

4. Participation and Eucharist

In this final talk I want to talk with you about participation and Eucharist. The way I want to do this, is by discussion the relationship between preaching and Eucharist. Now, I don't mean that I'm going to talk first about preaching and then about the sacrament. That would be an entirely appropriate thing to do: both preaching and Eucharist are means of grace, and so we could talk first about the Word and then about the Altar. We're not going to do that. Instead of talking about Word *and* Altar both, I'm going to talk about the Altar *as* Word. I'm going to talk about how it is when we celebrate the Eucharist that *in that very act of celebrating the Eucharist*, we proclaim the gospel. And the basic point I will make is that to recognize the Eucharist as an act of *proclamation* we need to see it as a *sacrificial* act.

So, first things first: How is it that the celebration of the Eucharist itself is a kind of proclamation? How is it that we can talk about the Altar *as* Word? One way of answering this question is to say: Well, when we celebrate the Eucharist, after the priest has said the words of institution, he tells the congregation, "Let us proclaim the mystery of faith." Note the wording—"Let us *proclaim* the mystery of faith"—the priest reminds us that there's something you and I in our pews are going to proclaim. And then we respond with the words, "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." This little part of the Eucharistic service is called the "Memorial Acclamation." In some form or other it goes back all the way to the sixth century. While the *priest*

preaches the gospel in his sermon, *all of us together* preach the gospel at the Altar, when we proclaim, “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.”

That small part of the Eucharistic service—the Memorial Acclamation—really goes back not just to the sixth century, but all the way to Christ’s words in the Upper Room. Saint Paul reports these words in 1 Corinthians 11: Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me” (1 Cor. 11:24). The same with the cup: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me” (11:25). Right after that, we read the words, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (11:26). Note that Saint Paul is drawing a close link between eating and drinking, on the one hand, and proclaiming the Lord’s death, on the other hand. How is it, that Paul suggests our eating and drinking proclaims Christ’s death? How is it, that our Sunday morning Eucharist is a form of preaching, a missionary act? Why is it that both the words of institution from 1 Corinthians 11 and the Memorial Acclamation make preaching one of central acts of the Eucharistic celebration?

Polycarp’s Eucharistic Sacrifice

To see how it is that you and I are preaching when we’re eating, I want to take you to a famous story from the early church. It’s a story of martyrdom. In the story, the Roman soldiers finally find their victim. They had pursued all the tricks in the book to find out where he was hiding. In the end, they had resorted to torture. One of the household

slaves had finally cracked and given away the secret. Mounting their horses, the soldiers had scurried off to a little house, where *in the Upper Room* they found the person they had been looking for.¹ To their astonishment, the dangerous offender wasn't quite the robber type they had expected. Instead, he turned out to be an old man, hardly the kind of person that would seem to pose a danger to the empire. Nonetheless, orders were orders. And so it happened that around the year 155, the old Bishop Polycarp, at the age of 86, was dragged into the stadium of Smyrna, a town on the west coast of today's Turkey.

Face-to-face with the prospect of either lions or a burning stake, Polycarp did not cringe. In the eyewitness account, which we still have of *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, we read what happened next: “[W]hen he came near, the proconsul asked him whether he was Polycarp. On his confessing that he was, [the proconsul] sought to persuade him to deny [Christ], saying, ‘Have respect for your old age,’ and other similar things, according to their custom, [such as], ‘Swear by the fortune of Caesar; repent, and say, Away with the Atheists’.” (Christians, as you may know, were often called ‘atheists’ because they refused to worship the Roman gods.) What would Polycarp do?

But Polycarp, gazing with a stern countenance on all the multitude of the wicked heathen then in the stadium, and waving his hand

¹ All info on Polycarp is taken from Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, ed., *Ante-Nicene Fathers (ANF)*, vol. 1 (1885, repr.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994). *The Martyrdom of Polycarp (Mart Pol)* VII uses the term ὑπερῶον (upper room; *Patrologiæ Græcæ [PG]* 5.1033), which is also used in Acts 1:13; 9:37, 39; 20:8. The word ἀνώγειον is used in Mark 14:15 and Luke 22:12.

towards them, while with groans he looked up to heaven, said, “Away with the Atheists.” Then, the proconsul urging him, and saying, “Swear, and I will set you free, reproach Christ;” Polycarp declared, “86 years have I served him, and he never did me any injury; how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?”²

