

Currents

in Theology and Mission

Published by
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

in cooperation with
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary
Wartburg Theological Seminary

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CURRENTS IN THEOLOGY AND MISSION (ISSN: 0098-2113) is published bimonthly, February, April, June, August, October, December by Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, a non-profit organization, 1100 East 55th Street, Chicago, Illinois 60615, to which all business correspondence is to be addressed. Annual subscription rate: \$13.50 in the U.S. and Canada (\$15.50 overseas). Two-year rate: \$25.00 in the U.S. and Canada (\$29.00 overseas). Three-year rate: \$36.00 in the U.S. and Canada (\$42.00 overseas). Second Class Postage Paid at Chicago, Illinois and at other mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A.

CURRENTS is indexed in *Elenchus*, *IZBW*, *NTA*, *OTA*, *Religion Index I* (formerly *IRPL*), *Religious and Theological Abstracts*, and *Theologische Literaturzeitung*.

MICROFORM AVAILABILITY: 16mm microfilm, 35mm microfilm, 105mm microfiche, and article copies are available through University Microfilms Inc., 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 1100 East 55th Street, Chicago, Illinois 60615.

Richard J. Beauchesne and Kathleen Coviello respond to the suggestion of the BEM document that all churches review the old controversies about the Eucharist as sacrifice. To them the *anamnesis* leads to shaping one's speech and action in particular ways, namely, the sacrifice of self for the liberation of the oppressed. While the Eucharist was meant to be a remembrance of Jesus' liberative action, it came to be the preservation of the status quo. Hence it was alienated from the people and allied to the powers of domination. The Eucharist is the Christian expression of one's commitment to human liberation. One would rather die than live in compromise with oppressing powers.

The Eucharist as Sacrifice: Ethics that Enlightens Doctrine & Cult (An Ecumenical Praxis)¹

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[Sacrifice is] the everyday practical life of Christian virtue, in the apostolic and charitable work of being a good Christian, of being "for others" as Christ was "for us." It [is] a totally free and loving response, carried out on the practical level of human existence, to Christ's act of self giving love.²

The BEM—as it is often referred to by theologians—is a significant ecumenical document of the 80s on the topics of baptism, eucharist, and ministry.³ It resulted from the Faith and Order Conference held in Lima, Peru, in 1982,⁴ and reflects the ongoing concern of the Faith and Order Commission to work toward the visible manifestation of God's gift of unity to the Christian churches. Its ecumenical impact resounded through the numerous responses that the

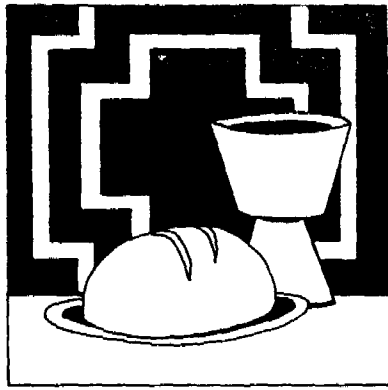
document has evoked on the part of the Christian churches.⁵

This article focuses on the eucharistic dimension of the BEM document. More specifically, it attempts to respond to a

¹ The main theological thrust of this article (regarding both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures) is developed further in Robert Daly, *The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) and in Richard J. Beauchesne, "Worship as Life, Priesthood & Sacrifice in Yves Congar," *Église et Théologie* (Ottawa: St. Paul University), 21 (January 1990): 79-100.

² Daly, *The Origins*, 140.

³ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith & Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983).



BEM recommendation: that all churches review the old controversies about the eucharist as "sacrifice" (BEM, 11, *Commentary* 8). To do so, the article proposes a view of the Eucharist *as sacrifice*, which might offer an ecumenical perspective—one that finds its roots in the Christian origins of the meaning of sacrifice; namely, sacrifice as ethical praxis that pertains to human liberation.

Traditionally, especially within the Roman Catholic tradition, the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist has been grounded in the following assertion: namely, that in the three synoptic Gospels (Mt 26:17, Mk 14:12, Lk 22:11),⁶ Jesus' last meal before he died is set within the context of Jewish Passover meals—covenantal sacrificial meals. These were ritualized meals that allowed one to eat and drink "after gazing on [the] God [of the Sinai Covenant]" (Ex 24:9-11). These meals were already ritualized in Ex 12:1-28 as Passover meals (Exodus 12) which, then, became the temple Passover (Deuteronomy 16) and finally the Jewish Passover, commonly celebrated in the time of Jesus. The sacrificial meals "began with the lamb being slaughtered by

priests in the temple and with an elaborate blood rite of *tossing* or *throwing* the blood at the altar with strong covenantal associations" (Lev 3:2, 8:13, 7:14; Ex 24:3-8).⁷

However, a stronger case for viewing the Eucharist as sacrifice might be made by appealing to the Lord's *anamnesis* ("Do this in memory of me") interpreted as having *primarily* ethical rather than cultic or doctrinal significance. One might even suggest that in ecumenical dialogues the ethical ramifications of the *anamnesis* should determine both its cultic and doctrinal content, rather than the other way around.

