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The Gift We Cannot Give Ourselves: The Eucharist in the Theology of Pope Benedict XVI

James Massa

I. Introduction

Last summer, Pope Benedict XVI fulfilled one of his promises to Catholic traditionalists by widening the use of the so-called Latin Mass. In a *Motu Proprio* (a form of papal teaching that is issued solely in the pope's own name) entitled "Summorum Pontificum,"¹ the pope relaxed restrictions on the celebration of the Eucharist according to the 1962 Roman Missal, which had been the last revision of the Catholic Rite issued by Pius V in the immediate aftermath of the Council of Trent. Since 1970, the vast majority of the world's billion plus Roman Catholics encounter a reformed version of the Roman Catholic Mass that is nearly always celebrated in the vernacular. Benedict XVI, in declaring the 1962 Missal—now called the Missal of Blessed (Pope) John XXIII—an "extraordinary form," has by no means given up on the ongoing reform of the new liturgy. In fact, it is the pope's expectation that the use of the two forms of the Roman Rite will be mutually enriching. On the one hand, the old can take from the new a more varied lectionary of Sunday and weekday readings, along with new feast days and prayers that reflect contemporary sensibilities. On the other hand, the new can learn from the old the sacred quality and reverence that attended the best of the pre-Vatican II liturgies, not to mention the music of Gregorian chant.

Reactions to the *Motu Proprio* of July 7, 2007, reflected a broad spectrum of opinion. Traditionalists within the Roman Catholic Church, who had long been celebrating the "old Mass" because Pope John Paul II had given limited permission for its use in the 1988 *Indult Ecclesia Dei*, were naturally elated. Hopes were also affirmed for restored full communion with the followers of Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, who broke ties with the Roman Catholic Church over Vatican II's liturgical reform as well as its teachings on religious freedom and ecumenism. Criticism of the pope's

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, "Summorum Pontificum," July 7, 2007, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/letters/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20070707_lettera-vescovi_en.html.

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initiative, however, could be heard among bishops and scholars who had long defended the reformed Rite of the Eucharist. James Carroll, writing in *The Boston Globe*, called it a "fundamentalist strike back" against the pillars of modernity.² *The Tablet of London* considered it "troubling" and fundamentally "at odds with the teachings of the Council."³ Roman Catholic bishops in France were most upset by the new instruction, as were Jewish leaders who worry that the older form of intercessions for the Good Friday service of 1962 expressly targets Jews for conversion. In that same series of intercessory prayers, Orthodox and Protestant Christians are referred to as "schismatics" and "heretics" respectively, as prayer is invoked so that "God may save them from their errors and be pleased to recall them to our Holy Mother the Catholic and Apostolic Church."

It is clear to anyone who has followed official Vatican commentary on the *Motu Proprio*, as well as to anyone familiar with the theological writings of Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI), that the intercessory prayers of the 1962 Good Friday service are in need of revision because they do not reflect the teachings of the Second Vatican Council,⁴ much less the progress that has been made in doctrinal reconciliation between the Roman Catholic Church and her partners in the communities of the Reformation. As someone who has responded to a pastoral need in his own local church, the Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn, New York, I have the dubious distinction of being a full time ecumenist who regularly celebrates the Latin Mass according to the 1962 Missal. I was asked to do so by my bishop, who was responding to requests for the older form by a rather small group of traditionalists. It is clear to me, in my paradoxical role as ecumenist and pastor to traditionalists, that both forms of the Catholic Mass need to evolve further and in a manner that coheres with the deepest eucharistic structures of Roman Catholic identity. Perhaps through a process of

² James Carroll, "Pope Benedict's Mistake," *Boston Globe*, July 16, 2007, http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2007/07/16/pope_benedicts_mistake.

³ Mark Francis, "Beyond Language," *The Tablet: The International Catholic Weekly*, July 14, 2007, 6-7.

⁴ See "Vatican II, *Nostra aetate*, 28 October, 1965 (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions)," in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (New York: The Costello Publishing Company, 1975), par. 4, 740-742. On February 5, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI published a revised form of the Prayer for the Jews which omits language from the various editions of the 1962 Missal that has long been associated with negative images of Jews. See http://rorate-caeli.blogspot.com/2008_02_01_archive.html (Tuesday, February 05, 2008). The action taken by the pope indicates that the 1962 Missal is open to revision, so that the Roman Catholic liturgy remains coherent with its present articulation of doctrine.

mutual correction, and by drawing on the rich resources of music and devotion found in the other Christian confessions, the Roman Catholic Eucharist will become an even more effective instrument for deepening the faith of Roman Catholics who, like other Christians, always stand in need of worship that is both intelligible and imbued with the sacred.