These famous words of Bishop Polycarp, spoken in the stadium of Smyrna, have echoed through the centuries of the history of the church. Shortly after these words, the soldiers tied his hands behind his back and led Polycarp to the stake, on which he offered his thanksgiving, his εὐχαριστία, to God, ending with the words, “I praise Thee for all things, I bless Thee, I glorify Thee, along with the everlasting and heavenly Jesus Christ, Thy beloved Son, with whom, to Thee, and the Holy Ghost, be glory both now and to all coming ages. Amen.”³ Those were the last words of St. Polycarp as he sacrificed his entire self in εὐχαριστία to his God and Saviour. Polycarp’s words are the liturgical prayer spoken in preparation before he offers up his Eucharistic sacrifice.

Note what it is that Polycarp is doing. He is following Jesus in martyrdom. He sacrifices his entire being—everything he has—in sacrifice to God. And his prayer of thanksgiving (his Eucharistic prayer) makes clear what is happening here: Polycarp is sacrificing himself, and in his sacrifice he is proclaiming Jesus—the sacrifice of Jesus. When we celebrate the Eucharist, we too offer a sacrifice of praise. We pattern our lives—even to the point of death—on that of Christ. We’re bringing

² *Mart Pol IX (ANF 1.41).*

³ *Mart Pol XIV (ANF 1.42).*

everything to the Altar (our capacities, our work, our earnings, our relationships, everything). Eucharist is about sacrificing ourselves to God.

Now that may make it look like we're proclaiming ourselves in the Eucharistic celebration. We're bringing all of our gifts to the Altar; in the Eucharistic host, give everything we have and are, to God. We're sacrificing ourselves, offering ourselves up to God. All that is true—and yet, we don't proclaim ourselves. "*Christ* has died; *Christ* has risen; *Christ* will come again." That's the Memorial Acclamation. But how is that true, if we sacrifice ourselves in the Eucharist? Let's briefly turn to the Gospel of John, for several links closely connect this story of the martyrdom of Polycarp with the Gospel of John, and in particular with chapter 15, where Jesus says to his disciples, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).⁴ We read in *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* that the soldiers "found him lying down in the upper room (ἐν ὑπερώῳ) of a certain little house."⁵ In John 15, Jesus and his disciples also are in the "upper room." John 15, as you know, is the central chapter of Jesus' lengthy "Upper Room Discourse," chapters 13–17.

We don't know where Polycarp got his name, but it definitely was an appropriate one.⁶ Polycarp's name was a reminder—both to the

⁴ Throughout these two essays, I use the English Standard Version.

⁵ *Mart Pol VII (ANF 1.40)*.

⁶ John Foster has suggested that Polycarp received his episcopal name from St. John in the light of the challenge that these verses posed ("A Note on St. Polycarp," *Expository Times* 77 [1966]:319). Cf. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John (xiii-xxi)*, The Anchor Bible, 29A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 661.

Bishop himself and to his parishioners—that his purpose in life was to bear much fruit— πολὺς καρπός. His purpose was a missionary purpose. Some time before he got martyred, St. Polycarp wrote a letter to the Philippians—the same people that also received a letter from the apostle Paul. At the very beginning of that letter, Polycarp makes clear that not only does he want to be a true “Polycarp” himself, but he also wants the church to which he writes to be “polycarps.” He writes to them: “I have greatly rejoiced with you in our Lord Jesus Christ, because ... the strong root of your faith ... persists even until now, and brings forth fruit to our Lord Jesus Christ, who for our sins suffered even unto death.”⁷ The reason for Polycarp’s joy is that the root of the Philippians’ faith has produced fruit. The Philippians themselves are apparently bearing much fruit, πολὺς καρπός. There is no greater joy for Bishop Polycarp than to see that his parishioners, too, are turning into “polycarps.” Note the parallel with John 15: “Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit (καρπὸν πολὺν)” (15:5). “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit (καρπὸν πολὺν) and so prove to be my disciples” (15:8).

