

## THE HOLY EUCHARIST AS SACRIFICE

In an encyclical in 1980 entitled *Dominicae Curae*, Pope John Paul II wrote:

The Eucharist is above all else a sacrifice. It is the sacrifice of the Redemption and also the sacrifice of the New Covenant, as we believe and as the Eastern Churches clearly profess: 'Today's sacrifice, the Greek Church stated centuries ago, 'is like that offered once by the Only-begotten Incarnate Word; it is offered by Him (now as then), since it is one and the same sacrifice.' Accordingly, precisely by making this single sacrifice of our salvation present, men and the world are restored to God through the paschal newness of Redemption. This restoration cannot cease to be: it is the foundation of the 'new and eternal covenant' of God with man and of man with God. If it were missing, one would have to question both the excellence of the sacrifice of the Redemption, which in fact was perfect and definitive, and also the sacrificial value of the Mass. In fact, the Eucharist, being a true sacrifice, brings about this restoration to God.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the Holy Father's assertion of the sacrificial nature of the Mass, Patrick McCloskey explains that there had been misunderstandings about the nature since Saint Paul wrote his first epistle to the Christian Church in Corinth (1 Cor, 11).<sup>2</sup> He argues that some Catholics stress that the Eucharist is a meal, while others still maintain that it is a sacrifice. Liturgical changes (certainly since Vatican II) have meant that the sense of mystery in the Mass has disappeared: the tabernacle has been hidden away; the altar has been replaced by a nave table; consecration bells have been silenced and the previously quiet preparation to receive the sacrament has been interrupted by the handshake of peace. McCloskey concludes that Mass no longer suggests any sense of awe or sharing in an eternal sacrifice.

Many of these changes had their origins in the writings of the Reformers. For Martin Luther the doctrine of justification through faith alone (*sola fide*) was at the heart of his argument with the papacy and eventually the Mass became central to this conflict. Carl Wissløff points out that Luther did not attack the Mass until his reforming efforts had been under way for some time. Initially he confessed that he would have carried wood to burn

---

<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, *Dominicae Curae*, Sect 9, Ref: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/letters/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_let\\_24021980\\_dominicae-cenae\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_24021980_dominicae-cenae_en.html) (Accessed 20/12/10).

<sup>2</sup> Patrick McCloskey, Is the Mass still a Sacrifice?, Ref: <http://www.catholicity.com/baltimore-catechism/lesson27.html> (Accessed 19/12/10).

someone heretical enough to attack the Mass.<sup>3</sup> Eventually, however, Luther came to view the Mass as the very worst of all papal heresies, as he discovered that nothing less than the very essence of the Gospel was at stake. Luther's most strenuous objection was to the concept of Mass as sacrifice. The Roman teaching that in the Mass the priest offers a sacrifice and thus appeases God's anger denied, in Luther's view, the efficacy of Christ's atoning work. The Papal Mass was therefore a persistent, daily attack on the article of justification; it was an unremitting assault on the gospel and on the sufficiency of Christ's atonement. It completely distorted the nature of Christianity, changing it from a religion of grace to one of works.

This emphasis on the efficacy of grace as opposed to the importance of works was at the heart of Cranmer's teaching. His doctrinal view on sacrifice was clear in the Prayer of Humble Access (1549), which contained the words, 'although we be unworthy (through our manyfolde synnes) to offre unto thee any Sacryfice'. He amplified this view in the Prayer of Consecration; 'who made there (by his one oblacion once offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifyce, oblacion, and satysfaccyon, for the sinnes of the whole worlde'. Cranmer's doctrine, that Christ's sacrifice at Calvary was uniquely sufficient, and had no need for extension or repetition, was maintained in all subsequent revisions of the *Book of Common Prayer*.

Followers of Cranmer's teaching quickly associated the maintenance and use of altars, usually constructed of stone and positioned against the church's east wall, with the concept of sacrifice. Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of London, was among the first Reformers to demand their removal from churches within his diocese and their replacement with wooden tables, placed longitudinally in the chancel or nave. This change was designed to inculcate into the minds of the congregational members the idea that the Holy Communion was a meal.

Anglican monk Dom Gregory Dix made over one hundred references to sacrifice in his seminal work *The Shape of the Liturgy*. He understood that early Christians (certainly the first two or three generations) would have seen in their own worshipping praxis links with the sacrificial Temple worship of the Jews. Dix reminds us that in the *Didache*, thought to date from some time in the first two centuries, Section 14 states:

14:1 And on the Lord's own day gather yourselves together and break bread and give thanks, first confessing your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure.

---

<sup>3</sup> Carl Wissløff, *The Gift of Communion: Luther's Controversy with Rome on Eucharistic Sacrifice*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1964), 5.

