

Salvation in the Blood of the Lamb

RAYMOND GAWRONSKI, S.J.

St. John Vianney Seminary

Denver, Colorado

Introduction: Dr. Anderson's Book

ST. IGNATIUS would have us begin our spiritual exercises with a profound consideration of sin, and so Dr. Anderson's *Sin: A History* has been of special interest to this Jesuit. Some years ago, I myself left the world of university academics—and its conversation—to work more directly with formation in the faith in a seminary context, and I too hope to contribute from that perspective, seeking to blend intellectual with spiritual reflection.

I would like first to offer a brief appreciation of Dr. Anderson's work, a few observations, and then proceed with my own reflections on sin and redemption.

This is a very carefully written and rich book. It is an exegete's book, a study of "Second Temple" or "rabbinic" Judaism, and of the change in the concept of sin from a "weight" in more ancient biblical presentation to a "debt." The investigation focuses on notions of debt/creditor, and how these notions came to dominate the Semitic world. Paul Ricoeur points to metaphor as essential ("ideas emerge from symbols"),¹ and this metaphor of debt became dominant and naturally passed into early Christianity, along with the Aramaic culture of the time.

Most helpful is Dr. Anderson's desire in the book to help rehabilitate traditional Christian understandings of atonement. So, most importantly, St. Anselm's theory of atonement—a most generous satisfaction, not a punishment—is shown as having its roots directly in the Bible, and those

¹ I will note in passing that, helpful as this interest in metaphor is as expressed by Ricoeur, without a grounding in ontology—here, in the Crucifixion—metaphor becomes myth. I am indebted for this insight to my brother Jesuit Vincent Strand.

roots were spread throughout the Aramaic-speaking world, which was the whole Middle East at one time, Egypt to Persia. This is especially helpful not only for rehabilitating this theory of atonement for liberal Protestant partners in dialogue, but in general for re-opening for the spiritual heirs of Luther the traditional understanding of prayer for the dead, indulgences, etc. This is an explicit goal of the book, and I believe the author is admirably successful in amply demonstrating the traditional pedigree of this understanding and of these practices.

Now, subtitles of books can be notoriously misleading, and though this book does explore one period in the history of the understanding of sin, this is not a history of sin, nor of concepts of sin throughout time. It is, however, a detailed look at how the notion of sin as a debt and the payment of that debt, and the storing of merit with God, developed in a certain tradition. Dr. Anderson shows that this was fully developed in rabbinic Judaism. Perhaps most interestingly, he goes on to show how the understanding of the sacrifice of Isaac itself can be seen as virtually a Jewish equivalent of the sacrifice of Jesus. This introduction of the note of sacrifice, and its tie to the Mass late in the book, is provocative and very interesting. We will return to it later in the essay.

The mercantile—or business—metaphor of contract and satisfaction of debt naturally emerges in ancient cultures that have highly developed economies, whether in the more highly developed areas of the ancient Near East or those more economically developed sections of Europe many of which eventually embraced Calvinism. Most of humanity is more recently come to this level of development, if development it is,² and so the more ancient—more primitive—understanding of the First Temple, of sin as a “weight” and a “burden,” might in fact more truly reflect the deeper feelings of the human heart, which Christ, bearing the burden of His Cross, comes to heal.

Still, the introduction of rabbinic Judaism as an essential element in understanding Jesus is very enriching, and part of a contemporary retrieval of that aspect of tradition and bringing it into dialogue with Christian theology.

While the book explicitly criticizes a strongly anti-Semitic strain in some past Christian scholarship, most notably earlier German scholarship, one wonders if the apparent philo-Semitism of the book is not also perhaps unbalanced and even uncritical. To dismiss the portrayal of Shylock by Shakespeare as “anti-Semitic” (214 n. 24), though very much a contemporary sentiment, must strike one as name-calling that simply

² One will recall the Catholic tradition’s ancient hostility to usury and suspicion of capitalism in general.

stops any conversation. Put differently, as a non-Old Testament scholar reading the book, I found myself wondering at what point a friendly openness to the wisdom of the Jewish tradition exposes itself to the danger of actual judaizing.

