

Eucharist and Violence

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Eucharist and Violence

Kevin Kelly

Violence and the Eucharist seem to be diametrically opposed. The fact that Archbishop Oscar Romero was shot dead while celebrating the Eucharist made his murder seem particularly shocking. There were cries of blasphemy some years ago when a US nuclear submarine was named 'Corpus Christi', the Body of Christ. For Christians the Eucharist is seen as the sacrament of unity, showing forth the oneness of Christians in the one body of Christ and a sign of the unity of our whole human family.

Yet violence and the Eucharist are not as far removed from each other as we might think. There is, in fact, an inseparable link between the Eucharist and violence.

WHAT IS REMEMBERED

The Eucharist is keeping alive the memory of a bloody and cruel act of violence. 'Do this in memory of me' commits the Christian Church and every Christian to never forgetting a horrendous act of violence against the person of the one whom they believe to be the Son of God. Obviously, it is not the violence itself they are glorying in, but Jesus' response to this violence 'Greater love has no one ...' Nevertheless, it is the violent context which highlights the immensity of his self-giving love. 'Do this in memory of me' is implicitly saying, 'Be prepared to lay down your life for others, as I have laid down my life for you – and for all.'

Mel Gibson's recent film on the passion of Christ provoked heated controversy. For some, by laying the blame for Jesus' passion and death on the Jewish people, it reflects an anti-semitic bias in the gospels and is likely to provoke further violence against the Jews. Others deny these charges. The 6/3/04 issue of *The Tablet* contained two contrasting items on this film. In a letter to the Editor, the Abbot of Glenstal condemned the film for its

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gratuitous violence, while in a longer article John McDade, Principal of Heythrop College, praised it as a most remarkable film. My own critical reflections on this film were published in *The Furrow*.

Whatever the merits or demerits of the film, why Christ was condemned to death and what motivated those who brought about his condemnation are important questions.

It seems clear that in the course of his ministry Jesus increasingly met with and even provoked opposition from at least some of the leaders of the Jewish establishment and eventually came to be rejected by them. They perceived his life and teaching as a direct threat to their power and authority and to the form of Judaism they stood for. In this they were merely typical of most other forms of establishment before and since. In fact, they represent the 'establishment' side of each of us, the shadow side of human solidarity. That is why Christians believe that all share corporate responsibility for the death of Christ.

Hence, it could be argued that Jesus himself provoked the course of events which ultimately led to his violent death. In being true to his growing consciousness of himself and his mission from his Father, Jesus saw ever more clearly that the path on which he was embarked must inevitably lead to confrontation with the Jewish establishment. Jesus trod the road which could end only on Calvary, not because he believed that his Father wanted him to die but because, in fidelity to his mission from his Father, he was committed to witness to a God of totally gratuitous, unconditional and all-embracing love. It was in that ultimate witness of love that his Father's will was to be found. Theologies based on the notion that the violent death of Jesus was demanded by his Father as some kind of retribution or expiation are utterly repugnant and totally unacceptable. The bottom line for Christians is that the death of Jesus for us reveals not a violent God but a loving God. That might sound *simpliste*, but it is absolutely fundamental.

At least some of the Jewish establishment found Jesus very threatening. It was not just that he was questioning their basic understanding of God. It was also because it was in the name of the God of their ancestors, the God revealed in the Law and the Prophets, that he was making his challenge. No wonder they felt that their power and teaching authority over the people were being undermined. Far from rejecting the authentic traditions of Judaism, his whole lifestyle, ministry, preaching and parables developed out of his prayerful reflection on and penetration of these same traditions. Moreover, he did not mince his words. His diatribes against the scribes and Pharisees, as found in chapter 23

of Matthew's gospel, read like verbal abuse. And his driving the money changers out of the Temple (Matt 21:12), a violent act in itself, was hardly calculated to win him friends. Consequently, it was certainly not accidental that Jesus died a violent death. It was the inevitable outcome of the opposition he himself provoked through his mission and ministry.

Jesus own response to the violence inflicted on him was passionate non-violence.

It is significant that the word, 'passion', is traditionally used of the sufferings of Jesus. In medieval times the word 'passion' was in common use in the ethical field. It carried a totally different meaning from that given today to its sister-word, 'passive'. Passive suggests lack of any movement, passivity. Passion means actually being moved – often moved intensely, as in the word 'passionate' – but by forces not completely under one's own control.

