

THE EUCHARIST AND CLIMATE CHANGE: A LITURGICAL-THEOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

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Abstract

In this age of climate change Christian vocation pertaining to the world of creation has been relegated to the background. On the other hand, it has long been held that ecological crisis is one of the greatest concerns of this age. While some efforts have been made by theologians and ethicists to address the problem of climate change, many do not realize that there is a strong liturgical-sacramental basis for the care for creation. It is the intention of this paper to offer a contribution to the ongoing discussions from the liturgical-theological perspective. In other words, this paper intends to establish the basis for the Church's response to the problem of climate change from a liturgical-theological perspective specifically on the celebration of Eucharist. The contemporary climate change challenges Christians to bear Eucharistic witness to creation's groaning as the ground suffers from deforestation, mountain-top removal, toxic dumping and rising temperatures. Eucharistic witness will be that God's newness will break the powers of self-destruction and make new life possible.

Keywords: Creation; Climate Change; Eucharist; Liturgy; Transformation

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Introduction

The human responsibility to care for creation finds its basis in the scripture in Genesis 2:15 where God places the human person in the garden to tend and keep it. This means that the human beings, and especially Christians are expected to tend and keep creation, and this means to prevent and avoid everything that leads to the environmental destruction. Christians are called to respect nature, to model their lives in Christ whom they celebrate in the Eucharist. In *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis asks all Christians to recognize and to live fully ecological conversion. He wishes and hopes that all human beings may bear witness to the power and grace they received from God in their relationship to other creatures and to the world around them.¹ As such liturgical-theological response to climate change is important as it brings into reality the divine mystery celebrated in the church building to the world of creation. Every Christian has a divine mandate to be committed to the care for creation as a way of witnessing to the Eucharistic faith. David Fagerberg and Alexander Schmemmann have given some insights on how the celebration of the Eucharist and the care for creation are intrinsically linked. In what follows, in the light of the insights drawn from Fagerberg and Schmemmann, I offer a reflection on three central liturgical theological concepts regarding the Eucharist relevant for ecological liturgical life, which are: sacrifice, presence, and meal. These three concepts form the structure of this paper. The last part offers some concluding remarks.

1. The Eucharist as Sacrifice

Sacrifice is one of the most frequently used words in human society. It is common to hear people making statements like 'I have sacrificed my time, I have sacrificed my money, I have sacrificed my life' and the like. According to Lucien Deiss the meaning of 'sacrifice' varies widely depending on religion and culture. For Deiss: "there is a world of difference between the sacrifices a football player makes to get a trophy, financial sacrifices parents impose upon themselves for their children's education and the sacrifice of the Mass (the Eucharist)." ² In *Sacrifice Unveiled: The True Meaning of Christian Sacrifice*, Robert Daly provides a general secular definition of

¹Pope Francis *Laudato Si': Encyclical Letter of the Holy Father Francis on Care for Our Common Home*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2015, no. 221. According to the Pope, ecological conversion includes among others, the awareness that each creature reflects something of God, and to recognize that God created the world.

²Lucien Deiss, *It's the Lord's Supper: The Eucharist of the Christians*, London: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1980, 68.

sacrifice. According to him, in the secular sense, the word 'sacrifice' can mean: "giving up something in order to get something else that is thought to be more valuable."³ For Daly, what is given up or offered in the name of sacrifice could be almost anything as long as it is considered at least of some value to the one making the sacrifice. In most cases there is always some calculation involved at least to make sure that the good obtained is higher in value than what is sacrificed.⁴