As a celebrant of the Latin Mass of 1962, I am constantly struck by the appropriateness of a particular rubric that has received repeated scholarly attention by the present pope. Writing in the mid-1970s, while still a German professor at the University of Regensburg, Ratzinger expressed regret over the loss in the new liturgy of the eastward-facing position of the celebrant during the Eucharistic Prayer. The so-called *ad orientem* posture of worship, he contended, had from ancient times contained a cosmological and eschatological significance that should not be abandoned. By praying in the direction of the rising sun, we join with all of creation in giving praise and thanks to the Creator who makes the sun shine “on the good and the bad” (Matt 5:45), and who also raised his Son from the dead as the first fruits of the new creation (1 Cor 15:20). As far back as the apostolic age, Christians believed that Christ would return “from the east” (Matt 24:27), so they constructed places of worship to accommodate an eastward facing position of prayer for both minister and worshipping assembly. To speak of the presiding minister as having his “back to the congregation”—a common description of the older posture—misses the essential point of the symbol. Together, leader and assembly are looking to the future, to the new creation of which the Eucharist affords believers an anticipatory participation. In Ratzinger’s view, we go out to meet the Lord who is the One to come.⁵

As a celebrant of the old liturgy, I experience acutely the power of this eschatological tension, so much so that it makes the rubric of “facing the people” seem to me like a plausible, but ultimately indefensible accommodation to modern sensibility. Of course, in western ecclesiastical architecture altars have not been positioned for centuries to allow for the ministers to face the geographical east. Yet the practice of having a still common orientation toward an altar with a prominent cross placed on it or over it—comparable to the ones engraved over the eastern doors of ancient churches—has been a legitimate embodiment of the same principle.⁶ The

⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, *Feast of Faith: Approaches to a Theology of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 139–145, and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 69, 74–84.

⁶ In ancient churches, it should be noted, crosses were often engraved or painted over the eastward door of the building.

point is to take the focus off the minister and put it where it belongs: on the Lord who comes to us through the invocation of the Holy Spirit, whose power transforms bread into the Lord's body and makes of us, the gathered community, the true body of Christ for the life of the world.

All of this is not to deny the need for moments in the liturgy when leader and congregation face each other. The benefit of the *versus populum* innovation in the post-Vatican II Mass—and in the eucharistic services of many other Christian communions—corresponds to the dialogical character of the liturgy of the word. In the portion of the celebration in which the Scriptures are read and the preacher opens up the texts for the congregation, a face to face posture expresses the basic intentions of hearing and responding to God's word. Yet when it comes to the prayer of the church addressed to the Father, in the Son, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, it is time to open up the "circle" and look beyond ourselves to the gift that only the Triune God can bestow. What all Christians need, in Ratzinger's view, is a liturgical education that counters whatever smacks of an autonomous, complacent community. Our dialogue is not fundamentally with ourselves; rather are we "engaged on a common journey toward the returning Lord"⁷ who forms us into a fellowship of faith by first gathering us into his own communion with the Father.

The image of minister and congregation facing east, in the direction of the returning Lord, helps to frame the more general topic on which I have been asked to speak at this conference. The Eucharist in the thought of the present pope can be understood advantageously in an eschatological perspective. In fact, when viewed in this way, the doctrine and celebration of the Eucharist puts flesh on the conviction that Roman Catholics profess to hold as they join with their Lutheran brothers and sisters in saying that salvation is "by grace alone"; or in other words, it is the gift that we cannot give ourselves. The core statement of *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* in 1999 invites a testing as to whether its common, core conviction, found in paragraph 15, is lived out in the worship of our respective communities. "By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works."⁸ For the current Bishop of Rome, the Eucharist

⁷ Ratzinger, *Feast of Faith*, 143.

⁸ The Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html.

is the one necessary gift that only God can provide; and it is also a gift that transforms us into givers of the same healing love that we have received.