Whether or not Polycarp purposely conjures up for us the Upper Room Discourse of St. John’s Gospel, I am not quite sure. But he was one of John’s direct disciples, and as such it would not have been out of place for him to have chosen as his episcopal identity a name that echoed Jesus’ words of John 15. Nor would it have been out of place for the church of Smyrna—in relating the account of their beloved bishop’s

⁷ *The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians I*, in ANF 1.33. PG 5.1005A uses the words ρίζα (root) and καρποφορεῖ (bear fruit).

death—to have noted the remarkable fact that Polycarp, like Jesus, was in the Upper Room in the days immediately preceding his martyrdom. There’s a deep link, I think, that connects Polycarp to Jesus, and this has to do with the overall theology of John chapter 15, and indeed with the theology of the entire Gospel. “I am the vine,” says Jesus; “you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (15:5). These simple words give us the deepest grounds why the life of Polycarp is patterned on that of Christ. Or, I should perhaps say: these words of Jesus give us the deepest grounds why the life of Polycarp *participates* in that of Christ. “I am the vine; you are the branches.” These words make clear what it means when we sacrifice ourselves in the Eucharist. When you and I offer ourselves up to God in the Eucharist, and likewise when Polycarp sacrificed himself to God in the stadium of Smyrna, we’re not doing something on our own. We’re not just following Christ’s example. No, we’re participating in Christ; our sacrifice is a sharing in Christ’s sacrifice; Polycarp’s sacrifice was a sharing in Christ’s sacrifice. It is all about the branches being united to the vine, depending for their life and fruit upon the vine: “As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me” (15:4).

The verb “abide” (μένω) is used ten times in this passage. We are clearly meant to take note: our bearing fruit depends on us as branches abiding in Christ as the vine. What that also means is that when Polycarp sacrificed himself in stadium and when you and I sacrifice ourselves in church, we’re not doing something as individuals, by ourselves, in our own strength. “You brought a vine out of Egypt; you

drove out the nations and planted it,” sings Asaph in Psalm 80. “You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. It sent out its branches to the sea and its shoots to the River” (Ps. 80:9-11). The Psalmist tells the story of the exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land, and he says it’s like God taking a vine from one piece of land and transplanting it into another, moving it from Egypt to Canaan. Clearly, Israel is the vine. We cannot pursue this further here, but we find the same identification of Israel as the vine throughout the Old Testament.⁸ There is even a passage in Jeremiah 2 that identifies Israel as the “true vine” (Jer. 2:21). For Jesus to insist that he is the true vine is to say nothing less than that he is the true Israel. By abiding or participating in Christ, then, we are joining the true Israel. To join Christ and to join the church are one and the same thing. The two are quite simply inseparable.

It is hardly a coincidence that it is on the occasion where he instituted the Eucharist that Jesus is telling his disciples as well as us to abide in the vine. Polycarp, too, was undoubtedly aware that it is in the Upper Room, along with the Apostles (Acts 2:13), that one is united to Jesus, that one participates in him by eating the “living bread” (John 6:51) and by drinking the “fruit of the vine” (Mark 14:25; Matt. 26:29). Jesus is both the living bread and the true vine (John 6:51; 15:1). “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends,” comments Jesus as he explains the story of the vine and the branches (15:13). Jesus’ identity as the true vine calls to mind his

⁸ Cf. Hosea 10, Isaiah 5, Jeremiah 2, Ezekiel 15.

sacrificial love in dying the martyr's death for the sake of his friends. It is this same sacrificial love in which Polycarp participates when he, too, leaves the Upper Room to give his life for the church of Smyrna and also for us. And it is this same sacrificial love in which we participate when we share in the Eucharistic celebration. "Truly, truly, I say to you"—this is John 12:24—"unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit (πολὸν καρπὸν φέρει)." The fruit-bearing of a "polycarp" has to do with participating in the sacrificial martyrdom of Jesus. The Lutheran New Testament scholar, Oscar Cullmann, helpfully observes: "The relation between the branch and the vine is, therefore, above all, the eucharistic communion of believers with Christ."⁹

Whenever we celebrate the Eucharist, we become a "polycarpic" congregation by offering ourselves up, by participating in the very sacrifice of Christ. Christians are polycarpic in many ways. There are all kinds of ways to bear fruit. Obviously, every fruit on the tree in some

