

would not be a sacrament. For such a ritual would not effect what it signifies, even instrumentally.

In conclusion it can be said that the sociologist does have a role in determining what those conditions are under which a sacrament can effect what it signifies. Purely *qua* theologian, the theologian does not know the sacraments in respect of the conditions which determine their material, social effects. In principle, sociology can (though this is to beg no questions about the adequacy to the task of many sociologists). And it is in respect of those material conditions that the question of the ideological character or otherwise of a ritual is settled. This is something which must matter to the theologian, even if, *qua* theologian he can know nothing of it. For, in the end, whatever it is that makes a ritual to be a form of ideology, just that is what makes it to be a form of idolatry.

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- 1 "... sacramenta . . . efficiunt quod figurant", *Summa Theologiae*, 3, q. 62 a.1, ad 1
- 2 *How to Do things with Words*, Oxford, 1957, p 12.
- 3 *Op. cit.* p 16.
- 4 Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, 3, q.62 a1, corp.
- 5 *The Eucharist and Justice*, Commission for International Justice and Peace, London, 1981.

## The Liberating Eucharist

Nicholas Paxton

In his 1977 book *The Eucharist and Human Liberation*, Tissa Balasuriya reminds us that "the Eucharist has an extraordinary potential for being an agent of personal and global transformation. Every week about two hundred million persons meet all over the world in Christian communities".<sup>1</sup> Yet, while the worldwide eucharistic congregations every Sunday probably make up the largest global assembly for any shared purpose, the influence of the Eucharist on the creation of a more just, more loving and (in fine) more Christian world is almost minimal. The paradox, in Balasuriya's words, "is that while the example of Jesus should make the eucharistic community a champion of social justice and a contestant of social

evil, this happens very seldom" (*op. cit.* pp 85-6). Gustavo Gutiérrez has tried to emphasize this matter by directing a hard hit at the quality of the Eucharist as celebrated in some gatherings:

"without a real commitment against exploitation and alienation and for a society of solidarity and justice, the eucharistic celebration is an empty action, lacking any genuine endorsement by those who participate in it".<sup>2</sup>

But Gutiérrez oversimplifies here. The search to help resolve the paradox has to take into account not only attitudes of indifference but also the theological schizophrenia – the great divorce between faith and life, or religion and everything else – which underlies and has helped to form them. This has led, on the one hand, to the 'idealist' and 'spiritualist' attitudes which (as Gutiérrez maintains) avoid the sharp realities; and, on the other hand, to the huge loss of credibility sustained by the Church in the present century and hence by the Eucharist which lies, or should lie, at the heart of the Church's work.

In the hope of providing some pointers to the solution of the paradox stated by Balasuriya, the following will look at four aspects of the relationship between eucharistic and liberation theology, namely :

- i) the tension within liberation theology about the fittingness of celebrating the Eucharist at all,
- ii) the weakened view of the Eucharist arising mainly from 'domestication' and passivity,
- iii) the Eucharist as catalyst in social change, and
- iv) the Eucharist as providing, of itself, the way to new freedom in the increase of love.

## I

The Eucharist can be called the sacrament of the Church *par excellence*, since it engenders the unity of the participants in the Body and Blood of Christ; so that the Church's primary function is to celebrate (as Gutiérrez puts it) "the gift of the salvific action of God in humanity, accomplished through the death and resurrection of Christ. This is the Eucharist" (*op. cit.* p 262) which, as the re-presented work of our redemption, is meant for the whole Church. If, as Peadar Kirby appears to have done, we re-interpret "the redemption of the world" as "a service to the liberation of the oppressed", we unacceptably particularize the Eucharist's scope by excluding the oppressors, for whom Christ also died. But Kirby is, of course, right in stating that the place of the Church's work for oppressed people "demands a transformation of all sectors of the life of the Church within this renewed understanding of its commitment".<sup>3</sup> This raises the question of whether it is right to

go on celebrating the Eucharist in a church riven (as in Latin America) by conflicting social allegiances and by class antipathies.