Jesus was moved by an almost unbearable intensity of suffering, both physical and mental. Part of John McDade's praise for Mel Gibson's film is that it brings home to us very vividly just how intensely Jesus suffered. To call such suffering the 'passion' of Jesus suggests that his response to such intense suffering was far from being passive. Though completely helpless in the hands of his torturers and executioners, his response was one of being prepared to have such violence and suffering inflicted upon him. The 'Passion' of Jesus was the ultimate revelation of God's passionate love in all its unbearable red-hot intensity.

Misunderstood, this could give the impression that Jesus wanted to suffer. That is light years away from the truth. In his body and spirit Jesus found such suffering repellent. Jesus did not want to suffer. The agony in the garden brings that out very clearly. Nor did his Father want him to suffer. Those who crucified him were not doing the will of the Father. They were not God's agents. In their blindness ('Father, forgive them') they were actually agents of the forces of evil. They were not performing the will of a masochistic or sadist God. Rather, they personified evil as it has always manifested itself down through history – as destructive and life-denying.

The suffering of Jesus ended in his dying, portrayed by Luke as an active committing his spirit into the hands of his Father (Lk 23:46). And in the sense in which I have been using the word, the final act of Jesus' 'passion' lay in his resurrection. The resurrection is the climax of his passion. The Father raised him from the grave and established him in glory, thus giving an even richer meaning to what I said earlier – 'The "Passion" of Jesus was the ultimate revelation of God's passionate love in all its unbearable

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red-hot intensity.' 'Do this in memory of me' is not just remembering an act of horrendous violence – and the heroic and loving bearing of such violence. 'Do this in memory of me' is also remembering the final act of resurrection. As Christians proclaim: 'Christ has died, Christ is risen.'

THE ACT OF REMEMBERING

Eucharist is not just about past memory but about living presence. In fulfilling the command 'Do this in memory of me' in the Eucharist, Christians remember the violent suffering and death of Jesus not to glory in that violence but to draw life and strength from the spirit of Christ risen and living today. In that spirit is found the ultimate power of non-violence, the victory of love over the very worst violence can perpetrate. It is the food of that spirit with which Christians believe they are fed at the eucharistic table. In the power of that spirit, they believe that Christ lives today in and through them. In more corporate language, they believe that they themselves are 'the body of Christ'.

In his book, *Torture and Eucharist* (London: Blackwells, 1998), William Cavanagh reminds us of the valuable research of Henri de Lubac into the patristic and medieval use of the phrase, 'Body of Christ'. The Christian community were called the 'real' body of Christ; the consecrated bread and wine were the 'mystical' body of Christ. As Cavanagh puts it: 'Christians are the *real* body of Christ, and the Eucharist is where the Church *mystically* comes to be' (p. 212). Later in the same chapter (entitled incidentally, 'The True Body of Christ') Cavanagh goes on to write:

The Christian performance of the Eucharist depends on taking quite seriously the designation of the Church as the body of Christ; the Church's performance of self-sacrifice is in fact the 'proof' of the presence of Christ in the bread and wine. In order for the Church at the eucharistic table to offer what Christ offered, the church must offer its own self in sacrifice, because the community of Christians is nothing less than Christ's *corpus verum* (p. 230).

Cavanagh draws out the practical implications of this when he writes, 'Christ's body on earth is always a body under construction. We live in a construction zone, with all of the dangers that implies' (p. 233).

Thomas Cullinan, in his collection of talks, *The Passion of Political Love* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1987), has a chapter entitled, 'Violence Within and Violence Without'. In it he speaks about the need for a new language today to expose and challenge the narrow-mindedness and blinkered vision of the dominant speech of modern society and suggests that this new language

may be found in the Eucharist. However, if this new language is to liberate us from that violence 'without', it must do the same for the violence 'within'. This double process will set us on a collision course within and without. Just as there will be violent resistance from the established forces without, there will also be violent resistance from within, as our cherished addictions and enslavements struggle to maintain their stranglehold over us. Cullinan puts it very forcefully, paraphrasing Ghandi, 'We are our first enemy. Don't set up the British as the cause of what you are refusing to face yourself' (p. 24).

If the Eucharist commits Christians on a path which will almost inevitably lead them to face some kind of violent opposition, they can expect to face that opposition as much from within themselves as from outside. As Cullinan puts it very starkly, 'The latent conflict within each of us and public conflicts of our society are in fact locked on one to another' (p. 29). I suspect that what the gospels portray as Jesus' forty days being tempted in the wilderness was, in fact, his struggling with this violence within, probably including the shadow side of his religious upbringing as a young Jewish man.

If Christians claim to be 'the body of Christ' and true to his spirit, it is to be expected that they will provoke violence too. Cullinan insists that when Christians look at the various dimensions of the present-day cultural, social and ecclesial context in which the Eucharist is celebrated, they need to remember that they themselves do not inhabit some world outside of that context. It is part of their own human reality. Their celebration of Eucharist takes place within that context, not outside of it. If the Eucharist does not speak to and help interpret that context, it hardly offers a new language. It could even be meaningless and irrelevant.

