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Damasus Winzen Lecture

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"It was my good fortune recently to acquire some long unavailable commentaries on the sacred liturgy by some of the pioneers of the liturgical movement. Among these are Dame Aemiliana Löhr's *The Mass Through the Year* – the latter being a German Benedictine nun of Herstelle where Dom Odo Casel of Maria Laach served as chaplain. Of course, it is from Maria Laach that the person in whose name this lecture is presented came with two companions to found this monastery of Mt. Savior. And it was he who wrote the foreword to the English translation of Löhr's work in 1958. I would like to begin this lecture, therefore, with a brief but profound passage from that introduction:"



Rev. Dr. John A. Colacino, C.P.P.S.

Damasus Winzen Lecture

May 1, 2011; Second Sunday of Easter (Divine Mercy Sunday)

Introduction

It was my good fortune recently to acquire some long unavailable commentaries on the sacred liturgy by some of the pioneers of the liturgical movement. Among these are Dame Aemiliana Löhr's *The Mass Through the Year* – the latter being a German Benedictine nun of Herstelle where Dom Odo Casel of Maria Laach served as chaplain. Of course, it is from Maria Laach that the person in whose name this lecture is presented came with two companions to found this monastery of Mt. Savior. And it was he who wrote the foreword to the English translation of Löhr's work in 1958. I would like to begin this lecture, therefore, with a brief but profound passage from that introduction:

In the work of a truly Christian scholar historical and philological research become instruments of that basic humility which bids him leave the accustomed ways of his own human thinking in the effort to come to a more faithful understanding of the divine realities handed down to him in the Word of God and in the tradition of the Church (vii).

Hopefully, these few words of mine possess such humility as we explore some perhaps startling – because forgotten – elements of the church's tradition based on recently excavated historical and philological research. And you just might be asked – as I have been -- to leave behind some accustomed ways of thinking in this grand effort to come to a more faithful understanding of divine realities. Before getting to that, however, please let me situate this lecture firmly within the liturgical life of the church as befits a talk in honor of a Benedictine monk.

Mystagogy for the Easter Season

For the neophytes who received the sacraments at the Easter Vigil, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults speaks of the Easter season we have entered as “the period of postbaptismal catechesis or mystagogia” (cf. nos. 235-239). In the ancient church this catechesis consisted principally in an explanation of the sacramental mysteries already celebrated – which seems odd to us since sacramental preparation and catechesis normally precede the liturgical celebration of the rite. Yet the ancient sensibilities would find this equally odd since the mysteries were regarded as so sacred they could not really be spoken of except among the initiated. Catechumens had to wait until they were baptized before they could be instructed in the meaning of the rites. Witnesses such as Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, and Theodore of Mopsuestia remind us that the mysteries of which we speak are for members of the community (cf. Yarnold, 65ff.). This is why even today in the Liturgy of the Hours at the Office of Readings during the Easter Octave we hear from the first Letter of Peter – quite likely a baptismal homily to neophytes – and from the *Jerusalem Catecheses* of Cyril. In other words, the church would like us all to be neophytes at this time of year, reflecting on the meaning of the sacraments of initiation. And in this spirit – by a happy coincidence of timing -- I am offering this lecture quite intentionally as a form of mystagogia appropriate to the Easter season, hopefully making available some new insights into the mysteries just celebrated.

Divine Mercy Sunday

There is, moreover, another happy coincidence given the liturgical occasion we are celebrating this very day. Something that required of me an act of humility in the spirit of Fr. Damasus quoted earlier, something which I believe has led me precisely to leave behind some accustomed ways of my own human thinking in the effort to come to a more faithful understanding of the divine realities handed down to us in the Word of God and in the tradition of the church. I refer to this lecture being given not merely on the Second Sunday of Easter as we conclude the paschal octave but on what the third typical edition of the Roman Missal also calls -- rather modestly and in smaller print beneath its major title -- *seu de divina Misericordia*: “or of divine mercy.”