Much depends on the people with whom we are in dialogue, of course. Members of the academy might be surprised—and put off—by the fact that fellow Catholics in a seminary context, trying to renew the Faith in our time and place, are themselves instinctively put off by the usage of “B.C.E.” and “C.E.” to replace the “B.C.” and “A.D.” as defining marks of world history. That is, it does appear that Christ is being removed from the center of our sense of world timing in order not to offend others who have already taken offense at Christ. I say this to make us aware of some different underlying assumptions among us.³

Again, an Old Testament scholar might be forgiven a certain territorial chauvinism. I was pulled up short to read: “As New Testament scholars have long noted, reading about Jesus of Nazareth in Greek is problematic.” Although not such a scholar myself, consultation has led me to suspect it might be more accurate to say “some New Testament scholars.” Balancing this position would be that of a Martin Hengel who writes:

Any historical investigation which is to do justice to the New Testament cannot be content with stressing the tradition of the Old Testament and Judaism, important though that may be; it must also pay very close attention to the Graeco-Roman world, where the problems become particularly interesting at the point where Jewish and Greek conceptions have already become fused in the pre-Christian period. By the providence of God, the New Testament is written in Greek, and not Hebrew or Aramaic.⁴

It is of note that this sense of God’s providence causing the New Testament to be formed in the Greek language and the Greek-speaking world is strongly insisted upon as well by Pope Benedict, of course, most notably in his now-famous Regensburg address of September 12, 2006.

The significance of this can be seen in that the very notion of “substitutory suffering,” so important to Christian soteriology, is virtually

³ Fr. Cletus Healy, S.J., is an elderly Jesuit who founded a store called “Catholic Books and Gifts” in Milwaukee. An explicitly Catholic evangelizer, Fr. Healy used to advertise on the classical radio station to the effect: “If your grandchild is ashamed to hang up a holy picture or crucifix bought in our store in their college dorm room, maybe they shouldn’t be at that college.”

⁴ Martin Hengel, *The Atonement*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 5.

unknown in the Old Testament, apart from Second Isaiah, and although it may well be repugnant to modern Jewish sensibilities,⁵ the notion is richly attested throughout the ancient Greco-Roman world.

Apart from these perhaps professional turf disputes, Dr. Anderson's book offers a greatly expanded vision and represents a real contribution in the long journey to the retrieval of traditional soteriology, especially in academic places where those understandings have long been dismissed out of hand. On the other hand, there is such a wealth of impressive technical expertise in what is perforce in large part a rather arcane area—the Aramaic-speaking world—that a non-exegete is left grateful for the good foundation laid and yet also a bit inclined to move on.

The Bloody Sacrifice

And so I would like to shift the tone a bit from the world of careful biblical studies to that of a rather impressionistic spiritual theology.

In the early 1970s, largely in response to my complaint that the religion department at Syracuse University had no Catholic on the faculty, theologian Michael Novak was invited to lead us in a weekend retreat at an Episcopalian retreat center called “Thornfield.” He led faculty and graduate students in an exercise of imagining what heaven would be like. As we went around the room, sharing our imaginary visions, I became aware that my vision was different, because many, at least, of the saints I saw were bloody. In fact, in this meditation I saw lots of blood in Heaven. I was puzzled by this, because all my fellows were having such edifying, glowing visions, and mine was—well, bloody—and I asked Dr. Novak what he made of it. Perhaps because at the time he was very much involved in the ethnic awareness movement, he observed: “You’re Polish—and the history is full of blood, especially recently.” That satisfied me in a way, though at the time I was minimally aware of that heritage. What Dr. Novak didn’t observe was that none of the faculty, and few of the graduate students, were Catholic.

