

## **The Tortured Body: a Meditation on the Eucharist**

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*This essay is a meditation on the Eucharist. arranged in the order of that great liturgy itself, as set out in the Episcopal Church's 1979 Book of Common Prayer. It is my small "offering in sacrifice" in the face of the reality of torture in the world and in my own country.*

In it I make the claim that, as the theologian William Cavanaugh suggests in *Torture and Eucharist*, the church's practice of the Eucharist cannot rightly be separated from the state's practice of torture and disappearance. Writing about the Catholic church's confrontation with the use of torture by the Pinochet regime in Chile, Cavanaugh argues that "a Christian practice of the political is embodied in the Eucharist, the remembering of Jesus' own torture at the hands of the powers of this world." But the Eucharist is more than mere memorial, it is "the church's response to torture, and the hope for Christian resistance to the violent disciplines of the world."<sup>1</sup> From Chile to Brazil to South Africa to the United States, whenever Christians truly "discern the body" of Christ in the Eucharist, they find the wisdom and courage to confront the engines of pain and death.

### **Sursum corda**

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Some time during the early 1990's in San Francisco, California, I attended the speech of a Salvadoran trade unionist. I have forgotten her last name, but her given name I remember well: Gloria.

Gloria's purpose that evening was to inform her audience about the situation in El Salvador of union members like herself. By way of illustration, she related the story of her own

capture and torture by the notorious Salvadoran Treasury Police. She told us that it was only the pressure of phone calls and letters from *la solidaridad internacional* — international solidarity — that had finally forced the police to set her free. As Gloria spoke, I began to shiver. I remembered that I had heard – and spoken – her name before. I realized that I myself had made some of those calls.

In the late 1980's my friend Sharon Martinas organized an informal phone tree among her Spanish-speaking friends, so that when news of police kidnappings reached her from El Salvador, we might telephone the appropriate police force or military service (El Salvador had several) and demand the victim's release. Sharon would keep us updated about what was known of the victim's whereabouts and supply us with the relevant telephone numbers. I remembered my phone calls to the Treasury Police, remembered insisting that we knew they had her, that she had been seen in the prison at Ilopango, which they controlled.

As Gloria told her story, I was seized with a sort of retrospective terror. *What if we had failed to make those calls?* What if we had been too busy in the days of her capture to add our voice to those of others demanding her reappearance? What if the press of life, or my own laziness, had kept me from participation in the body of *la solidaridad internacional*?

Still, there she was in front of me, alive. My heart was lifted up to encounter in the flesh a woman whose body the little community organized through Sharon's phone tree had helped to save from torture.

### **Sanctus and benedictus**

Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of power and might,  
heaven and earth are full of your glory.

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest.

What connection can there be between the ritual of the cup and the bread, a ritual performed publicly throughout the world, and the ritual of the cage and the electrode, a ritual which most of us have never seen? What has an act of adoration of the Most Holy to do with the unholy rite of intentional destruction of a human body and mind? If there is one place in the world that is *bereft* of God's glory it is the room set aside by the authorities for torture. The one who comes into that room in the name of the State is anything but blessed.

In fact, the Eucharist and the practice of torture are intimately connected. The Eucharist is, as theologian William Cavanaugh has said, a memorial of the torture and murder of a human being whose active solidarity with the poor and oppressed made him dangerous to the political powers of his time. In this shared meal and thanksgiving, Christians celebrate that life, that death — and a resurrection.

The Eucharist is a common event, practiced daily all over the world. Is torture not by comparison an unusual occurrence? Near the beginning of the liturgy we declare that heaven and earth are full of God's glory. Surely the practice of torture is so rare that it forms no more than a tiny blot on that glory. Surely it is an aberration, a governmental excess rarely seen in the civilized 21st century?

But torture is not a rare or aberrant event. *It is an important tool in the apparatus of the majority of modern nation-states.* We are told that it is a tool of interrogation, but its primary purpose has little to do with the extraction of information. Torture exists to destroy any opposition to those in power — and to dismantle the structures of organized opposition to power. Far from being a phenomenon of the unenlightened past, torture is common practice today. Even

as you read these words, human bodies are torturing other human bodies in cells all over the world, including the prisons of the United States.