As you might know, devotion to the Divine Mercy has achieved a remarkable notoriety and reception among Christ’s faithful as propagated by an otherwise obscure Polish nun, St. Faustina Kowalska whom Pope -- now Blessed -- John Paul II canonized as the first saint of the third Christian Millennium. His death on the vigil of Divine Mercy Sunday in 2005 and his beatification today only serve to raise the profile of this popular devotion.

Here is the act of humility. For a long time I found this devotion frankly repugnant. For years I had a copy of St. Faustina’s *Diary* on my bookshelf, which contains a record of her inner life, and which was focused entirely on divine mercy in her soul -- writings replete with interior messages and visions, advocating forms of piety that seemed antiquated, to say the least. Every time I attempted to read from Faustina’s work, I could not get beyond a few lines. Part of the reason was my “accustomed way of human thinking” – an instinctive suspicion of private revelations; another part was the language of the *Diary* that I found (and can still find) rather off-putting.

I am happy, however, to report that my original reservations regarding the devotion to divine mercy placed me in good company. One example suffices -- that of St. Faustina's spiritual director, Fr. Sopocko. Among his initial reservations was the somewhat obvious one concerning Faustina herself. Here she was, a person of very simple background and yet who would cause him one day to remark, "I was amazed that she, a simple nun, with hardly any education, and without the time to read ascetic works, could speak so knowledgeably of theological matters, and such [difficult] ones as the mystery of the Holy Trinity, or the Divine Mercy and other attributes of God, with the expertise of a consummate theologian."

Indeed, it is true. When I was finally able to delve into the *Diary* I remember my own astonishment at some things which read like a virtual treatise of spiritual theology with all the earmarks of theological learning and acquaintance with the masters of the tradition (cf. *Diary*, esp. sections 95-122).

And so the *Diary* of St. Faustina finally compelled me for reasons once again given in her spiritual director's own words:

There are truths of the faith which we are supposed to know and which we frequently refer to, but we do not understand them very well, nor do we live by them. It was so with me concerning the Divine Mercy. I had thought of this truth so many times in meditations, especially during retreats. I had spoken of it so often in sermons and repeated it in the liturgical prayers, but I had not gone to the core of its substance and its significance for the spiritual life; in particular, I had not understood, and for the moment I could not even agree, that the Divine Mercy is the highest attribute of God, the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. It was only when I encountered a simple holy soul who was in close communion with God, who, as I believe, with divine inspiration told me of it, that she impelled me to read, research, and reflect on this subject....

The Paschal-Atoning Mystery

Let me move now from the mystagogical and liturgical context for this lecture to several correlations, the first of which is a deeper appreciation of the very Mystery of the Lord's death and resurrection we celebrated during the Paschal Triduum. In what follows, I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness to theologian James Allison for introducing me to the two scholars whose work influences the remainder of this lecture: namely, the British exegete and philologist Margaret Barker, and cultural anthropologist and literary critic, René Girard.

Here then is the first-level correlation I would like to make between the Divine Mercy and the Easter mystery, the way into which is the identification we find in the New Testament between Christ and the mercy-seat of the ancient temple in Jerusalem: the *hilasterion* in Greek and the *kaporeth* in Hebrew. The texts are Rom. 3:25: "God put [Christ Jesus] forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood" and Heb. 9:5: "above [the Ark of the covenant] were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat" (NRSV). Notice how the word is translated inconsistently: in the case of Romans, translators render *hilasterion* in reference to the atoning work of Christ, sometimes as propitiation, whereas Hebrews refers to the seat, or cover, over the throne-like structure flanked by Cherubim, the upper portion of the Ark of the Covenant that existed in the Holy of Holies during the period of the First Temple. However translated, both passages have to do with God's eternal *hesed* for humanity -- this word

being the defining attribute of God in the Hebrew Bible, translated in the Septuagint as *elesos* and the Latin of Jerome as *misericordia*: both words handily translated into English as mercy. But where do we find the link between the *hilasterion-kaporeth-mercy seat* and the *hesed-elesos-misericordia* of God to make our first correlation between divine mercy and Easter secure? For this, we turn to the astounding historical, philological and exegetical work of Margaret Barker and her reconstruction of the annual ritual of making the divine mercy effectual for Israel on the Day of Atonement, *Yom Kippur*.