This rather long prelude to my topic offers assurance that the ancient maxim, *lex orandi, lex credendi*—"we pray as we believe"—is very much alive among some of your brothers and sisters in the Roman Catholic community. But now it is time to turn to the crucial question that is appropriately raised within the broader discussion of Christ's atoning death.⁹ What does the worshipping assembly do when it celebrates the Eucharist? Are we justified in calling the eucharistic action of minister and congregation a "sacrifice" on biblical grounds? Ratzinger argues that we are, but only by means of a renewed understanding of sacrifice that departs from ordinary usage and that takes cognizance of how the term develops within the entire canon of Scripture. After covering this ground, I will point to the essential problem that Ratzinger identifies in Luther's judgment about the Roman Catholic teaching on the Mass as sacrifice. From Ratzinger's standpoint, not everything Luther was opposing in Roman Catholic theological arguments of the period can be defended. Yet the core Roman Catholic position on the unity of the Eucharist and the cross was something that the great German Reformer was unable to affirm on account of his view of history. In the final section, I will try to show how an understanding of the eucharistic sacrifice as "assimilative" opens out to Roman Catholic practices such as adoration of the Lord's presence in the eucharistic species. The fruits of such devotion are to be found, for Ratzinger, precisely in those works of love and justice to which the justified believer is directed.

II. Sharing in Christ's Sacrifice

Ordinarily the notion of sacrifice is associated with destruction. In the cultic practices of many religions something is destroyed, usually an animal or some form of organic matter, in order to be handed over to the deity for the purpose of acquiring a favor or of offering thanks for blessings already bestowed. This is not the case for the worship "in accord with reason" (*λογικὴν λατρεία*) that belongs to the essence of Christianity (Rom 12:1). Sacrifice, in union with the eternal *Logos* Jesus Christ, means not destruction but offering to God one's inmost being. For Ratzinger we are asking Christ to "logify" us—to draw us into his worship of the Father "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23). In fidelity to biblical thought, it means "emerging from the state of separation, of apparent autonomy, of existing

⁹ This study was originally presented at the 2008 Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions in Fort Wayne which focused on the Atonement.

only for oneself and in oneself. It means losing oneself as the only possible way of finding oneself (Mark 8:35; Matt 10:39)."¹⁰

In the Old Testament we find precisely this movement of interiorization in the understanding of sacrifice. Whereas Israel receives from God a sacrificial cult that enables the people to abide in the covenant, as time progresses the prophets increasingly point out the ineffectualness of offerings made from hearts that have become impure. "Were I hungry, I would not tell you, for mine is the world and all that fills it. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats? Offer praise as your sacrifice to God; fulfill your vows to the Most High. Then call on me in time of distress; I will rescue you, and you shall honor me" (Ps 50:12-14). What God wants is love, not sacrifices, the prophet Hosea tells the people (Hos 6:6). Through the purifying experience of the exile, Israel learns to live without the temple sacrifices (Dan 3:37-41) and comes to realize that God is honored not by the destruction of things "but in the transformation of man; in the fact that he becomes himself conformed to God. [The human being] becomes conformed to God when he [or she] becomes love."¹¹

Jesus inherits the cult of Israel, in all of its variegated forms, and transposes it in the key of his own salvific mission. On the eve of his passion, together with his disciples Jesus celebrates the Passover which is completely permeated with sacrificial meaning. His "last supper" would have included the typical elements of the Jewish feast: the *haggada*, the narrative commemoration of Israel's Exodus from slavery, as well as the words of praise and thanksgiving from the Psalms, culminating in the *berakah*—in Greek εὐλογία or εὐχαριστία. For the Jewish disciples, these standard features build a bridge from past to present, reminding them that their redeemer lives even into the present. Yet because the people still suffer from oppression and sin, the redemption is not complete. Remembrance opens out to hope and supplication. Jesus seeks to communicate at the Last Supper that God is about to restore hope and set in motion a new form of remembrance that will show forth the divine power over sin and death.

Jesus' celebration of Passover is also unique because of the absence of an essential element in the Jewish meal: the lamb. Ratzinger hears the echo

¹⁰ Ratzinger, *Spirit of the Liturgy*, 27-28; see also Joseph Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 96.

¹¹ Joseph Ratzinger, "Love, the Heart of Sacrifice," in *Looking Again at the Question of the Liturgy with Cardinal Ratzinger: Proceedings of the July 2001 Fontgombault Liturgical Conference*, ed. Alcuin Reid OSB (Farnborough, Hampshire, UK: Saint Michael's Abbey Press, 2003), 25.

of Abraham's assurance to Isaac as an interpretive key for the passion narratives. "God himself will provide the lamb" (Gen 22:8) becomes the divine promise that awaits fulfillment throughout the Old Testament up until the moment of Jesus' live-giving service. According to the Fourth Gospel, Jesus sheds his blood at the very moment when the Passover lambs were being sacrificed in the temple for the evening Passover supper (John 19:14, 34). For the fourth evangelist, Jesus dies on the day before Easter and not—as it would appear according to the accounts in Matthew, Mark, and Luke—on the day after the Passover celebration (two full days before Easter; cf. Matt 26:17, Mark 14:12, and Luke 22:7). Despite this apparent discrepancy, Christ in John's Gospel is every bit the true Passover lamb whose redemptive death has consequences for the whole world (John 1:29).