⁹ Oscar Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, trans. A. Stewart Todd and James B. Torrance (London: SCM, 1966), 113. Quoted in Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John (xiii-xxi)*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 29A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 673-74. For Brown, Cullmann's claim is too far-reaching, since the relationship of believers with Christ is, in this passage, primarily one of love (and faith) and only secondarily Eucharistic. This may be true in terms of historical meaning, but theologically love and Eucharistic participation are inseparable. For further support of a Eucharistic reading, Brown points to the Eucharistic blessing of *Didache* 11:2 ("We thank you, our Father, for the holy vine of David your servant, which you revealed to us through Jesus your servant."), which is significant considering the similarity between the *Didache's* words about the Eucharistic bread and John's account of the multiplication of the loaves (*ibid.*, 673). Brown further alerts us to the similarity between 15:5 and 6:56; the overall passage and 6:57; 15:13 and 6:51. Comments Brown: "The 'I am the living bread' of vi 51 and 'I am the real vine' of xv 1 form a Johannine diptych not unlike 'This is my body' and 'This is my blood'" (*ibid.*, 673).

way preaches Christ. When we offer up money to the poor, we preach Christ; when we give of ourselves in the soup kitchen, we preach Christ; when we offer a room or an apartment to a poor person, we preach Christ; and yes, even when we simply devote ourselves to our everyday job, we preach Christ. For in each of these acts, we give something of ourselves. But in the Eucharist, we bring all of these little sacrifices to church. We gather them up. Some members of the congregation bring them to the front of the church; there we offer all these gifts. There the priest prays over our gifts so that our sacrifices may come to participate in the one, unique sacrifice of Christ. Our sacrifices are no longer just things we've offered up; no, they've become the body of Christ; we sacrifice our lives in the sacrifice of Christ. It's in and through the Eucharist that we remain in Christ.

Filling up Christ's Afflictions?

It seems to me that we see something of this participation in Christ's sacrifice in St. Paul's letter to the Colossians, when he writes in 1:24: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church."¹⁰ This is, in various ways, a puzzling passage. First, we have the remarkable fact that the Apostle claims to be rejoicing in suffering—something that certainly our culture would consider a rather odd claim. Second, for the Apostle to say that there are things that are lacking—τὰ ὑστερήματα in Greek—in Christ's afflictions would also

¹⁰ The following reflections on Col 1:24 are taken from Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 231-33.

seem out of place; it is almost as though he were denying the once-for-all sufficiency of Christ's sacrificial death. Doesn't he make it appear as though he exalts human merit, in the sense that we earn our own salvation—even if it is by means of suffering?

Of course, the notion that there is joy in suffering is not unique to Colossians 1:24. In many places, St. Paul expresses his joy in the midst of suffering and boasts of it.¹¹ His reason for this joy does not lie in Paul's personal character, in his personal ability to put up with difficult circumstances. After all, with the right disposition we might *grin* and bear difficult things, but we would not *rejoice* in suffering. To grasp at least to some extent how Paul is able to write that he can rejoice in his sufferings, we need to move briefly into what forms a likely historical backdrop to his comment. Circumstances in the centuries before the birth of Christ had forced the Jewish people of God to reflect on their suffering—in particular the suffering of continuous oppression and domination. How could it be that while being faithful to the Torah, they were nonetheless oppressed by powers hostile to the kingdom of God? Why did God not have mercy on his people? In this situation, the Jewish people developed a martyrdom theology.¹² Without necessarily seeking out suffering, they began to realize that through suffering they were obtaining a place in God's plan of redemption. We find this reflected in the Fourth Book of Maccabees:

¹¹ E.g., Rom 5:3; 2 Cor 1:5-7; 4:1-18; 7:4; 11:23-27; Gal 6:17; 1 Thess 1:6. Cf. James D.G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*; New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), 114.

¹² Cf. John S. Pobee, *Persecution and Martyrdom in the Theology of Paul* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1985), 13-46.

These then, having consecrated themselves for the sake of God, are now honored not only with this distinction but also by the fact that through them our enemies did not prevail against our nation, and the tyrant was punished and our land purified, since they became, as it were, a ransom for the sin of our nation. Through the blood of these righteous ones and through the propitiation of their death the divine providence rescued Israel, which had been shamefully treated. (4 Macc. 17:20-22)¹³

The Jewish martyrs came to regard themselves not just as enduring foreign oppression by way of punishment from God or as suffering injustice inflicted on them by their enemies, but as participating in the redemption of God's people.¹⁴

Especially since Albert Schweitzer's 1906 publication on the historical Jesus, New Testament scholars have often pointed out the significance of this suffering of the so-called "messianic woes," which

¹³ Translations of 4 Maccabees are taken from James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985).