Theologically, sacrifice symbolizes the internal offering of commitment and surrender to God. In other words, the purpose is primarily for the one who offers to acknowledge the dominion of God but also to bring about the reconciliation of themselves (and possibly others) with God, to render thanks for blessings received and to petition for further blessings for oneself and for others.⁵ According to Schmemmann sacrifice is closely connected with worship. For him, the aspect of worship is the very center of the whole idea of sacrifice and the place where all its facets come together: renunciation, offering up and transformation.⁶ As such, sacrifice is not a result of something or a form of transaction. It is (according to Schmemmann) a major expression or a first revelation of life itself; it is life's spiritual content. For Schmemmann, the absence of sacrifice means the absence of life. In other words, there is an intrinsic link between life and sacrifice. He says, "where there is no sacrifice there is no life. Sacrifice is thus rooted in the recognition of life as love: as giving up, not because I want more for myself or to satisfy an objective justice, but because it is the only way of reaching the fullness that is possible for me."⁷

Unlike the secular sacrifice, Christian sacrifice is not something or some object that one can manipulate neither is it something one gives up. It is rather "a mutually self-giving event that takes place between persons. It is in fact the most profoundly personal and interpersonal event that one can conceive or imagine."⁸ According to Ian Bradley sacrifice means to make something holy and not to lose it. Bradley argues that when one brings a life to God or a gift to God, it becomes His, and it is no longer the person's possession in the greedy and

³Robert J. Daly *Sacrifice Unveiled: The True Meaning of Christian Sacrifice*, New York: T&T Clark International, 2009, 2.

⁴Daly, *Sacrifice Unveiled*, 2.

⁵Daly, *Sacrifice Unveiled*, 2.

⁶Alexander Schmemmann, *Liturgy and Tradition: Theological Reflections of Alexander Schmemmann*, edited by Thomas Fisch, Crestwood, New York: Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990, 129.

⁷Schmemmann, *Liturgy and Tradition*, 130.

⁸Daly, *Sacrifice Unveiled*, 2.

possessive sense of the word. It rather becomes holy with the holiness of God.⁹

This understanding of sacrifice as offering something to God played a great role in the life of the people of Israel. Roch A. Keretszty in his book, *The Wedding Feast of the Lamb* argues that sacrifices had many images associated with Yom Kippur, (the Day of Atonement).¹⁰ On this day, the Israelites could offer animal sacrifices for the atonement of their sins as a sign of purification and conversion. Keretszty argues that for the people of Israel sacrifices have a cosmic dimension.¹¹ A typical example of this is the sacrifice of the famous two brothers, Cain, and Abel, in the book of Genesis 4:2-4. The two were of different professions, and they offered to God the work of their hands. As animal keeper Abel offered from his flock whereas his brother Cain offered cereals from his farming. As such sacrificial offering is primarily for the one who offers to acknowledge God as his/her creator and to render thanks for blessings received and to petition for further blessings for oneself and for others.

In his book *Church, Eucharist and Priesthood*, Edward Kilmartin affirms that the Eucharist is a “true sacrifice which brings about the restoration of mankind and the world to God.”¹² In this regard, one can already notice that the idea of the Eucharist as sacrifice has a lot to do with Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross, which is also known as the paschal mystery. Kilmartin affirms that in the Eucharist, the memorial of the “once-for-all sacrifice of the cross, Christ offers himself to the Father as priest and victim.”¹³ According to Kilmartin, when the Eucharist is celebrated Christ who is the one mediator makes himself present and active in the celebration so that the Christians are brought near to the redemptive sacrifice of Christ.¹⁴ In the Eucharistic celebration, “the community offers as community the *caritas Christi* that flows through it to the father.”¹⁵

⁹Ian Bradley, *The Power of Sacrifice*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 199, 23.

¹⁰According to the Jewish tradition, the Yom Kippur was regarded as the holiest year. Yom means day in Hebrew and Kippur means to atone. The blood of sacrificial animals the human life given to God. See Roch A. Keretszty, *The Wedding Feast of the Lamb: Eucharistic Theology from a Historical, Biblical and Systematic Perspective*, Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2004, 10.

¹¹Keretszty, *The Wedding Feast of the Lamb*, 8.

¹²Kilmartin, *Church, Eucharist, and Priesthood: A Theological Commentary on the Mystery and Worship of the Most Holy Eucharist*, New York: Paulist Press, 1981, 39.

