

## Does God demand sacrifice? Interpreting Jesus' death as a sacrifice

*Whether or not Jesus' death on the cross is interpreted with sacrificial categories, its meaning in salvation history, says Böttigheimer, will be clear only when it is understood within the total context of Jesus' preaching and way of life. Jesus' shameful death on a cross was an integral part of his historical existence, which was spent completely at the service of his proclamation of the unconditional redeeming nearness of God. It was for the sake of that proclamation that Jesus freed those who were suffering under the burden of sin.*

"Fordert Gott Opfer? Zur Deutung des Todes Jesu als Opfertod," *Theologie und Glaube* 98 (2008): 106–23.

**T**heologians as well as ordinary believers have wondered what kind of God stubbornly claims equitable compensation, and they have asked what kind of God demands a sacrifice before being reconciled with humankind. Is not God quite simply love (1 Jn 4, 16)? How is love compatible with bloody sacrifice? Friedrich Nietzsche pointed out the chasm between the traditional doctrine of redemption and Jesus' message about the reign of God:

God gave his son for the forgiveness of sins, as a *sacrifice*. How it was all at once at an end with the gospel! The *sacrifice of guilt*, and just in its most repugnant and barbarous form, the sacrifice of the innocent for the sins of the sinners! What a horrifying heathenism!

We will consider the theology of sacrifice in scripture, seek to interpret Jesus' death on the cross, and reflect on the concept of the eucharist as a sacrifice.

### Abraham's sacrifice

In the OT story of Abraham's sacrifice (Gn 22:1–19), we are probably dealing with a very late narrative, i.e., with a text that originated from the time of, or after, the closing of the Pentateuch, and a good part of the narrative probably stems from the Elohist tradition.

When this story came into being, Israel's neighbors still commonly practiced human sacrifice, believing that in this way they could appease the gods. The sacrifice of Isaac narrative stands in stark opposition to this practice; human sacrifice is altogether rejected in the Bible (Ex 22:28f; Lv 20:2–5). By replacing the firstborn male with an animal sacrifice, the narrative makes clear that the God in whom Israel believes does not in any way desire human sacrifice. "Do not lay a hand on the boy and do nothing to harm him" (Gn 22:12). Animal sacrifice replaces human sacrifice. "Abraham went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son" (Gn 22:13).

Some have conjectured that underlying the sacrifice of Isaac narrative is an

originally independent, non-Israelite account having to do with cult. The narrative was taken over by the Elohist, recast in accord with themes taken from the Sinai narrative (e.g., fidelity to the commandments and meeting God in worship), and integrated into the stories of the patriarchs. But because by this time the Pentateuch had already evolved and the issue of human sacrifice was probably not as pressing as it had been earlier, the Elohist gave an entirely new point to the narrative, pushing the older, original intention of the story into the background. The story is now situated in the framework of “fear of God.” “For now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your only son” (Gn 22:12). Abraham’s response to the test of his fear of God is now the focal point.

“Fear of God” for the Elohist is not identical with anxiety but is the proper attitude before God. Fear of God more or less means keeping on the right path before God; it protects you from transgression (Ex 20:20). One who fears God keeps the commandments and trusts in God (Sir 2:8; Dt 10:20). On the one hand, fear of God can be learned (Ps 34:12); on the other hand, it is a gift of the Spirit (Is 11:2). It has to be steadfast but, by being put to the test, must also prove itself time and again to be enduring. Significantly, the word *nissah* (“test”) appears at the very beginning of Gn 22: “Sometime later God tested Abraham and spoke to him” (Gn 22:1). Practically as a subtitle, it indicates at the beginning what the narrative is all about: Abraham’s fear of God needs to be demonstrated because there is no promise without testing and proof; there is no faith without the obedience of faith. Thus at the very beginning, as the

reader or hearer learns what will follow, the severity of the narrative is mitigated.