⁴ See Michael A. Fahey, "Genesis of the Lima Document on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry," pp. 3-6 in *Catholic Perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry: A Study Commissioned by the Catholic Theological Society of America* (Lanham/New York/London: University of America Press, 1986). See also BEM, vii-x.

⁵ See for example the series of volumes (I to VI) entitled *Churches Respond to BEM*, Max Thurian, editor (Geneva: World Council of Churches): Vol. I (Faith and Order Paper #129, 1986), Vol. II (Paper #132, 1986), Vol. III (Paper #135, 1987), Vol. IV (Paper #137, 1987), Vol. V (Paper #143, 1988), Vol. VI (Paper #144, 1988).

⁶ For a discussion of Jesus' last meal in John, see John Reumann, *The Supper of the Lord: The New Testament, Ecumenical Dialogues and Faith and Order on the Eucharist* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 3-4, 17-21.

⁷ Daly, *The Origins*, 39; biblical references, 37-38. The discussion continues among biblical scholars as to whether or not the last meal taken by Jesus with his disciples was in fact a Passover meal. See Reumann, *The Supper of the Lord*, 2-4. Reumann concludes: "We can only say that Jesus' last meal before he died was 'at Passover time,' but about the exact type of meal or what he said over the loaf and the cup we cannot be sure."

In the Christian Scriptures, the *anamnesis* is attributed to Jesus once in Lk 22:19b and twice in Paul (1 Cor 11:24, 25). As John Reumann pointed out (referring to an analysis of "remembering" by Nils Dahl):

To remember leads to shaping one's speech and action... in fact to a "way of life"... This strong moral or ethical side to anamnesis, so that memory and commemoration do not deal only with faith (doctrine) and worship [liturgy] but also with life... has often been overlooked. Yet Paul turned the "Christ-anamnesis" of Phil 2:6-11 to hortatory purposes (2:1-5) and employed the Words of Institution to deal with disciplinary and, more important, socioeconomic, ethical issues at Corinth (11:17-43).⁸

Similarly, and more to the point, Robert J. Daly, S.J.—in concluding his in-depth study of *The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice*—stated succinctly his underlying thesis, namely, that the Christian understanding of worship (including that of the Eucharist) must be primarily formulated in ethical rather than cultic or doctrinal terms. Furthermore, that it is 'sacrifice' which is the proper Christian category to do so,

that a proper understanding of the concept of Christian sacrifice is basic to a proper understanding of Christianity itself.... [W]e find the early Christians from the New Testament onward understanding the Christ-event as a sacrificial event, looking upon the Eucharist... as sacrifice, and speaking of the practical living of the Christian life as sacrificial.⁹

Daly claimed:

For the New Testament church, Christian sacrifice was not a cultic but rather an ethical idea, an idea that could include prayer and worship in the formal sense, but was not constituted by them....

[It] was the everyday practical life of Christian virtue, in the apostolic and charitable work of being a good Christian, of being "for others" as Christ was "for us." It was a totally free and loving response, carried out on the practical level of human existence, to Christ's act of self giving love.... Thus no matter how similarly or differently we might understand the institutional or ecclesiological ramification of celebrating the Eucharist, unless we do so with the fully spiritualized (=christologized) dispositions of Christian sacrifice, we call upon ourselves the stern rebuke Paul leveled against the Corinthians: "It is not the Lord's Supper which you celebrate" (1 Cor 11:20).¹⁰

Tissa Balasuriya, O.M.I., one of Asia's foremost Christian theologians and native of Sri Lanka, therefore, might be interpreting correctly the Lord's *anamnesis*. "Do this in memory of me," he claimed, refers to Jesus' mandate to Christian communities. According to this venerated Christian tradition, Jesus said these words while sharing a meal with his friends and, at the same time, sharing with them the secret of his life: that his life was one lived for the sake of integral human liberation and fulfillment (as the next forty-eight hours of his life, during which he would be arrested, tried, and crucified, clearly demonstrated); that his life was truly a sacrificial life. During his life, Jesus "courageously opposed every form of oppression and injustice. His obedience to God... [consisted] in [the] service [of human liberation] to humanity." And by the words: "Do this in memory of me," Jesus called his followers to do likewise.¹¹

⁸ Reumann, *The Supper of the Lord*, 34.

⁹ Daly, *The Origins*, 135.

¹⁰ Daly, *The Origins*, 140.

