God makes use of our symbolic linguistic activity, our ritual activity, so that we may be transformed into Christ's Body – an exchange of identities indeed. In sacrament the assembly is incorporated into that mystery of Christ's self-offering to God for the sake of the world. Through matter penetrated by word, the Church maintains that grace is a mediated gift. The Church's theology therefore affirms that in the sacramental life of the Church, God's presence to us and our presence to God is established. It is before God's eternal self-restraint, self-limitation, self-surrender, self-sacrifice, so that new life might be born – our life! – that we stand eternally grateful as we are transformed into God's very image. It is a message which we bear witness to as ministers of this eternal self-sacrifice in Christ, this gift which is not always received with enthusiasm or open arms because it invites us to die to self, it invites us to ongoing conversion. Conversion is none other than this: dying to self so that new life – ecclesial life – might be born. This new life is the Body of Christ born for the sake of the world.

As ministers we must ask if we ourselves are willing to embrace the paradoxical message that life begins at the moment we die to self so as to serve our sisters and brothers in this great work – God's work in progress – of celebrating Eucharist. The scandal of Christianity is that God gifts us first in and through Christ Jesus. That sacrifice of God offered through the Eucharist when received humbly by us and shared freely by us for the sake of the world, becomes even more fulsome with the passage of time until it reaches its culmination in the Reign of God.