With the demand that Abraham sacrifice his only son, God’s promise of a posterity (which had already been fulfilled) is apparently being retracted. So this divine command must necessarily appear paradoxical to Abraham. But this is exactly the way his fear of God is being tested. Isaac was Abraham’s hope for a future. In the view of antiquity, the father lived on in his son. Therefore Isaac is not being offered up in place of his father; rather, everything is at stake for Abraham: his hope for a future competes with his fear of, and loyalty to, God. Abraham is supposed to find his existential security by trusting in God’s saving word (Gn 12:2). In this radical test of obedience, God recognizes that Abraham is willing to hand back his only son. Fear of God means holding God as dearest and most precious in one’s life; all else must be secondary.

### **Jesus’ death on the cross as a question**

Just as Abraham does not shrink from doing all that God demands of him, so does Jesus not shrink from the reality of the cross. In Jesus’ obedience “unto death, even unto death on a cross” (Phil 2:8), the entire history of God and humankind appears to be at stake—just as Abraham’s future was at stake in his obedience. And as Abraham did not refuse God that which was most precious to him, so did God offer his own Son. “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son” (Jn 3:16). The Abraham-God typology is also found in Paul: just as Abraham’s son would not be spared, “God did not spare his own Son” (Rom 8:32). God, too, is ready to surrender his own Son, but, while God did not require Abraham’s

sacrifice, God in the person of his Son now becomes the sacrifice, in order to "along with him give us all things" (Rom 8:2): redemption and reconciliation.

From its beginnings, Christianity has openly confessed its faith conviction that God has redeemed the world through Jesus, through his way of life and through his passion, death, and resurrection. This conviction appears in the oldest extant confession of faith, handed down by Paul: "Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3ff). And since the fourth century, the Nicene Creed confesses that "for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven . . . was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, suffered, died, and was buried." That Jesus died for the salvation of humankind lies at the soteriological heart of Christian faith. But the idea that Jesus had to die to save us creates difficulties for many people. There is a widespread "cross with the cross" (1 Cor 1:23).

How can Jesus' death on the cross redeem us? Is not a God who slaughters his own Son or delivers him up to death an unrelenting God of judgment? What kind of forgiveness is it if the guilt for my sins is distributed, when only the sacrificial death of one who is sinless can rescue me from God's wrath, when God can forgive me only by making the one who is without sin to become sin? How do we square ideas of sacrifice and expiation with an image of God as absolute love, which Jesus preached and lived?

Outsiders ask if we Christians do not perhaps have a suppressed passion for the gruesome when we display crucifixes on which the tortured body of a man writhes with agony and we, singing "lamb of God," confess Jesus as "slaughtered,

guiltless, on the tree of the cross." Why do Christians do this to themselves, and what are the effects on them, asks Daniel Jonah Goldhagen; "rendering the crucified Jesus an icon effectively makes violence and terror something aesthetic, not to say a fetish. . . ." The central question is thus posed to Christian faith: why did Jesus have to die in this way? Did God require a bloody sacrifice because of our sins? What does it mean when we sing "we thank you, Lord Jesus, that you died for us and, by your precious blood, have made us just and good."

### **Jesus' understanding of his death**

Researchers generally accept that Jesus' actions and preaching constituted a provocation that had to lead to conflict and that his violent death did not come to him as a surprise. It would have been peculiar if he had not perceived this. So he likely saw his death coming and went his way to Jerusalem, aware that his life was in danger. If someone goes to meet death with open eyes, he must have some idea about death. How, therefore, did Jesus interpret his death and integrate it into his mission? Here we are confronted with the same methodological and hermeneutical problems inherent in every question about the historical Jesus.

First, we note that Jesus' death plays no role in his preaching of the reign of God. Indeed, quite the contrary: nowhere is Jesus' giving up of his life a condition for God's reconciliation and salvation. To be sure, on the basis of his message of God's unqualified, unconditional forgiveness, Jesus must have seriously considered the possibility of a violent death. But that does not necessarily mean that he made his death a topic of preaching on the reign of God or that

during his lifetime he attributed a soteriological meaning to it. At any rate, Jesus' followers could not derive from his message any help for understanding his crucifixion; otherwise there is no explaining the fact that the disciples fled (Mk 14:50; Jn 16:32).

