

Blood, Sex, and the Eucharist: A Discourse Analysis on the Reception of the Precious Blood

Andrew Casad

It is a Sunday morning and several hundred people are gathered for the celebration of the Second Sunday of Advent. The singing is low as the faithful stream forward to receive the Eucharist. Some recall the recent instruction to make a gesture of reverence before receiving the Body of Christ, but most simply stretch out their hands to embrace the Body of Christ. Passing before the cup bearing the Blood of Christ, only one woman bows her head slightly, but she does not take the cup offered her. Counting the number of people receiving the Body and Blood of Christ makes it clear that less than one fifth of the assembly is partaking of *both* the Body and the Blood of Christ. The majority accepts the host-bread transformed into the Body of Christ, its name derived from the Latin *hostia*, meaning “victim” — and proceeds to pass by the cup filled with the Precious Blood as if it were not present. This is not an isolated incidence nor is it set in some distant past where the chalice was reserved for the priest alone. No, this is happening among assemblies of otherwise well educated, contemporary Catholics – spanning the entire spectrum of believers, from those who would consider themselves conservative to those who regard themselves as progressives. Why is this happening? Why are the faithful seemingly ignoring the Blood of Christ when the words of Matthew are recalled in every liturgy at the moment of consecration in the Eucharistic Prayer, “Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins?”¹ Why do so few heed the command to drink to their own salvation?

It seems to me that the answer to this quandary lies in the fact that blood has lost its value as a symbol. By this, I do not mean to imply that the Blood of Christ is a “mere symbol” or that it is not somehow ontologically the Blood of the Risen Lord. In fact, the degree to which the Precious Blood is understood by the faithful to be the Blood of Christ is in some way evidenced by their very failure to partake in the cup. Were the Blood of Christ to be seen

¹ Matthew 26:27–28.

simply as symbolic *of* blood, then the following argument would not ring true. It is only through an understanding of the Blood of Christ functioning *as* blood, that is to say bearing the symbolic load of that which blood itself symbolizes, that an explanation can be evinced as to why the faithful are not partaking of the Precious Blood. If the Blood of Christ is understood to be functioning symbolically as blood it becomes possible to see why, for the majority of the assembly, the reason for not partaking of the Blood of Christ has its roots in the loss of blood – all blood – to function symbolically; blood no longer bears the same meaning it once did.

In order to discern how it came to be the case that blood lost its symbolic efficacy, or rather retained the ability to symbolize, but suffered a shift in its signification, we may look to Michel Foucault's discourse analysis. Foucault traces the transformation of power, arguing that power, once channelled through the discourse of blood, has come to be channelled through the discourse of sexuality. In short, I argue that those factors which "caused our societies to go from a symbolics of blood to an analytics of sexuality"² not only are responsible for the inability of the Precious Blood to bear the desired meaning, but also explain the sexualization of the Body of Christ, which together account for the lack of desire on the part of the majority of the assembly to partake of the cup.

From Blood and Sex...

The core of Foucault's argument in the *History of Sexuality* is that the power that had been written in blood for the aristocracy comes to be embodied in the discourse of sexuality for the emerging middle class. "The bourgeoisie's 'blood' was its sex."³ Those elements of sexuality that we consider to be naturally coupled are shown by Foucault to have been constructed as part of a process of legitimization of the bourgeoisie. Whereas for the aristocracy, veracity lay in blood — in the blood one had flowing in one's veins and the blood extracted in punishments — the bourgeoisie constructed an alternative "discourse in which sex, the revelation of truth, the overturning of global laws, the proclamation of a new day to come, and the promise of a certain felicity are linked together."⁴ Through this amalgamation of distinct elements, the true production of knowledge and one's sexuality came to be seen as intimately and naturally linked to the point where authenticity was to be found most deeply in the intimate recesses of

² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 148.

³ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, p. 124.

⁴ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, p. 7.

each person's sexuality. Although it has come to be seen as entirely natural, "this was the first time that a society had affirmed, in a constant way, that its future and its fortune were tied . . . to the manner in which each individual made use of his sex."⁵ Blood was the source of life for the aristocracy: through blood one made promises that could not be broken, with one's blood one acquired the strength of one's forefathers, and in blood one paid for the offenses against all others. For the bourgeoisie, however, blood represented a system that could not be penetrated, an unbroken chain of being that hindered their ascendancy as masters of the emerging commercial world. Sexuality, on the other hand, came to dominate bourgeois concerns with legitimacy and was exploited towards the end of delegitimizing the claims of the aristocracy.