Is it possible that both John and the Synoptic Gospels could be historically correct? Ratzinger believes that contemporary exegesis of the passion narrative allows for an explanation that only serves to reinforce the conviction that Jesus' Passover makes of him the true lamb of the new memorial in the shedding of his blood. The hypothesis that Ratzinger deems credible, which is based on readings of the Qumran scrolls, is that John's historical claim is entirely correct: Jesus truly shed his blood on the eve of Easter at the time of the immolation of the lambs. However, the Synoptics also contain a reliable witness: Jesus did indeed celebrate a Passover meal with his disciples, but not according to the calendar of the temple and the Jewish majority. Instead he celebrated according to the calendar of the Essene community of Qumran, at least one day earlier. Why would such a novelty be significant? Because the Essenes, having rejected the temple cult, would not have celebrated with a lamb. Neither would Jesus have done so, if he wanted to underscore the fact that he himself is the true lamb of the new redemption. Therefore, Ratzinger argues, "he anticipated his death in a manner consistent with his words: 'No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord' (*Jn* 10: 18). At the time when he offered his Body and his Blood to the disciples, he was truly fulfilling this affirmation. He himself offered his own life" in what would have otherwise been an irrational act of destruction.¹² Jesus himself, and certainly not his executioners, is the priest

¹² Pope Benedict XVI, "Homily for the Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord's Supper," April 5, 2007, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20070405_coena-domini_en.html (accessed January 14, 2008).

who offers this sacrifice. "Only in this way did the ancient Passover acquire its true meaning."¹³

What does all of this imply for the present Bishop of Rome? There exists a unity between the Last Supper and the cross that is implicit in the renewed sacrificial meaning that Jesus gives to the former. The old lamb, just like the old temple (John 2:19), has given way to the new worship that flows from the cross of Christ. From his pierced side flows the cleansing water of Baptism and the nourishing blood of the Eucharist (John 19:34). Supper and cross interpret one another, so do bread and wine on the one side, and flesh and blood on the other. The two together, moreover, refer to the resurrection when the flesh of Christ acquires a new spiritual accessibility as living nourishment on which eternal life itself depends: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (John 6:53). An extraordinary transposition has happened in Ratzinger's mind:

The [Jewish] paschal *haggada*, the commemoration of God's saving action, has become a memorial of the Cross and Resurrection of Christ—a memorial that does not simply recall the past but attracts us within the presence of Christ's love. Thus, the *berakah*, Israel's prayer of blessing and thanksgiving, has become our Eucharistic celebration in which the Lord blesses our gifts—the bread and wine—to give himself in them.¹⁴

What then is the celebration of the Eucharist? Is it a remembrance of Jesus' meals with sinners by which the participants experience God's forgiveness? There is undoubtedly an element of those encounters recorded in the Gospels (e.g., Matt 9:9–13) taken up into the Christian Eucharist. But to put the emphasis here, or to conceive of the Eucharist's basic structure as primarily that of a meal, misses the point for Ratzinger. The Passover is the form in which the essential eucharistic reality—Christ's involvement of us in his self-offering—is imparted to the believing community. "Do this in memory of me" pertains not to the Passover as such, but to the sacrificial offering it embodies. Jews sometimes offered up animals or simple bread as a thank-sacrifice to God (a *todah*, Hebrew תודָה) for deliverance from some evil (Pss 69; 51; 40:1–12; 22). Some scholars, Ratzinger among them, think that the Eucharist may have functioned at the Last Supper as Jesus' own *todah* for God's new deliverance of him from the chains of death.¹⁵ Eventually that *todah* is joined to the agape meals of the early church. Yet Paul's admonition against unworthy celebrations of

¹³ Pope Benedict XVI, "Homily for the Holy Thursday Mass."

¹⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, "Homily for the Holy Thursday Mass."

¹⁵ Ratzinger, *Feast of Faith*, 51–60.

the meal component (1 Cor 11:17-22) expresses a deepening of awareness that led finally to the Christian thanksgiving being combined with the service of the word found in the synagogue. Thus, the two outstanding Jewish contexts of liturgical prayer, temple and synagogue, sacrifice and word, are subsumed by the Christian community in its worship in the light of the risen Lord.