We can detect only vague hints of Jesus' understanding of death in the NT. To be sure, Jesus reckoned with the certitude of his death at the Last Supper: "Amen I tell you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God" (Mk 14:25). This statement (which very likely goes back to Jesus himself but which has probably been recast) simply expresses Jesus' certitude that the eschatological meal practice will have its fulfillment in the end-time meal. By no means does this demonstrate that Jesus intended his death to have a redemptive outcome. In opposition to this view, many exegetes attribute Jesus' words over the cup at the Last Supper to Jesus himself and argue that the reference to Deutero-Isaiah is evidence of a sacrificial and expiatory meaning: "Drink from it, all of you. This is my *blood of the covenant*, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins (Mt 26:27–28; Mk 14:24). But must exegetes think that the Last Supper traditions have been stamped by the ceremonial worship of the Christian community and therefore a post-Easter understanding of Jesus' death? In any case, there is no longer any way to ascertain the original words at the Last Supper. In addition, it needs to be pointed out that the fourth suffering servant song (Is 52:13–53,12), interpreted in the sense of a just person suffering in place of another, first appears in a relatively late text (1 Pt 2:24).

There is no way to determine with certitude how Jesus himself understood his death. Some scholars argue that he understood it as a vicarious atonement, even though he had a critical attitude toward the temple worship in Jerusalem with its sacrificial atoning activities (Mk 13:1f); and the post-Easter Jerusalem temple theology is not central to our discussion because it was substantially different from the earlier temple worship. That is, there was nothing cultic about Jesus' execution on the cross, nothing that would allow for comparing it to the temple worship that was being practiced at the time of Jesus' death. Jesus probably understood his death as a free acceptance in obedience of the task God had set before him and as a self-offering for others. What is probably most remarkable in Jesus' understanding of his death is his certitude that it would not be in vain, that his proclamation of God's reign would not come to naught, that God's will to save would be mightier than death.

### NT interpretive models

If no exact reconstruction of Jesus' understanding of his death is possible, nonetheless the NT reports the fact of Jesus' crucifixion and, by interpreting and explaining it, certifies that it was necessary. Otherwise, missionary preaching would hardly have been possible (1 Cor 1:23). More precisely, we find in the NT a variety of attempts to understand Jesus' death—christologically, soteriologically, or theological—without a preference for any one category of interpretation; on the contrary, the authors of the early Christian tradition offer all these motifs as a compilation rather than as alternatives. This means that the christology of sacrifice

and expiation is neither the one and only nor the superior way to understand Jesus' violent death; it is one way among many.

In the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus' violent death is simply contrasted with his being Messiah:

This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. (Acts 2:23)

Let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ. (Acts 2:36)

For Mark and Luke, this violent death had to happen the way it did. The prophecies of the Passion (post-Easter formulations) state that "the Son of Man must suffer much" (Mk 8:31; 14:21), as demonstrated in the narrative of Jesus' struggle in Gethsemane (Mk 14:32–42). The necessity of Jesus' death for salvation is also found in John (Jn 3:14; 12:34), who portrays the death, on the one hand, as inescapable and, on the other hand, as exemplifying Jesus' trust: his terrible death has a purpose in God's providence; it accords with God's loving will, and it is not in vain. Out of a disaster caused by human hands, God often, in a wonderful way, ultimately brings about deliverance. So is Jesus' death now part of God's manner of saving. In the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, the resurrected Christ makes clear that "the Messiah had to suffer so as to enter into his glory" (Lk 24:26; 17:25; 24:7, 44, 46). The violent lot of the prophets is also remembered. Jesus suffered the same fate as they did:

persecution, violence, and death (Lk 11:49ff; 13:34f). In explaining Jesus' death as the consequence of Israel's rejection of his prophetic message, the early Christians faced a threat similar to the threat of death Jesus faced.