This shift in the locus of authority and legitimacy away from blood and towards sexuality is paralleled in the development of penal technology and transformations in the application of juridical power as described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. What one witnessed was "a shift in the point of application of this power: it is no longer the body, with the ritual play of excessive pains, spectacular brandings in the ritual of the public execution; it is all in the mind or rather a play of the representations and signs circulating discreetly but necessarily and evidently in the minds of all."⁶ Just as the bourgeoisie sought "to transform the sexual conduct of couples into a concerted economic and political behavior,"⁷ punishment was to be employed toward the end of generating a society that was amenable to the commercial needs of the bourgeoisie. Toward this end, sexuality, rather than being a taboo about which one was prohibited from speaking, became the privileged site to discipline and form bodies in conformation with bourgeois ideals. Just as punishment and the threat thereof come to be "a play of the representations and signs circulating discreetly but necessarily and evidently in the minds of all," so too did sexuality become the unspoken discourse which functions in a manner analogous to the normalization demanded by the new penal technologies in which all were required to partake.

Just as the genealogy of punishment has shown that "knowledge follows the advances of power, discovering new objects of knowledge over all the surfaces on which power is exercised,"⁸ so too does the history of sexuality uncover the way in which sexuality was transformed into an object of knowledge. Sexuality becomes an object so powerful that it comes to be seen as the source of all

⁵ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, p. 26.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 101.

⁷ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, p. 26.

⁸ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, p. 204.

authenticity. Although it was through this emerging discourse that “sexuality was constituted as an area of investigation, this was only because relations of power had established it as a possible object.”⁹ In other words, the power wielded by those who stood to gain from the application of new forms of bodily and sexual discipline brought into existence these new categories of knowledge. These categories came to be legitimated and further authorized the discourse itself through the accumulation of knowledge about that which was only created as a distinct arena of investigation because it met bourgeois political needs. Due to its creation as a distinctive object of inquiry, sexuality demanded to be subject to investigation and hence, “we demand that sex speak the truth . . . and we demand that it tell us our truth . . . the deeply buried truth of that truth about ourselves which we think we possess in our immediate consciousness.”¹⁰ In this way, it is in the discourse of sexuality “that power and knowledge are joined together.”¹¹ Power relations allowed for the construction of a new category — sexuality — which was then subject to investigation and became the most curious, most mysterious object of knowledge. It is both intimate and distant; it functions as an object only because of its central role in the legitimization of the power of the bourgeoisie.

Looking once more at the confluence of punitive technology and the discipline of sexuality, one can see that the world of the aristocracy, governed by blood, is replaced by the world of the bourgeoisie, governed by the body and its most mysterious object of knowledge: sexuality. The disciplining of bodies is what made possible the substitution of a new “coercive, corporal, solitary, secret model of the power to punish” for the earlier “representative, scenic, signifying, public, collective model.”¹² In the latter, “the sovereign exercised his right of life only by exercising his right to kill, or by refraining from killing.”¹³ In the former, however, “at the juncture of the ‘body’ and the ‘population,’ sex became a crucial target of a power organized around the management of life rather than the menace of death.”¹⁴ The spectacle of the scaffold, wherein the sovereign triumphs over the condemned by spilling his blood, is replaced by the administering of life, the nourishment of the body, and the disciplining of procreation. “One might say that the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by the power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death.”¹⁵ In other words, the institution of the

⁹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, p. 98.

¹⁰ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, p. 69.

¹¹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, p. 100.

¹² Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, p. 131.

¹³ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, p. 136.

¹⁴ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, p. 147.