One of the most distinctive characteristics about our Catholic Faith that distinguishes it at least from modern Protestantism is the realism with which we are mindful of, adore, and represent Christ’s Passion and death. We have bloody crucifixes, saints with bloody wounds; in baroque iconography we celebrate the instruments of Christ’s Passion and death. Though the saints have had their robes washed white in the blood of the Lamb, we know that we are on this side of that great washing and have not yet fully participated in it; and, no matter, we know that we need to be washed in

⁵ From a conversation with Mother Timothea Elliott, RSM, in which she reported on remarks by a Rabbi Foster in Congregation Emmanuel in Denver.

His blood, to consume His blood and His broken body. Though in the book of Revelation the saints have washed their robes white in the blood of the Lamb, the Lamb Himself “is clad in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God” (Rev 19:13). And so He is represented in the great mosaic at the National Shrine in Washington.

We know that it is written, in the Letter to the Hebrews, “there is no forgiveness of sin without the shedding of blood” (Heb 9:22) and though this is “under the law” it continues in the transformed and transforming sacrifice of Christ the Lamb. And though this blood is uniquely shed in the one perfect sacrifice of Calvary, we must balance that with the teaching in Colossians that we “make up in our own flesh what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ” (Col 1:24).

Aidan Nichols’s title—*No Bloodless Myth*—for one of von Balthasar’s works is perfect, because that which is revealed in Christ is neither myth (at least not in the shallower sense) nor bloodless. If anything, the story comes closer to myth than to philosophy, for it is the language of story, but it is true story, the deepest revelation of truth, where history and myth coincide. And it is definitely flesh and blood, and in the end, bloody.

“Have you been saved?” is a question that has colored American speech for a long time. Catholics will answer variously as to when that happened: either at Calvary, or, if they want to personalize it, at the day of their baptisms. But we have perhaps been a bit distanced from just what happened in order for us to be saved, that from which we have been saved, and how we were saved.

For one thing, to be “saved” means not to be dissolved into nothingness or absorbed into the godhead. It means that this unique individual, with these wounds to show, will be transformed, as this individual, but transformed as through death, and live for eternity: saved, not lost.

For another, it means to be snatched from the fires of perdition, snatched from the consequences of sin, to be saved from God’s wrath.

For a long time now, the notion of the bloody act of redemption has been an embarrassment to theologians and to many Christians, who prefer what can be called a “forensic” view of salvation. Regardless of how theologically correct the explanation of the atonement can be, there tends to be a reduction of the actual bloody working out of salvation in favor of a conceptual attempt at explanation. I realize that in saying this I am taking on virtually all of theology, for theology must be conceptual and explanatory. But the concepts of theology must be rooted in something beyond concept, and though ideas may come from symbols, we yearn for the real beyond, or at least in and through, the symbol. When von Balthasar writes that “the resurrection of the flesh vindicates the poets in a definitive

sense,”⁶ we must remember that the Risen Body is also the Crucified Body, transformed, but still bearing the wounds: that is, the mute, dumb, sheer physicality of bloodied flesh. We shall return to this later in the essay.

Perhaps the most common concept at least among devout contemporary Christians is that Christ “paid the price” for our salvation. Dr. Anderson’s study brilliantly shows the ancient roots of this notion. Apart from very traditional expressions of Catholicism—chief among them the dramatically bloody crucifixes of the Latin cultural world, cousins to the earlier German tradition of Gruenewald—most Christians seem to content themselves with this notion. The scholarly world, less devout and more prone to notions of a general absolution granted the universe by a loving God, distances itself from notions of satisfaction, let alone atonement. It tends toward the forensic either by sheer reliance on the “general absolution” of what is called a “loving God”—or it is forensic in the much deeper sense which colors even St. Anselm’s theory of atonement. Yet even that theory has long been in disfavor, certainly in most modern theology. Theologians of the Ressourcement have been attempting to return to it with a new respect, most notably Hans Urs von Balthasar and also Joseph Ratzinger.

As noted, *Sin* offers a great help to those theologians attempting to re-appropriate the tradition by contributing this abundantly documented discovery that “paying the price” has profound roots in at least Second Temple Judaism. And that St. Anselm of Canterbury is not just a Roman legalist inflicting that pagan tradition onto the Gospel vision of salvation, but that Anselm in fact is fully in harmony with the Jewish tradition which informed the Christian in the matter of “paying the price”—and that includes praying for the dead.