Another non-sacrificial interpretation is that of Jesus as the Just One who suffers innocently and is exonerated and raised up by God (Ps 22:33). This interpretation especially characterizes Mark's gospel and, in the view of various exegetes, very probably goes back to a pre-Markan Passion tradition. Resonating with this approach was the widespread belief among Jews of apocalyptic calamities that God would visit upon humankind in the end-times. The Just One stands before oppressors. He is victorious, strong, and allied with God but is dismissed as weak and ineffectual. The model is frequently found in the Synoptic Passion predictions (Mk 8:31 et al.) and speeches in Acts (Acts 2:2f et al.).

To be sure, there are NT interpretations of the cross colored by cult. In addressing a Jewish audience, the disciples quite understandably made use of language drawn from Jewish worship and interpreted Jesus' death with categories like "sacrifice" (Eph 5:2 et al.), "paschal lamb" (Jn 1:29 et al.), "blood" as purifying power (1 Jn 1:17 et al.), "blood" for the forgiveness of sins (Mt 26:26–29 et al.), the "blood" of the covenant (Mt 26:28 et al.), "blood" that brings about reconciliation (Eph 2:13 et al.), a salvific participation in the "blood" of Christ (Jn 6:53–56), ransom (Mk 10:45 et al.), or atonement (Rom 3:25 et al.). Such cultic concepts, however, were used metaphorically and with a new meaning—and were thus used critically—with respect to sacrificial

worship. When Jesus' death is described as "for sins" or "for the sake of sins" (Rom 4:25 et al.) and when Is 53 and the early Jewish theology of martyrdom (2 Macc 7:37f et al.) provide the background to it, the atonement theology of the priestly school may also be surmised even when the words "atonement" and "atone" do not appear explicitly.

Now what place does the theological model of sacrifice and atonement occupy in the NT tradition? Some see it as fundamental; others deny that it has a dominant position, or they regard it as a time-conditioned interpretation that can no longer be comprehended in a historical and cultural situation that is totally different. Must concepts like "atonement" and "sacrifice" be abandoned today in interpreting Jesus' death on the cross, or can they be used meaningfully? This is the question that occupies us next.

### **The cross as sacrifice and atonement?**

From the very beginning of Christianity, Jesus' death on the cross gave rise to an irreducible multiplicity of concepts, images, and attempts at explanation. "Sacrifice," "atonement," and "vicariousness" became central interpretive categories for the church's theological explication of the cross. Those terms do not, however, represent the original linguistic usage but are abstractions that draw from early Christian expressions about God's saving work in and through Jesus Christ.

The sacrifice of atonement theory was systematically formulated by Anselm of Canterbury (+1109). Designated as the "doctrine of satisfaction" and based on the German concept of honor, his interpretive model, with its juridical overtones, has had an enor-

mous impact. To put it simply, humankind has insulted God with its sins, has offended God's honor by disturbing the sacred order of creation. Because this offense is against an infinite being, it entails infinite guilt, and it demands infinite atonement, infinite satisfaction—something finite human beings are incapable of accomplishing. As a result, God becomes human in the form of his Son and vicariously accomplishes satisfaction or atonement for human beings by offering his life for them. To this day, we encounter the effects of Anselm's theory of sacrifice and atonement in hymns, chorales, prayers, and theological disputes, especially those from the 16th and 17th centuries.

Particularly in the modern era, the atonement theory has become dominant and has come to displace the numerous other biblical models for the forgiveness of sins, to the point that the cross is regarded as absolutely necessary for salvation, and the ministry of the historical Jesus is overshadowed by his death. Increasingly, the theology of sacrificial atonement has become abstract, speculative, and disconnected from the historical Jesus. As a result, it is often forgotten that salvation and redemption are also to be found within Jesus' life and ministry. The Bible testifies that what is decisive is a personal relationship to Jesus Christ, not merely to his death; further, the saving power of the cross presupposes the resurrection, without which Christian faith is useless (1 Cor 15:14).