Christ makes of himself the lamb of sacrifice for the new covenant in his blood. Yet, in the Christian liturgy, we encounter him not simply as the Lamb slaughtered, for sacrifice has ceased to mean destruction. Rather, Jesus is the Lamb "once slain who dies no more" (Rev 1:18). John of Patmos' vision of the heavenly liturgy suggests that it is because supper, cross, and resurrection form an indivisible unity that we, the partakers of the lamb's self-offering, are able to approach the heavenly feast. In Ratzinger's rendering of eucharistic worship, our communion is with the victorious Christ who has already drawn all of history to himself. He comes from the future to meet us, in order to lift us up into his eternal self-giving in love to the Father (Heb 12:18-24). His sacrifice becomes ours.

III. Difficulties with Luther

All that I have discussed regarding Benedict XVI's ideas about eucharistic sacrifice may sound somewhat bold in the setting of esteemed Lutheran pastors. Did not Luther call the doctrine "the greatest and most appalling horror" and a "damnable impiety?" Yet I wonder whether Joseph Ratzinger, who has long been engaged with Lutheran theology, as with Luther's own writings, might in some sense be the best ally on the Chair of Peter that Lutherans have ever had. As a commentator on the final session of Vatican II, Ratzinger criticized the lack of christological focus in the deliberations around the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*, 1965). He made the curious statement that the document suffered from having too much Teilhard – as in Teilhard de Chardin, whose cosmological optimism Ratzinger found to be unbiblical – and not enough Luther.¹⁶

On the matter of the Mass as a sacrifice, Ratzinger sees Luther's fundamental problem to be one of historicity. For the German Reformer, the "once and for all" (ἐφάπαξ in Heb 10:10) event of the cross belongs essentially to the past. It is a deed definitively accomplished. The Eucharist

¹⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II* (New York: Paulist Press, 1966), 152-162. See also Joseph Ratzinger, "Part I, Chapter I," in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 5, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 5:138-145.

might recall and transmit the fruits of Christ's sacrifice, but the latter is unrepeatable. Yet one must ask: Has not the cross, not to mention the supper, been taken up into the resurrection? What does it mean to "rise from the dead"? Have not the limitations of normal corporeal and temporal existence been overcome through entrance into the new creation? "To have risen from the dead," the pope argues, "means to be communicable; it signifies being the one who is open, who gives himself."¹⁷ When Paul speaks of broken bread and a shared cup as a "participation" in the body and blood of Christ (1 Cor 10:16), he can only have in mind resurrected flesh. It is this same life-giving flesh that nourishes us with eternal life and, yet, nonetheless gave scandal to the crowds in Capernaum (John 6:35-66). The resurrection qualifies the believer's relationship to the past events of Jesus' life and death. Within the limited framework of his conception of historical time, Luther could not help but draw the conclusion that any so-called "re-presentation" of the sacrifice of Golgotha was at best an act of presumption, and at worst idolatry.¹⁸

Yet the Council of Trent in defending the doctrine of the Mass as a "true and proper sacrifice" means something different from what some of Trent's defenders might have implied in their polemically framed arguments. "If anyone says that by the sacrifice of the Mass blasphemy is committed against the most holy sacrifice of Christ enacted on the cross, or that it devalues that sacrifice: let him be anathema."¹⁹ It is unfortunate that both post-Reformation and post-Tridentine theology generally lacked the tools for explaining how the Eucharist could be both a sacrament and a sacrifice, in such a manner that these two terms are brought into relationship with one another. An important historical sidebar to this point is that Trent did not take up the doctrine of eucharistic sacrifice until eleven years after it had treated the issue of sacramental presence (1551 and 1562, respectively), which was the more urgent task on account of Luther's condemnation of Transubstantiation. A more biblically grounded theology, which we find in Augustine and the early fathers, would

¹⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, *God is Near Us: The Eucharist, the Heart of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 81.

¹⁸ It is questionable whether Ratzinger has a sufficiently comprehensive grasp of Luther's evolving understanding of the Eucharist. For a trenchant analysis of this topic, see Robert C. Crocken, *Luther's First Front: The Eucharist as Sacrifice* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1990).

¹⁹ Council of Trent, Session 22, Canon IV on the Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass; Norman P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1990), 1:735.

maintain that the Eucharist makes present sacramentally the once and for all sacrifice of Christ. By the same token, our worship enables us to encounter the true presence of him who gives himself sacrificially to us.

