

New Developments in the Theology of Sacrifice

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Sacrifice is one of the most misunderstood words and concepts in all of Christian theology. What many people think is that sacrifice is often an outright aberration of authentic Christianity. The mere titles of a number of recent books indicate that theologians and others are increasingly aware of this problem,¹ so much so that any recent treatment of religious sacrifice that does not acknowledge the complexity and problematic nature of the topic is immediately suspect. Hence the title of my own book, *Sacrifice Unveiled*,² scheduled to appear at about the same time as this article. My task, in that book as in this article, is twofold: to expose mistaken ideas of Christian sacrifice, and to unveil what it really is.

Although I began working on the theology of Christian sacrifice more than forty years ago and had already published two books and almost two dozen articles on the topic,³ it has been only within the past decade that I have finally come—and that almost by accident—to a true, that is, specifically trinitarian, understanding of it. That “accident” was a series of serendipitous coincidences that began with the 1994 untimely death of my former teacher, Edward J. Kilmartin, S.J., and my becoming his literary executor. That happily coincided with my having a whole sabbatical year to devote to editing for posthumous

publication his final *magnum opus*, *The Eucharist in the West*.⁴ It was only toward the end of that year, and while working on the last few of pages of that manuscript, that I finally “got it”—an insight into the trinitarian reality of Christian sacrifice that has turned into the most exciting event of my whole academic life, an insight that has dominated and driven my whole theological “agenda” since that time. This is the central “new development” that I am attempting to summarize here for the readers of *Liturgical Ministry*.

The Many Meanings of Sacrifice

In my book *Sacrifice Unveiled* I begin my exposition of the many meanings of sacrifice with an unfortunately all-too-typical story that illustrates the severity of our problem. It was in an upscale Jesuit parish known for the quality of its preaching and instruction. The religious education instructor, bringing her young charges back into the main church to celebrate the Eucharist together with the adult members of the assembly, was asked by the pastor, “Have you found out what sacrifice is?” The first reading on that second Sunday of Lent had been the story of the (almost) sacrifice of Isaac from Genesis 22. “Yes,” proclaimed the instructor triumphantly, “Sacrifice means giving up what you love.” Expressing himself happily content

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with her answer, the pastor, while I was restraining my impulse to shout out: “No! No! You’ve got it all wrong!” moved to the altar to begin celebrating the specifically sacrificial part of the sacrifice of the Mass.

If, as I most vigorously affirm, our participation through the Spirit in the mutually self-giving life and love of the Father and the Son is the absolutely key reality of authentic Christian sacrifice, then this sadly typical story that could have happened in any number of churches across the world dramatically illustrates the severity of our challenge. For the common understanding of sacrifice, fraught as it is with negative baggage—giving up what we love, destruction of a victim, doing something we’d rather not have to do, etc.—does more to veil than to unveil what authentic Christian sacrifice is.

Sacrifice has a seemingly limitless range of meanings. Search through the traditional encyclopedias or, better still, put a modern internet search engine (Google, for example) to work on “sacrifice,” and one is confronted with hundreds of thousands of entries. Even when one refines the search down to “religious sacrifice” or still more down to “Christian sacrifice,” the quantity and variety of the results remain overwhelming. If one did not already know that “trinitarian” is the key toward guiding one to an authentic Christian understanding of sacrifice, one would have to be quite lucky to get there via an internet search engine.⁵ To help set the table in this article for this trinitarian understanding of sacrifice, I can quickly list—and that list is still just a selection from what is possible—at least five “preliminary” meanings of sacrifice, any one of which, or almost any combination of which, can be what people are thinking of when they hear the word “sacrifice.”

1. Secular understanding of sacrifice

There is, first, a general secular understanding of the word: giving up something, usually something of at least

some value, in order to get something of greater value. Because of the deprivation factor, there is inevitably some sadness or misfortune connected with it, and also some calculation, too, in order to make sure that the good being obtained is worth more than the good being given up. These secular, calculating, and unavoidably negative connotations of “sacrifice” are so pervasive and deep, so deeply rooted in the way we think and talk, that they inevitably influence almost all other uses of the word, even the most sublimely religious. It is not wise to pretend that they are not there.

2. General religious understanding of sacrifice

Here, sacrifice is generally understood as giving something valuable to God, often in a ceremony that symbolizes an internal offering of commitment or surrender to God in which an external gift is consumed or destroyed. Its purpose can be to acknowledge God’s dominion, to seek reconciliation with God, to render thanks for or to petition for blessings, and in general to establish or protect the relationships that human beings have or want to have with the divine.⁶

3. Sacrifice in the Hebrew Scriptures

What eventually became the Christian understanding of sacrifice was something that was already developing deep in the Old Testament (for example, in the accounts of the Genesis 4 sacrifices of Cain and Abel and the Genesis 8 sacrifice of Noah after the flood) namely, the vital importance of the sacrificer’s religious dispositions and the knowledge that God alone decides what is an acceptable sacrifice. But this divine decision was anything but arbitrary. As taught by the prophets, it was connected with fulfilling the covenant requirements of justice and mercy. In addition, the (historical) connection, and for many (even to this day) the practical identification, of sacrifice with atonement goes back to this time. And finally, as Israel’s religious sensitivity developed, there arose the awareness that what brought about atonement and communion with God was not precisely the performance of the sacrifice, but the fact that it was performed *in obedience to the law*, that is, in accordance with God’s will. This awareness developed into one of the singular religious achievements of late biblical and post-biblical Judaism: the belief that it was not ritual performance but prayer and the virtuous works of mercy and service that brought about or occasioned reconciliation, atonement, and communion with God.