Western theology has come under criticism for being largely fixated on sin, the cross, and sacrificial atonement. There is no warrant, it is argued, for understanding Jesus' death as a bloody sacrifice to propitiate a resentful and an-

gry God. According to Jürgen Werbick,

it profoundly contradicts Jesus' experience of God and way of life for one to see sacrifice—here the cross—as the price that humankind or the “Son of Man” must pay for God’s gracious care.

Indeed, to regard atonement as appeasing God’s majesty, a majesty offended by human sin, amounts to failing to understand the biblical concept of God. Unconditional love and a demand for complete satisfaction are mutually exclusive. God’s anger over human sin is the other side of divine love and does not need to be appeased by a bloody expiatory sacrifice.

Other objections arise from a theological critique of sacrifice and worship. The OT practice of sacrifice and expiation, interpreted as a human action and thus a matter of self-redemption, is contrasted with the NT’s teaching on reconciliation as totally the gracious work of God. Eugen Biser objects that viewing Jesus’ death on the cross as expiatory distorts the purpose of death, which has no intrinsic purpose but itself: “in death, the meaning of a person’s life becomes clear.” In this light, Biser urges that we ask not about the purpose of Jesus’ death but about its meaning and that we see it as an “excess of [God’s] love.”

Another point of contention that arises regularly with respect to the idea of vicariousness is that there can be no substituting for a mature responsible human being when one’s entire life and death are at stake. A person’s guilt, said Immanuel Kant,

so far as right reason can see, cannot be wiped out by someone

else; for it is not a transmissible debt, like, say, a financial obligation . . . that can be transferred to another, but it is the most personal of all debts, namely that of sin, which only the guilty can pay, and not an innocent person who is generously willing to assume it.

Just as one person cannot be punished vicariously for the crimes of another, neither can one person take the place of another in the moral sphere. Sin, in a word, adheres personally to the sinner and is simply not transferable. In what follows, we will examine the warrant for these points of criticism.

### **Substitutionary atonement**

On the basis of the narrative theology of Gn 22, we have established that God wants trust, not sacrifice, from humankind. It is the fear of God that keeps us on the right path. Our attitude must be tested time and again, as was Abraham’s. Keeping this in mind helps us realize that OT sacrificial and expiatory actions are not necessarily attempts at self-salvation that have to be rejected. Despite all the criticism leveled against its practice of sacrificial worship, Israel held on to the practice because it symbolically expressed Israel’s self-offering to God. The new purpose of expressing this self-giving to God transformed the gifts brought for sacrifice. Sacrifice for the Israelites was ultimately about a spiritual encounter with God, a God who is both giving and being given. Only in this way could prayers, scripture reading, and divine praise increasingly take the place of sacrifice (Ps 50:7–15; 51:19; 119:108; 107:21f). Because faith is the actual gift to God, Jesus praises the widow’s mite (Mk

12:41–44); it all comes down to the interior attitude which gives rise to the offering. And here we come back full circle to Abraham's sacrifice. If the same notion of sacrifice is applied to Jesus' death, then there is no reason to interpret it in terms of violence, self-salvation, or propitiation; rather, it must be understood as a radical self-surrender.

From the biblical perspective, sin is an offense against the divine order of life, a deliberate defiance of what the covenant articulates as the will of God. As such, sin destroys both the God-human relationship and the human-to-human relationship; it constitutes a comprehensive relational crisis. No longer able to interconnect in a relationship with God, self, or neighbor, we find ourselves driven to our limits, powerless to proceed. Substitution, i.e., taking the place of another, does not mean in this case replacing someone's unique personhood (Bernd Janowski), but taking the place which another is simply unable to assume. Substitution therefore does not destroy the dignity of a person; one person does not replace another but, in the manner of a quasi-surrogate, represents the other. Jesus takes the place of a guilty humanity whose own possibilities are exhausted and whose redemption can be effected only by grace from outside. As God's Son, Jesus has entered the human situation, which was essentially marked by hopeless distance from God and the decay of death.