¹³Edward J. Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West: History and Theology*, Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998, 23.

¹⁴Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West*, 23.

¹⁵Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West*, 24.

In that sense as the sacrament of love, the Eucharist embraces the entire life of Christ.¹⁶

The ecological character of the Eucharistic sacrifice can be seen in its matter and form. By matter here we mean the ingredients so to speak of the Eucharist: bread from wheat and wine, the fruit of the vine. The form refers to the words of institution uttered by the priest during consecration of bread and wine. According to Schmemmann, when the people bring the gifts of bread and wine to the altar, they perform even without thinking of it what constitutes the core of every religion: “they offer sacrifice.”¹⁷ As Fagerberg argues Eucharistic offering is rooted precisely in a sacrifice of love by its very nature. This is because the origin of the offering is an expression of love, the love of the Triune God for the world.¹⁸ In the Eucharistic sacrifice everything is fulfilled and accomplished because it is the sacrifice of God himself. God the Son becomes food for the salvation of the world. Both humanity and creation benefit from this sacrificial offering of God. This is to say that when Christians become responsible in their way of dealing with the world of creation, then the whole creation enjoys the love of the creator.

It is worth noting that the word “life” is very important in Schmemmann’s understanding of Christ’s offering. In other words, for Schmemmann the aim of Christ’s sacrifice is to give life to the world. Jesus dies on the Cross for the salvation of the world. Not just for human beings but for the whole world. The apostle Paul puts it beautifully when he comments that Christ embraced and united in himself all things in his sacrifice. In his famous hymn in Ephesians 1:10, Paul highlights that the mystery of God has been revealed in creation and Christ’s mission in the world is to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. The mission of Christ is to gather all to God the Father, not to scatter. This is an ecological mission, to preserve the work of creation and bring it to the Father, the creator. According to Schmemmann, the fruits of Christ’s sacrifice is forgiveness of all sins, the fulness of salvation and sanctification of humanity.¹⁹

¹⁶ Benedict XVI, *The Sacrament of Charity: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Sacramentum Caritatis*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2007, no. 9.

¹⁷ Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*, Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1987, 101.

¹⁸ Fagerberg W. Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima: What is Liturgical Theology?* Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2004, 199.

¹⁹ Schmemmann, *The Eucharist*, 105.

In the celebration of the Eucharist Christians consecrate the entire world and all their daily actions to God.²⁰ By so doing, the “Christian can be said to participate in two liturgies: the celebrated liturgy and the lived liturgy or what Ion Bria called the liturgy after the liturgy.”²¹ As Fagerberg observes the world’s sacrificial composition becomes clear when the world is done correctly in liturgy. In other words, men and women must see themselves as the tongue of creation’s sacrificial praise to the creator.²² If Christ’s life is offering and sacrifice, then the Christian life and the whole life of the Church are offering and sacrifice. That is the offering of themselves and each other and the whole world.²³ In this context one needs to think of this question: what do I have to sacrifice? meaning, what am I required to give up? This is to say that to live ecological Eucharistic lifestyle one needs to ask oneself: what do I have to sacrifice? Meaning, what do I possess that I may offer up to God’s glory? What do I have that I could sacrifice in order to protect the environment from any destruction? This is the lesson we learn from the concept of the Eucharist as sacrifice. It is about self-offering for the world. Taking part in the Eucharist implies responsible relation and good interaction with the creation.

2. The Eucharist as Presence

According to Fagerberg the key to understand the Eucharist is actually to understand it as an act of love.²⁴ Both love and unity have the same origin which is the Holy Spirit. Thus, Fagerberg emphasizes that the Christian life must demonstrate in their lives love and unity because the two are “celebrated, actualized, received, accomplished and symbolized in the liturgy.”²⁵ It is from this context we look at Eucharistic presence as being ecological. Christ willed that his sacrificial offering should be for the life of the whole world, the world of humans and everything that lives in it.²⁶ Sacramentally speaking, the Eucharist contains the fruits of creation from the glorified body of Christ. This is to say that the sacrificial love of Christ on the cross continues to exist in creation. According to Deiss, “in resurrection, Christ’s body touches the stars; and since the first Supper, a bit of

²⁰David W. Fagerberg, *Consecrating the World: On Mundane Liturgical Theology*, Kettering OH: Angelico Press, 2016, 96.