Christians must humbly recognize that they learned/ inherited this insight from their Jewish forebears. This spiritualized—and for them now “christologized”—idea of sacrifice is what Paul is preaching in Romans 12:1: “ ...

present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” It is also what is at least implicitly intended in those several other New Testament passages that speak about Christian sacrificial activity.⁷

4. General Christian understanding of sacrifice

Christians understand that this offering can range all the way from something transcendentally precious as the heroic, self-giving dedication of one’s life to the service of God, all the way down to something quite small like giving up some trivial pleasure for Lent. But Jesus’ comments on the widow’s tiny offering (Mark 12:43 and Luke 21:3) remind us that the value of an offering does not depend on its size; it depends rather on the extent to which what one does is an aspect or expression of personal self-giving in union with Christ.

5. Specifically Catholic understanding of sacrifice

The close relationship and, in the minds of many, the identity, of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross and the sacrifice of the Mass has been a central point of Catholic faith and teaching from the time of the Fathers of the church right up to *Sacramentum caritatis*, the recent post-synodal apostolic exhortation of Pope Benedict XVI. But this relationship has also been the point of massive misunderstandings by Catholics and Protestants alike that have veiled rather than revealed the true nature of Christian sacrifice. Catholics and Protestants at the time of the Reformation agreed in seeing the New Testament as the fulfillment of the Old. Ironically (and fatefully) they also agreed in failing to recognize that the Christ-event had done away with sacrifice in the commonly understood history-of-religions sense of the word. They concurred, as many still do, in the same fatal methodological mistake of looking first to the religions of the world rather than to the trinitarian Christ-event in order to ascertain what it was that the early Christians were groping to express when they began (hesitatingly at first, because “sacrifice” was not what Christians did but what Jews and pagans did) to refer to the death of Christ and to the Eucharist in sacrificial terms.

The practical identification of atonement with sacrifice that I mentioned above under *Sacrifice in the Hebrew Scriptures* exacerbated the consequences of these infelicitous ecumenical “agreements.” Traditional Western atonement theory—at least in its extreme, but all-too-common forms—ultimately reduces to something like the following caricature: (1) God’s honor is damaged by sin; (2) God demanded a bloody victim to pay for this sin; (3) God is assuaged by the victim; (4) the death of Jesus the victim functioned as a payoff that purchased

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salvation for us. Such a theory is literally monstrous in some of its implications. For when it is absolutized (see Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ*) or pushed to its “theo-logical” conclusions and made to replace the Incarnation as central Christian doctrine, it tends to veil from human view (from Protestants as well as from Catholics) the merciful and loving God of biblical revelation.⁸

Despite my books and articles on the subject, I had for many years no satisfactory answer to this problem. That changed when, serendipitously forced to edit Ed Kilmartin’s last book, I discovered the trinitarian understanding of sacrifice to which I now turn.

Authentic Christian, that is, Trinitarian Understanding of Sacrifice

Constantly fine-tuning my own understanding of it, I here reproduce, slightly augmented, the articulation of it that appears in the opening pages of *Sacrifice Unveiled*.⁹

First of all, Christian sacrifice is not some object that we manipulate; it is not primarily a ceremony or ritual; nor is it something that we “do” or “give up.” For it is, first and foremost, something deeply personal: a mutually self-giving event that takes place between persons. Actually it is the most profoundly personal and interpersonal act of which a human being is capable or in which a human being can participate. It begins in a kind of first

“moment,”¹⁰ not with us but with the self-offering of God the Father in the gift-sending of the Son. Christian sacrifice continues its “process of becoming” in a second “moment,” in the self-offering “response” of the Son, in his humanity and in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the Father and for us. Christian sacrifice continues its coming-to-be, and only then does it *begin* to become Christian sacrifice in *our* lives when we, in human actions that are empowered by the same Spirit that was in Jesus, begin to enter into that perfect, en-spirited, mutually self-giving, mutually self-communicating personal relationship that is the life of the Blessed Trinity.

This, in a nutshell, is the whole story. Everything else is just dotting the “i”s and crossing the “t”s. Anything less than this—that is not at least beginning to become this—and most especially anything other than this, whether or not done by Christians, and however noble it might be, is simply not *Christian* sacrifice in the most authentic sense of the word.