¹¹ Tissa Balasuriya, *The Eucharist and Human Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 1.

Throughout the centuries, numerous followers of Jesus distinguished themselves by celebrating the Eucharistic meal, and they did so under various conditions: in Roman catacombs, as a persecuted community; in Roman basilicas, as a triumphant community; in medieval monasteries, as a devotional community; in all the corners of the earth, as an accomplice community with the colonizers of the world; during the Protestant Reformation and the Roman Catholic Counter Reformation, as a community divided and entangled in wars of religion; and in modern times—in churches, homes, and prisons, on the seas and in the air—still as a divided community. Thus, in so many ways, even in clashing and sinful ways, throughout their history, Christians have ‘remembered’ Jesus.¹²

“Do this in memory of me,” which for Jesus meant the *sacrifice of self* for the liberation of the oppressed, came to mean the *sacrifice of the oppressed* for the well-being of the rich. As a result, politically, economically, and sociologically, the Eucharist itself has been conditioned. Through eras of imperialism, feudalism, capitalism, colonialism, racism, and sexism, the Eucharist was enslaved and domesticated in order to suit the need of dominant social classes.¹³

Equally—in order to preserve church and sacramental unity even at the price of condoning social inequalities—theologically, the Eucharist has been domesticated. Masses continued to be ‘said’ while the oppression of the poor and the latter’s quest for liberation went unnoticed. Masses were ‘said’ to implore personal sanctification rather than to celebrate the gospel imperative of human liberation: for the attainment of heaven rather than for the just transformation of the earth. For the sake of theological unity despite the needs of the poor, whom Jesus instructed his followers to re-

In so many ways, even in clashing and sinful ways, throughout their history, Christians have ‘remembered’ Jesus.

member (“Do this in memory of me”), Masses have had to follow the same rites, use prescribed scriptural readings, and celebrate yearly the same feasts.¹⁴ Thus in 1972, Christmas masses throughout the U.S.—with themes of “peace on earth” and “a child is born unto us, the Prince of Peace”—were being celebrated while, under President Nixon, U.S. military air operations were redoubling the bombing of North Vietnam in an attempt to wipe the latter out of the world map.

Furthermore, historically and ‘churchly’ speaking, the Eucharist got to be clericalized. By the year 1100 C.E. the ordained priest was the all-important functionary of the Eucharist. At mass, he recited prayers silently, in a foreign tongue (Latin), and with his back turned away from the people. Especially at mass, the ordained priest was regarded as the intermediary, the mediator between God and the people: Moses on the mountain conversing with

¹² Balasuriya, 1-2.

¹³ Balasuriya, 2.

¹⁴ Balasuriya, 3.

God. People did not participate in the mass. Rather, they meditated on the passion and death of Jesus or on the lives of the saints.¹⁵ The Eucharist then became totally dependent on the priest. He alone could make Christ become present in the bread and wine. At the consecration of the mass, the priest came to be seen as acting not only in the name of Christ, but in his person—in *persona Christi*. He alone could touch the hosts and distribute them, but only on the tongue of the faithful. Priests, with or without a congregation, were obliged to 'say' mass every day, and only during the morning.¹⁶ And, since marital intercourse was prohibited prior to receiving the Eucharist while mass had to be 'said' daily, celibacy was prescribed for priests.¹⁷

Finally, due to their alienation from the Eucharist, people received communion only with great fear and very rarely—so rarely that the church had to prescribe that communion had to be received once a year. For many Christians, the reception of communion was replaced by the adoration of the host. Thus, on the part of the people, adoration of Jesus in the host replaced the sharing of Jesus' self and of his followers with the oppressed, and on the part of the religious leaders, the clericalization and domestication of the Eucharist came to mean power over the laity, even the colonialization of the oppressed.¹⁸

Ironically, while at the beginning the Eucharist was meant to be a symbol, a remembrance (a memorial/sacrament/sacrifice) of Jesus' liberative action, now—alienated from the people and allied to the powers of domination—the Eucharist meant 'preserving the status quo'; namely, preserving the unity of the church aligned with world powers which, at the same time, meant the oppression of the poor.¹⁹

At the beginning, the early Christians believed that the meaning of the bread for

Jesus was his body, "This is my body." Thus, the bread meant or sacramentalized the real presence of Jesus: his total self sacrificed unto death for the liberation of the oppressed. Similarly, they believed that the meaning of the cup of wine for Jesus was the blood of the covenant: "This is my blood of the covenant." Thus, the cup meant or sacramentalized the promises of God in the covenant of old made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey," not a land divinely apportioned to a single nation, but the earth itself totally liberated from oppression, the ultimate transformation of the world through Jesus' blood which was shed: his life sacrificed unto death for the liberation of the oppressed of the world.

