

IDOLATRY AND THE EUCHARIST: IN SEARCH OF THE LAND OF THE FREE

Theme of the 2025-26 Saint Thomas Theological Education Program: *The Eucharist as an Antidote to Idolatry*. The inspiration is taken from the works of the theologian **William Cavanaugh**, who will give the **Saint Thomas Spring Theology Lecture on May 16: "Idolatry and The Eucharist: How to See God in Things without Making a God of Things"**. We will explore this theme and Cavanaugh's book in detail in a series of **Sunday Theology Talks** and the **Thursday Reading Group** during Lent.

Sunday Theology Talks	Thursday Reading Group
1. The Many Gods of the Secular Age: Idolatry and Restless Hearts (February 22) 2. The Work of Our Hands: Scripture and Augustine on Idolatry (March 8) 3. The Desires of Our Age: Nationalism and Consumerism (March 15) 4. The Gift of God's Presence: The Eucharist as the Undoing of Idolatry (March 22)	1. Introduction: Everyone Worships. (February 26) 2. Chapter 3: Idolatry in Scripture. (March 5) 3. Chapter 6: The Splendid Idolatry of Nationalism. (March 12) 4. Chapter 7: The Unsplendid Idolatry of Consumerism (March 19) 5. Chapter 8: Incarnation and Sacrament. (March 26)

3. THE GIFT OF GOD'S PRESENCE: THE EUCHARIST AS THE UNDOING OF IDOLATRY

Hymn of Philippians 2.1-11

6. *Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.*
- 6.1. 3Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,
 - 6.2. but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.
 - 6.3. 4Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.
 - 6.4. 5Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6who,
 - i. ~~Though~~/because he was in the form of God,
 - ii. did not count equality with God **a thing to be grasped**,
 - iii. 7but **emptied** himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8And being found in human form,
 - iv. he **humbled** himself by becoming **obedient** to the point of death, even death on a cross.
 - v. 9Therefore **God has highly exalted him** and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

7. The key to undoing idolatry is a matter of **direction**.
 - 7.1. Idolatry tries to reach up and seize divinity, to bring it within human grasp;
 - 7.2. in contrast, God offers participation in God's life as a gift to be received. (348)
8. The movement of God is instead one of descent, restoring the image of God in humanity by the Incarnation, which can be received only as a gift. [Philippians 2:5– 8] (348)
 - 8.1. What he empties himself of is the desire for *harpagmon*, something to be seized or grasped.
 - 8.2. Seizing or grasping is what the pagan rulers do.
 - 8.3. Kenosis is not the loss or concealment of divine power but the manifestation of a kind of divine power that is not like human power. (348)
 - 8.4. Paul's language of bent knees and confessing tongues is a reference to Isaiah 45:22– 3. [...] The text is explicitly antiidolatry; the prophet's words are directed to "those who carry about their wooden idols and keep on praying to a god that cannot save" (45:20).
 - 8.5. Paul's message is clear: worshiping Jesus Christ is worshiping the one God of Israel, the same God who declares "there is no other."
 - 8.6. Worshiping Jesus Christ as Lord is not idolatry, but is in fact the antidote to idolatry. (349)
 - 8.7. Christ's humility is not an end in itself to be imitated but rather **a means toward [...] *koinonia*, the community in Christ**.
 - 8.8. This is the frame for understanding Paul's preface to the hymn:

"[B]e of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:2– 4).
 - 8.9. The choice is not between selfishness and selflessness, narcissism and the annihilation of the self, but rather the creation of a larger self that incorporates all things in Christ. The person becomes a person only in communion with others. (350)
9. Kenosis [*Self-humbling of Christ*]
 - 9.1. is a way of relating to God, a receptive openness to being filled by God, as opposed to the idolatrous reaching out and grasping God, subjecting God to the limits of our understanding. [...]
 - 9.2. The kenosis of the image is not a judgment against finitude or against material creation, but is rather an invitation to love as God loves, not by grasping but by receiving. (363)
10. **In this passage we find how the Eucharist is an antidote do idolatry**
 - 10.1. **Idolatry is an attempt to make a god that we can 'seize', 'control' - or make ourselves divine, that is the center of everything**
 - 10.2. **Idolatry is seeking our own benefit, interest (individually or as a group) at the expenses of others – it breaks communion**
 - 10.3. **The God who gives himself to us in the Eucharist can be encountered only if, like Jesus, we embrace his gift of himself – by giving ourselves with him.**

11. **Everything depends on the way we participate in the Eucharist**
 - 11.1. **as an attempt to ‘seize’ divinity**
 - 11.2. **or as receiving God’s gift of himself by entering into the movement of that gift.**
12. The [Eucharist] is fundamentally a statement about
 - 12.1. how God wants to have a relationship with us,
 - 12.2. how God wants to be with us, and
 - 12.3. how God wants to use material reality to forge relationships with us as material creatures.
 - 12.4. The [Eucharist] is the action of God’s self- gift; it is not a statement about the inherent qualities of material reality as such. (357)

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN IDOLS AND THE EUCHARIST

The Eucharist can become an idol

13. **The Old Testament [...] refuses to make images of Yahwe (“aniconism”)**
 - 13.1. In the Old Testament, the rejection of idolatry and the emphasis on aniconism in Israelite worship does not indicate the rejection of the divine presence in the created world.
 - i. God’s “sacramental” presence is found in the Tabernacle and its furnishings, including the Ark of the Covenant and the table of the Bread of the Presence (Ex. 25– 31, 35– 40).
 - ii. The detailed prescriptions of the Law governing the mundane minutiae of life— from personal hygiene to animal husbandry, from clothing to pots and pans— indicate that God is to be found in everyday interactions with the material world, which, as Genesis 1 repeatedly reminds us, is good in God’s eyes. (346)
14. **Reformers** [for example Calvin] objected to the capture of God’s power in the material world, which they routinely labeled idolatry.
 - 14.1. Reformers wanted to do away with the magical view of the sacraments, such that the changes that the Eucharist effected became less in the bread and wine and more in the interior of the human person. (344)
15. **Everything depends on how we understand the Eucharist, especially**
 - 15.1. **How does God become visible in the Eucharist?**
 - 15.2. **Is the Eucharist ‘automatic’, ‘magical’?**

How is God ‘visible’ in the Eucharist

16. The Incarnation establishes a delicate dynamic interaction of visibility and invisibility, presence and absence. The Gospel of John proclaims both
 - 16.1. “No one has ever seen God” (1:18) and
 - 16.2. “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (14:9). (358)
17. The Incarnation thus also opens the possibility of seeing the world as icon and sacrament of the presence of God. The goal of both is to present the invisible God in visible form,

but without thereby reducing God to something that can be grasped and manipulated. (358)

Does the Eucharist work ‘automatically’?

18. The classical distinction that arises out of the Donatist controversy is between the validity and the fruitfulness of the sacraments.
 - 18.1. **Validity:** “From the moment that a sacrament is celebrated in accordance with the intention of the Church, the power of Christ and his Spirit acts in and through it, independently of the personal holiness of the minister.
 - 18.2. **Fruitfulness:** Nevertheless, the fruits of the sacraments also depend on the disposition of the one who receives them.” (374)
19. To say that the Eucharist reconciles, for example, is a normative theological claim, but it can be taken in the indicative as an empirical claim that this is in fact what the Eucharist accomplishes in any given circumstances. This can cause confusion and give the impression that the Eucharist acts “automatically.” (375)