Barker's central, and controversial, thesis can be stated as follows: Early Christianity – meaning a particular form of First Century Palestinian Judaism -- was rooted in pre-Deuteronomic, that is to say pre-exilic, First Temple strands of Israel's religion. While we cannot go into detail about how this differed from Second Temple Israelite religion and how sectarian groups differentiated themselves from Second Temple practices and its priesthood – most notably at Qumran – what follows is the related thesis relevant to our purposes, namely that the theology and rituals of the Day of Atonement from the First Temple period inform Christian understandings of Christ's death and resurrection, as well as the practice of Christian worship, from the very beginnings of the Christian movement.

In this regard, perhaps the most important thing Barker does for us is point out how what we call the Paschal Mystery is in fact a conflation of not only the meanings associated with Passover – this is clear enough – but those of *Yom Kippur* as well. In other words, the New Testament does not interpret the death and resurrection of Christ only against the backdrop of Passover but also in light of Atonement, most notably in the ninth and tenth chapters of the Letter to the Hebrews. In recovering the centrality of Atonement themes for Christian origins and worship, however, Barker wants us to hearken back, as I said, to the rite as performed in the First Temple, when the Ark of the Covenant, and hence Mercy Seat, were still present in the Holy of Holies – and above all, to grasp the meaning attached to the word “atonement.” This is all-important, since for many of us this word and its cognates such as “propitiation” and “expiation” are associated with the Anselmian substitutionary theories which so easily conjure notions of a God who can only be appeased by the offering of his Son's blood in sacrifice. In other words, the understanding still prevalent in Evangelical circles, and I dare say, many Catholic ones as well.

Atonement as Rite of Healing and Restoration of the Covenant of Shalom

Before attempting a re-visioning of such notions, let me briefly present Barker's interpretation, of the pre-exilic ritual, central to which is her painstaking reconstruction of the whole temple apparatus, from its personnel, its physical layout, and its rituals, as a system of representation, where each earthly item had its heavenly counterpart: “The traditions say that it was an exact replica of the service of heaven” (*High Priest*, 46). This was true especially of the high priest who was understood to represent the LORD, that is, Yahweh, whose name he wore on his mitre. The Subject of the atonement rite was therefore God himself acting in the person of his earthly counterpart, the high priest. She summarizes it as follows: “*The key figure in the rite of atonement was the high priest who was the visible presence of the LORD [i.e. Yahweh] on earth, and, just as the LORD had ordered the creation at the beginning, so he recreated it on the Day of Atonement at the New Year*” (*The Great High Priest*, 35).

The ritual itself, as reconstructed by Barker, ran thus in outline:

On the Day of Atonement the eternal covenant was renewed, and blood was sprinkled and smeared, to remove the effects of sin and to heal. The high priest took [the blood of a goat] into the holy of holies [where he sprinkled the *hilasterion* over which the LORD was thought to be enthroned]...and when he emerged, he smeared and sprinkled it on various parts of the temple.... [I]n temple symbolism, this was new life brought from heaven to renew the earth [since for the Hebrews, life was in the blood] and [this was meant] to restore the community of all creation which had been broken by sin.... The blood which renewed the creation was new life from the LORD.

Then he placed both his hands on [another goat], the scapegoat, loaded the animal with the sins of the people, and sent it into the desert. Translated into temple terms, this means: The LORD [in the person of the High Priest] emerged from heaven carrying life which was [then] given to all parts of the created order as the effects of sin were absorbed and wounds healed.... Since the high priest himself represented the LORD, wearing the Sacred Name on his forehead, we have here a ritual in which the LORD was both the high priest and the victim in the act of atonement.... (cf. *The Great High Priest*, 50, 83-84 passim).