Some Implications of a Trinitarian View of Sacrifice

Speaking about “*Christian* sacrifice in the most authentic sense of the word” reminds one of the words of the Council of Trent in declaring the Mass to be a “true and proper sacrifice—*verum et proprium sacrificium*.”¹¹ Trent, however, never explained precisely what it meant by sacrifice, and, in speaking of sacrifice (*offerre*), inconsistently referred both to the transcendent Christ-event/the self-offering of Christ and “the liturgical-ritual sacrificial act of the Eucharistic celebration,” which it tended to see in history of religions types of categories.¹² The resulting confusion is still with us. We begin the modest clarification that we hope to bring to this situation by examining more closely the three “moments” of the trinitarian understanding of sacrifice.

1. The self-offering of the Father

Get this right and things begin to fall into place. Get it wrong and we are condemned to a series of theological, ecumenical, and pastoral dead-ends. Christian sacrifice, as the ultimate personal/interpersonal event, begins not just with the *initiative* of the Father, but with the *self-offering* initiative of the Father in the gift-sending of the Son to and for us. It is not something that the Father imposes on the Son, does to the Son, or demands from the Son. That kind of thinking makes a shambles of any authentic understanding of both the immanent Trinity (the internal relationships of the three persons of the Trinity) and the economic Trinity (the relationships between God and the created world). Thus, authentic

Christian sacrifice in its inchoative human realizations is never something that someone does to or demands of someone else.

In other words, those feminists who reject sacrifice because of the way patriarchal authority has been willing to use sacrificial rhetoric to keep women in positions of subservience are absolutely right. What they are rejecting is not *Christian* sacrifice, but an aberration of it. Erin Lothes Biviano brilliantly develops this by astutely unpacking the paradoxical tensions between self-sacrifice as “the loss of self” and the transcending fulfillment of genuinely free self-giving as “the gift of self.”¹³

This approach may seem to run counter to such well-known New Testament statements as “He who did not withhold/spare his own Son, but gave him up for all of us” (Rom 8:32). It may seem to contradict the apparent implications of at least *some* of Paul’s atonement metaphors, especially the judicial and economic metaphors, and the Christian atonement theories that have been built on these metaphors. Indeed it does! But the point is that some of these atonement *theories*, though they *claim* to be doctrines, are actually not authentic doctrines but erroneous “theo-logical” conclusions. In their tendency to turn God into some combination of a great and fearsome judge; or offended lord; or arbitrary, satisfaction-demanding temperamental spirit, they are fundamentally un-Christian—fundamentally at odds with an authentic understanding of the central Christian mysteries of the Trinity and Incarnation. Julian of Norwich instinctively knew this and spent much of her life trying to explain it.¹⁴

2. The self-offering “response” of the Son

The “response” of the Son to the Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit, takes place *in his humanity*—in the human living of Jesus, his life, works, death, resurrection, and sending of the Spirit—as, so Aquinas, the instrumental cause of our salvation. Thus, to reduce the sacrifice of Christ just to his death on the cross, or to turn the whole life of Christ into just a prelude to the passion, is a mistake. But it is a fact that most Christians, especially Catholics, not only think that the cross is central to what they mean by (1) the Christ-event, (2) the sacrifice of Christ, and (3) the sacrifice of the Mass, they also tend to bring together, even identify these three aspects of the Son’s “response” to the Father. Utmost care in distinguishing, nuancing, and balancing is required, especially since we cannot easily prescind from the fact that we so easily find in the crucifixion of Christ most of the essential elements of a history-of-religions concept of sacrifice: (1) the sacrificial *material* to which something is done, (2) the *agents* of the sacrificial action, (3) the

recipients of the sacrificial action, and (4) the *purpose* for which the sacrificial action is performed. Making a virtue of necessity then, let us jump right into the “Catholic” heart of the matter and see what happens when we actually do apply these history-of-religions elements of sacrifice to a trinitarian understanding of the way in which the sacrificial Christ-event is present in the sacrifice of the Mass.

(1) At first glance, the sacrificial *material* would seem to be the body of Jesus dying on the cross. Fixation on this led to the fruitless post-Tridentine debates that began by presuming that the destruction of a victim was a key element in any “true and proper” sacrifice, as Trent in 1562 had defined the Mass to be. Since, from as early as the third century, Christ had been acknowledged to be both the priest and the victim in the sacrifice of the cross, and since Christ was now in glory beyond all suffering, the Protestants who simply denied that the Mass was a sacrifice easily won most of the debating points.

But look what happens when we view Christ’s death, resurrection, and sending of the Spirit as the central event in the working of the economic Trinity. The “material” of this sacrifice is, first and foremost, the perfectly free, responsive, self-giving, self-communicating en-Spirited love of the Son to/with/in the Father, as well as to and for us. It is what theologians have sought to express by speaking of the eucharistic sacrifice as “unbloody,” “sacramental,” or “metahistorical.”

(2) Looking at the *agents of the sacrifice* from these two viewpoints is similarly revelatory. In the history-of-religions view, the agents of Jesus’ historical sacrificial death—people at that time, of course, viewed it simply as an execution, not as a sacrifice—are the Roman government and its soldiers; or certain Jewish religious authorities; or, in some views, Jesus himself “staging” his own death; or even, if one takes Romans 8:32 literally, God the Father sacrificing his Son. And from this history-of-religions view, the (ritual) agents of the sacramental re-presentation of the sacrifice of Jesus that takes place in the sacrifice of the Mass would be the celebrating priests and/or the participating assembly.