### **Words of Institution, Anamnesis**

[T]he Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for" you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after Supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1Cor 11: 23-26)

Therefore we proclaim the mystery of faith: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

In the Eucharist, we not only proclaim the Lord's death by torture, but we recall the life of Jesus Christ. In that ritual meal, we both remember and reenact the core of Jesus' own practice: the abundant, transgressive fellowship of the table at which all are welcome, most especially the poor and the outcast. In proclaiming his death, we acknowledge the tortured nature of that death and the cost of solidarity.

Torture turns the Eucharistic meal inside-out, creating an intimacy that is a ghastly mirror-image of the Body of Christ formed in the Christian ritual. Like communicants gathered around the altar, torturers and tortured also form one body, linked in a hideous intimacy. It is no accident that the torturers often name their rituals after the occasions of social bonding found in ordinary life: the "birthday party," the "dance," the "tea party," the "tea party with toast."<sup>ii</sup>

But rather than serve as a memorial, torture is the anti-anamnesis; by reducing all consciousness to an awareness of pain, it reduces all time to the present, foreclosing both past and future. Torture thus represents the anti-eschaton. All of time and space shrink to the dimensions of the individual body and the eternal moment of pain. Rather than the collective resurrection of all humanity in the Reign of God, the atomized individual is trapped in an endless

reign of terror.

In the course of the Eucharistic prayer, we proclaim that “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.” These three affirmations confront the logic of torture with the logic of resurrection.

When the torturers present the body of the tortured individual (or merely conjure it in the public imagination) it is intended as a sign of terror to the rest of the people. The torturers expect that the presence in their midst of the tortured body will terrify, demoralize, and separate the people from each other, as Jesus’ tortured body – by any logic – ought to have done for his movement.

Proclaiming the Resurrection – announcing God’s continued and promised future presence among and throughout the people who are the Body of Christ – gives the lie to torture. This happens whenever the solidarity of the people gives the lie to the dictator’s apparent triumph, when we announce that the murdered one is still “*presente*.”

We enact the promise of Christ’s return whenever we build for a barely possible future in the midst of repression. This is what we do when we organize for justice against hopeless odds.

### **Epiclesis**

Recalling his death, resurrection, and ascension, we offer you these gifts.

Sanctify them by your Holy Spirit to be for your people the Body and Blood of your Son, the holy food and drink of new and unending life in him. Sanctify us also that we may faithfully receive this holy Sacrament, and serve you in unity, constancy, and peace; and at the last day bring us with all your saints into the joy of your eternal kingdom.

Physical pain disorganizes. By its very nature it serves to separate and isolate people. It is impossible for one person to experience another’s pain. In this sense, pain cannot be communicated, nor can it be verified. “To have pain” says the philosopher Elaine Scarry, “is to have *certainty*; to hear about pain is to have *doubt*.”<sup>iii</sup> Furthermore, intense pain destroys language. In the midst of torture the victim is robbed of her voice, or rather of her capacity to use

her voice to communicate anything but her pain – the one thing that cannot be communicated.

The immediate purpose of torture is the intentional and violent disorganizing of the prisoner's personal world, by attacking *individual* body. Its ultimate purpose, however, is the disorganization of those *social* bodies capable of resistance to the power of the state. The real target of torture is not the individual, but the web of social relations that sustains the individual.

By contrast, organization is a gift of the Holy Spirit. In the face of so much that divides human beings, the transformation of atomized individuals into a social body – like a union or a church – is truly a miracle. Organization overcomes entropy, which is universal tendency of matter to lose cohesion and order, to devolve towards a random dispersion. Organization can only happen when new energy enters a system. In the Eucharist we call on the Holy Spirit to enter our us, to help us transform ourselves as individual communicants into the Body of Christ, given for the world.

### **Fraction**

We are one body, because we share the one bread.

