

Written in an engaging style that is both conversational and informative, *Inwardly Digest* is a timely invitation to life in the Spirit sustained by the paterens and rhythms of the Prayer Book.

—FRANK GRISWOLD
25th Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church

With the spiritual foundation in *The Book of Common Prayer*, Derek Olsen shows how everyday Christians can grow closer to God through a “training regimen” that incorporates the spirituality of Anglican liturgy as a daily practice. In straightforward and accessible writing, Olsen provides a guide to Prayer Book spirituality for everyone.

—THE REV. SUSAN BROWN SNOOK
Episcopal priest and editor of *Acts to Action: The New Testament's Guide to Evangelism and Mission*


INWARDLY DIGEST

THE PRAYER BOOK AS GUIDE TO A SPIRITUAL LIFE

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CHAPTER 8

SPIRITUALITY OF THE EUCHARIST

There are a lot of different approaches to talking about the Holy Eucharist. Books, long books, multi-volume books have been written on the Eucharist and on its spirituality. In these pages, we can do no more than lightly scratch the surface.

I am not going to try to be comprehensive; rather, I hope to give you some perspectives, some lenses, through which to view the Eucharist in hopes that they can enrich your understanding of what we do in this celebration and what it means for our Christian life together. I will begin with a big metaphorical step back and give the broadest possible, big-picture view before we head back in and explore our prayer book Eucharist.

STARTING WITH SACRIFICE

We are modern twenty-first-century people; we can't be anything other than this. We know our world, and, for us, Eucharist is a church ceremony that happens on Sundays. I want to start by taking us out of our environment and putting us in a completely different headspace. A new perspective

will help us get a different angle on something that we have witnessed and experienced over and over again. I would like to approach it from the perspective that the Eucharist, as religious practice, is deeply rooted in the sacrificial customs of Mediterranean antiquity.

So, the place to start is the ancient Mediterranean mindset; we need to have a sense of what those people were thinking in order to have a better sense of the environment of Jesus and the Early Church. One particular element to highlight: When we think about sacrifice, and animal sacrifice in particular, we tend to focus on one particular aspect of it—the death of the animal. But when we do so, we miss many other factors. We fixate on the moment and the concept of death, and we fail to see the other things that surround it.

To get into this alternate headspace, I would like us to start out in Homer's *Iliad*. One of the great epics of world literature, the *Iliad* is a long poem originally composed and handed down orally; it was written down in Greek probably at some point in the eighth century BCE. It tells the story of the great siege of Troy, a Greek city on the coast of modern-day Turkey, and the struggle of other Greeks—Achaean—against the Trojans. As a result, the *Iliad* gives us a glance into Greek society at a time when it was closely aligned with its ancient neighbors in the Middle East.

In the midst of the drama, one of the leaders tries to resolve a god-sent plague in the Greek camp by returning a captive to her father, a priest of Apollo, and bringing along a hecatomb (100 cattle) as recompense.

Once they get there, a sacrifice happens. That's where we'll pick up:

[A] When prayers were said and grains of barley strewn,
they held the bullocks for the knife, and flayed them,
cutting out joints and wrapping these in fat,

two layers, folded, with raw strips of flesh,
for the old man to burn on cloven faggots,
wetting it all with wine.

[B] Around him stood
young men with five tined forks in hand, and when
the vitals had been tasted, joints consumed,
they sliced the chines and quarters for the spits,
roasted them evenly and drew them off.

[C] Their meal now prepared and all work done,
they feasted to their hearts' content and made
desire for meat and drink recede again,
then young men filled their winebowls to the brim,
ladling drops for the god in every cup.

[D] Propitiatory songs rose clear and strong
until day's end to praise the god, Apollo,
as One Who Keeps the Plague Afar; and listening
the god took joy. After the sun went down
and darkness came, at last Odysseus' men
lay down to rest under the stern hawsers.

(*Iliad*, 1.526-46)

I have added in some letters to help us keep track of the action. One of the ways to analyze what is happening in this scene is to break it down into four pieces: [A] marks the deaths of the animals; [B] is when the meat gets cooked; [C] describes the meat being eaten together; and [D] is where the god is praised.

I want to emphasize some points here. First, yes, a lot of animals are dying here. But notice how little emphasis is given to that fact. The animals die, but that does not seem to be the central point of this operation. Second, if there is a central point, it would be about the party and not the preparation.

The emphasis is placed on the meal. Third, we should not miss the act of social reconciliation that is occurring. The men of Odysseus are not random guests who stopped in; they are pirates who sacked this town a short time before. The last time these men saw each other, they were likely trying to kill each other! The fact that the priest and his young men sat and ate with Odysseus and his men must not be overlooked. Fourth, there is an act of divine reconciliation going on as well. The god, Apollo, looks with favor upon both the act (the restoration of the girl) and the sacrifice, and is present with them, listening.