The blood-rituals of atonement were then essentially creation rituals, rituals of healing and restoring the created order ruptured by sin, the order inscribed by the Creator. These re-creation rituals were also restorative of the covenant in its cosmic dimensions. Hence, Barker tells us, “[t]he role of the high priest, the LORD, was to remove the damaging effect of sin from the community and the creation, and thus to restore the bonds which held together the community and the creation” (*High Priest*, 53). By the way, our English word is very helpful here in that we can catch the meaning without further translation: at-one-ment.

So Barker’s insights help us to appreciate more the several New Testament allusions to atonement seen in this perspective. For example, the Letter to the Hebrews, mentioned earlier:

When Christ came as high priest of the good things that have come to be, passing through the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made by hands, that is, not belonging to this creation, he entered once for all into the sanctuary, not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.

Further thoughts from Rene' Girard

Let me pass now to the second-level correlation linking the Easter mystery, Divine Mercy, Atonement, and now Sacrifice. Here I would like to draw on the insights of René Girard who has helped me recognize Christianity for what it is and, just as importantly, for what it is not. His anthropological and theological insights on the nature of violence have opened up for me new vistas on the meaning of the paschal-atoning mystery.

One of Girard’s central insights is his mimetic theory, concerning the nature of human desire—not the desire arising from instinct, but from culture. What Girard’s study of human beings disclosed was how human

desiring is something learned, indeed imitated. Think of a roomful of toys, enough for a nursery-full of children. As soon as one child chooses a toy, all the rest are forgotten and pretty soon there is a competition to have the one “desired” toy. In other words, human desire is “according to the other” as Girard puts it—where someone is always modeling a desirable object for someone else, creating desire, as it were. It’s not hard to see how the convergence of desire on one object by several subjects becomes the source for much human rivalry, conflict, and violence.

Another central feature of Girard’s thought concerns the “scapegoat mechanism” whereby human beings demonstrate a need to create victims who absorb, so to speak, the rising tension created by rivalry and conflicting desire. The scapegoat becomes the convenient “third” whose death releases this tension and permits culture to form and develop in the absence of the rivalries that would destroy it. The victim in turn is often “rewarded” with elevation to a quasi-divine status as the memory of the founding murder is covered over and lost in the mists of human origins. One has only to think of the murder of Abel by his brother Cain – originators of agricultural and urban life respectively – and how the scapegoat Abel’s blood is thought to speak with an eloquence prefiguring the Blood of the Victim to end all victims, our great high priest, Jesus Christ (Heb. 12:24).

Like Barker, Girard also requires us to rethink what Christians mean by atonement, and especially what place sacrifice – bound up in the history of religion with the death of scapegoats – could possibly have in a religion whose founder has permanently interrupted the mechanisms of victimage. We are, in other words, confronted with the central problem of soteriology and the meaning of Christ’s death.

The first thing to note – important as it is obvious – is that this is the death of an innocent victim who is consciously and publically proclaimed as such. As I Peter puts it: of a spotless unblemished lamb (1:19). This is crucial because the victimage mechanisms of religion normally operate unconsciously. But what the death of Christ does, for Girard, is to expose the lie, “things hidden since the foundation of the world”, as the title of his major work on religion and violence puts it. No longer, after the death of this Victim, can the community remain convinced of its innocence in murdering the scapegoat, the tension of rising mimetic desire and rivalry discharged through its sacrifice. As Girard puts it, “he exposes all the myths of scapegoating and shows that the victims were innocent and the communities guilty.”

At the same time, because Christ returns to those responsible for his death – beginning with the disciples who abandoned him -- not to exact vengeance but to offer the Easter gift of shalom, the mechanism of scapegoating and sacrificing victims is ended. Moreover, it is the deity who is the subject of the final sacrifice – the very Son of God – and not a victim, as in religion elsewhere, offered to propitiate a deity. This forgiving victim, after offering himself through non-resistance to violence, will have no more of sacrifice understood as propitiation; hence, the traditional soteriologies indebted to Anselm’s substitution and satisfaction theory of atonement are falsified by Girard. (Brian McDonald, “Violence and the Lamb Slain”: An Interview with Rene Girard” (2011);

<http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=16-10-040-i#ixzz1F4hIznlr>).