Gutiérrez, rather than taking a stand on the Eucharist's unifying value, maintains that "communion with God and others presupposes the abolition of all injustice and exploitation". Just as sharing in a Jewish *chaburah* meal symbolized brotherhood, so the sacral meal of the Eucharist should signify the fraternal relationship, in and with Christ, among the participants. Since Matt 5: 23-24 requires peace to be made between brothers before one of them offers a gift at the altar, Gutiérrez stresses that he who has caused a rift in the Christian family is disqualified from sharing in the Eucharist. There is some patristic authority for this view, both explicit in chapter 14 of the *Didache* (which re-states Matthew's precept in a eucharistic context) and implicit in, for example, John Chrysostom's statement that 'he who said "this is my Body" is the same who said "you saw me, a hungry man, and you did not give me to eat" ... The Temple of your afflicted brother's body is more precious than (the church building)'.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, Gutiérrez's argument that the Eucharist must be seen as the archetypal symbol of human freedom in Christ (because – as celebration of Christ the new Passover – it completes the meaning of the old Jewish Passover's spiritual and political liberation) is capable of more than one interpretation, since it highlights an important justification for continuing eucharistic celebration. A second argument is that the unifying value of the Eucharist is not totally vitiated in cases of practical schism, although it is much diminished. We see this in practice right down the Church's history: although such statements as Matt 5: 23-24 and I John 4: 20 have presupposed full reconciliation between persons, mutually antipathetic groups have gone on celebrating the Eucharist. When this happens (as Geoffrey Wainwright notes):

"the Eucharist's value as expression will not be entirely lost, for it will express both the measure of unity that still holds the two parties together and also the will to reconciliation that already exists even in those who seek fellowship at the Lord's table with their temporary adversaries".<sup>5</sup>

A third point is that the Last Supper was, of course, intimately bound up with the self-offering of the Christ who gave, not just food and drink, but his own life for the freedom of others in the Body surrendered and the Blood shed. Since the Eucharist places on us the mission to give ourselves up to the service of others, and since –

"it is impossible to speak of the God ... who revealed himself in Jesus Christ without recognizing that he is the God *of* and *for* those who labour and are heavy laden",<sup>6</sup>

we have to ask ourselves what right we have to stand on the letter of the precept given in Matthew's Gospel and amplified in the *Didache* in such a way as to advocate the denial of the Eucharist to those who so need it. This is particularly important since the Eucharist, instituted for man, requires respect for others in Christ and hence the promotion of human rights. Since this aspect of the causal relationship between Eucharist and mission is but rarely evident, how has our concept of Eucharist become adulterated?

## II

Nowadays (as Balasuriya mentions in the preface to his book) the strong demands which the Eucharist makes have been 'tamed' and its incisive power weakened. His stance is that the Eucharist should be seen as a vital force for Christian liberation, since it was intended by Christ to be a sign of his freeing action and a sharing in it, but that it has instead been rendered static through being bound up with the currently established order. In becoming so it has ceased to convey the teaching of Christ to people in the way that it did in the days of the apostolic and patristic Church. The challenge to present-day Christians is thus to restore the relationship between Eucharist and congregation to a much more dynamic state. "The Eucharist", says Balasuriya:

"is in captivity ... (it) will not be liberated to be true to its mission so long as the Churches are captive within the world's power establishments. The Eucharist has to be liberative; it should lead to sharing and genuine love. But in its social impact it fails to do so" (*op. cit.* p 62).

This is particularly true in Latin America, where the circumstances of the colonization and evangelization between 1500 and 1900 led to a strong association of the Church with the State, a forging of links between the Church and the landowners, and a combination of marked clericalism with a dearth of preaching in view of the shortage of priests in general and native-born priests in particular. This combination of factors has meant that so many Latin-American Catholics have seen day-to-day Catholicism as rooted, not in the Eucharist, but in the cults of processions, of prayer to the Saints, and of vows (often of the *do ut des* variety). As Walbert Bühlmann points out, "in the end it is not man at the service of God but religion at the service of man in his selfish ends".<sup>7</sup>