Some church people love to argue about the basic nature of the Eucharist: Is it a sacrifice or is it a meal? The way we answer this question has broad implications. For example, it determines whether the thing in the front of the church is an altar or a table.

Well, what would Homer say?

Let me suggest three main takeaways from this description of a Homeric sacrifice. First, there is the fact of the hecatomb: That's a lot of cow! Consider all of the economic effort that goes into raising 100 head of cattle. This is a lot of property and wealth being dedicated to the god. It is given to the god, and the giving is motivated by the god, with the secondary result of the gift being that it is also shared with the community. Second, meal and sacrifice are intimately related. We cannot escape the way that these are inextricably bound to one another. It is not an either/or; it is definitely a both/and. The meal cannot happen without the deaths, and the deaths enable the meal. Now, did the Greeks ever have sacrifices where the meat was not eaten, when it was burnt entirely? The answer is yes, but typically that occurred when they were making sacrifices to the dark gods of the underworld, the gods they had no interest in eating with! And that leads to the third point. The meal is bidirectional: The humans are communing

with one another and communing with the god to whom the sacrifice is being offered. Again, it's a both/and. Keeping Homer and his lessons in mind, I think the best way for us to consider the Eucharist is to see it as a sacrificial meal of reconciliation. All three of these words are important: There is a sacrifice; it enables a meal. And the meal both symbolizes and enacts reconciliation among those who gather around it.

Now, I am not suggesting that there is a direct line between Homeric sacrifice and the Christian Eucharist. Too much time and too many changes separate the two. However, there are broad, continuous themes in Homer that can be found in the Old Testament record as well as in the world of late antiquity that birthed the Church. If we take a look at the type of sacrificial events that show up in the Old Testament, we find three major categories. The first are the whole burnt offerings. As we discussed when talking about the Daily Office, you see this most in those almentary offerings, when the point was to feed God in the temple. The second are the sin and guilt offerings. With these sacrifices, some of the meat was burned, the other portion was given to the priests to eat; you didn't get to party if you were paying for a sin. The third are the thanks and freewill offerings. These were the occasions of rejoicing in God's presence or thanking God for his benefits. These sacrifices were shared with the priests and the community. This is the kind of meal most closely related to what we see in the Homeric vision.

Furthermore, 1 Corinthians 10 reveals just how prevalent these understandings remained in the life of the Early Church. In this chapter, Paul wrestles with the issue of whether Christians are allowed to eat meat sacrificed to idols. The question is whether eating such meat is itself an act of communing with the god to whom it was sacrificed. On one hand, Paul wants to deny that the old gods have any power over the faithful; on the other hand, he understands

how powerful the associations remain and does not want weaker Christians to be harmed by what they see more mature Christians doing. What makes this issue even more complicated is that most of the meat sold in a Greek market of his day would have come from a temple sacrifice.

So, how does this look into the past help us understand what we do today? Well, it gives us a bit of perspective when we say that the Eucharist is a sacrificial meal of reconciliation. No part of this phrase need stand in opposition to any other part of it. Sacrifice, meal, and reconciliation appropriately belong together. To argue otherwise stands in contradiction with the milieu from which this rite came.

EUCCHARIST AS SACRIFICE

In what sense is the Eucharist a sacrifice? In a strictly literal sense, nothing dies. Your priest doesn't get up on Sunday morning and kill something in front of you. And yet, tradition emphasizes that the Eucharist is a sacrifice.

Chronologically speaking, Paul's letters represent the earliest Christian writings that we have—and it is his words that we use at the fraction: "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us, therefore let us keep the feast." 1 Corinthians 10 and the following chapter (after an aside regarding women's hair) speak of pagan sacrifices and the Eucharist as fundamentally analogous and competing rites:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices partners in the altar? What do I imply then? That food sacrificed to idols is anything, or

that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons (10:16-21).

Rhetorically, Paul is insisting upon the continuity between pagan sacrifice, Jewish sacrifice, and the Eucharist: The same intrinsic mechanism occurs—the act of sacrifice and the subsequent sharing in the meal is a sharing in and with the spiritual being with whom the sacrifice is performed, whether divine or demonic.

Now, exactly how the Eucharist is a sacrifice, and what we mean by that, has been a major point of argument between Protestants and non-Protestants (Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox alike). To get at the heart of the prayer book spirituality of the Eucharist, it is sufficient to agree on this central point: We are participating in Christ's own self-offering at his own invitation.

We don't believe that anyone is re-sacrificing Jesus. Indeed, the book of Hebrews goes to some lengths to note that one of the ways in which the self-sacrifice of Jesus is greater than that of the temple sacrifices is because those sacrifices must be redone year after year; the act of Jesus was done once and accomplished for all time. Our repeated actions are joined to his single great action.