Dr. Anderson relies heavily on Paul Ricoeur to provide a contemporary intellectual structure for his observations. Ricoeur points to metaphor as essential: the metaphor of payment of a debt became dominant in Second Temple Judaism and passed unnoticed into Christianity. Ricoeur notes that “ideas emerge from symbols.” But no sooner did I read this than the somewhat impish face of Flannery O’Connor showed up, with her famous line about the Eucharist: “If it’s a symbol, to hell with it.”⁷ That is to say, if Ricoeur is right, behind the idea, there is the symbol. And, I would add, underneath, in and through the symbol, is the reality which blossoms in the symbol, but which is pulsing with a life far richer, deeper, that is not exhausted in the symbolic utterance.

⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 155.

⁷ O’Connor in conversation with Mary McCarthy.

So as I read *Cur Deus homo*, so needed in the Church today, as Dr. Anderson most helpfully insists, I am yet puzzled at its own rather bloodless approach. No doubt this is characteristic of the tenor of that theology which would be flowering in Scholasticism. It is clear, intellectual, scriptural to a great extent—but it remains curiously bloodless. And this is my question: What does it mean that we are “saved by the blood of the Lamb” [“we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God” (Rom 5:8)]? Again, what does it mean that “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Heb 9:22)?

Saved from What?

Of course, how we understand salvation will flow from how we understand sin. In the Anselmian understanding, buttressed for us by Dr. Anderson’s research, sin is a debt which we could never repay.

Another way of viewing this comes from the writings of Hans Urs von Balthasar. In a section redolent of the work of Karl Barth as well, von Balthasar writes:

The religious ideal of man after his expulsion from paradise—to become ‘spirit,’ ‘sage,’ mystic,’ perfect’ (to name but the purest and worthiest ideals)—always means *at the same time* that this genuinely religious impulse will contain a revolt against the Creator, a disowning of the nature in which man was placed and created: the earthly, physical-psychic, communal, spatial-temporal existence. Man does not want to be man but something else (as he imagines, something ‘higher’).⁸

In other words, one seeks that place in himself that is most “godlike” and identifies himself with God there. The essence of sin is refusing to be human, rejecting the analogous relation with God in which man acknowledges that “God is always greater”: “The element of original sin in human religiosity consists in this: that the similarity between Creator and creature that is given with the fact of our derivation from God, is not inscribed in the fundamental relationship of the creature’s *not being God*.”⁹

One consequence of sin is that humanity simply does not see sin where it in fact is. If humans are striving, from a sinful orientation, to be “godlike,” this in itself only aggravates the sinful condition: “The deepest longing of man is to ascend to God, to become like God, indeed to become equal to God. . . . But we know that the snake got a hold of this

⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Patristik, Scholastik und wir,” trans. Edward Oakes, as cited in Edward Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 113.

⁹ Ibid.

very innermost drive of man to press on to God, and poisoned it.”¹⁰ Original sin, then, is to want to be godlike, and von Balthasar singles out the Platonic tradition as finding this godlikeness in that “highest,” most “spiritual,” part of our beings, where, quite apart from grace, we find ourselves identified with God: by concentrating ourselves on our highest “part”—the spiritual, or, perhaps *pari passu*, the intellectual, we become divine by nature and have no need of grace. For him, then, this attempt to self-divinize is the very root of all sin, as it denies creatureliness and, using human wisdom alone, would ascend to and identify with God Himself.

The salvation offered in Christ is radically different from this: so far from denying creaturehood, there is an absolutely humiliating embrace of creaturehood. Instead of trying to make men godlike, the revelation of salvation will show man up for the snarling beast sin has made him, and it is in answering these deepest, most hidden and shameful drives that the Crucified Christ will offer salvation, a healing and redemption from that which is *least* godlike in us: our bloodthirstiness.