Man's view of the Eucharist, in Latin America and indeed worldwide, has also been much clouded by the perennial problems of individualism and 'domestication'. Attitudes to the Eucharist have suffered greatly (and tended to become passive) through the individualistic or 'verticalist', almost exclusively 'I – thou', view

which people had of their relationship to the Mass and to Communion from the late Middle Ages to Vatican II. This arose largely because the liturgy had become so remote from them in terms of language, culture and (within the church building) space. Since Catholicism was, of course, brought to Latin America after this whole phenomenon had arisen, the consequence there can be thought of as even more serious. 'Domestication', the evacuation from the Eucharist of its demands for Christian living, provides both a temptation to people in any age and a further opportunity to narrow down the meaning of the Eucharist. As temptation, it is easily succumbed to because of our fear of having our lives upset by the Eucharist's requirements; as Robert Hovda puts it:

"we think we can see ... but ... as a whole, Christians and Christian churches in our society have only the haziest notion of any moral imperative flowing from the Sunday meeting in which we celebrate God's word of human liberation and solidarity and then act it out in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup".<sup>8</sup>

As restriction, the 'domestication' of the Eucharist can easily (among other things) help to separate rich and poor by a great gulf fixed. It is not really appropriate to call the Eucharist a 'domestic feast', since it is open to all who hear the Word and are baptized. The Eucharist, as the 'advance pledge', the antepast, of the heavenly Messianic Banquet, is a solemn feast celebrated within the whole Church, without distinction between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female: for in it we are set not in the kingdoms of this world but in the Kingdom of God, with the distinctions of this world replaced by the equality of all before God. If we 'domesticate' the Eucharist either by minimizing its demands or by making it into an exclusive celebration for a particular group, its universal application can very easily be forgotten. In short, the Eucharist's power will only begin to be properly felt when we do our best to allow the Eucharist to 'be itself' and so to unify and free humanity through man's redeemed relationship to a Power which transcends the human powers (political, military and economic) which can oppress harassed man in the ordering of his life on earth.

### III

Gutiérrez's reminder that sin is the root cause of poverty, injustice and oppression both points up the (collectively or personally) willed nature of human injustice and admits that no social change, however deep, will of itself overcome all the evils engendered by man's willed oppression of his fellow-man. The effectiveness of grace (in whatever sacramental or extra-sacramental chan-

nel) will always be diminished by postlapsarian human nature's indulgence of sin and compromise. So, as Helder Camara has observed:

“there is a measure of transforming struggle in Christianity; the death and resurrection of Christ were aimed at the transformation of the world”,<sup>9</sup>

and the Eucharist is central to this struggle, as the participation in the Bread and the Cup of Christ's risen life by which his followers will proclaim his saving death until the Last Day.

The Eucharist also provides the primary opportunity to disseminate the idea of *promoción popular* and to make the voice of the Church heard at local levels, both by preaching and by the eucharistic action itself. The eucharistic presentation to oppressed people of their equality in the Reign of God with those who claim to be their betters in this world gives not only an ever-renewing hope but also a perduring incentive to develop whatever qualities they can to promote themselves in the spirit of the gospel. Again, the Christian assembly is probably the only gathering in which oppressors and oppressed can be found together on equal terms which are, not merely tolerated, but essential to the assembly's nature. The Eucharist is thus in its own right an agent for 'conscientization'; and the priest presiding will have an additional opportunity to foster this process through the ministry of preaching – which is, appropriately, now mandatory at the Eucharist on Sundays and holydays.<sup>10</sup> In doing so he will be able to explain political morality in the context of the Church's mission. To take a firm stand for justice is not easy when the mighty of this world decide to stop both their ears and their financial support; to preach brotherhood and (most importantly) love is even harder in situations of near-despair or open hostility. But the preaching of the gospel of Christ the sign of contradiction requires continuing, and demanding, faith on the preacher's part – whether in, say, Bolivia or Belgravia. As Cyprian tells us:

“the divine admonition never rests, is never silent ... the people of God ... are stirred up to works of mercy; everyone who is being prepared for the hope of the Kingdom of Heaven is commanded by the voice and counsel of the Holy Spirit to give alms” (*On Works and Alms*).<sup>4</sup>

This command takes on an even stronger note when what is called for is not merely poor-relief but a reformation of attitudes, for the building of a more Christian society. And, in the Church's daily life, it is in and through the Eucharist that the gospel call is sounded: as Hovda remarks –

“where else in our society are all of us ... called to be social critics, called to extricate ourselves from the powers and principalities that claim to rule our daily lives? Where else do economic czars and beggars get the same treatment? Where else are food and drink blessed in a common prayer of thanksgiving ... so that everybody shares?” (*art. cit.* p 6).