Hence, as Girard says, “When you understand Christianity correctly in its closeness and distance from archaic religion it is the same structure, the scapegoat phenomenon, that Jesus is victim of. Yet the text is intended to

destroy your belief in [the] scapegoat phenomenon instead of using it in order to have sacrifices” (Grant Kaplan, “An Interview with René Girard,” Nov. 6, 2008; <http://www.firstthings.com/onthesquare/2008/11/an-interview-with-rene-girard>).

I hope the correlation between Girard and Barker is becoming apparent, as well as to Easter and Divine Mercy Sunday. Atonement has little to do with sacrifice as practiced and understood by ancient religion and, I dare say, much in Christian theology and spirituality. On the contrary, atonement as renewal of the cosmic covenant of shalom by a God who becomes the forgiving victim for us interrupts, as I said, all mechanisms of rivalrous desire leading to violence and transposes all notions of sacrifice. This transposition relativises all human notions of justice by exposing them to the revolution interjected into human history by the One who never seeks vengeance, does not look for further victims, and who makes merciful forgiveness the primary transaction to be sought in human relationships.

All of which brings us full circle, back to Divine Mercy Sunday. One reason this devotion and now its liturgical observance is so popular among so many people is the promise purportedly made to St. Faustina in one of her interior locutions, namely, that

On that day the very depths of My tender mercy are open. I pour out a whole ocean of graces upon those souls who approach the fount of My mercy. The soul that will go to Confession and receive Holy Communion shall obtain complete forgiveness of sins and punishment. On that day are open all the floodgates through which graces flow. Let no soul fear to draw near to Me, even though its sins be as scarlet. My mercy is so great that no mind, be it of man or angel, will be able to fathom it throughout all eternity. Everything that exists has come forth from the very depths of My most tender mercy. Every soul in its relation to Me will contemplate My love and mercy throughout eternity. The Feast of Mercy emerged from My very depths of tenderness. It is My desire that it be solemnly celebrated on the first Sunday after Easter. Mankind will not have peace until it turn[s] to the Fount of My Mercy (*Diary*, 699).

Now Catholics of a certain vintage will recognize this as the grant of a plenary indulgence, and indeed the Vatican has officially regularized this aspect of the devotion (cf. Decree of the Apostolic Penitentiary; http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/tribunals/apost_penit/documents/rc_trib_appen_doc_20020629_decree-ii_en.html).

Here I again confess some interior reservation if for no other reason than the dangers of a works-righteousness or mechanistic approach to grace. I have also noticed among some devotees of the Divine Mercy what seems to be a greater importance attached to these devotional exercises than to the Sacred Triduum itself. Having said that, it also strikes me as eminently appropriate, for theological, spiritual, and liturgical reasons, that the conclusion of the Easter Octave be enhanced with a potent reminder that we have just celebrated the Plenary Indulgence of a God who has assumed the mantle of both Priest and Victim in order to win for us so great a

salvation through the offering of Christ once for all, such that we may approach the throne of divine mercy – the One who has become in his own person the Hilasterion – to find with confidence every grace which we need.

All of which is summarized in that greeting of Shalom the Lord gave his disciples on both Easter evening and its Octave – a further reminder known to the ancients that every Sunday is at the same time the First and the Eighth Day signifying the new order brought about by the resurrection of Christ and that will be completed when the High Priest of our confession, the Alpha and the Omega, comes forth again from the heavenly realm to consummate the Creation.

A liturgical-spiritual implication

Now it would do us little good merely to highlight these underrepresented themes of Easter without suggesting some important liturgical and spiritual implications of what we have said. Here Fr. Damasus warns us of something in the work I cited at the beginning:

Whatever our immediate political future may be, the final outcome of the present struggle depends on the degree in which the given reality of our Redemption through Christ transforms our personal lives. This transformation will not come about so long as the power of Christ's Death and Resurrection, contained in the mysteries of the Year of the Lord, is shackled by a false 'objectivity' which considers the liturgy of the Church either as a decorative series of ceremonies of only aesthetic value, or as a collection of regulations appointed by the hierarchy to be carried out in the performance of the sacred rites, or – and this is perhaps the greatest danger – as an objective sacramental power which would render our personal co-operation superfluous. The Feasts of the Lord's Year, the sacred texts with which the Church adorns their celebration, are intended to bridge the gap between sacramental grace and ourselves. Here lies their decisive importance" (*op. cit.* vii-viii).

