

THE EUCHARISTIC SACRIFICE

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"The eucharistic sacrifice, that storm-centre of controversy, is finding in our day a truly evangelical expression from the 'catholic' side, when it is insisted that the sacrificial action is not any sort of re-immolation of Christ, nor a sacrifice additional to his one sacrifice, but a participation in it. The true celebrant is Christ the high-priest, and the Christian people are assembled as members of his body to present before God his sacrifice, and to be themselves offered up in sacrifice through their union with him." These words, by the distinguished Anglo-Catholic biblical theologian Fr A. G. Hebert, SSM were endorsed by the Prayer Book Sub-Committee (chaired by Archbishop George Otto Simms) at the Lambeth Conference of 1958.

Alas, A. G. Hebert's words proved premature insofar as there remains, in 2007 a theological fault-line within Anglicanism which to some extent still divides people into different schools of thought not only in relation to the eucharistic offering but also over the real presence of Christ in the eucharist, prayers for the departed and a number of issues. But they do hold out the tantalising possibility that the doctrine of the eucharistic sacrifice is, at least in principle, capable of being expressed in a way which is congruous with both biblical and traditional thinking and regarded as part of the common faith of Christians. The ARCIC 1 *Agreed Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine* (Windsor 1971) and its *Elucidation* (Salisbury 1979) reflects a similar line of approach.

It is striking that the concept of the eucharist as in some sense sacrificial seems to have been part of a common understanding within the church from earliest times. That problematical document the *Didache*, which some have dated as early as the second half of the first century A.D., refers to the eucharist as a *thusia* (sacrifice), and the important letter from the Church at Rome to that of Corinth known as 1 Clement (usually dated around 96 A.D.) refers to presbyters as those who are *poiountes tas prosphoras* (making the offerings). Many early Christian liturgical documents are composite, having been modified over a period of time and so are hard to date, but the one thing in common to them all is the use of sacrificial language in the eucharist. Addai and Mari has, for example, "the commemoration of the body and blood of your Christ which we offer to you upon the pure and holy altar". The so-called *Apostolic Tradition* of St. Hippolytus has "Remembering therefore his death and resurrection, we offer to you the bread and the cup, giving you thanks because you have held us worthy to stand before you and minister to you."

A fully developed concept of eucharistic sacrifice is found in the (fourth century) *De Sacramentis* of St Ambrose of Milan and the much later *Gelasian Sacramentary* which is to be found in the ninth century Stowe Missal used by the Celtic Church in Ireland by that date.

The extraordinary reaction of the sixteenth century Reformers (including Thomas Cranmer) against traditional eucharistic doctrine, including that of the eucharistic

sacrifice, can probably best be understood as the downside of the rediscovery of the biblical doctrines of justification by faith and the great *ephapax* (once for all) of the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary. It was supposed that this necessarily meant that sacrificial language when applied to the eucharist was a presumption and an infringement upon the finished work of Christ, although the Prayer Book did contain references to "this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving" and to the offering of "ourselves, our souls and bodies". However, in the post-Reformation period a balanced doctrine is found in the writings of the Caroline Divines which combined a full recognition of the "once for all" with a strong sense of the validity of an objective and corporate "remembrance" of the death of Christ on the cross "for us and for our salvation" in the celebration of the eucharist. John Bramhall (Bishop of Derry and later Archbishop of Armagh) once said,

The holy eucharist is a commemoration, a representation, an application of the all-sufficient propitiatory sacrifice of the cross.....We acknowledge an eucharistical sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving; a commemorative sacrifice or a memorial of the sacrifice of the cross; a representative sacrifice, or a representation of the passion of Christ before the eyes of his heavenly Father; an impetrative sacrifice or an impetration of the fruit and benefit of his passion by way of real prayer; and, lastly, an applicative sacrifice, or an application of his merits unto our souls.

A paraphrase of the dominical command, which brings in the concept of eucharistic offering is that "we remember before God in thanksgiving and supplication the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ on the cross of Calvary". That is a defensible and a highly scriptural understanding.