

THE THEOLOGY OF THE EUCHARIST: WORSHIP THAT MAKES US WHOLE

1. Eucharist, Agape, Holy Sacrifice, Mass, Divine Liturgy: What's in a Name? (October 26)

Names we give to the Eucharist shape the way we welcome God's healing, presence, and fellowship.

2. The Words of Institution (Consecration): Are They Magical? (November 2)

Jesus' words "This is my body" make sense if we become aware of the many ways Jesus is present in our celebrations.

3. The Invocation of the Holy Spirit (Epiclesis): The Eucharist's Forgotten Act? (November 9)

The Holy Spirit is called to sanctify bread, wine, and the community.

4. The Great Thanksgiving (Doxology): What Does the Eucharist Have to Do with Praise? (November 16)

The Eucharistic turns everything into praise and thanksgiving to the Father.

5. "Do This in Memory of Me" (Memorial): Are We Remembering or Re-Living? (November 30)

The Eucharist is more than remembrance - it unites us to Jesus' death and resurrection, until he comes again.

6. **The Eucharist as Meal and Sacrifice: How Do These Fit Together?** (December 7)

We become a sacrifice to God by being united in one body through the sharing of one bread.

7. One Bread, One Body (Communion): How United Do We Really Become? (December 14)

The Eucharist heals us from division and isolation by calling us into fellowship with each other and with God.

8. "Go in Peace to Love and Serve the Lord" (Mission): How Does the Eucharist Shape Our Lives? (December 21)

The Eucharist blends into everyday life as God sends us out to love, serve, and be his witnesses to the world.

6. THE EUCHARIST AS MEAL AND SACRIFICE: HOW DO THESE FIT TOGETHER?

1. Just after the *Sanctus* (Holy, Holy, Holy...), the Eucharistic Prayer (Rite 1) says
All glory be to thee, Almighty God, our heavenly Father, for that thou, of thy tender mercy, didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption; who made there, by his one oblation of himself once offered, a full, perfect, and sufficient **sacrifice**, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world; and did institute, and in his holy Gospel command us to continue, a perpetual memory of that his precious death and **sacrifice**, until his coming again.
1. How do we understand the word ‘sacrifice’?
2. Let us start by considering the common cultural use of this word
 - 2.1. A parent works extra hours to pay for a child’s education. She/he sacrifices time and rest.
 - 2.2. A student gives up weekends to study for important exams. She/he sacrifices leisure for long-term success.
 - 2.3. An athlete follows a strict diet and trains daily. She/he sacrifices comfort and pleasure for performance.
 - 2.4. Someone moves to a smaller home to save money. She/he sacrifices space for financial stability.
3. In common, non-religious language, the word “sacrifice” refers to
 - 3.1. giving up something valuable
 - 3.2. for the sake of something considered more important.
 - 3.3. The core idea is *loss freely accepted for a higher good*.
 - 3.4. What makes it valuable is that it is *free* and *costly*.
4. This is the meaning of sacrifice that we often instinctively apply to Jesus’ death on the cross: it was a sacrifice because it was costly (Jesus’ own blood, that is his life) and free.
5. It is difficult however to reconcile this understanding of sacrifice with the way it features in the eucharistic prayer:

And we earnestly desire thy fatherly goodness mercifully to accept this our **sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving**; most humbly beseeching thee to grant that, by the merits and death of thy Son Jesus Christ, and through faith in his blood, we, and all thy whole Church, may obtain remission of our sins, and all other benefits of his passion.
6. How is ‘thanksgiving’ a ‘sacrifice’ according to the common meaning of sacrifice? It is free, but is it *costly*?
7. It is true that Jesus says about the cup that “this is my blood ... shed for you” – and that part of the sacrificial system of the Old Testament described in the book of Leviticus consists in the offering of animals: they are killed, their blood is shed – and we might think that they are effective and agreeable to God because this offering is costly.

- 7.1. One of the main form taken by the sacrifice of animals was the holocaust (which means ‘totally burned’)
 - 7.2. The whole victim was burned – that is symbolically ‘transferred’ to God.
8. There was however another form of sacrifice in Jewish culture described by Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, priest, and former general whose detailed works, including *Jewish Antiquities*, preserve crucial insights into Judaism, Rome, and early Christianity.

There are two kinds of sacrifice which take two distinct forms:

- the first is offered by individuals and
- the other by the people.
- In the first case, the whole of the sacrificial victim is burnt (holokauteitai) whence its name [**holocaust**];
- the other kind [by the people as a collectivity] has the nature of being an **offering of thanks** and it is done in such a way that **those who have made the sacrifice can have a banquet**.¹

9. Here we see the connection between sacrifice and meal:

- 9.1. In the Jewish culture, any meal in which the participants *acknowledge* that the food they eat is a gift from God and *give thanks* to God for this gift is a ‘sacrifice’
- 9.2. In the sense that the meal is ‘consecrated’ or blessed: the very act of eating (together) with gratitude is an act that unites the participants to God and with each other.
- 9.3. It is a sacrifice not because it is ‘costly’, but because it is a way of acknowledging God’s gift, of feeling grateful for this gift, and of wanting to offer in return the whole of one’s heart and life as a gift to God.
- 9.4. What makes our gift and ourselves ‘sacred’, ‘con-sacrated’ is that we somehow are ‘transferred’ to the divine by the movement of our lives and hearts offered to God:

And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee; humbly beseeching thee that we, and all others who shall be partakers of this Holy Communion, may worthily receive the most precious Body and Blood of thy Son Jesus Christ, be filled with thy grace and heavenly benediction, and made one body with him, that he may dwell in us, and we in him.