Aided by historical critical research, scholars today have a deeper understanding of what commemoration means in the biblical context. To "remember" what Jesus did at the Last Supper (1 Cor 11:24-25 and Luke 22:19) implies remembering that is more than a mere recalling of what Christ did in the past. In the rich biblical sense, liturgical commemoration of some foundational event affords the worshipers a share in its saving effects. Such participation has a significance beyond the subjective intentions of those who take part in them.²⁰ To perform the eucharistic action in Christ's memory is first and foremost to allow him to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. He is the true performer in the liturgy. Ministers of worship can never be more than instruments of his work. Our remembering is itself his grace which allows us to be drawn in the present moment into his saving action.

In surveying some of the key ecumenical documents of the last forty years—including Lutheran-Catholic agreements—I cannot help but marvel at how the issue of eucharistic sacrifice has moved to the margins of our dialogues. Is that because the matter has been settled and is therefore no longer church-dividing? For example, the Anglican-Orthodox Theological Consultation in the United States twenty years ago affirmed the consensus between the two communions that the eucharistic memorial "does not merely 'remind' us of the sacrifice of Christ; it makes this sacrifice truly present."²¹ The 1982 Lima Paper of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches also seemed to suggest a remarkable convergence: "The Eucharist is a memorial of the crucified and risen Christ, i.e., the living and effective sign of his sacrifice, accomplished once and for all on the cross and still operative on behalf of all humankind. The biblical idea of memorial as applied to the Eucharist refers to this present efficacy of God's work when it is celebrated by God's people in a

²⁰ Avery Dulles, "The Eucharist and the Mystery of the Trinity," in *Rediscovering the Eucharist: Ecumenical Conversations*, ed. Roch A. Keretszty (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 178.

²¹ Anglican-Orthodox Theological Consultation in the United States, "Agreed Statement on the Eucharist," 1998, par. 10, in *Growing Consensus: Church Dialogues in the United States, 1962-1991, Ecumenical Documents V*, ed. Joseph A. Burgess and Jeffrey Gros (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 343-347.

liturgy."²² The document went on to call the Eucharist "the sacrament of the unique sacrifice of Christ, who ever lives to make intercession for us."²³

It would be a distortion to say that this ecumenical convergence, to the extent that it is a true one, shows that the Roman Catholic side won the post-Reformation debate over eucharistic sacrifice. Luther and the heirs of the Reformation frequently opposed theories of eucharistic sacrifice held by Roman Catholic theologians of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that were harmful to faith and practice. As a careful student of history, Ratzinger acknowledges the purifying influence that Protestant critiques have had on the development of Roman Catholic doctrine. Luther had every reason to denounce the theories of Duns Scotus and Gabriel Biel (1420-1495) that provided legitimacy to the frenetic multiplication of Masses. While Christ's sacrifice has infinite value because he is without sin, Biel reasoned in his *Exposition of the Sacred Canon of the Mass*, the Church's sacrifice has only finite value on account of the imperfect agent making the offering.²⁴ As the Church acquires new merits on the basis of its members' good works, new Masses should be offered in order to apply additional benefits to the living and the dead. In addition to misconstruing the true subject of the eucharistic celebration – which can only be Christ – this kind of reasoning in Roman Catholic theology not surprisingly opened the door to many abuses.²⁵

At the end of the day, it must be said that Christians have nothing to give to God except Christ, and all that Christ enables us to do once we are united to him in faith and worship. The Eucharist can become the gift of the church only because it is Christ who associates himself with us as members of his ecclesial body. To offer ourselves, as Paul exhorts us to do, as a "'rational' and living sacrifice [λογικὴν λατρείαν], holy and pleasing to God" (Rom 12:1), we must have communion with both head and members of the church, which Augustine defines as the "whole Christ" (*totus Christus*). "This is the sacrifice of Christians: we, being many, are one body

²² Faith and Order, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* [Lima Paper, No. 111], (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), "Eucharist" no. 5.

²³ Faith and Order, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, "Eucharist" no. 8. The Holy See later noted that this corresponds to Roman Catholic doctrine; see Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry: An Appraisal," *Origins* 17 (November 19, 1987): 409.

²⁴ Gabriel Biel, *Canonis misse exposito*, ed. Heiko A. Oberman and William J. Courtenay, 4 vols. (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1963-1967), 1:31-33.