Or: where else do we see the road to full freedom opening before us, save in the Eucharist which is the pledge of Christ’s love?

#### IV

Commenting on St Paul, Gutiérrez follows him in asserting that Christ’s motive for liberating us was to set us free to love. Hence the fullness of Christ’s freely offered gift of liberation consists in communion, both with God and with others. *Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est*. In a world in which our eucharistic witness to communion has been hindered by sin, we have to look to the Eucharist to work for our freedom and to increase our love and hope. Thus: when the choice lies between seeing the Eucharist as the sign of present unity and seeing it as the instrument for future unity, we have to choose the latter. This choice (essentially between the static and the dynamic in eucharistic fellowship) is necessary if we are to allow the Eucharist to do its unifying work in us and if we are to build on mutual sharing in the Eucharist to do our work towards loving and just reconciliation. If we are truly to hope for this end, a basic element in our hope must be (as Nicholas Lash describes it):

‘the conviction that ... God will continue to enable and ensure sufficient “communion in belief” amongst Christians as to ensure that the Church continues to perform . . . its sacramental and missionary task’<sup>11</sup> —

a fellowship in belief and faith which will always be maintained, clarified and deepened through fellowship in the Eucharist.

Taking up the idea of eucharistic *koinonia* into the wider meaning of the word, Gutiérrez follows Congar’s exposition of *koinonia*<sup>12</sup> as having three distinct senses, namely:

- i) sharing material goods with others of the Christian family,
- ii) eucharistic communion with and in Christ, and
- iii) the relationship of Christian believers with the three Persons of the Trinity.

Though the last of these is the most general, we can see it as subsuming the first two, and particularly the second, into itself: since man’s relationship of sonship to God, by which he is liberated from sin’s slavery, is set forth in the Eucharist, in the meal of the new covenant which is held in the freedom and glory of the chil-

dren of God and which is necessary to bring the spiritual life to its completion, for "all the sacraments are ordered to it" (Aquinas, S. T. 3a, 73, 3).

This 'finality' of the Eucharist reminds us that, in seeing it as vehicle of human liberation, we must not forget its eschatology, as it looks forward to Christ's great feast in the heaven which **will** be the wholeness of our freedom. Even in circumstances of sin and oppression, our sharing in the Eucharist will bring us nearer to the complete freedom of the heavenly Kingdom. As Wainwright well puts it:

"such a Eucharist **will** be the occasion for (the Lord) to exercise the three eschatological functions of casting out from us what is amiss in us, of uniting us closer to himself in divine fellowship, and of joining us together in common enjoyment of his presence and gifts" (*op. cit.* p 143);

as in every Eucharist we re-live our liberation by the blood of the Lamb who has ransomed us for God from every tribe and language and race and nation and who will continue to feed us at his table when the former things will have passed away and our freedom will be entire and eternal.

- 1 T. Balasuriya, *The Eucharist and Human Liberation* (London, SCM, 1979 ed.) p 132
- 2 G. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (English ed. London, SCM, 1974), p 265
- 3 P. Kirby, 'Pointers towards a Popular Church in Britain', in *New Blackfriars*, vol 63 no. 742 (April 1982), p 184.
- 4 Quoted in Balasuriya, *op. cit.* pp 26-7.
- 5 G. Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology* (London, Epworth Press, 1971), pp 142-3.
- 6 J. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York, Lippincott, 1970), pp 17-18 (Cone's italics).
- 7 W. Bühlmann, *The Coming of the Third Church* (English ed. Slough, St Paul Publications, 1976), p 155.
- 8 R. Hovda, 'The Mass and its Social Consequences', in *Liturgy '80* (Chicago), vol 13 no 5 (June/July 1982), p 3.
- 9 Helder Camara, *Church and Colonialism* (London, Sheed & Ward, 1969), p 181.
- 10 Cf. *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, art. 42.
- 11 N. Lash, *Voices of Authority* (London, Sheed & Ward, 1976), p 40.
- 12 Cf. Gutiérrez, *op. cit.* p 264; Y. Congar, 'Les biens temporels de l'Église d'après sa tradition théologique et canonique', in *Église et pauvreté*, pp 247-9.