

Views from the Pews: Is the Eucharist as Sacrifice?

To begin, what is a sacrifice? According to the OED it is the surrender of something to a Deity and often includes animals, or things of value to the individual. In the Eucharist we are offering, as the prayer Book says, “a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving” to God. Other denominations have different views of this and even in the Anglican Church there is a variety of understandings about the nature of the Eucharistic sacrifice. In the Old Testament animal sacrifices were offered to God in expiation of the sins of the people.

The New Testament makes it plain that the sacrifice made by Jesus on the Cross was a sacrifice made for the redemption of humankind. It is the New Covenant's sacrifice for sin and provided Christians with atonement for their misdeeds. It is evident that that Jesus' death was a once for all act, and that with the crucifixion His redemptive work was finished (John XIX 30; Romans VI 10). These references show that Our Lord's redemptive work was done and that then there need be no other sacrifice of that kind for our redemption. This makes the atonement an historical event as indeed the crucifixion was. As an historical event we are, today, removed from it by some 2000 years and we need a more proximate presence than that.

Among Christians there exists a wide variety of ideas about the question of the Eucharist as a sacrificial offering. These range from the notion that it is merely a memorial, through ideas of the “real presence” to the notion that it is a fresh expression of the actual sacrifice after all Our Lord's words at the institution “This is my body; This is my blood”.

The authors of the 1662 Prayer Book were careful to describe the Eucharist as a “sacrifice of Praise and Thanksgiving”, but this leaves open the reality that our reception of the elements brings us into a close relationship with Our Lord in a way that is greater than we can achieve by prayer alone. Because we have been “crucified with Christ”, when we surrender in the Eucharist as an act of worship, we are sacrificing ourselves to God and we participate with Christ who sacrificed Himself and is both priest and victim. As Paul says, Christ lives in us (Gal II 19 and 20). In this way the Eucharist is a solemn memorial of Christ's once for all atoning sacrifice and it is, thereby, a sacrifice and one at which we are present participants as we “do this in remembrance” of Him.

Bryan Bang