DOI:10.1111/j.1741-2005.2006.00138.x

Catholic Theological Association 2006 Conference Papers

The Eucharist: Some Contemporary Perspectives

Introduction

Geoffrey Turner

'The Eucharist makes – and is – the Church.' Matthew Levering's assertion suggests that it was, with hindsight, time that the Catholic Theological Association should hold after twenty years a conference on 'The Eucharist', though the bi-line 'Some Contemporary Perspectives' shows that it was not possible to cover every angle. Apart from the topic, there were a couple of other firsts: the first time, and maybe not the last, that we held our conference at the north of England seminary, Ushaw College near Durham and, by happy chance, the first time that we were able to build in a joint session with the British Orthodox theologians who were in Durham at the same time, at which Ephrem Lash and Michael McGuckian explored Eastern and Western perspectives on the Eucharist, printed here as a pair. In these ecumenical times, you will see that each author is more inclined to self-criticism than scoring points off the other, a position exemplified by the presence of Roman Catholic and Orthodox theologians at a celebration of Anglican Evening Prayer in Durham Cathedral with a Bishop from each of the three traditions in the choir.

The theological starting-point of the conference was a review by Nicholas Lash of *In Breaking of Bread*, the impressive study of Patrick FitzPatrick, recently republished by CUP. FitzPatrick thinks the language of "transubstantiation" is incoherent and a misguided attempt to talk about the presence of Christ under the form of bread and wine (not that he thinks more recent continental reconfigurations have been any better). He prefers to see the *presence* in the whole ritual. Professor Lash focuses on the 'reification' of the Eucharistic elements that seems to accompany transubstantiation language, in which Christ's presence is 'disguised' under a mask of bread and wine which isn't bread and wine. Disguises obscure, but sacraments are signs that disclose. And the Eucharist is a sign (or perhaps a

© The author 2007. Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK, and 350 Main Street, Malden MA 02148, USA

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2006.00138.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

cluster of signs) in which gestures and ritual actions and words are the modes of Christ's presence.

Michael McGuckian traces the history in the West of the doctrine of the presence of Christ and associated devotions from the ninth-century to its culmination at the Council of Trent with its assertion that Christ's presence is 'most aptly' called transubstantiation, a claim which is doubted by most contributors here. Fr McGuckian notes that the greater the devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, the less frequent became communion, a practice which, according to Eamon Duffy, has some limited support from Pope Benedict. Ephrem Lash tells us abstinence from communion is to be found in the East too, but he deplores it. All the faithful are intended to be participants in a sacred drama with the priest who, in the East, is not himself alone seen to be acting 'in the person of Christ'. Nor is there a magic moment at which Christ becomes present; he is present in the whole. In some respects the East has been drawn into following Western trends and Fr Ephrem appeals to the Orthodox to re-receive their own tradition. McGuckian in turn calls the Western Church to a renewed emphasis on the mystery of the Church with its 'heavenly liturgy' which brings the risen Christ to us in the Eucharist.

From his wide pastoral experience, Timothy Radcliffe considers those who are excluded from the Eucharist in the Catholic Church: non-Catholics, those in irregular relationships, and the poor. He makes a strong case on the grounds of identity for not having regular inter-communion with non-Catholics: if a person seeks communion with those who are Roman Catholics, then maybe that person desires to join the community that Catholics are. Eucharistic communion is constitutive of what the Church is, says Fr Radcliffe, quoting Levering. On the other hand, as historical and social circumstances change, we have to find ways of bringing back into communion those who are in irregular situations, and new ways of achieving solidarity with the poor. In the Eucharist 'we learn who we are to become'.

Tina Beattie takes up a theme that we find in other papers, of the Eucharist as a heavenly liturgy with an eschatological dimension, but she finds her inspiration in the Isenheim altarpiece of Matthias Grünewald. In the central panel there, she finds a bodily presence. And while she approves of bodily presence in the Eucharist, she also thinks some feminist and neo-orthodox writers exaggerate the importance of gender and sex in theology to pursue, in their various ways, ideological interests, yet 'a more poetic and fluid understanding' of gender, we are told, can rekindle a sense of mystery of life in the Church and its liturgy.

Marcus Pound opens some surprising intellectual pathways by relating the Eucharist to Lacan and psychoanalysis through the idea of "trauma", rupture, to show how God makes himself present in the Incarnation; and Christ becoming present in the Eucharist

© The author 2007
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2006.00138.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

can be seen as a paradigm of what takes place in psychoanalysis. Dr Pound's paper is also a strategy for circumventing the language of transubstantiation.

Eamon Duffy's survey of Pope Benedict's writings on the Eucharist shows a man who as a *peritus* at the Second Vatican Council, having been schooled by his mentor Romano Guardini, whose 'magnificent work', Benedict thinks, was 'thrown into the waste paper basket' by the Council. As Cardinal Ratzinger, he deplored Paul VI's new mass, imposed so hurriedly, as 'a crass and faddish change' throwing out centuries of Catholic culture. The problem, apparently, is seeing the Eucharist as a meal, as the Council did. Remove that model and the reforms of the 60s fall apart. Whatever the form of the Eucharist, Benedict XVI is clear that dogmatically it is a sacrifice. So Michael Kirwan considers whether it can or should be called "a sacrifice" and, if so, how. He concludes that we *can* speak of the Eucharist as a sacrifice if we use our language carefully. He reflects on what he calls "the pedagogy of filiation", how we might become sons (and daughters) through the Eucharist, not slaves, and Fr Kirwan thinks that this language can do much of the work that we required the doctrine of sacrifice to do in the past.

Yet we have a Pope who insists that the Eucharist is a sacrifice not a meal, and dislikes much of what goes on in the liturgy of Catholic parishes. Will he change things? Professor Duffy thinks it unlikely as Benedict, despite having had the reputation of an enforcer, would not want to copy the high-handed imposition of his predecessor, Paul VI. The field, then, remains open for new ways of talking about Christ's presence in the mass other than that proposed by Trent and for the consolidation for what is best in the Catholic eucharistic tradition, including that which, for the moment, we have lost sight of. And Catholic here does not just mean the tradition of the Western rite.

Dr Geoffrey Turner
175 Leeds Road
Harrogate HG2 8HQ
galfridus@btinternet.com

© The author 2007
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2006.00138.x Published online by Cambridge University Press