In his great remonstrance to the church at Corinth, Paul tells that community, “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body eat and drink judgment against themselves.” (1Cor 11: 27-9)<sup>1</sup>

Paul issues his admonition to the Corinthians because in his view they have perverted their celebration of the Lord's Supper. By allowing some to eat well while others go hungry,

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<sup>1</sup> It is sad to me that this great admonition about discerning the body directly follows Paul's bitter discourse in verses 3-16, in which he mandates that women must take our place beneath men in the hierarchy of creation and of the church.

rather than creating a shared feast, they have failed to discern in their own community the one bread, the Body of Christ. As a result, says Paul, “many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.” (1Cor 11:30)

Failing to discern the Body of Christ is a dangerous business. It can kill you. This becomes all the more clear when we consider that in the process of producing atomized individuals, torture takes apart organizations, rendering their members unable to discern the body. Pain is “the great isolator, that which cuts us off in a radical way from one another.”<sup>iv</sup> Much more valuable to the regime than any actual information yielded in interrogation is the people’s knowledge that if their union’s or party’s or sewing cooperative’s members have been caught, they have undoubtedly betrayed their fellow members.

We find an example in Pinochet’s Chilean dictatorship. At a time when solidarity and mutual aid was the best hope of survival and resistance, the Pinochet regime used torture to fracture those social bodies. Because social bodies were the most potent locus of moral resistance to the regime, the regime strove to break those bodies into isolated individuals. Ironically, they did this precisely in the name of morality, following the ethical as well as the economic counsel of their great capitalist advisor, Milton Friedman, who has written that “a ‘country’ or a ‘society’ is a collection of individuals... only individuals can have moral obligations.”<sup>v</sup> I would argue that the Eucharist enacts an opposing precept: it is only as persons bound in related community that we have the capacity for moral action.

### **Communion**

The body of Christ, the bread of heaven.

The blood of Christ, the cup of salvation.

Torture does not intend to create martyrs; its victims are not supposed to inspire others to

follow their examples. Most people who die under torture remain “disappeared.” They die alone, disconnected from their families, friends, and comrades, their bodies often dumped in a secret grave. Or they linger in “indefinite detention” in Guantánamo or some undocumented black site. Torture is meant to render their deaths inevitable, final, and ultimately meaningless.

The communion opposes this meaningless of life and death. It reminds us of the eschatological hope we share, a hope we find in the assurance of a union that extends beyond the temporal borders of our own individual lives.

When I traveled in the war zones of Nicaragua, for many months the fear of the *contra* always traveled with me. I was a terrible coward, my mind always distracted by wondering whether the road was mined, whether a clutch of *contra* lay in ambush around the next bend. I believed that if I died at the hands of the *contra*, death would have the final word. Gradually, though, as I lived with the solidarity of ordinary Nicaraguan people, I began to remember that my life was part of a much greater history of struggle for justice – a struggle begun long before my birth, one that would last long past my own death. The more I experienced that solidarity, the more my fear of dying melted away.

Through the Eucharist we participate in death, in resurrection and in the promise of the reign of God, which is with us now and still to come. When we become the Body of Christ we create solidarity, which is the only context in which the torture victim’s death has meaning. We participate in a physical way—eating and drinking with our own bodies—in the Body of Christ, both crucified and resurrected. But we become the *corpus verum*, the *true* body, only when make the Eucharist real beyond the altar table, in the world.

**Prayer after communion**

Eternal God, heavenly Father,  
you have graciously accepted us as living members  
of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ,

and you have fed us with spiritual food  
in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood.  
Send us now into the world in peace,  
and grant us strength and courage  
to love and serve you  
with gladness and singleness of heart;  
through Christ our Lord.

This meditation began with the assertion that torture and Eucharist are intimately connected. Even as the Eucharist memorializes the torture and death of Jesus, in that very process the effects of torture are reversed. Where torture produces atomized individuals, Eucharist binds people in solidarity, in “singleness of heart.” Where torture creates terror and distrust, Eucharist casts out fear.

For what purpose, then are we sent into the world after we have celebrated the Great Thanksgiving? Why as we leave the communion table do we ask for strength and courage? I would argue that in the most literal sense our purpose must be to confront the torturers of the world, those powers and principalities that still hold human bodies and spirits in thrall to pain. This is the work that has been given us to do. Let’s get on with it!

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<sup>i</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1998).

<sup>ii</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 44.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>iv</sup> Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 38

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, 39

**LEARN. PRAY. ACT.**

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