But viewed from a trinitarian point of view, these historical or ritual agents become secondary. What is primary in the historical sacrifice is the saving action of God entering into human history through the instrumentality of the human living, dying, and rising of Jesus. What is primary ritually in the eucharistic celebration is the action of the church, the Body of Christ, and of a particular assembly of that Body, acting in the power of the Holy Spirit of Jesus, actualizing both eschatologically and proleptically (i.e., anticipatorily) that most intimate relationship with her divine partner of which the church

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is capable, that is, beginning to enter into that event in which the self-offering initiative of the Father in the gift of his Son is, in the Spirit, responded to in the mutually self-communicating love of the Son.

(3) Asking about the *recipients* of the sacrificial action is perhaps even more revelatory. Is God the Father the recipient? No. Greek religious philosophy had already unveiled the illusion of trying to offer anything bodily or material to a spiritual deity. The early patristic suggestion that the devil might be the recipient also had a short life, unable to survive critical analysis. To whom, then, is this sacrifice offered? If authentic Christian sacrifice begins with the self-offering of the Father as its first “moment,” and if its second and third “moments” are free, loving, and totally self-communicating interpersonal responses, as we have been expounding, then there is no really proper recipient either of the sacrifice of Christ or of the sacrifice of the Mass. No *thing* is being offered. For what is *happening* in Christian sacrifice is that *persons*, in full freedom are giving/communicating *themselves* to each other. In other words, Christian sacrifice is, in God, in Jesus, and (at least inchoatively) in us, a participation in the perichoretic¹⁵ life of the Blessed Trinity.

(4) Looking for the *purpose for which the sacrifice is offered/performed* is similarly revelatory. The purpose of religious sacrifice as it is generally understood is to establish and/or set aright the proper or desired relationship between human beings and their Deity/deities. Analogously, this also holds true of the sacrifice of the

Mass. But in this sacrifice, what is being established or set aright is something that totally transcends what a history-of-religions analysis might imagine. For what is taking place is nothing less than the transformation of the participants into ever more active and participatory members of the Body of Christ; it is the divinization or *theosis* of which the Greek Fathers spoke.

3. The self-offering of the believers

Beginning from and responding to God's initiative, authentic Christian sacrificial activity is thus a responsive, interpersonal, human activity that Christians are enabled to make only in the power of the same Holy Spirit that was in Jesus, the same Spirit and Power that empowered his loving "response" to the Father. While it may be ritually symbolized in the sacrifice of the Mass, it is only proleptically realized there. For it does not begin to become actively real in our lives apart from our loving service to our brothers and sisters whom we do see with our bodily eyes, as the Epistles of St. John so trenchantly emphasize. This is the ultimate meaning of Kilmartin's conclusion that "the radical self-offering of the faithful is the only spiritual response that constitutes an authentic sacrificial act according to the New Testament (Romans 12:1)."¹⁶

The Sacrifice of the Mass

Edward Kilmartin wrote, "If the law of prayer, the Eucharistic Prayer, determines and explicates the law of belief, and if this is indeed the doing of theology, then the voice of the Church should be heard when she speaks to her divine partner in that moment of maximum relative tension of which the one and the other are capable."¹⁷ These words, almost as revelatory as those that guided me to the three "moments" of the trinitarian theology of sacrifice, now guide me to look more closely at the eucharistic prayer. I ask three questions of the eucharistic prayer: (1) Who is doing what? (2) Who is saying what? (3) What is taking place?

Who is doing what?

Strikingly common to all the classical eucharistic prayers of the various Christian traditions and also of all the developed eucharistic prayers of the contemporary mainline sacramental churches is that the primary ritual agent is not the presiding minister but the whole assembly. Apart from "maverick" presiding, and apart from an occasional "private prayer of the priest" that the rubrics forbid proclaiming aloud, those presiding never speak in their own voice or for themselves alone, nor do they speak as mediators between God or Christ and the assembly, but always in the first person plural, as one of

the assembly. Further, when one asks, what, ritually, is being done during the eucharistic prayer (or *anaphora* as the tradition often refers to it) the answer is, primarily, *praying!* When examined closely, the sometimes prescribed ritual actions such as bowing, genuflecting, making signs of the cross, handling the eucharistic elements, etc., turn out to be subordinate to the praying of the assembly and, when overemphasized, are a distraction from it. For, as we will see below, what is primarily taking place is the work of God/Holy Spirit. Although it is indeed taking place *in* our space-time human world, it is not an event *of* that world.

Who is saying what?