²¹Fagerberg, *Consecrating the World*, 97.

²²Fagerberg, *Consecrating the World*, 99.

²³Schmemmann, *The Eucharist*, 104.

²⁴Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima*, 208.

²⁵Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima*, 202.

²⁶Deiss, *It’s the Lord’s Supper*, 113.

bread and wine become the center of the universe each day.”²⁷ Christ’s presence in the Eucharist can therefore be translated in the love practiced by Christians in the World.

Norman Wirzba observes that true followers are “beloved friends of Jesus who know from the inside what the intention and the life of the Father is all about.”²⁸ Wirzba observes that “if Christians are grafted onto Jesus—most basically by continuing Christ’s ministries of feeding, healing, and reconciling, then they will be continuing in the world God’s own life that has been in place since the first day of creation.”²⁹ This is to say that human life must grow out of Christ, who is the vine, so that they can be the agents of God’s continuing care in the World.³⁰ As such, the newness of Christianity is not only in the commandment to love but in the fact that it is possible to fulfill the commandment.³¹ As Schmemann observes, to love essentially and self-evidently means to love neighbours and family and one’s own people, one’s own country—all those persons and things that we would usually love anyway, without Christ and the gospel.³²

In the Eucharist, the Lord Jesus makes the liturgical assembly “witnesses of God’s compassion towards all their brothers and sisters. Eucharistic mystery gives rise to a service of charity towards a neighbour.”³³ By assembling as a community in the celebration and as church, Christians should become a symbol of Christ’s sacramental love in the world: “we go to Church so that this divine love will again and again ‘be poured into our hearts’, so that we may put on love.”³⁴ The presence of Christ in the Eucharist presupposes the presence of peace in the world, peace among the members of the Christian community and among the whole community of creation. By participating in the Eucharistic celebration Christians celebrate the mystery of their lives embodied as sacrament of Christ. They get transformed by the Eucharistic action to become the sacrament of

²⁷Deiss, *It’s the Lord’s Supper*, 113.

²⁸Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 67.

²⁹Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 67.

³⁰Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 67.

³¹Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima*, 202.

³²Schmemann, *The Eucharist*, 135.

³³Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 88. The word “neighbor” in this context should be understood in a broader perspective. The word “neighbor” can both human and non-human beings. This is to say that to love my neighbor is to recognize creation as the footprint of God.

³⁴Schmemann, *The Eucharist*, 138.

Christ-embedded and embodied in the world.³⁵ As Fagerberg observes Christians have plenty to do in the world if they are to live their lives sacrificially. Because they share in the three offices of Christ, as priest, prophet and king, they are expected to reflect what they are. This is to say that any abuse of creation contradicts the Christian vocation as priests, prophets, and kings.³⁶

Moreover, the credal and biblical affirmation of the Spirit as the giver of life provides a solid foundation in our discussion on the ecological significance of Eucharistic presence: “the Holy Spirit is to be seen as the source of novelty in creation. Since “the Holy Spirit is the divine love, he is first and foremost the source of creation because creation is the overflow of God’s love and participation in God’s being. He is also the source of life in the created world.”³⁷ In the liturgy of the Eucharist, *epiclesis*, which is the invocation of the Holy Spirit, is necessary for the transformation of the Eucharistic gifts (the bread and wine) into the body and blood of Christ.³⁸ Like creation, the liturgy is the work of the Trinity. All prayers are offered to God the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. The account of creation in Genesis 1:2 reveals that the Spirit of God hovered over the waters. This is an indication that the Holy Spirit has always been a creative power and the sign of God’s presence in creation.³⁹ Schmemmann maintains that “the liturgy is entirely, from the beginning to the end, an *epiclesis*, an invocation of the Holy Spirit who transfigures everything done in it, each solemn rite, into that which it manifests and reveals to us.”⁴⁰ The Holy Spirit sanctifies not only the species of bread and wine, but through these gifts from creation the whole creation is sanctified. Moreover, the liturgical assembly is also transformed by the same Spirit of God.⁴¹ As such, Eucharistic presence teaches that the transforming power of the Liturgy brought by the Holy Spirit must be reflected in the lives of Christians in the world.⁴² In other words, understanding of the Eucharist as presence is an invitation to the Christians to recognise