As described in the synoptic Gospels and in Paul, all of Jesus' meals²⁰ celebrated—as Balasuriya expressed it—one's fundamental decision to die rather than to live in compromise with the religious and political leaders of one's era, with those who lorded it over the little people. To all the oppressed—women, children and elderly, tax collectors, possessed and sinners, paralyzed, hemophiliacs and lepers (today's PWA's), physically, emotionally, and mentally handicapped, the dying, even the dead (the daughter of a Jewish widow and the son of a Roman centurion)—to all the marginalized, Jesus brought healing, reconciliation, and life: human liberation. But the

¹⁵ Balasuriya, 28.

¹⁶ Balasuriya, 28-38.

¹⁷ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Ministry: Leadership in the Community of Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 86-87 (regarding *lex continentiae*).

¹⁸ Balasuriya, 29-38.

¹⁹ Balasuriya, 6.

²⁰ See, for example, Reumann, *The Supper of the Lord*, 4-5.

religious leaders of the time insisted that Jesus halt his liberating work. In fact, they considered his ministry to the oppressed the work of the devil. "He is possessed by Beelzebul. He drives out devils by the prince of devils," they claimed (Mk 3, 22). But Jesus, through his liberating presence, words, and deeds, continued "to announce the good news of liberation to the poor; to proclaim the release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind; to let the broken victims go free; to proclaim God's liberation" (Lk 4:18-19). And rather than submit to the powers that be and compromise his dedication to the oppressed, Jesus accepted to die.²¹

Eucharist: memorial of the sacrifice of Christ

Jesus' death reveals the ultimate meaning of the sacrament of the Eucharist: the *sacrifice* of one's life *unto death* for the liberation of the oppressed. Thus the Christian understanding of 'sacrifice' pivots around what *God revealed in Jesus [sola gratia]* about the meaning of human liberation and, as a result, the Eucharist is the Christian existential and celebratory expression of one's commitment to human liberation: to die rather than to live in compromise with oppressing powers, be they religious, political, economic, or military. For that reason alone, for one to participate in the *Memorial of the Christian Eucharistic Sacrifice of the Cross* is not primarily a matter of ecclesiastical order or canon (who's got the 'right' succession and the proper gender to preside over it), nor is it a matter of one's personal devotion. It is first and foremost a matter of life (liberation) or death (oppression).

Balasuriya asserted: "The Eucharist is in captivity. It is dominated by persons who

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do not experience oppression [death] in their own daily life. Even within the poor countries, church leaders generally belong to and side with the affluent elite. [Consequently,] the Eucharist will not be liberated to be true to its mission [as the celebration of self-sacrifice] as long as churches are captive within the world's power establishment. The Eucharist has to be liberated and liberative; it should lead to sharing and genuine love. But in its social impact [at the present] it fails to do so.... [Only] when Christians make a fundamental option against oppression, and struggle against it... [will] the Eucharist itself be liberated"²² and again become truly sacrificial.

Such an understanding of sacrifice might refocus the ecumenical dialogue about the Eucharist on a basis of faith (life) rather than on one of order (theology/ministry); on the sacrificial life of the priestly people rather than on the sacrifice of the priestly people to safeguard hierarchical concerns about which church expresses 'correctly' eucharistic doctrines; on Christ and the

²¹ Balasuriya, 16-17.

²² Balasuriya, 62.

*christifideles*²³ rather than on Paul, Apollo, or Cephas (the leaders). In the words of Balasuriya, "[E]ucharistic gatherings would then be among the vanguard of the building of the new world in hard work, real sharing, and justice. As the churches begin to relate to these issues, they will forget their petty concerns with rubrics and ritualism and enter the heart of the human search today. They will then be among the foremost harbingers of the real new international economic order, which has to be a foretaste of the ultimate kingdom of peace and justice promised by God in Jesus Christ."²⁴

Or in Daly's words: "Thus no matter how similarly or differently we might understand the institutional or ecclesiological ramifications of celebrating the Eucharist [whether from Roman Catholic, Lutheran, or other denominational perspectives] unless we do so with the fully spiritualized²⁵

(=christologized) dispositions of Christian sacrifice, we call upon ourselves the stern rebuke Paul leveled against the Corinthians: 'It is not the Lord's Supper which you celebrate' (1 Cor 11:20)."²⁶

²³ In *The Church with a Human Face: A New and Expanded Theology of Ministry* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), Edward Schillebeeckx states that the content of the concept 'laity' (often defined as 'non-clergy') finds its positive content in the expression *christifidelis* (157).

²⁴ Balasuriya, 145.

²⁵ Regarding the concept of 'spiritualization,' see Daly, *The Origins*, 6-10, 135-40, and 147.

²⁶ Daly, *The Origins*, 140.

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