¹⁵ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, p. 138.

disciplinary model of punishment and the analogous policing of sexuality allowed for greater and more effective distribution of power. This also means, however, that the symbolism of blood, the connection to the sovereign aristocrat, whose prerogative it was to have legitimate control of violence and thus to spill the lifeblood of any individual for their transgression of his laws, is lost. The symbolism of power comes to be replaced by the intimate and atomized panopticon of the docile and disciplined body, wherein control over life is exercised in a more subtle yet more pervasive fashion. As part of this domestication of the body, “sex was thus able to function as a unique signifier and as a universal signified.”¹⁶ Life comes to be more and more regulated, in all its aspects, and this is signified in the dense and aggregated symbol of sex. Concomitantly, blood loses its ability to signify power. In short, there was once

A society of blood — I was tempted to say, of ‘sanguinity’ — where power spoke *through* blood: the horror of war, the fear of famine, the triumph of death, the sovereign with his sword, executions and tortures; blood was *a reality with a symbolic function*. We, on the other hand, are in a society of ‘sex,’ or rather a society ‘with a sexuality’: the mechanisms of power are addressed to the body, to life, to what causes it to proliferate, to what reinforces the species, its stamina, its ability to dominate, or its capacity for being used. Through the themes of health, progeny, race, the future of the species, the vitality of the social body, power spoke *of* sexuality and *to* sexuality; the latter was not a mark or a symbol, it was an object and a target.¹⁷

... To the Eucharist

The first line of William Shannon’s *Catholic Update* entitled “Eucharist: Understanding Christ’s Body” states, “The way Catholics think about the Eucharist has a lot to do with the way we understand the body.”¹⁸ *Catholic Update* is a publication of St. Anthony Messenger Press, widely used both for the ongoing education of the Catholic laity in the United States as inserts in weekly bulletins and in many parishes as a primary resource for the faith formation of those seeking to become Catholic. Each *Catholic Update* bears the Imprimatur of a Catholic bishop, thus guaranteeing the publication’s adherence to official Church teaching. Because of the widespread use and magisterial approval of these publications, they are especially suitable for an analysis of the discourse of the Eucharist.

¹⁶ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, p. 154

¹⁷ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, p. 147.

¹⁸ William H. Shannon, ‘Eucharist: Understanding Christ’s Body,’ *Catholic Update* COI99 (1998).

The fact that the first line of Shannon's *Update* asserts that the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist is reliant on a shared understanding of the body is as important for what it does not say as for what it positively asserts. Eucharistic theology is not directly stated here to be derivative of a particular Christological position; it seems less concerned with the divinity and ascribed honor of the Christ and more focused on the embodied nature of each person, especially the Incarnate Jesus. Drawing on the theologian Nathan Mitchell, Shannon argues that in the Eucharist the species become not an *object*, but rather the Body and Blood of a *person* in our midst. Therefore, the way in which one engages with embodied persons is ultimately important in shaping how one relates to the Eucharist.

Recalling that the bourgeois creation of a discourse of sexuality created sex as precisely that object of knowledge which is to be inquired about in order to know and regulate the body, it seems that a Catholic understanding of the body in the contemporary world must, in some sense, rely on an understanding of sexuality. Although not to be fully fleshed out in the present argument, the Theology of the Body, inaugurated by Pope John Paul II and continued in Pope Benedict's XVI's *Deus Caritas Est*, is precisely the kind of theology one would expect according to Foucault's understanding of the history of sexuality. Namely, the Theology of the Body is a theology concerned with regulating and disciplining sexuality as a means of expressing theological realities. In John Paul II's Theology of the Body, sexuality, in accordance with the dictates of the bourgeois discourse of sexuality, is made to conform to "the desire for sex—the desire to have it, to have access to it, to discover it, to liberate it, to articulate it in discourse, to formulate it in truth."¹⁹ John Paul II's theology, as echoed in Pope Benedict's recent encyclical, makes sexuality testify to the truth about the connection between Christ and his bride, the Church. The Theology of the Body seeks to discover the truth about sexuality, to liberate it from what are seen as forces dominating sexuality in the secular world, and ultimately to ennoble erotic love by articulating in theological discourse the truth contained in sexuality itself. While this thumbnail sketch by no means does justice to the Theology of the Body, it is indicative of the connection between the Eucharist and sexuality. Having a Eucharistic theology dependant on a shared understanding of the body demands at a more fundamental level a thoroughly articulated Theology of the Body, grounded, as it must be according to the discourse of sexuality, on that greatest of mysteries which has been construed as revealing the truth about our very selves.

¹⁹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, p. 156.