With few exceptions (the exceptions being prayers addressed to Jesus, most of which can trace their origin to very early, relatively primitive forms of eucharistic praying) the eucharistic prayer is addressed by the assembly to God the Father.¹⁸ The gist of that prayer—which usually begins with a remembrance of salvation history into which is inserted a quotation (often a harmonizing conflation) of Jesus' words of institution from the Last Supper—is to ask the Father to send the Son to bless/sanctify the assembly and its eucharistic gifts of bread and wine. In other words, the words of institution (words of consecration, as they are often referred to in the Western Church) are not performative but epicletic (i.e., they work not by the action of the priest but by way of invocation of the Holy Spirit). The transformation of the gifts—no more, of course, than the transformation of the assembly—does not take place "through the action of the priest," as a popular eucharistic hymn used to put it, but by the action of God/the Holy Spirit. It is the whole purpose of the eucharistic prayer, prayed by the assembly through the mouth of its presiding minister, not to effect ("confect the Eucharist" was a traditional phrase) these transformations, but to call upon God to bring them about.

Theologically impeccable as this conclusion may be, it is often veiled rather than unveiled by the way we ritually celebrate Mass. In this respect, practical liturgical renewal still has a long, long way to go. As we struggle toward the desired goal, striving to keep our "eyes on the prize," we have to be humbly aware that there are few, if any, church traditions, however authentic, that can ever be more than particular traditions. Thus while faithfully and loyally working within our own particular tradition, we also need to be humbly alert to what we can learn from other particular traditions. At this point I have in mind Kilmartin's emphasis on the "anamnesis offering prayer," the prayer that is—or ideally should be—proclaimed by the whole assembly at that most central point (usually

after the words of institution and moving into the epiclesis) where the assembly makes its own and consciously enters more fully into the mystery (the sacrifice) that is sacramentally taking place. One of the more felicitous instances of such an “anamnesis offering prayer” that begins to do this (at least in its content, for its actual wording is too complicated for a whole assembly to proclaim aloud), one from which we can all learn, is found in the Methodist Great Thanksgiving:

Pour out, holy God, your Spirit on us and on these gifts of bread and wine. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we, through them, may be his true body, redeemed by his blood. Look, then, upon this offering of your Son. Look upon this body which your Spirit has made us. Hear us as we pray that we may be more fully one with Christ in his sacrifice, and with each other, and in service to all the world.¹⁹

If indeed “the radical self-offering of the faithful is the only spiritual response that constitutes an authentic sacrificial act,”²⁰ one would think that an explicit expression of this radical self-offering would be part of every eucharistic prayer that claims to be the central part of every “true and proper sacrifice.” But that is not the case. The explicit expression of such a radical “self-offering” seems to be less a part of official Roman Catholic eucharistic prayers than of the eucharistic prayers of some of the mainline Protestant churches, such as the just-quoted prayer from the Methodist Great Thanksgiving. On the other hand, Protestants are generally more reticent than Catholics are to offer the eucharistic species, even in the traditionally reticent forms: “We offer you, Father, this life-giving bread, this saving cup,” or, “We offer you ... this holy and living sacrifice.” Liturgical renewal is still far from complete.

What is taking place?

This question can be answered on three distinguishable levels: (1) the present level of human ritual action, (2) the transcendent level of divine action, (3) the eschatological level in the already/but not yet level of the eucharistically celebrated Christ-event.

(1) On the here and now level of *human ritual action*, a particular local assembly of the church is speaking and acting under the presidency of one chosen/ordained to lead this assembly in this its central prayer and action. This presider is speaking/acting not just *in persona Christi* but *in persona Christi capitis ecclesiae*—in the person of Christ the head of the church. The role of the presider is not that of a mediator between Christ and the church; the presider’s role is embedded in the Christ-church relationship from which the Eucharist comes.²¹

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(2) Since the church is speaking to her divine partner with a confidence born of the knowledge that she is already the Bride of Christ, and the Body of Christ, and thus able to speak with the same kind of confidence that Mary apparently had at Cana when she told the servants to follow the instructions of her Son (John 2:1-11), we can ask, what is it that the church is confident that God/the Spirit is bringing about on the *transcendent level of divine action*? There are two interrelated transformational events: (1) the eucharistic elements of bread and wine are being transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, and (2) the participating faithful are becoming more fully members of the Body of Christ. Because Christian sacrifice involves our at least beginning, here and now, to participate in the life of the Trinity, God is the principal, but not the only cause of these events. The eucharistic celebration is a conjoined divine/human event involving both eternity and time.

On closer look, we see that one of these transformational events is clearly subordinated to the other. The whole, ultimate purpose and *raison d’être* of the transformation of the eucharistic gifts is the eschatological transformation of the participants. Take that away and the transformation of the gifts becomes meaningless and potentially just superstitious, even blasphemous. Modern ways of thinking identify meaning with reality so closely that something without meaning tends to be seen as something without reality. One begins to question the reality of eucharistic presence in those eucharistic celebrations where (hypothetically at least) the participants are not at least beginning to be transformed. Difficult as

it may be to bring this way of thinking into line with traditional Catholic understandings of transubstantiation and real Presence, Catholic theologians and liturgical ministers are well advised to keep in mind that many in the world about them actually do think this way.