³⁵Carmel Pilcher, “The Sunday Eucharist: Embodying Christ in a Prophetic Act” in *Reinterpreting the Eucharist: Explorations in Feminist Theology and Ethics*, ed. Anne Elvey, et al., Sheffield: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2013, 31-53, 50.

³⁶Fagerberg, *Consecrating the World*, 108.

³⁷Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, London: SCM, 1983, 227.

³⁸Schmemmann, *The Eucharist*, 214.

³⁹Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, London: SCM Press Ltd, 1985, 99.

⁴⁰Schmemmann, *The Eucharist*, 223.

⁴¹Schmemmann, *The Eucharist*, 223.

⁴²Fagerberg, *Consecrating the World*, 51.

the divine presence in creation, the one they experience in the celebration and in the species of bread and wine (the fruits of the earth). In other words, the Eucharist opens new horizons to finding God in creation and become responsible Christians for God's creation. Christ presence in the Eucharist is to be translated in love practiced by Christians in the world. This means that any destruction and abuse of creation contradicts the Christian faith in the Eucharist because to love is to care and respect other members present in the community of creation.

3. The Eucharist as a Meal

The basic question we ask in this section is: what does the Eucharist symbolize? What is the ecological significant of sharing the body and blood of Christ at the Eucharistic table? Like other animals, all human beings need to eat and drink in order to live. This means that eating and drinking is very essential human activity.⁴³ Frank Senn observes that like other animals, the human body is composed by the earth's elements and receives nutrients for life by consuming the food the earth produces.⁴⁴ Schmemmann observes that the human being is what he/she eats."⁴⁵ For Schmemmann "the human beings must eat in order to live; they must take the world into their body and transform it into themselves, into flesh and blood. They are indeed that which they eat, and the whole world is presented as one all-embracing banquet table from man and woman."⁴⁶ Unlike other beings, for humans, meals have a social as well as biological function. We bond with others by eating and drinking with them.

Moreover, conversation usually takes place at meals. It is a common human custom to observe special events by having a big reception with food and drink. Always whenever one organizes a special event in life such as a wedding anniversary, or birthday, an ordination and even funeral, they think of offering food and drinks. This shows that there is more to a meal than just satisfying a biological necessity. A meal enhances personal relationships, helps to bring people together, and is a way of commemorating the past. Human beings do not simply consume food in proximity to one another; they share meals. The dining table is seen as transforming

⁴³Frank C. Senn, *Embodied Liturgy: Lessons in Christian Ritual*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016, 119.

⁴⁴Senn, *Embodied Liturgy*, 119.

⁴⁵Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 11.

⁴⁶Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 11.

those sitting around it from individuals to community.⁴⁷ Schmemmann observes that one of the things which secularism has failed to transform is the sacred character of the meal: "Food is still treated with reverence. A meal is still a rite, the last 'natural sacrament' of family and friendship, of life that is more than eating to maintain bodily functions. People may not understand what that 'something more' is, but they nonetheless desire to celebrate it."⁴⁸

According to Paul Bernier, eating is an important social ritual in which we all share. Meals are meant to strengthen the relationship between the members of the family and friends.⁴⁹ To break bread with someone was a pledge of solidarity and friendship. This is implied on many occasions in the synoptic Gospels, seeing that towards those who were regarded as outcasts and sinners in the Jewish society Jesus acted with a sympathetic understanding. The traditional understanding of meals as sacred moments of coming together is perfected in the Eucharist. In the Eucharist Jesus demonstrates a love in action whereby those who come to share his body and drink his blood become one family. The Eucharistic table becomes a place where love, peace, reconciliation, and unity become visible, a sign which is to be reflected in the people's attitude towards the world of creation.