¹⁴ For more extensive elaborations of this theme in intertestamental literature, see N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, vol. 1 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1992), 276-79; *Jesus and the Victory of God*, vol. 2 of *Christian Origins* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1996), 577-84. Cf. Manfred T. Brauch, *Hard Sayings of Paul* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1989), 234-39; Leonardo Boff, *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World: The facts, their Interpretation, and Their Meaning Yesterday and Today*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), 60, 75-78.

are the birth pangs of the new age of the Kingdom of God.¹⁵ They constitute a time of concentrated, redemptive suffering of certain individuals on behalf of the entire nation so as to give birth to the messianic age. Without this suffering, the dawning of the new age would be impossible, because God would continue to be angry with his people. And so the martyrs prayed, “Be merciful to your people and let our punishment be a satisfaction on their behalf. Make my blood their purification and take my life as a ransom for theirs” (4 Macc. 6:27-29).

The early Jewish Christians interpreted Christ’s messianic suffering in the light of this overall picture of the “messianic woes” that would introduce the new age of the resurrection. The “afflictions” of Christ that Paul mentions in Colossians need to be understood, suggests Peter O’Brien in his commentary, against “the OT and Jewish background with its apocalyptic conception of the afflictions of the end time, the woes of the Messiah.”¹⁶ When St. Paul comments that he rejoices that in his flesh he is filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions, his joy stems not from the sufferings in themselves, but from the fact he is allowed to share in the messianic suffering of Christ. The Pauline notion of Christians being crucified with Christ is not an abstract theological idea, but gives rise to his joyful willingness to suffer to the point of sacrificial martyrdom in and with Christ.

¹⁵ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery, 3rd ed. (London: Black, 1954), 385-86. Cf. Pobee, *Persecution*, 38-39; Wright, *Jesus*, 578.

¹⁶ Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*; Word Biblical Commentary, 44 (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1982), 78.

This, it seems to me, explains why Polycarp patterns his actions on those of Christ in the Upper Room. He is participating in the very sufferings of Christ, filling up what is still lacking in Christ's afflictions. Indeed, in his book, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*, Michael J. Gorman insists that this pattern of cruciformity reaches beyond St. Paul to all Christian believers. The metanarrative of Pauline theology is, he writes, "an ongoing pattern of living in Christ and of dying with him that produces a Christ-like (cruciform) person. Cruciform existence is what being Christ's servant, indwelling him and being indwelt by him, living with and for and 'according to' him, is all about, for individuals and communities."¹⁷ For Gorman, this implies that cruciform suffering is an integral part of the life of the Christian community. This cruciformity is more than mere imitation of Christ: "Cruciformity misunderstood as the human imitation of Christ is indeed an impossibility. However, cruciformity is the initial and ongoing work of Christ himself—by his Spirit sent by God—who dwells within each believer and believing community, shaping them to carry on the story (Phil. 4:13)."¹⁸

This last point is crucial. According to Gorman, our cruciform lives are not separate from the cruciform life of Christ. In some mysterious way, our self-sacrifice is a participation in the sacrifice of Christ. If we view the sacrifices that we offer as separate from that of Christ, we end up with two distinct kinds of sacrifices—the one offered by Christ, the others by us. That would lead to all sorts of problems, not

¹⁷ Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 49.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 400.

the least of which is the question I raised earlier: wouldn't this be a denial of the sufficiency of the sacrifice of Christ? How could we add a second sacrifice to the once-for-all (ἐφάπαξ) character of Christ's sacrifice that the letter to the Hebrews insists upon (Heb. 7:27; 9:12, 26; 10:10)? Furthermore, if we separate our sacrifices from his, we need to realize that the implication is that Christ himself offers only the one sacrifice, namely, his own; and that therefore the other sacrifices are those that *we* offer, on our own, by ourselves. It's hard to avoid a Pelagian, pull-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps theology if we are left to offer the second type of sacrifice—our own—by ourselves.¹⁹

And yet, it's impossible to get around the notion that the Lord does call on us to offer sacrifices. We are “like living stones [that] are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 2:5). The Apostle appeals to us in Romans 12:1 to “present [our] bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Paul explains to the Philippians—perhaps the most joyful book in all of Scripture: “Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all” (Phil. 2:17). Sacrifice is a Christian calling, and—as this last verse from Philippians makes clear and as we have seen from our reflections on Colossians 1:24—this sacrifice may in the end involve martyrdom.