And although we are unworthy, through our manifold sins, to offer unto thee any **sacrifice**, yet we beseech thee to accept this our bounden duty and service, not weighing our merits, but pardoning our offenses, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

10. “The only first-century Christian source that mentions sacrifice as an activity of the followers of Jesus [is] the *Didache*.

On the day which is the Day of the Lord **gather together for the breaking of the loaf and giving thanks**. However, you should first

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¹ Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 3, 224–6. Quoted by Thomas O’Loughlin, *The Eucharist. Origins and Contemporary Understandings*, 131.

confess your sins so that your **sacrifice** may be a pure one; and do not let anyone who is having a dispute with a neighbor join until they are reconciled so that your sacrifice may not be impure. For this is the **sacrifice** about which the Lord has said: 'In every place and time let a pure sacrifice be offered to me, for I am the great king, says the Lord, and my name is feared among the nations'.²

11. We know that the Christian Eucharist arose from the Jewish sacrificial tradition, but often we do not realize that
 - 11.1. It is not only nor mainly the sacrificial tradition of the Temple (killing of animals)
 - 11.2. But the sacrificial tradition of the meal
 - 11.3. Which after the destruction of the Temple remained as the fundamental form of worship in Judaism (cf. the *Shabbat*, and the *Seder*, that is the Passover meal)

"What distinguishes the true Israelite in his eating from the Canaanites and all idolaters, is that **he knows and acknowledges that food and drink are God's gifts**; to him they are no longer the products of natural agencies tainted by sin; they are the gifts of the grace of his Redeemer, who is also the Creator of all things. (119)

"For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be rejected that is accepted with **thanksgiving**. For it is **sanctified** by the word of God and prayer." (1 Tim 4:4f)
12. Historically, there is an element in particular of the *Seder* (Passover meal) that evolved into the Christian Eucharist, which is called the *maggid*, literally "the act of telling."
 - 12.1. that is the part of the Jewish ritual meal where the Exodus story is recounted, fulfilling the biblical command:

8You shall tell your son on that day, 'It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt.' 9And it shall be to you as a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the law of the LORD may be in your mouth. For with a strong hand the LORD has brought you out of Egypt. 10You shall therefore keep this statute at its appointed time from year to year. (Ex 13:8).
13. Here is how some of the key steps of *maggid*:
 - 13.1. The presider of the meal announces that the story of the Exodus is about to be told.
 - 13.2. The youngest participant asks some questions, especially:
 - i. Why do we eat only flat, unleavened bread tonight?
 - ii. Why do we eat bitter herbs tonight?
 - 13.3. The presider gives the basic answer. The story starts with: "We were slaves in Egypt, and God brought us out with a mighty hand."
 - 13.4. The presider explains the meaning of three items on the table: the roasted meat (God's protection), the flat bread (the speed of the escape), the bitter herbs (the bitterness of slavery).
 - 13.5. This is followed by psalms of praise and thanksgiving.
14. Just as the *maggid*, the Eucharist is a proclamation of God's saving acts

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² Didache, 14.1-3, quoted by Loughlin 132.

- 14.1. spoken during a ritual meal
 - 14.2. the symbolism of the food is explained
 - 14.3. structured as thanksgiving
 - 14.4. aimed at making the saving act *present* to the participants
15. The most striking parallel between the *maggid* and the *Eucharist* is the explanation of the symbolism of the food:
- 15.1. In the *maggid*, the presider explains the meaning of food on the table (why the roasted meat represents God's protection, the flat bread signifies liberation, and the bitter herbs recall slavery)
 - 15.2. During the Last Supper, Jesus too 'explained' the meaning of the food
For in the night in which he was betrayed, he took bread;
and when he had given thanks, he brake it, and gave it to his
disciples, saying,
"Take, eat, this is my Body, which is given
for you. Do this in remembrance of me."
Likewise, after supper, he took the cup; and when he had
given thanks, he gave it to them, saying,
"Drink ye all of this;
for this is my Blood of the New Testament, which is shed for
you, and for many, for the remission of sins. Do this, as oft as
ye shall drink it, in remembrance of me."
16. It is true that Jesus is also presented in the New Testament as the Paschal Lamb.
"Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed." (1 Cor 5:7)
- 16.1. However, the Passover lamb was not a sin offering
 - 16.2. It was not killed in the Temple; it was a family meal.
 - 16.3. It was to be eaten during a ritual meal full of narrative and thanksgiving, the setting of the *maggid*.
17. So when Jesus is called the lamb, it is not to say his death is like a Temple sacrifice, but that his death is the **new Exodus**, and he delivers us.
18. Thus the Eucharist becomes:
- 18.1. the new Passover meal,
 - 18.2. in which the "lamb" is not an animal but Christ Himself,
 - 18.3. and this meal itself is a sacrifice of thanksgiving where the participants are 'consecrated': their offering of themselves with Christ is agreeable to the Father and results in union with God and with each other.