Rooted in St. Paul, the theology of the Fathers tends to focus on the “pro nobis” or Christ’s atoning death, and this expands into the “admirabile commercium” which develops with the emerging Christological understanding of the Councils. That is, God became man so that man might become God—this “admirable exchange.” But for this to happen, for this to be effective, God must take on our sins.

We note the work of Rene Girard and Raymond Schwager, unique in our times for pursuing this question of the *Suendenbock*, the scapegoat. This invites us to look at questions of deep healing, and that which is offered to us—from the point of view of a spiritual psychology. It is this approach that I offer, because my own work has spilled over from theology into spiritual direction, which really is applied theology, rightly understood. Though true ideas are life-giving and indeed essential to our human lives, yet we are not saved by ideas: this is perhaps the single greatest reason behind the diminishment in effective salvific power in the Church in recent times. Human souls are starving for the body and the blood, and they are all too often being fed the stones of mere ideas, at best.

Put differently, in the vernacular we have the phrase: “What do you want—blood?” The answer to this must be “yes.” Humans are a blood-thirsty race, and in this nothing has changed from the spectacles of ancient Rome to the spectacles on our contemporary screens. Apart from the constant bloodshed in our films and TV shows, literature bears abundant witness to this: one thinks of the blood-smearing rituals in *The Lord of the*

¹⁰ Ibid., 110.

Flies, or more powerfully, in William Faulkner's *The Bear*—and countless other such rites—and is led to conclude that something very deep, far deeper than our rational constructs, is at work. One recalls William Butler Yeats's insight into the terror that obtained before we "pieced our thoughts into philosophy." Exactly: the healing must go much deeper than mental or even verbal expression, to what, again Yeats, calls "the secret working mind." The Word—clear, pure—must become bloodied flesh, for our salvation.

As Girard might point out: the one thing that has changed is the one "sacrificial lamb" and more to the point, the scapegoat—which is Christ, whose death is meant to put satisfaction to our murderous instincts. This represents an anthropological turn, of which yet we must be careful, for Christ's death reconciles us to God, above all: it is not primarily to satisfy us—though it does do this, as I will point out—but if we are to be true to the Scriptures we must somehow come to understand how His Passion and death are effected primarily to satisfy "the wrath of God."

And so the question arises: how are we saved? And how do we know that salvation?

We are repeatedly told that we are saved "by the blood of the lamb." We are saved by the suffering, death and Resurrection of Christ. Though the articles of the Creed pertaining to the Atonement are clearly enough stated—"For us men and for our salvation"—just how that salvation is effected is not explained. That we are saved is abundantly laid out, as Dr. Anderson well notes: but how? No sooner does one begin to investigate this than one begins seeing ideas taking the place of the symbol: we are often told the blood is a symbol for life, and so the shedding of blood is the symbolic expression of giving one's life. Pouring out one's life, literally, is to shed one's blood. The theological mind naturally tends toward abstraction: "this means that"—and immediately the saving reality which should strike us mute with terror and adoration becomes a safe concept, powerless to save. Another idea.

Yes, but why was it necessary for Christ to shed His blood? To satisfy an angry God? This is too easily dismissed, for, as von Balthasar insists, picking up on the concerns of Karl Barth, the Scriptures are full of the "wrath of God"—and that wrath has to be appeased, wrath being the obverse of the passionate love of the passionate God. Essential to the notion of a sacrifice is the notion of appeasing the wrath of God, as Fr. Pohle reminds us in his treatise on soteriology, faithful to and passing on the tradition, yet leaving it untainted by attempt at deeper understanding.¹¹ Is God then blood-thirsty,

¹¹ Fr. Joseph Pohle wrote a series of manuals in the early twentieth century on the various areas of dogmatic theology, including *Soteriology* (B. Herder: St. Louis, 1946; originally published in 1923).

like the images one sees in some of the *tankhas* of Tibetan Buddhism, where a huge black demon, bloody mouthed, is simply devouring human bodies?