¹⁹ Cf. Thomas F. Torrance's comment: “Thus, if the human priesthood of Jesus Christ is set within a damaging dualist context ... we are thrown back upon ourselves to effect our own ‘Pelagian’ mediation with God by being our own priests and by offering to him our own sacrifices” (“The Paschal Mystery of Christ and the Eucharist,” in *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975], 106-38, at 133-34).

Sacrifice is part and parcel of the Christian life. The reason why none of these sacrifices add a new, second sacrifice to that of Christ, and the reason why we don't offer them up on our own strength, is that there really is only one sacrifice, namely, that of Christ—and the sacrifices that we offer up merely *participate* in that one sacrifice of Christ. In the Eucharist, we don't proclaim ourselves. We proclaim Christ: "Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again."

I suspect that one reason why so many churches have done away with a sacramental view of the Eucharist is that people are nervous about the notion that we would offer something to God in the Eucharist. And, frankly, that's not a bad nervousness to have. If indeed we have two distinct sacrifices—the one on Golgotha and the other one in church—then we have a serious problem. That is something the Reformers rightly were apprehensive about. Martin Luther, for instance, claimed: "We know and have no other sacrifice than that which [Christ] made on the cross on which he died once for all."²⁰ "Christ has sacrificed himself once; henceforth he will not be sacrificed by anyone else."²¹ And John Calvin asked rhetorically, "Are we allowed daily to sew innumerable patches upon such a sacrifice [i.e., that of Christ], as if it were imperfect, when he has so clearly commended its perfection? When God's Sacred Word not only affirms but cries out and contends that this sacrifice was performed only once and all its force remains forever, do not those who require another sacrifice accuse it of

²⁰ *Luther's Works*, vol. 36, p. 313. Quoted in George Hunsinger, *The Eucharist and Ecumenism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 101.

²¹ *Luther's Works*, vol. 36, p. 147. Quoted in Hunsinger, *Eucharist and Ecumenism*, 101.

imperfection and weakness?"²² These objections seem to me entirely right—at least, when directed against the notion that there are two separate sacrifices, one offered by Christ and another that we offer ourselves. And, unfortunately, there is a great deal to suggest that this is exactly the way people often looked at the Eucharistic sacrifice in the late Middle Ages, which made the Reformation reaction quite understandable.²³

Eucharist and the Sacrificial Life

The early church unanimously regarded the Eucharist as sacrificial in nature. It is there as early as the *Didache*, Clement, Justin, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus, and it runs throughout the tradition, from the very first evidence that we have, from the second century. "There is no exception whatever," comments the liturgical scholar, Gregory Dix, "in any Christian tradition in the second century and no hint of an alternative understanding anywhere."²⁴ The unanimity of the tradition on this score first struck me when I read the beautiful book by Catholic theologian J.-M.-R. Tillard, called *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ*.²⁵ Tillard shows, from passage after passage, in theologians of both East and West, that they all were convinced that in the Eucharistic

²² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 2 (Philadelphia, Penn.: Westminster Press, 1960), IV.xviii.3.

²³ Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (Westminster: Dacre, 1945), 623; J. M. R. Tillard, "Sacrificial Terminology and the Eucharist," *One in Christ* 17 (1981): 306-21, at 319. Cf. Hunsinger, *Eucharist and Ecumenism*, 125-26.

²⁴ Dix, *Shape of the Liturgy*, 113. As quoted in Hunsinger, *Eucharist and Ecumenism*, 128-29.