This revisits, of course, the traditional question of the relationship between the sacrifice of the cross and the sacrifice of the Mass. The *fact* of the ontological presence of the one to the other is not what is in question here. The *how* is the question. One approach sees the sacrifice of Christ as made present to the faithful. A second approach sees the faithful as made present to the sacrifice of Christ. Each approach affirms core Catholic belief in the ontological presence to each other of the sacrifice of the Cross and the sacrifice of the Mass. The first is more in tune with traditional theology and catechesis, especially in view of recent ecumenical convergence in using Caselian categories of “presence” (re-presentation, *Vergegenwärtigung*, etc.) to come to agreement about eucharistic presence. However, the second is more in tune with the work of recent liturgical theologians such as Kilmartin, Giraud, and Meyer,²² and also with a deeper appropriation of Thomistic metaphysics. For this second approach evades the philosophically questionable transporting of a past historical event to later times, and it locates the effect of the action, the change that takes place, precisely where it belongs: not in God, or in Christ, or in the action of Christ, but in the transformation of the participating faithful. God is not changed; Christ is not changed; *we* are changed. Or, in terms of our trinitarian, three-“moment” understanding of sacrifice, we, in the Spirit, begin to enter into the life of the Father and Son.

(3) Attending to what is taking place *eschatologically* sheds more light on the divine-human and the eternal-temporal relationships in the sacrifice of the Mass. First, the subordination of the transformation of the gifts to that of the participants does not imply the unimportance of the former, which is the real foundation and condition of the latter. But second, the relationship between the two is neither necessary nor absolute. For the vast majority of those who have been or are being transformed have never participated in a Eucharist. Nor can we be sure that all who (externally or ritually) participate in a Eucharist actually experience any transformation. Of the three interrelated self-offerings—of the Father, and of the Son, and of human beings—the first two, divine actions, are essentially perfect and complete. The third, obviously, is not. Our appropriation of the self-offering dispositions of Christ is something that is, at best, just beginning, and can be completed on the individual level only from the moment of each one’s end-of-life *transitus*, and on the

ecclesial or universal human level only on the Last Day. Our human appropriation of Christ’s self-offering has a unique symbolic intensity and actual reality in every worthy celebration of the Eucharist. But, unless we are going to give up believing in God’s universal salvific will, we have to recognize that this is also really beginning to take place in all those situations in which human beings respond positively to self-giving love. All this is sacrifice in the deepest, most authentic and trinitarian sense of the word.

Authentic Sacrifice

This article has been an attempt to unveil Christian sacrifice. But along the way we have discovered that the closer we get to the what we can call authentic Christian sacrifice, the closer we get to something that transcends Christianity. It is not wise or safe for a Christian theologian to relativize Christianity. But to be faithful both to what we believe and to what we understand, we must begin at least to seem to be doing that. For, as I come to the end of this article, attempting to put into a few inevitably inadequate words what, over the past fifty years I have been learning about sacrifice—the sacrifice of Christ, the sacrifice of the Mass, and the path to salvation that God wants every human being to find—I find myself talking about a path that transcends the lines that separate nations, cultures, and religions from each other. For this path is, and indeed can only be, the path of personal self-giving response to one’s personal experiences of receiving self-giving love from others. I have spent this article laying out a specifically Christian, trinitarian understanding of this path. It is a unique path. There is no other. And whoever is on it is on the way to salvation. But the vast majority of human beings who have walked on it are not Christians. Christian theology, so much of it still struggling to get beyond the exclusivist implications of “no salvation outside the church,” is only just beginning to make sense of this in terms both of its own traditions and the traditions of the other religions of the world.

Struggling with this problem, at least qua “problem,” is primarily a task for theologians and teachers of theology. Most ordinary people already “know,” at least by way of personal experience, what I am trying to describe as Christian sacrifice. One doesn’t get to be a half decent human person except by having been at some time, perhaps many times, the recipient of self-giving love, whether from parents, spouse, guardians, siblings, relatives, teachers, colleagues, friends, or whomever. For all acts of self-giving love, to the extent that they are indeed self-giving, and regardless of whether they are performed

by Christians, are acts that are participations in the self-giving love of God. They are acts that, in the first place, have been empowered by, and function as invitations to enter into, that process of divinization that, in its first “moment,” begins with the self-offering of the Father in the gift-sending of the Son.

Good people all over the world already “know” this, not of course in the technical terms that the theologian is struggling to find, but at least virtually, implicitly, and instinctively. It is the task of the preacher and teacher, the spiritual director, or whoever is trying to “explain” it to them to bring this knowledge and experience to the surface, to invite people to become aware of and empowered by the ultimate reality of Christian sacrifice that is already at work in their lives.

What people already “know,” and what it is our task to evoke in them is what Augustine was referring to, in the opening of *Confessions*, in remarking that our hearts are made for God. It is what is behind the plot of every love story that we encounter in countless novels, films, and even in that seemingly endless series of soap operas and situation comedies. It is the idea of perfect love: a love that receives everything, and gives everything; a love from which nothing is held back and that holds nothing back; a love that is eternal, that knows that it will never be betrayed. We know, sadly, that such love is not for this world. But we also “know,” in faith and hope, that such love is our origin and our destiny. And we “know” that this is what we are being called to whenever anyone really loves us.