If, from the perspective of the history of religions, we understand atonement to be a "religious action of clearing or correcting a fault"—i.e., "redemption" (D. Sitzler-Osing) or "the healing of culpably destroyed relationships and affiliations" (G. Gestrich)—then "substitutionary or vicarious atonement" means that

"Jesus Christ . . . with his death 'for us,' 'entered into our place,' i.e., into our situation of hopeless distance from God and the decay of death" (B. Janowski) in order to bear the consequences of human guilt and so to liberate humankind from the life-threatening condition of sin (Is 53:7–10). In his vicarious atonement, Jesus did not himself become a sinner, but he joined in solidarity with the victims of sin; he allowed himself to encounter sin and experience its deadly impact.

Substitutionary atonement, therefore, is not a human achievement (self-salvation) or a staving off of God's wrathful judgment (satisfying God's vengeance). Nor is it making restitution for God's offended honor. For it is not the human person who is the acting subject, but God. In loving self-giving, Jesus surrenders himself as compensation by entering deeply into the situation of human misery and experiencing the deadly consequences of sin. By his freely taking on of suffering, humankind is delivered from its guilty fate, apart from any atonement rituals of sacrificial worship. It is God who carries, sustains, and bears those who are helpless before the unbearable. Because human beings cannot heal their relational crises themselves, the chosen people must be freed from the outside, brought back to their election in order to still have a future. In not laying the burden of sin on others' shoulders but suffering it himself, Jesus, by his vicarious action, opens new life. Vicarious atonement is bestowed by God's grace and mercy alone; thus humankind can be delivered from the bondage of sin and guilt and can live once again.

### **Living for others in death**

Jesus' living "for others," which marked his entire existence, was concen-

trated and radicalized in his death. "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45; Lk 22:27). Jesus' self-giving in service and love is a hallmark of his total existence; his death brought to a head his life of self-giving as a sign of God's dawning reign. When the NT speaks about Jesus' sacrifice, it is describing his entire life, not only his death. As he lived for and served human beings, so too did he die for them (Jn 13:1). In giving up his life, he indicated in an extreme fashion the radical dedication of his life, even unto death, for humankind ensnared in sin and guilt; "the totality of his love for his own finds fulfillment in the cross" (Ulrich Wilckens). Jesus' death is the result of his life, an unsurpassable expression of his radical dedication to the loving will of God. "There is no greater love than for one to give his life for his friends" (Jn 15:13; 10:11,15; 13:16). There is no difference between Jesus' consistent life and ministry for others and his handing over of his life for others:

Jesus' atoning death does not . . . bring about a new salvation, fraught with extreme tension with respect to the saving event that Jesus proclaimed and represented from the beginning of his ministry. The salvation of his atoning death is, on the contrary, an integral part of the advent of God's reign. (Helmut Merklein)

Jesus' death was the consequence of his life, not its purpose. "Meaning resides not in the gift of his death but in the gift of his life, i.e., in a life that the Son of God as the 'Good Shepherd' gives for his own by risking his life for

them" (Bernd Janowski). It is not his death as death that is liberating and redemptive, but his preaching of the reign of God in word and action that is the liberating event of salvation. Jesus' message of a God of unconditional love and mercy frees humankind from its hopeless distance from God and the decay of death. This message and Jesus' praxis open up a new and salvific future. Only in this understanding, cautions Eugen Biser, is the purpose of Jesus' death not distorted but, in an unsurpassable way, revelatory of the meaning of his life: "The good shepherd gives his life for his sheep" (Jn 10:11).