Here let us pause and take a deep breath: we are eager to understand that which must, of necessity, be beyond our understandings. We are attempting an ascent at the highest peaks, and even if we can make it to that most narrow, highest of places, there can be no dwelling in that thin air. And yet, if we can find a cleft in the rock we may catch a glimpse of the passing supreme truth. Mystery: we are groping at a mystery. A “raid on the ineffable” as Merton might have said.

Two angles of approach suggest themselves. The first, building on the Old Testament notion of bloody sacrifice of animals, would see this sacrifice finding its perfect expression in the bloody sacrifice of Jesus, the Son of God. Critical authors are quick to dismiss the concept of appeasing the wrath of God this way as a vestige of a barbarous past—and an image that makes a monster of God the Father, who somehow feels satisfaction when blood is shed. This criticism has obvious truth, and this is recognized both in the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, which insists on a “reasonable” or “rational” worship, and in the Latin tradition, which always insists on an “unbloody sacrifice” of the altar. Still, with these cautions, perhaps we should not be too quick in dismissing what appears to be essential in our salvation. For if the prophets moved to the Word and away from the bloody altar, in Christ the two are re-united where the Word becomes Flesh and speaks in and through the blood poured out in sacrifice.

Perhaps it is the seminary professor in me who insists that we pause here for a moment. Priesthood and sacrifice go together: in fact, it is sacrifice that defines the priesthood (1 Samuel 13), as distinct from something like “ordained ministry.” We would do well to bear in mind that even as there is the considerable overlap and profound sharing—with equally profound transformation—with the Old Testament, which Dr. Anderson so helpfully highlights, so the New Testament priesthood in some essential way continues the priesthood of the Old. Though transformed, yet “the offering of gifts of Abel, of Abraham our father in faith, and of Melchizedek” continues at our altars today.

The mystics write that there is an outpouring of love within the Trinity itself, a circulation, in which the fluid of circulation—the lifeblood—of the Trinity itself is the Spirit (for “the Spirit gives life”; the flesh is mysteriously “of no avail”). This is a total outpouring of perfect goodness, perfect self-giving, perfect love. The wrath of God is turned against sin, provoked by it, elicited by it: that is, the love of God becomes wrath when confronted with the icy coldness of sin. That which provokes must be melted down, the obstruction removed, so that the circulation of love can freely flow.

Come into this world of sin, the love of God is “poured out” upon the world in Christ Jesus. And yet that which is bliss in God becomes agony in the world, the ultimate perfect joy of outpouring love within the Trinity becomes perfect suffering, perfect pain in the flesh and blood, in the mind, of Christ who is God become flesh. And the circulation of love that is poured out on the Cross sinks into the earth, sinks into the depths of creation—“ad inferos”—and is lifted up in the Resurrection, which is no bloodless resurrection, for the wounds of Christ remain visible.

Perhaps this sacrifice “appeases” the wrath of God in that it flows over, under, through this world, bathing, washing, feeding it and so penetrating it with God’s ever-flowing love.

What of the human beings for whom this blood is shed? I would suggest the prayer the *Anima Christi* as entry point into this mystery. “Soul of Christ sanctify me, Body of Christ save me, Blood of Christ inebriate me, water from the side of Christ wash me, Oh Good Jesus, hear me, within Thy wounds hide me, permit me not to be separated from Thee.”

We are to be given the intoxication of the Spirit of God by drinking the Blood of Christ, by being bathed in it, by beholding it flowing from His wounds; we are to be washed by the water from His side—and, remember, it was blood and water that flowed from His side (as is seen at the center of the image of Divine Mercy as revealed to St. Faustina).¹² We are to be hidden within His wounds.

How then do we apply this sacrificial death to ourselves, how do we know salvation in Christ? By entirely submerging ourselves in the Incarnate Body and Soul of Christ, that is, by participating—partaking—fully in the Eucharist which He offers us.