²⁵ Roch Kereszty, *Wedding Feast of the Lamb: Eucharistic Theology from a Historical, Biblical, and Systematic Perspective* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2004), 137-139 and 155-157.

in Christ. And this also is the sacrifice which the Church continually celebrates in the sacrament of the altar, known to the faithful, in which she teaches that she herself is offered in the offering she makes to God."²⁶

IV. Adoring the Presence

Ratzinger once described his theological career as a lifelong conversation with Augustine. In many of his essays and talks, he returns to the same passage about conversion in Augustine's *Confessions* that has eucharistic overtones. At a time prior to his own conversion, Augustine had a sort of vision that he could not make sense of on the basis of his Neo-Platonic philosophy. The future bishop of Hippo hears the voice of Christ speaking to him through the Scriptures: "I am the food of strong men; grow, and you shall feed upon me; nor shall you convert me, like the food of your flesh, into you, but you shall be converted into me."²⁷ Ratzinger draws out the implications of this insight for understanding the Eucharist:

In the normal process of eating, the human is the stronger being. He takes things in, and they are assimilated into him, so that they become part of his own substance. They are transformed within him and go to build up his bodily life. But in the mutual relation with Christ it is the other way around; he is the heart, the truly existent being. When we truly communicate, this means that we are taken out of ourselves, that we are assimilated into him, that we become one with him and, through him, with the fellowship of our brethren.²⁸

The passage from Augustine's *Confessions* provides a basis in which Ratzinger understands the rationale for eucharistic worship, even when it takes place outside the church's liturgy. While he has sometimes offered critiques of various theories of eucharistic presence that depart from Roman Catholic orthodoxy, including the Lutheran view of a "dual presence" as well as contemporary Roman Catholic proposals like "transignification,"²⁹ Ratzinger's principal concern is to demonstrate that through the Sacrament we enter into Jesus' act of self-giving.

Objections to certain Roman Catholic devotions like eucharistic adoration, usually celebrated with a large host placed in a monstrance for veneration outside of Mass, are heard often enough within the Roman Catholic community. After all, it is argued, the Lord said: "Take and eat,"

²⁶ Augustine, *City of God* 10.6, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120110.htm>. (accessed January 14, 2008).

²⁷ Augustine, *Confessions* 7.10.16, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/110107.htm> (accessed January 14, 2008).

²⁸ Ratzinger, *God is Near Us*, 78.

²⁹ Ratzinger, *God is Near Us*, 88.

not "Take and look at me." The Council of Trent acknowledges that the ultimate purpose of the Eucharist is its physical consummation by the believers. "But let us just recall," Ratzinger cautions, "what does that mean, to receive the Lord? That is never just a physical, bodily act, as when I eat a slice of bread. So it can therefore never be something that happens just in a moment. To receive Christ means: to move toward him, to adore him. For that reason, the reception can stretch out beyond the time of the eucharistic celebration; indeed, it has to do so."³⁰

The transformation that the Eucharist must effect is a profound sacramental union that can best be described in terms of the "two in one flesh" metaphor of the creation story. Man and woman become one, even if they remain two distinct persons, in their self-donation to one another. Christ has given himself to us in his Passover, and we believers return to him the gift of ourselves in our eucharistic worship. The apostle Paul draws on the marriage metaphor in explaining the union of Christ and believer that begins in Baptism: "He who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit [that is, shares a single new existence in the Holy Spirit] with him (1 Cor 6:17)."³¹ Ratzinger asserts in his first encyclical (*Deus caritas est*), "More than just statically receiving the incarnate *Logos* [in the Eucharist], we enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving."³² The marriage imagery is employed for the sake of a sacramental mysticism. The agape-love of the Christ's self-gift on the cross and in the Eucharist perfects the eros-love of human beings within the marriage covenant.³³

Union with Christ necessarily implies union with all those to whom he gives himself in word and sacrament. "I cannot possess Christ just for myself," Benedict XVI insists. "I can belong to him only in union with all those who have become, or will become his own."³⁴ Ratzinger's eucharistic theology opens out to a social ethic in which the Christ of the Passion, who washed the feet of his disciples (John 13:1-10), becomes the model for compassionate service on behalf of justice and peace. No opposition between worship and ethics can be tolerated. Eucharistic communion entails both the experience of being loved and the compulsion to love generously in turn. "A Eucharist which does not pass over into the

³⁰ Ratzinger, *God is Near Us*, 89.

³¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, no. 11, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html.

³² Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, no. 13.

³³ Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, 133.

³⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, no. 14.

concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented," Ratzinger argues.³⁵ Conversely, "only if I serve my neighbor can my eyes be opened to what God does for me and how much he loves me."³⁶

This intrinsic bond between worship and ethics finds apt expression in the lives of virtuous Christians. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, now called "Blessed" among Roman Catholics, renewed her capacity to express love for the poorest of the poor through her encounters with the Eucharist. By the same token, the pope notes, "this encounter [with the sacrament] acquired its realism and depth in [Blessed Teresa's] service to others."³⁷ Love grows through love, in Benedict's understanding, as the Christian is configured more and more to the eucharistic Lord who pours out his life in service to all. In the case of St. Polycarp, the configuration takes on a peculiar literalness in the ancient account of the second century bishop's martyrdom. As he is burned at the stake onlookers describe the odor emitted from his flesh to be that of baked bread, and the flames enveloping his body as having the shape of stalks of wheat. Ignatius of Antioch likewise looked upon his future martyrdom as an expression of eucharistic sacrifice.³⁸ The ancient martyrs in Abitina, North Africa, also intimate that both the Lord's Day and Lord's Supper are together a matter of inner necessity for them. Replying to their Roman judges, the martyrs confess their inability to live without either the Eucharist or the Day of Resurrection to which it is consecrated. The point is that the Christian "who offers his life in martyrdom enters into full communion with the Pasch of Jesus Christ and thus becomes Eucharist with him."³⁹

What is the effect of living Sunday's Eucharist for Ratzinger? It is never merely an increase in benefits for the individual believer. In the broader catholic tradition, the *res tantum* or "principal effect" of the Sacrament is our incorporation into the mystical body of Christ, the church. For the present pope as for many Eastern and Western ecclesialogists today, the Eucharist "makes" the church just as surely as the church "makes" the Eucharist. It is the essential constitution of the new

³⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, no. 14.

³⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, no. 18.

³⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, no. 18.

³⁸ See references to the two church fathers in Benedict's general audience address on Wednesday, March 28, 2007, at St. Peter's Square, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20070328_en.html.

³⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum caritatis*, no. 85, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20070222_sacramentum-caritatis_en.html#The_Eucharist_a_mystery_to_be_proclaimed; Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, 112.

people of God, as Ratzinger has sought to demonstrate in his interpretations of the core ecclesial doctrine of Vatican II.⁴⁰

The Eucharist is never an event involving just two, a dialogue between Christ and me. Eucharistic communion is aimed at a complete reshaping of my own life. It breaks up man's entire self and creates a new "we." Communion with Christ is necessarily also communication with all who belong to him: therein I myself become a part of the new bread that he is creating by resubstantiation of the whole of earthly reality.⁴¹

The worship of the eucharistic Christ engenders the life of Christians, as well as their mission in the world. Adoration leads to reconciliation among human beings, in other words, to the tasks of building a more just and peaceful society. Worship also leads to reconciliation between humanity and the world of nature which has been harmed by the ego-centric decisions of individuals and whole societies. In fact, the transubstantiated bread points to the new creation that is the goal of the present universe, in which all of created reality will become at the eschaton and an effective sign of the glorified Christ. As stewards of the mysteries of worship, the faithful Christian cannot help but be stewards of God's creation as it extends to other living things and to the planet as a whole.⁴²

V. Conclusion

The Eucharist has been at the center of Joseph Ratzinger's career for more than a half century. He treated the topic extensively as a theologian, especially as it relates to ecclesiology and the reform of liturgy. He assumed the papal office in a year that was dedicated to the Eucharist by his predecessor, and in the following fall he presided over an Extraordinary Synod that was commissioned to explore the theological and pastoral dimensions of eucharistic celebration. Each day, like most priests of the Roman Catholic Church, Benedict offers the Eucharistic sacrifice in union with the entire people of God, those living and those who have made the final journey to the Father's house.

In the present pope's vision of Christian faith and life, the Eucharist sums up everything. It draws to itself all that God has sought to give humanity in the gift of his only Son. Heaven meets earth in this glorious Sacrament. The future of hope becomes a present reality for Benedict XVI. "From now on," he says, "the Parousia is accomplished in the Liturgy, but

⁴⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, "The Ecclesiology of Vatican II" in *Church Ecumenism and Politics: New Essays in Ecclesiology* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 2-18.

⁴¹ Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, 78.

⁴² Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum caritatis*, no. 92.

that is so precisely because it teaches us to cry: 'Come, Lord Jesus,' while reaching out towards the Lord who is coming. It always brings us to hear His reply yet again and to experience its truth: 'Yes, I am coming soon.' (Rev. 22:17, 20)."⁴³ Within such a noble and challenging perspective, it seems natural for us in our worship to "face east," if not with our bodies, then certainly with our hearts.

⁴³ Reid, *Looking Again at the Question of the Liturgy with Cardinal Ratzinger*, 31.