To explain the inexplicable, Jesus often told stories. Perhaps the best way for us to conclude this article is to try to follow his example.

Saved by love

There’s this man (make it a woman and adjust the details and you still have the same story), a totally selfish, self-absorbed person who has everything: youth, health, brains, all the right connections, and enough wealth to be comfortably free of any worries. And he’s smart. He knows how to use people to get what he wants and make life easy for himself. He may seem to belong to some religion or church but that, too, is just something he uses, knowing how useful a good reputation can be. And he has a girl friend, as beautiful as he is handsome, as bright and as smart as he is. His friends think that they are the perfect couple. He lets them think that, but he knows in his heart that she is just there for his pleasure, ready to be dropped whenever something really better comes along. For his real gods are wealth, power, success, and pleasure.

But one day, to his great surprise, he finds himself

*In terms of our trinitarian,
three-“moment” understanding
of sacrifice, we, in the Spirit,
begin to enter into the life
of the Father and Son.*

beginning to fall in love. And because the roots of God’s image and likeness never totally die out, even in the most selfish, and because he’s smart, he begins to figure out what is facing him. Yes, he notices, she is ready to give to him, do for him, whatever he asks, holding nothing back. That used to be part of his plan: total control. But his old world, the world into which she used to fit so easily, is beginning to crumble, for he senses a call to begin to return her love. He knows that would be the end of a life that he could control. He’d be turning away from his trusted gods of wealth, power, success, and pleasure. He’d be making himself vulnerable, exposing himself to suffering, even victimhood. He’d now be reaching for something that, until then, he’d thought existed only in the minds of romantic, unrealistic fools.

People all over the world, across all cultures and religions, are faced with this kind of choice. The possibility of this kind of choice is, indeed, what distinguishes us from the animals. God’s love is so powerful, and the extension of God’s love into the love that human beings offer to each other is so powerful that people are constantly responding positively to the kind of choice facing the man in our story. They begin to offer themselves in return. They begin to enter into the process that, when described in trinitarian terms, begins with the Father’s self-offering gift-sending of the Son, proceeds through

the “response” of the Son, and begins to become real in our human world with our en-Spirited self-offering response to God and to and for each other.

“New Developments in the Theology of Sacrifice” is a humbling title. There may indeed be something new, or recently developing, in our “theology,” but the mystery that we are attempting to approach—true sacrifice—is as eternal as the very life of God, and has a history that is as old as humanity itself.

1. Erin Lothes Biviano, *The Paradox of Christian Sacrifice*, A Herder and Herder Book (New York: Crossroad, 2007); Stephen Finlan, *Problems with Atonement: The Origins of, and Controversy about the Atonement Doctrine* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005) [for many Christians, “atonement” is practically synonymous with “sacrifice”]; S. Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006); Dennis King Keenan, *The Question of Sacrifice* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006); Kathryn Mcclymond, *Beyond Sacred Violence: A Comparative Study of Sacrifice* (Baltimore: the Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).
2. Robert J. Daly, S.J., *Sacrifice Unveiled: The True Meaning of Christian Sacrifice* (New York and London: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2008). This title acknowledges my indebtedness to Gil Bailie’s *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroad, 1995) and to the mimetic theory of René Girard.
3. *Christian Sacrifice: The Judaeo-Christian Background before Origen*, Studies in Christian Antiquity 18 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1978); *The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978); “Sacrifice in Origen,” *Studia Patristica* 11 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1972): 125–29; “Early Christian Influence on Origen’s Concept of Sacrifice” in *Origeniana* (Quaderni di “Vetera Christianorum” 12, 1975): 313–26; “The Soteriological Significance of the Sacrifice of Isaac,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39 (1977): 45–75; “The New Testament Concept of Christian Sacrificial Activity,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 8 (1978): 9–107; “Sacrificial Soteriology in Origen’s Commentary on John 1,29” in *Origeniana Secunda* (Quaderni di Vetera Christianorum 15, 1980): 151–63; “Sacrificial Soteriology in Origen’s Homilies on Leviticus,” *Studia Patristica* 17, Part Two, 872–78; “Opfer und Heilspraesenz: Systematische Erwägungen zum Wesen des Christlichen Opfers” in *Präesentia Christi*. Festschrift Johannes Betz, ed. L. Lies (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1984): 172–79; “The *Peri Pascha*: Hermeneutics and Sacrifice” in *Origeniana Tertia* (Rome: Edizioni dell’Ateneo, 1985): 109–17; “Sacrifice in Origen and Augustine: Comparisons and Contrasts” in *Studia Patristica* 19 (1987): 148–53; “Sacrifice” in *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1987): 923–25; “The Power of Sacrifice in Ancient Judaism and Christianity,” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 4/2 (1990): 181–98; “Sacrifice” in *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990): 1135–37; “Is Christianity Sacrificial or Antisacrificial?” *Religion* 27 (1997): 231–43; “Robert Bellarmine and Post-Tridentine Eucharistic Theology,” *Theological Studies* 61 (2000): 239–60; “Sacrifice Unveiled or Sacrifice Revisited: Trinitarian and Liturgical Perspectives,” *Theological Studies* 64 (2003): 24–42; “Sacrifice: the Way to enter the Paschal Mystery,” *America* 188 No. 16 (May 12, 2003): 14–17; “Marriage, Eucharist and Christian Sacrifice,” *The INTAMS Review* 9 (Spring 2003): 56–75; “The Power of Sacrifice in Ancient Judaism and Christianity,” in *Understanding Religious Sacrifice: A Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Carter (London/New York: Continuum, 2003): 342–56; “Sacrificial Preaching,” *Preach. Enlivening the Pastoral Art* (January/February 2005): 26–29; “Sacrificial Preaching: The Challenge of Preaching Sacrifice,” *The Priest* 63/9 (September 2007): 41–48, 33; “Sacrificial Language and Rhetoric in the Church’s Eucharistic Prayers: Ecumenical Considerations,” in *Ecumenism East and West*, The 19th International Congress of Jesuit Ecumenists, Lviv, Ukraine, 15–20 July 2007 (Secretariat for