²⁵ J.-M.-R. Tillard, *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ: At the Source of the Ecclesiology of Communion*, trans. Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2001).

celebration, we offer on the sacrificial altar our lives to God, in and through Christ. In the East, John Chrysostom explains that our sacrificial lives of mercy must be such that they are in harmony with the sacrifice that we offer up in church; after all, the sacrifice that we offer in taking care of the poor is the very one that we also bring with us to church. Speaking of the poor as if they were our altar on which we sacrifice, Chrysostom comments:

This altar [of the poor] is made of Christ's members themselves, and the body of the Lord becomes your altar. Venerate it: you sacrifice the victim on the flesh of the Lord. This altar [of the poor] is more awesome than the one we use here [in church], not just more than the one used in ancient times [in the Old Testament]. No, do not object. This altar [in church] is awesome because of the sacrifice laid upon it; that, the one made of alms, is even more so, not just because of the alms, but because it is the very sacrifice which makes the other awesome.²⁶

For Chrysostom, our sacrificial acts of mercy add beauty and weight to our Eucharistic sacrifice. And in the West, Augustine, as he looks at Paul's exhortation to "present [our] bodies as a living sacrifice" (Rom. 12:1) and discusses the various gifts that Romans 12 says each of us has in the congregation, makes this comment about our gifts: "This is the sacrifice of Christians: we, being many, are one body in Christ. And this

²⁶ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Second Corinthians* 20, in Schaff, *NPNF II/12* :374. As quoted in Tillard, *Flesh of the Church*, 69; italics omitted.

is also the sacrifice which the church continually celebrates in the sacrament of the altar, known to the faithful, in which the church teaches that it itself is offered in the offering it makes to God.”²⁷ For Augustine, we sacrifice ourselves—the church’s gifts—on the altar in the Eucharist.

I want to turn back once more to the passage we started with—the words of institution in 1 Corinthians 11. “We proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes,” says Saint Paul. How is it that we proclaim Christ’s death? It’s not just the *words* that we say—“Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again”—that proclaim Christ, though they do. It’s also not just the priest taking Christ’s words into his own mouth—“This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me; This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me”—it’s also not just *those* words that proclaim the Lord’s death, though I think they. No, it’s in the very act of eating the bread and in the very act of drinking the cup that we proclaim the Lord’s death.²⁸ In the Eucharistic celebration we offer up our lives in Christ; we sacrifice ourselves in him. And in that act, we proclaim Christ.

The implications are huge. Think of the situation in Corinth. The sad thing in Corinth is that there’s not much sacrifice going on there. When they celebrate the Lord’s Supper, probably in the context of a larger fellowship meal, a so-called ‘love feast,’ the rich help themselves first, they grab off the table whatever food fits on their plate, and in the

²⁷ Augustine, *De civ. dei*, X.6. As quoted in Tillard, *Flesh of the Church*, 45; italics omitted.

²⁸ Cf. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “‘You Proclaim the Lord’s Death,’: 1 Corinthians 11:26 and Paul’s Understanding of Worship,” *Review & Expositor* 80 (1983): 377–87.

end there's nothing left for the poor. Saint Paul sharply rebukes them: "It is not the Lord's supper that you eat" (11:20). "What!" he exclaims, "do you not have houses to eat and drink in?" (11:22). The Corinthians turn the Eucharistic celebration into the very opposite of what it's meant to be. It's meant to be a feast of self-giving; they turn it into a selfish hog fest. It's immediately after he has denounced the Corinthian so-called Eucharistic celebration that the apostle then gives the words of institution ("This is my body, which is for you.... This cup is the new covenant in my blood" [11:24–25]), and it's at that same point that he says, "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (11:26). The problem with the Corinthians is that they proclaim not the Lord's death but themselves. That's why Saint Paul insists it's not the *Lord's* supper they are eating. And that's also why he immediately adds, that they are eating and drinking "in an unworthy manner" (11:27).

We invariably proclaim something at the Altar. We either proclaim Christ or we proclaim ourselves. There's no doubt that when Polycarp sacrificed himself in the stadium, he was proclaiming Christ. The reason is simple: with every fiber of his being, he shared in Christ. Every thought he had, every word he spoke, every deed he did, was a participation in the sacrifice of Christ. The question we must ask when we come to the altar is this: Am I giving myself here in Christ, here at the altar, or am I asserting myself? In other words: am I proclaiming myself or am I proclaiming Christ? It's either the one or the other. Our lives are meant for fruit-bearing. They're meant to be polycarpic. That may not mean a literal sacrificial martyrdom. (Increasingly, though, in our

secular Western society, we must be prepared also for this reality. But regardless of what exactly our sacrifices may look like, one thing is clear: Christ calls us to proclaim him and him alone. Because it is a sacrifice, the Eucharist is at one and the same time an act of proclamation.