14:2 And let no man, having his dispute with his fellow, join your assembly until they  
have been reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be defiled;  
14:3 for this sacrifice it is that was spoken of by the Lord;  
14:4 {In every place and at every time offer Me a pure sacrifice;  
14:5 for I am a great king, saith the Lord and My name is wonderful among the  
nations.}<sup>4</sup>

Dix confirmed that Clement, Justin and Hippolytus all agreed that the Eucharist was an ‘oblation’ (*προσπηορα*) or ‘sacrifice’ (*θυσια*); something offered to God in the earthly forms of bread and wine.<sup>5</sup> In the Eastern tradition, for Ignatius (c AD 115) the church, the place for the Eucharist synaxis, was the *θυσιατεριον*, the place of sacrifice.<sup>6</sup> From the fourth century onwards the *sanctum*, a fragment of a consecrated host reserved from the previous Mass held in that place, was brought to the altar at the offertory, symbolising the perpetual nature of the sacrifice. It was placed in the chalice and later consumed. Similarly, the *fermentum*, a fragment of host from the Pope’s Mass, was carried to each church within the city, again to show continuity of the one sacrifice. Dix wrote that the basis of ancient Eucharistic theology was the indissoluble unity of the Eucharist with the sacrifice of Christ himself. John Chrysostom (c 347–407) had argued that the absolute unity of the church’s sacrifice in the Eucharist with that of Christ – unity of the Offerer (for it is Christ ‘our High-priest’ who offers though the church his Body); unity of the offering (for that which is offered is what he offered in his Body and Blood) and unity of the effects (which cleanses us).<sup>7</sup> Dix added:

the prayer [of Consecration] consecrates and sacrifices together – [it] sacrifices by consecration. For consecration is itself nothing else but the acceptance by the Father of the sacrifice of Christ in his members – the sacrifice of ‘the body of Christ’ in all its meanings.<sup>8</sup>

There can be no doubt that Dix accepted and believed that the celebration of the Mass was a sacrificial action and thereby was maintaining the pre-Reformation, Eastern and Western churches’ Catholic understanding.

---

<sup>4</sup> From a translation by J B Lightfoot, Ref: <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didache-lightfoot.html> (Accessed 26/12/10). See also: Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, (London: Dacre Press, 1945), 90ff..

<sup>5</sup> Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, 112.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 113.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 244.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 272.

Where does this leave the Eucharistic doctrine of the Church of England? The Reformers of the sixteenth century were clearly followers of Luther, and, to a lesser extent, of Calvin and Zwingli. Dix suggests that Cranmer's later Eucharistic thinking was essentially Zwinglian, or at least Bullingerian.<sup>9</sup>

In 1896 Pope Leo XIII, in a Papal Bull entitled *Apostolicae curae*, declared that all Anglican ordinations were, 'absolutely null and utterly void'. One of the reasons for this promulgation could have been the reintroduction of ancient ceremonial and ritualistic practices within celebrations of the Holy Eucharist in some Anglican Churches, often as a result of post-Tractarian developments, and some of which closely paralleled the Tridentine, Roman liturgy. Perhaps as a consequence of this Leo declared that the Anglican ordination rites created a priesthood different from the sacrificing priesthood of the Roman Catholic Church. Leo argued that the Church of England reduced ordination to no more than membership of an ecclesiastical institution, by appointment or blessing, instead of a sacramental conferral of grace. In the following year the Archbishops and Bishops of the Church of England responded with an encyclical entitled *Saepius officio*. In answer to the Pope's assertion that the Anglican ordination rite did not qualify priests to offer a sacrificial, Eucharistic order, the bishops wrote:

we think it sufficient in the Liturgy which we use in celebrating the holy Eucharist ... that they [the offered gifts] may become to us the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. We continue a perpetual memory of the precious death of Christ, who is our Advocate with the Father and the propitiation for our sins, according to His precept, until His coming again. For first we offer the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving: then next we plead and represent before the Father the sacrifice of the cross, and by it we confidently entreat remission of sins and all other benefits of the Lord's Passion for all the whole Church; and lastly we offer the sacrifice of ourselves to the Creator of all things which we have already signified by the oblations of His creatures. This whole action, in which the people have necessarily to take its part with the Priest, we are accustomed to call the Eucharistic sacrifice.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, 659, 676. Heinrich Bullinger was Ulrich Zwingli's successor in Zurich.

<sup>10</sup> *Answer of the Archbishops of England to the Apostolic Letter of Pope Leo XIII*, (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1897). Ref: <http://www.anglicanhistory.org/orders/saepius.pdf> (Accessed 21/08/16). One concession of the English bishops seems to be in their acceptance of the title 'Pope'. Since Henry VIII's break with the Holy See, the leader of the Roman Catholic Church has generally been referred to as the Bishop of Rome.

Does *Saepius officio* doctrinally refute Pope Leo's condemnation of Anglican orders? Does the definition of sacrifice by the English bishops agree with Cranmer's 'one oblation of himself once offered', or does it more align with John Chrysostom's 'absolute unity of the church's sacrifice in the Eucharist with that of Christ', or does it lie somewhere in between? Despite the *Book of Common Prayer* being, in essence, the work of Thomas Cranmer, is his Zwinglian, memorialist view of the Eucharist still maintained by the Church of England? Does the Church still accept the words of Article XXXI, which states, 'Wherefore the sacrifices of Masses ... were blasphemous fables, and dangerous deceits'? Is Dix right in his assertion of the indissoluble unity of the Eucharist with the sacrifice of Christ, and that the Prayer of Consecration both consecrates and sacrifices at the same time?<sup>11</sup>

This is a complex subject with many threads to be researched, and it appears that, like almost all doctrinal issues, there are as many opinions as opinion holders.

---

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed analysis of these and other understandings of the sacrifice of the Mass, see: Brian Douglas, *A Companion to Anglican Eucharistic Theology: Volume 1: The Reformation to the 19th Century*, (Leiden: Brill, 2011).