THE EUCHARIST IN TODAY'S WORLD

Jesus provoked violence because he himself was provoked by violence. Some people seem to be provocative by nature, almost as though they lack any sense of inner security or peace. Such people can sow dissention rather than peace. Jesus was certainly not provocative in that sense. He was provocative only because he himself was provoked. He was provoked by injustice, and especially injustice perpetrated in the name of God. He was provoked when he saw the poor, the sick, the blind, the disabled and lepers labelled sinners and treated as outcasts. He was provoked when religious leaders portrayed God as being more interested in the Sabbath than in relieving suffering and healing sickness. He whom John called the Word made flesh was provoked by religious hypocrisy in which the hollowness of people's religious words

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was exposed by their lack of mercy and compassion. He was provoked by the very same things that the prophets said provoked the God of his ancestors.

Using 'passion' once again in the sense of being moved by external factors, it could be said that the passion of Jesus took place throughout all his active ministry. The way whole categories of people were marginalized and despised provoked the passion which filled his whole life and preaching. Jesus was a very passionate person – revealing an extremely passionate God, a compassionate God. Most of the violence Jesus saw around him was systemic and institutional, bound up with religious and social exclusion. We know now how closely all this violence was linked to economic and political factors. Jesus did not operate in a purely religious world.

Speaking at a Vigil Mass for Romero Day 2003, Julian Filochowski, former Director of CAFOD and a personal friend of Romero, made it very clear how strongly Romero was provoked by the horrendous injustice and violence of the El Salvador government and its military and political institutions. The God of Romero was the God of Jesus, that same God about whom Sobrino wrote, 'What is most sacred to God is not himself but human beings.' For Romero, 'Do this in memory of me' was intrinsically bound up with being provoked passionately by such violence. It meant being filled with the spirit of the risen and living Christ, and so responding as the body of Christ to the violence and injustice he saw around him. In his preaching at the Eucharist, Romero felt he could not truly interpret the scriptures for the community without at the same time interpreting in the light of those scriptures the social, political and economic reality he saw all around him. For him the Eucharist was intrinsically and profoundly contextualized in the reality of El Salvador, a reality which could itself only be properly understood within the wider economic and political context.

Christians should be 'passionate' in celebrating the Eucharist today in such a provocative context of violence and injustice on a global scale.

If communion with God and each other is the language of the Eucharist, when the Christian community come together to share Eucharist, they must surely be provoked by all that is dehumanizing, demeaning and destructive of human persons in the current climate in society – the individualism, consumerism and relativism which is in the air we breathe; institutional and social prejudice and discrimination in all forms, whether based on race, ethnicity, sex or sexual orientation; ageism and intolerance of physical or mental disability, etc, etc. Moreover, remembering

Cullinan's words about the enemy within, Christians will expect to be challenged on all these counts in their own personal motivation and life-style and also in the internal life of the church itself. Stephen Shakespeare, the Anglican chaplain at Liverpool Hope University College, puts this very powerfully:

Whenever we celebrate the eucharist, we should feel the foundations of this world and its empires tremble. We should catch the non-violent, recklessly inclusive life-pulse of Jesus's presence. We should be re-made as an alternative community that is being liberated and shares in God's work of invitation. A spiritualized, apolitical, individualistic eucharist will be happily tolerated by the new world order with its creed of market share secured by violence. A eucharist which offers food without price could start a revolution (sermon entitled, 'Eaten Away: How Jesus Challenged the Empire').

THE EUCHARIST IN 'A TIME OF AIDS'

Many would say that today we are living in 'a time of terrorism'. The phrase 'war against terrorism' is in constant use, though its appropriateness is debatable. It too easily focuses on the symptoms of global insecurity rather than on the root causes.

I would dare to suggest that 'a time of AIDS' is a more appropriate description of our age. The HIV/AIDS pandemic and its devastating impact on developing countries seems to be laying bare the roots of much that is wrong and inhuman in our world today. Though sexual impropriety has undoubtedly a part to play in the spread of the virus, the deepest roots lie in the dehumanizing poverty of so many in the developing countries and especially in the feminization of that poverty, seen in the implicit but practical denial of full human dignity to women in many cultures. My personal HIV/AIDS involvement with CAFOD and its partners has opened my eyes to the accuracy of that analysis; and I have seen the real horror of such poverty with my own eyes on a number of occasions, most recently on an AIDS-related visit to Kenya and Zambia.