A redemptive effect can be ascribed to the death of Jesus if that death is understood as a continuation of his life for others and as the final service to his own. It is not Jesus' death that saves, however, but God's radical love manifested in Jesus. This is not a matter of a priestly act of atonement, but of the fact that Jesus, in his life and death, enters into radical solidarity with the victims of sin and exposes himself to a reality wounded by sin. "By entering without reserve into solidarity with the victims of this world, Christ—in his priestly service to them—has made himself a sacrifice" (Sigrid Brandt). Jesus fell victim to powers inimical to God; he was neither offered nor given over to death by God. Jesus' giving up of his life is no gruesome abandonment of the Son by the Father but an activity of divine love. In the person of Jesus, God sacrifices himself so as to break the power of sin through the powerlessness of love and to overcome the world's alienation. God did not slaughter his Son so as to redeem the world; Jesus was not a sacrifice to appease a resentful and angry Father. God did not have to be reconciled by a

bloody sacrifice but, rather, bestows (more precisely, brings about) the reconciliation. Jesus' death was not required by God. Nor was it a sacrifice made to God; rather, Christ gives himself freely to humankind (Jn 10:18) until he ultimately falls victim to the depths of human blindness (Lk 23:34; Acts 3:17; 13:27). Alone pleasing to God was Jesus' obedience to God's loving will and the self-giving in service and love that marked his entire life. God did not use the Son but gave himself in and through the Son and, with that, bestowed reconciliation and new life (2 Cor 5:17–20). God did not have to be persuaded; God already loved humankind—more precisely “the world”—when we were still sinners and had turned away from God (Rom 5:8–11). Of his own volition, God justifies the godless (Rom 4:5). Jesus did not bring about love in God but came from a God of love who, out of love, accepts humankind unconditionally.

God, out of love for sinful humanity, entered into the person and work of Jesus “so as to free us from sin by his almighty power and make us a ‘new creature’ (2 Cor 5:17)” (O. Hofius). In God's love and care for humankind, sin and death are not allowed to prevail. God brings about reconciliation out of love and, to that end, surrenders the Son to humankind. God is not acting when Jesus, mishandled and killed, comes to experience the consequences of human sin. Jesus' vicarious offering up of his life in this respect has both an active and a passive aspect. He is both the subject of his self-offering (Gal 1:4; Eph 5:2, 25; 1 Tm 2:6; Ti 2:14; cf. Gal 2:20; Mk 10:45)—just as Isaac consented to the sacrifice—and also the object of his sacrifice (Mk 9:31; 14:41; Rom 3:25f). Jesus' active offering up of his life, his

passive acceptance of suffering, his risking his life out of love, and his non-violence belong inextricably together. However God does not simply deliver his Son to the power of sin, does not simply sacrifice him, but, out of boundless love, keeps faith with him, snatches him from the history of human violence, and proves him right. The resurrection is the definitive affirmation of Jesus, of his message of God's reign, of his way of life for others, of his existence for the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt 10:6). The resurrection is God's ultimate self-identification with Jesus and his cause. “Only by looking at this creative act which surpasses all that came before it—thus only from the perspective of Easter—can the meaning of this sacrifice be interpreted aright” (Siegfried Dreher).

### The eucharist as “sacrifice”

The difficulties of interpreting the mystery of Jesus are also reflected in the controversy around the sacrificial nature of the eucharist, especially since the cross as sacrifice is central to the traditional doctrine of the Mass as sacrifice. Why is the eucharist a “sacrifice of the Mass”? Who in the Mass offers what to whom? Even today one hears a wide variety of answers, so it is no surprise that at the time of the Reformation this was one of the bitterest conflicts. The situation in the 16th century was aggravated by the fact that a sacramental understanding of the eucharist had been widely lost in the late medieval church. As a result, *sacramentum* and *sacrificium* were separated, and the sacrifice of the church could take on a life of its own: the sacrifice of the Mass could appear as a repetition or a renewal of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and

thus come under the suspicion of being an attempt at human self-salvation, as if the priest offering the sacrifice had taken the place of Christ. Martin Luther absolutely opposed the idea of the Mass as a sacrifice, the idea that the Mass as a human work would have an atoning power, that it would be "a good work and a sacrifice," a reparation, a ceremony whose external performance would of itself be efficacious (*ex opere operato*). Such an understanding of the Mass as sacrifice denies the singular sacrifice of Christ. So in the Schmalkald Articles, Luther sharply condemns the "papist Mass" as the "greatest and most horrible abomination" that "surpasses all the other papist idolatries," and he ultimately concludes that "we therefore are and will eternally remain separate and at variance with one another."