Allow me to suggest today just one item that might "bridge the gap" between liturgy and ourselves which I think is of considerable importance in light of the material I have shared with you. It is something I think has been steadily eroded in the post-conciliar period and which, frankly, is something the recent restoration of the traditional rite – the "extraordinary form of the Mass" -- reminds us of, a reminder of which we have sore need. I refer to the sacrificial character of the Eucharist. Anyone observing the former rite has no doubt that they are primarily there to participate in the "holy sacrifice of the Mass." That is, the offering of the innocent Victim by a priest acting *in persona Christi* – the only difference between Calvary and the Mass being the un-bloody manner of the latter's offering of the Body and Blood of Christ. Little emphasis is given to the Eucharist as a fraternal meal shared by an assembled community – at least by contrast with most celebrations of the "ordinary form of the Roman rite."

Let me return here for a moment to Margaret Barker. In her reconstruction of the ancient temple's ritual of atonement and its relation to the Christian liturgy, she observes how, "The original context of the Eucharist should be sought in the Day of Atonement, when the High Priest took the blood into the holy of holies and then returned to complete the rite of atonement and renewal" (*High Priest*, 57). In particular, she notes the relation between the

hilasterion and the Christian altar: As the ancient high priest sprinkled the mercy seat with blood – blood for the Jews carrying the divine power over life – so, “In the bloodless sacrifice of the Christians, the wine was substituted for the blood of the goat...but the same process was believed to take place. The Christian altar...derived from the *kapporet* in the holy of holies, the place where the atonement blood was transformed and the LORD was present” (*ibid.*, 61-62).

And why might this be an important retrieval for both the church and society at the present time? Because of Girard’s insistence that it is the definitive status of Christ as final and all-sufficient Victim that frees us from the cycles of violence which create endless scapegoats upon which to vent the tense build-up of human desire and rivalry. As Girard notes, these stimulants to violence in the hands of those with the power to unleash destruction on a massive scale now put the whole of humanity at risk. And it is the genius of Christianity to show the way to short-circuit these spirals through its proclamation of the One whose Blood has been shed once for all in a sacrifice unlike all others in the history of culture and religion. Moreover, the Eucharist, in Girard’s own words, “brings the sacrificial pattern into the open so that it can be overcome.”

Here one finds the heart of his view of Christian life and spirituality, the claims made by the gospel on its adherents -- the commitment to non-violence -- since there is no longer warrant of any kind to seek out scapegoats, victims, or the sacrificial violence to which they give rise. And the sacrifice of the Mass is the continual sign of that truth to any who would venture to observe its ritual message and embrace its call to live non-violently as a partaker in Christ’s sacrifice.

And so I close, appropriately, with the words of another Benedictine, Andrew Marr, who nicely sums up the material I have shared with you:

Much of the anxiety that inclines us to sacrifice *other* people before they sacrifice *us* comes from the fear that our sacrifices will have no end. But in Christ, our sacrifices participate in the one final and complete Sacrifice, the sacrifice to end all sacrifices. The Divine Love of the crucified One frees us of the need to sacrifice any of the human beings for whom Christ died. Perhaps we are tempted to draw back in the fear that we will remain victims if we become victims in Christ. But that is not what happens. Just as Jesus moved from death to new life, so we also will experience the movement to new life. In Christ, we gain the courage to face the reality of our own pain as victims and the pain of others because the our Risen Lord allows that pain to unfold into His Body as an Easter lily blooms in the sun. (Andrew Marr, OSB, “Christianity and Sacred Violence”)

<http://andrewmarr.homestead.com/files/girard/sacrifice.html>

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