And that's where our attention focuses—the great action. In the Eucharist, the events of the Last Supper and the Crucifixion are superimposed upon one another through Christ's own words and promise. Our Eucharistic prayers in both Rite I and II do this:

All glory be to thee, Almighty God, our heavenly Father, for that thou, of thy tender mercy, didst [A] give thine only Son Jesus Christ

to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption; [B] who made there, by his one oblation of himself once offered, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world; [C] and did institute, and in his holy Gospel command us to continue, a perpetual memory of that his precious death and sacrifice, until his coming again (*The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 334).

The prayer begins by specifically talking about the passion and death of Christ on the cross at [A]. Then, at [B], it moves into language that both identifies this action as an act of sacrifice but also goes to great lengths (clearly with Hebrews 7-10 in mind!) to establish several things: that this death was fundamentally a self-offering—not forced; that this one offering was sufficient for all times; and that this act in itself accomplished everything that needed to happen to reconcile God and humanity. Having established these points, the prayer comes back to the Eucharist itself and identifies it as a regular reminder of that sacrifice (using the word again to make sure we don't miss it) for the Church.

Or, to say the same thing with some slightly different emphases, we also pray this:

Holy and gracious Father: In your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death, [A] you, in your mercy, sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, [B] to reconcile us to you, the God and Father of all.

[C] He stretched out his arms upon the cross, and offered himself in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world (*The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 362).

Here we see the same fundamental pattern. In [A] Jesus is sent to us. The mention of his death is balanced by mention

of his life—a reminder of the redemptive action of the Incarnation—but his death is clearly in focus here. Then [B] identifies the goal of both his life and death: reconciliation between God and humanity. While this prayer doesn't use the same sort of legal language to proscribe the terms of the reconciliation as the Rite I prayer above, this section functions in the same way as the [B] part of the prayer, assuring us that the reconciliation promised was effected by the totality of Christ's life and death. Continuing, [C] specifically moves to the cross and picks up a few remaining points. Again, the prayer uses the word sacrifice and, in direct reference to it, emphasizes that this cruciform (cross-shaped) death was a self-offering. It was neither an accident nor was it compelled: It was a decision, freely given.

Sacrifice here is functioning as a central vehicle of reconciliation. In Antiquity, whom you ate with carried great significance, particularly social significance. To eat with someone said something publicly about who you were and what sort of company you kept. Remember, one of the chief charges against Jesus was that he ate with tax collectors and sinners, the wrong kind of people. Just as in the Homeric sacrifice, we saw former enemies sitting down together around a meal, the Eucharist likewise gathers together a broken humanity in an act of reconciliation. People are brought together over food.

But the bidirectional aspect we noted in the Homeric sacrifice is present here as well; this is also where we recognize that the Eucharist doesn't just focus on the Last Supper and the Passion. It also connects us with those odd meals on the foggy lakeshore and the journey to Emmaus where the disciples break bread with the Risen Christ. This memorial of his passion is also a remembrance of his resurrection and his resurrected communion with his disciples. This brings home one of the key points about a sacrificial meal. It wasn't just

about sharing a meal at the temple with their family and the other people they brought to help celebrate, and it wasn't just about sharing with the priests. They were all sharing a meal together with the god as well. Our Eucharistic meal isn't just a remembrance of a dead Jesus; it is eaten in the presence of the Risen Christ. Both of these factors play an important part in what's going on in the Eucharist.

Recognizing and growing more deeply into the spirituality of the Eucharist is bound up with our ability to grasp the sacramental paradox: In the Eucharist, the Body of Christ is eating with Christ and is eating Christ in order to participate in Christ's work of the reconciling of all creation.

EUCCHARIST AND OBLATION

There's one more point that I want to return to as we consider the relationship between the Homeric sacrifice and the Christian Eucharist. That's the notion of the hecatomb. As we said before, the hecatomb was a sacrifice of 100 cattle. It represented a huge amount of wealth dedicated to the god. It was precious and costly.

Where is that element in our rite?

We offer bread and wine. That's not terribly expensive—particularly given the sort of wine we normally offer!

One of the historical characteristics of Anglican Eucharistic prayers is what is sometimes referred to as the self-oblation; here are four examples from *The Book of Common Prayer*:

- Rite I, Prayer I: "And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee..." (p. 336).
- Rite I, Prayer II: "And we earnestly desire thy fatherly goodness

to accept this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, whereby we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies" (pp. 342-343).

- Rite II, Prayer B: "Unite us to your Son in his sacrifice, that we may be acceptable through him, being sanctified by the Holy Spirit" (p. 369).

- Rite II, Prayer D: "Grant that all who share this bread and cup may become one body and one spirit, a living sacrifice in Christ, to the praise of your Name" (p. 375).

You see, if we take the language of our prayers seriously, we are offering something costly at the altar. We are not just offering Jesus—we are offering ourselves as well.

In this act of self-giving, we give ourselves over to God's great plan of redemption: "to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ" (p. 855). We take our own place in the sacrifice of reconciliation as we live this message.