Paradoxically, AIDS could be seen as a 'grace' for our age. By suggesting that, I do not in any way belittle the horror of AIDS and the terrible suffering and massive mortality it is causing. Nor do I want to suggest that AIDS is some kind of medicinal plague sent by God.

When a disaster occurs, we can either patch up what was faulty – and then sit back and wait for the next disaster. Or we can try to get to the real root of the problem and thus increase safety and security on a permanent basis. Really to get to grips with the

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AIDS pandemic involves facing up to some of the most fundamental causes of global violence and injustice. It is in that sense, and only in that sense, that 'a time of AIDS' could be a time of grace. If we allow ourselves to face up to the enormity and horror of the AIDS pandemic and are sufficiently moved by it and provoked into action, it could be a redeeming moment for our human family.

A few years ago a HIV-positive Catholic priest was expelled from a Vatican conference on AIDS because he held up a placard which read: 'The Body of Christ has AIDS'. (To be fair on the organizers, he was later welcomed back into the meeting!) The eucharistic overtones of that banner are painfully and challengingly obvious. The other day I re-read my diary reflection after my recent visit to Kibera, the largest slum in the whole of Africa, on the edge of Nairobi – over a million people there without running water, sanitation or electricity. An MMM sister and a nurse took me there to visit four women with AIDS. My diary entry begins: "‘Body of Christ’ – can I think of the Body of Christ today and his real presence without the teeming and deeply impoverished people of Kibera coming into my mind? What does ‘discerning the body of Christ’ mean in practice for me today?" I am still struggling with that question.

OTHER ISSUES

Using Eucharist as a form of violence

Roman Catholic canon law allows exclusion from the Eucharist when its purpose is 'medicinal', i.e. to heal and lead a person to change their ways and so be welcomed back into the community. Cavanagh writes: 'As an invitation to reconciliation, then, excommunication done well is an act of *hospitality*, in which the church does not expel the sinner, but says to her, "You are already outside our communion. Here is what you need to do to come back in"' (p. 243). Of course, Cavanagh was writing of his experience in Chile where he saw the torture inflicted by Christians in Chile on their fellow Christians as a deliberate attempt to isolate them from society and depersonalize them. In Christian terms, it was an attempt to 'dis-member' the body of Christ and reduce its members to isolated individuals.

What about using exclusion from the Eucharist as a way of enforcing ethical positions with political implications, as was done by some US bishops in the recent US presidential election? It is interesting that the *National Catholic Reporter* filed this story under the heading, 'When Communion becomes a weapon'! Clearly, such an action was seen as a form of violence.

Or again, what about people involved in a second marriage

while the previous partner is still living? The official line, held by the Pope and the Vatican, is that they should be refused the sacraments, despite strong theological arguments in favour of a more open approach. Many Roman Catholics see this ban as a form of violence perpetrated against people whose second marriage is experienced as a gift of God and an occasion of grace. Though he does not use the language of violence, Archbishop Worlock revealed his unhappiness with the official position when he addressed the assembly in the presence of the Pope at the 1980 International Synod in Rome:

Despite our best efforts, some marriages fail and family unity is destroyed. To these victims of misfortune, not necessarily of personal sin, or of sin which has not been forgiven, the Church, both universal and local, must have a healing ministry of consolation ... Often such persons, especially in their desire to help their children, long for the restoration of full eucharistic communion with the Church and its Lord. Is this spirit of repentance and desire for sacramental strength to be for ever frustrated? Can they be told only that they must reject their new responsibilities as a necessary condition of forgiveness and restoration to sacramental life? (*Briefing*, vol. 10, n. 32, p. 8).

Worlock is virtually saying, 'What is medicinal about this way of treating people?'

Another theologian in an unpublished paper puts it even more bluntly:

The idea that a past broken relationship (e.g. divorce-remarriage) should bar a person from the very sacrament whose purpose is to heal wounds and rebuild life seems as perverse and blind as the criticism of Jesus by the Pharisees of a miracle of healing performed on the Sabbath.

Another instance might be the denial of the sacraments to Catholics living publicly in a committed gay relationship. Is that medicinal? Many would regard it as life-denying and destructive.

Doing Violence to the Eucharist

That seems to be what we are doing when we isolate the act of 'receiving Communion' within the whole integrated action of the Eucharist. We talk about 'refusing Communion' to people, even though we are happy for them to join us in all the other prayers and actions of the Eucharist. 'Receiving Communion' thereby becomes a separate entity in its own right.