It is worth mentioning that when Christians receive the holy Communion it is an act of sacramental expression of the unity of the participants with one another. This is a very important aspect of Eucharistic communion. Moreover, Eucharistic action shows "the human and social dimension of the corporate life of the Christian community. As for the case of all the traditional sacraments of the church, Holy communion symbolizes something that can be lived: a relationship of shared love in daily life. It allows the participants to play out this relationship in a symbolic act."⁵⁰ In other words, to eat and drink the body and blood of Christ is to be ready to be at the service of each other.

It is important to note that the symbolism of the Eucharist as meal promotes first and foremost veneration of God and, by analogy as Kilmartin puts it, strengthens the participants both inwardly and

⁴⁷Thomas O'Loughlin, *The Eucharist: Origins and Contemporary Understandings*, London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015, 112.

⁴⁸Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973, 16.

⁴⁹Paul Bernier, *Bread Broken and Shared*, Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1981, 61.

⁵⁰Kilmartin, *Church, Eucharist, and Priesthood*, 54.

socially.⁵¹ This sacramental strength becomes the source of inspiration and motivation for the Christians to live an ecological lifestyle of friendship and communion with others. If by analogy we say that the Eucharist is a meal or rather that it is food and drink which is truly signified, then our life must reflect that food, the Eucharistic food and drink.⁵² Eucharistic communion suggests that every member of the Christian community feels at home with each other. If there is a sense of concern and care for each other among the members of the Christian community, then there is preservation of life and environment. According to Schmemann, “the act of consumption of the Eucharist does not entail the appropriation of Goods for private use, but rather being assimilated to a public body, the body of Christ. This is to say that the Eucharist effects a radical decentering of the individual by incorporating the person into a larger body.”⁵³ As such, understanding of the Eucharist as a meal is an invitation for Christians to be aware of the rest of creation. It is the meal that makes human beings aware of being a community as human beings. This means that meals remind the human beings that they are never independent of other creatures. In that sense, Eucharistic meal reminds Christians the idea of interconnectedness and their dependence on creation for food, drink, and the like.

4. Concluding Remarks

Much as this topic is not completely exhausted here as it deserves detailed research, I conclude that understanding the Eucharist as sacrifice, presence and meal has the following ecological significance: One, in the Eucharistic celebration Christians confess and worship a God who created the heavens and the earth. Moreover, being created in the *imago Dei* the human responsibility is to imitate God in caring for creation. God created and cares for creation, and human person as an image of God, should imitate God by exercising in fidelity, the task of stewardship over the creation. This is the key to the survival of both humans and the world of creation, the way to put an end to the damage already done to creation, and a process towards renewing the face of the Earth. Two, understanding of the Eucharist as sacrifice means self-giving for the wellbeing of creation. To take part in the Eucharist demands responsible relationship with the rest of creation. Third, the Eucharist as presence means the recognition of divine presence in creation. The Eucharist makes Christians find God

⁵¹Kilmartin, *Church, Eucharist, and Priesthood*, 28.

⁵²Kilmartin, *Church, Eucharist, and Priesthood*, 27.

⁵³William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 95.

in creation, the one they experience in the celebration and the species of bread and wine. This implies that they are expected to become responsible Christians in their daily interaction with the rest of creation. Four, the meal aspect of the Eucharist makes Christians aware about their connection with other creatures. Meals remind the human family of the importance of other creatures. The reception of the Eucharistic meal is a call to Christians to be aware of the world around them. This is to say that in the context of climate change the concept of the Eucharist as sacrifice, presence and meal unfolds the meaning of being Christians. In other words, it has implications for the church's teaching in the Eucharist and how she responds to the challenges of the contemporary climate change.