Interreligious Dialogue: Curia S.J., C.P. 6139, 00195 Roma Prati, Italy, 2007): 4–54.

4. Edward J. Kilmartin, S.J., *The Eucharist in the West, History and Theology*, ed. Robert J. Daly, S.J. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998).
5. But if one knew the answer ahead of time; if one knew enough to Google “trinitarian understanding of sacrifice,” one would immediately be led to my recent articles on the subject.
6. See, for example, the broad varieties of meaning portrayed in the essays collected by Jeffrey Carter in *Understanding Religious Sacrifice: A Reader* (London/New York: Continuum, 2003).
7. Rom 15:16; 1 Pet 2:4-10; Heb 10:19-25; 13:10-16.
8. The faulty theology I am attempting to unveil is primarily a Western phenomenon. Eastern theology was much more reserved or “apophatic” in its attempts to unpack the processes of salvation, and tended to do so much more in terms of divinization or *theosis* than in terms of the juridical and mercantile metaphors favored in the West. See *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*, ed. Michael J. Christensen and Jeffrey A. Wittung Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007) and *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, ed. Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov (Eugene, Or.: Pickwick Publications, 2006).
9. The original statement of this is in Kilmartin’s *The Eucharist in the West*, 381–83.
10. “Moment” is in scare quotes in order to remind how profoundly metaphorical this word is, since there can be nothing temporal in the inner-trinitarian life of God. In a few lines further we put “response” also in scare quotes since, in the trinitarian Father-Son relationship, there can be nothing of the aspect of opposition or over-against that is suggested by the word “response.” It is for similar reasons that we also put “process of becoming” in scare quotes.
11. Canon 1 (DS 1751) of the ad 1562 twenty-second session of the Council of Trent.
12. See Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West*, 198.
13. See Biviano, *The Paradox of Christian Sacrifice*, within the section “The Feminist Critique of a Distorted Idea of Sacrifice,” 71–118.
14. See Joan M. Nuth, *Wisdom’s Daughter: The Theology of Julian of Norwich* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) and “Two Medieval Soteriologies: Anselm of Canterbury and Julian of Norwich,” *Theological Studies* 53 (1992): 611–45.
15. *Perichoretic*: from the Greek *perichōrēsis/perichōreō*, meaning interpenetration/to dance around (in Latin = *circumincessio*), a theological term referring to the interpenetrating, totally self-communicating life of the three persons of the Trinity.
16. Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West*, 382–83.
17. *Ibid.*, 324.
18. See the articles by Bryan D. Spinks, Larry Hurtado, Paul Bradshaw, and Baby Varghese in *The Place of Christ in Liturgical Prayer: Trinity, Christology, and Liturgical Theology*, ed. Bryan D. Spinks (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008).
19. *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville, Tenn.: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 57 and *passim*.
20. Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West*, 382.
21. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, the title of John Paul II’s 2003 encyclical, can be understood in a misleading way. Existentially, since the Eucharist is indeed the central sacrament of the church, the church does “come” from the Eucharist. But historically, it is the other way around. If “Eucharist” is what the church now celebrates, we have to recognize that this sacrament was indeed instituted by Christ, but it was the Body of Christ doing that, and it was a process that took several centuries. Thus, in the historical sense, it is more accurate to say *Eucharistia de Ecclesia*.
22. Cesare Giraudo, *Eucharistia per la chiesa. Prospettive teologiche sull’eucharistia a partire dalla “lex orandi”* (Rome: Gregorian University/Brescia: Morcelliana, 1989): 563–64; Hans Bernhard Meyer, *Eucharistie: Geschichte, Theologie, Pastoral. Gottesdienst der Kirche*, Handbuch der Liturgiewissenschaft, Teil 4 (Regensburg: Pustet, 1989). See Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West*, esp. 268–76 and 322–42 where he details his dependence on Giraudo and Meyer.