This is very strange since it is the community's celebration of the Eucharist as a whole, not some isolated part of it, which constitutes the sacrament of unity and reconciliation. To welcome

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someone around the table and invite him to share in all the unifying conversation at table and then refuse that person any share in the community meal seems to be an extraordinary thing to do. All the more so when we are not actually the host at the table. And especially so when the host is notorious for welcoming everyone at his table and has actually caused scandal by the kind of company he keeps.

To invite people to join the community in the very act of sharing a meal and then bar them from actually sharing the food would seem not just incongruous but downright inhuman. Would it be an exaggeration to say it would be subjecting people to social and perhaps psychological violence. After our Saturday Night Mass recently, one of our most committed parishioners, who has his feet firmly on the ground, said to me in his broad Liverpool accent: 'You know how you were talking about Jesus being committed to an open table in face of all the complaints of the religious establishment. Well, our bishops don't let us keep an open table, do they? I think it is shocking that those who are not Catholics are not allowed to share at our table. I know people bring up all sorts of reasons why not. Some even say you never know what awful things they might do with the consecrated host. But aren't our bishops already doing something awful with it, when they refuse it to those wanting to receive?'

This is particularly the case when the discipline prevents married couples from receiving Communion together in so-called 'mixed marriages'. The Anglican bishops highlight the horror of this violence in their trenchant criticism of the discipline of *One Bread, One Body* in this regard: 'The unity in Christ between husband and wife that is created sacramentally or covenantally through marriage, building on baptism, should not be put asunder at the Eucharist' (*The Eucharist, sacrament of unity*, n. 42).

Oliver McTernan in his *Violence in God's Name*, argues that violence in the name of God can be nourished by reading sacred texts which seem to imply that God is with me and not with you. Certain approaches to the Eucharist could work in the same way, strengthening an exclusivist identity among Catholics and making those not allowed to participate feel unwelcome and rejected.

To accept an 'open table' approach to the Eucharist would mean moving from an attitude of toleration to one of appreciating the gift of difference: if the Church claims to be a sacrament of the unity of the human family, the Eucharist should not be a meal at which the presence of outsiders is tolerated within certain strict limits, but a meal at which their presence is treasured and accepted as a gift. Communion will be more truly

Communion. The unpublished paper referred to above makes a similar point:

Perhaps the power and fire the Eucharist contains as the breaking of the Lord's body has to be thrown open to the world and all Christians so that no one is excluded who does not choose to be. The scene of the Last Supper would be transposed into the feeding of the five thousand with no questions asked about faith, merit or moral practice. Participation in the Eucharist would be rather the sowing of the seed of God's presence than the affirmation of orthodox membership of the one, true Church. For Christians it would be the bread of pilgrims searching for unity rather than a celebration by the few of a unity they believe they already possess. Perhaps the destruction of the temple of *One Bread, One Body* is needed, if the real Body of the Lord is to be given shape in the world today.

Many women – and many men, myself included – regard the current teaching that women cannot be ordained priests as doing violence to the human dignity of women. Those who believe this will also regard this teaching as doing violence to the Eucharist itself on the same grounds as mentioned above with regard to obligatory clerical celibacy. A poem quoted by Elizabeth A. Johnson in her book, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York/London: Continuum, 2003) expresses this in a very telling way:

All the way to Elizabeth
and in the months afterward,
she wove him, pondering,
'This is my body, my blood.'

Beneath the watching eyes
of donkey, ox, and sheep
she rocked him, crooning,
'This is my body, my blood.'

In the moonless desert flight
and the Egypt-days of his growing
she nourished him, singing,
'This is my body, my blood.'

In the search for her young lost boy
and the foreboding day of his leaving
she let him go, knowing,
'This is my body, my blood.'

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Under the blood-smeared cross
she rocked his mangled bones,
remembering him, moaning,
'This is my body, my blood.'

When darkness, stones, and tomb
bloomed to Easter morning,
she ran to him, shouting,
'This is my body, my blood.'

And no one thought to tell her:
'Woman, it is not fitting
for you to say those words.
You don't resemble him.'

Another instance of this violence against the Eucharist itself might be in the Catholic Church's giving higher priority to the ruling on clerical celibacy than to availability of the Eucharist.

Violence within the Eucharist in the sense of 'violent' readings in the Liturgy of the Word is another theme which could be treated but this article is already too long. I will leave that to the biblical scholars.

One final word. To experience violence is deeply disturbing and disorientating, to say the very least. In a certain sense, to share in the Eucharist should also be disturbing and disorientating. I once had a Christmas card from Mindanao, a very violent part of the Philippines, from a nun friend of mine whose ministry there exposed her to considerable risks. I have never forgotten the greeting on her card: 'May the Peace of Christ disturb you this Christmas.' The Eucharist should similarly disturb us and challenge us.