Ecumenical dialogue could have overcome the old controversies by now by understanding that the "sacrifice of the self-offering of Jesus Christ" is made present in the eucharist and that no other independent sacrifice is needed next to Jesus' singular, unique, and all-sufficient act of redemption. If God's radical love is expressed in Jesus' self-giving, and, in it, our redemption and reconciliation, then "any kind of human sacrifice is superfluous"—indeed is absolutely forbidden. That goes both for "religious-cultic" and for "political-social" sacrifices. Christ's self-sacrifice does not need any completion; instead, participation in his loving self-offering is granted insofar as this perfect sacrifice (Heb 10:12) is made sacramentally present in the eucharist. Only in this sense of a sacramental presence of his atoning self-gift is the celebration of the eucharist also a "sacrifice of atonement." What takes place at the center of

this memorial meal are community with Christ and liberation out of the sinful reality of life.

There is consensus today that the singular death of Jesus Christ, with its healing power, becomes really present in the celebration of the eucharist. But how do things stand with Catholic talk about the eucharist as the "church's sacrifice"? Is the church itself making a sacrifice in the eucharistic celebration? First of all, it must be insisted that the basic movement is that of God's self-offering to humankind for our salvation—reason enough for thanks and praise. Moreover, the church is incorporated into this grace-filled saving action only insofar as it turns toward God. This turning to God now makes it possible for the church to participate in God's turning to the world and to bring and give itself out of love as a living offering. The church offers itself with Christ, insofar as it is empowered by him to give itself out of love to humankind. "The church does not understand itself . . . as an independent subject offering a sacrifice next to Christ, but as the body of Jesus Christ, in whom and through whom Jesus Christ as the head of his body is the real subject" (1984, Bilateral Workgroup of the German Bishops Conference and the leadership of the United Evangelical-Lutheran Churches of Germany). Through the church's sacrifice, the redemption by Jesus Christ attains a concrete connection to the history of human misery; salvation and redemption do not take place without any relationship to each other; they cannot be reduced simply to a relationship to God.

The Protestant churches are not able to adopt as their own the Catholic perspectives on the church's self-offering; in the process of justification, is the human person truly one who receives and

not one who acts? That being said, those churches do not contradict the Catholic church-accented understanding of the eucharist so long as it is guaranteed that Jesus Christ is and remains the personified reality of reconciliation and that there is no obscuring of “Christ alone” [*solus Christus*]. Indeed the church’s offering is not an independent, self-empowered action that adds something to Christ’s offering. Rather, it is at all times oriented to the singular offering of Jesus, through which it is empowered and by whom it must be measured and tested time and again.

### **Jesus’ sacrifice in context**

Because the God of Jesus Christ takes all the initiative in salvation, the Christian concept of sacrifice demolishes all the notions of sacrifice found in the history of religions. God is merciful; it is God who justifies or, to be more precise, out of graciousness heals the sinner. Despite the fact that sacrifice came to an end with the death of Jesus—“where sins have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice

for sin” (Heb 10:18)—the concept of sacrifice has played an important role in the classic theology of the cross, whether in a cultic, juridical, satisfaction-theoretical, or metaphorical sense. That said, whether Jesus’ death on the cross is interpreted with sacrificial categories or not, its meaning in salvation history will be clear only when it is understood within the total context of his preaching and way of life. For the shameful death of Jesus on a cross was an integral part of his historical existence, an existence spent completely at the service of his proclamation of the unconditional redeeming nearness of God, for which Jesus freed those suffering under the burden of sin. By sharing their burden in his life for others (Gal 6:2), he entered into solidarity with the victims of sin and ultimately overcame for all and for all time the burden of sin. If theologians today, aware of the limits of our understanding, seek to retrieve the idea of substitution, it will be along the lines of recognizing God and God’s loving and serving self-offering at work in the mystery of Christ. (*Ronald Modras*)