The remainder of Shannon's *Update* sketches a brief history of the liturgical changes concerning the Eucharist from what is held up to be the golden age of the early church through the vilified middle ages and the eventual renewal of the Eucharist through the radical changes of the Second Vatican Council. The latter improvements are seen as having "as their ultimate intent to make the Mass once again a human reality, namely, something that people do."²⁰ In this explicit affirmation of the present state of the liturgy is also implied a denial of the liturgy as done by those who participated, or merely observed as Shannon argues, the liturgy in an earlier age. Therefore, what they were doing is seen as something that is not done by people. In terms of discourse analysis, the earlier forms of liturgy and their participants are being written out of the legitimate discourse concerning the Eucharist. To be a legitimate participant means being a participant in the manner that is consistent with the theology of the Second Vatican Council, or, rather, consistent with the understanding of the Second Vatican Council that has been preferred and proffered by the majority. This understanding, I argue, is one that is highly humanized, deeply intimate, implicitly sexualized. This is not to denigrate what such changes have done for a reinvigoration of the faith life of so many but is, rather, simply meant to illustrate how so doing is consonant with the discourse of sexuality. Making "the Mass once again a human reality" consists in making the participation in the Mass a participation in this wider discourse of sexuality and therefore something desirable.

The result of a highly sexualized understanding of the Eucharist is one wherein communion and intimacy are to be desired, both with other members of the assembly and with the one whom one consumes and takes into one's body: Jesus. The Body of Christ, therefore, is that which has become an embodied person in the midst of the assembly, a person with whom intimacy is desired in order to reveal the truth that lay cloaked in mystery. Just as sex makes "all the world's enigmas appear frivolous to us compared to this secret, miniscule in each of us, but of a destiny that makes it more serious than any other,"²¹ the secret intimacy of the Eucharist comes to be most fully embodied in the incorporation of the physical Body of Christ into oneself.

The sexualization of the Eucharist, however, leaves little room for a theology that emphasizes Christ's sacrifice. In fact, the very symbol of blood that once conveyed to all who partook of it an image of the unending and irreversible covenant between God and the chosen people, invoking the life sustaining sacrifices of the Temple, as fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ, is made in the discourse of

²⁰ William H. Shannon, 'Eucharist: Understanding Christ's Body,' *Catholic Update* COI99 (1998).

²¹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, p. 156.

sexuality to consist *only* of something undesirable. This is explicitly noted in another *Catholic Update*, “Real Presence in the Eucharist,” wherein Jeffrey Von Lehmen acknowledges that “In our culture, when someone says ‘blood,’ we more than likely think of something terrible, of violence or loss of life.”²² The power that the symbol of blood once carried is not only diminished in its strength, but the range of meanings carried by the symbol of blood has also been reduced. Once able to aggregate to itself myriad meanings, blood has become an impotent and impoverished symbol invoking only a narrow range of at best undesirable and at worst sinister signifiers. A sexualized Eucharist, wherein communion with Jesus is the understood means to apprehend the mystery, comes to monopolize the power to tell the truth at the expense of blood, the Blood of Christ by which all have been saved. The Eucharist has not been de-objectified as Shannon asserts, but rather has been reembodyed according to the dictates of the discourse of sexuality and therefore objectified according to the principles of bourgeois ideals of sexuality. As a result, the Precious Blood remains like the image of Christ hanging on a crucifix, only a gory reminder of things one would rather not think about – mortality, sacrifice, and pain – devoid of the once associated aspects—the defeat of death, the expiation of sins, and the power to reveal that which has been masked for all time.

It is clear that in order to make reverence of the Precious Blood once again important to the Catholic faithful, either some new meaning needs to be found which the Blood may signify or the sexualization of the Eucharist, not in and of itself an undesirable thing, needs to be balanced with an understanding of the fullness of love as a sacrifice. Gone are the days of the Temple sacrifices, aristocratic bloodlines, and the spectacle of the scaffold. Rather than looking backward with nostalgia for a period we never have really known and probably would prefer not to experience, we need to look beyond the discourse of sexuality to reanimate the Precious Blood as a powerful symbol. However, the monopoly that the discourse of sexuality holds over the production of knowledge prevents many from being able to experience a desire for the one cup. The one cup holds both the threat of suffering but also holds the promise of salvation offered to everyone and sealed in blood by the one whose covenants, from the first to the last, are unailing.

Andrew Casad
Chapel Hill, NC 27516
USA
Email: acasad@bellsouth.net

²² Jeffrey Von Lehmen, ‘Real Presence in the Eucharist,’ *Catholic Update* C0996 (1996).

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