The heart of all reality is unveiled when the blood is poured out on the Cross: this is the central act of salvation history, and it is made present to us each time the priest offers the Holy Sacrifice that is called the Mass. We gather at the foot of the Cross, and we must “take, eat; take, drink” because we must accept the fact that we are sinners, that, as the “poor banished children of Eve,” we are bloodthirsty murderers—for that is what sinners are—and we must drink His blood if there is to be any life, any health within us. It is at the point of the shedding of the blood that the peak of the human drama—of any human drama—is reached,

¹² The prayer of the Divine Mercy Chaplet is remarkable: “Eternal Father, I offer you the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity, of your dearly beloved Son Our Lord Jesus Christ, in atonement for our sins and for those of the whole world.” Nothing could be more faithful to the priestly nature of salvation, and in God’s Providence, this is recited by the lay faithful throughout the world, exercising their priesthood, in union with Christ and the sacrifice of the altar.

and it is after this shedding of blood that peace can come, but only if it is the blood of an innocent victim, received in the spirit of redemption, for blood is shed in an endless procession of murders from the foundation of the world—or at least from the fall of Adam and Eve, and the murder of man's first brother. It is at Jesus' command that we do this, at His command that the priest at the altar of sacrifice tears apart His body, mingles it with His blood, and says: "This is the Lamb of God."

It is this tear in the fabric of fleshly reality that is the opening through which the light of Heaven pours in upon us, and through which we are invited to ascend into the life of God Himself, a tear in the fabric that continues in the Resurrection, for His wounds remain. The wine becomes blood, even as analogously the blood becomes wine that we can drink and by which we can be nourished even in these mortal bodies. We too must eat His flesh, for we are bloodthirsty, and we are cannibals who live off the flesh of others. Those who refused to follow Jesus further in John 6 knew very well what they were rejecting: they were the people who wanted to live by the word alone, who wanted to live in the safe world of ideas—of a forensic salvation—and who would refuse the humiliation of admitting their own basest needs and come to God for His healing, His satisfaction of them.

This is the profound difference between what became rabbinic—that is, book—Judaism, and the sacrificial life of the Temple, which was realized in the new temple of Christ's body. This is startlingly depicted in John 6, of course, where the choice between eating Christ's Body and Blood and finding salvation elsewhere is offered. "We are no cannibals" say those who decide to refuse Christ,¹³ and yet, in the event, they will be calling for His Blood and because they seek salvation elsewhere—

¹³ John 6:52–53: "The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' So Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.' Of this, the Second Catholic Edition of the RSV says: "A natural question to ask. Jesus answers, not by explaining it away, but by reemphasizing the reality, though not, of course, in the crude sense implied in their question." The editors' comment illustrates my point. In spite of their clear intention to be faithful to the words of Jesus, it might be that the scholars are yet missing something of the scandal given by the Word Incarnate. It might be urged that the reader not dismiss too quickly what appears to be "the crude sense"—that is, the suggestion of cannibalism in Christ's words. The drastic remedy of the Cross applied to the sin of the world remains a mystery, and so is our sacramental participation in it. God's remedy is not at all what we would have thought up, and the wisdom of His salvation is inexhaustible to our contemplation. It remains a scandal and a stumbling block.

denying their own sinfulness where He reveals it to be and denying the salvation He offers—they will have “missed the hour of their visitation.”

This rejection of both indictment—you are in fact cannibals—and healing—your only salvation is in my flesh and blood—continued throughout the history of the Church, through the Reformation, which embraced the Word alone while progressively rejecting the deeper mystery of the Body and the Blood and the dark mysteries it reveals; this rejection continues to this day in the Catholic Church itself, where one influential wing has embraced the Reformation tradition by minimizing or even denying the sacrifice of the Mass which alone heals, while relying on the word alone—and the healing talk offered by much modern psychology—to heal that which can be healed by God alone, and by means that are infinitely deeper than our own minds can create. We are capable of approaching the mystery, but it is a mystery too deep and dark for an immediate appropriation by our concepts. It is a mystery known to Faith alone, faith that surrenders to the God who acts upon us, and who commands us: “Take, eat; take, drink” and it is His Body and His Blood that He gives us, knowing what we are like and what we need. The priest at the altar is not a minister who merely offers words of assurance; he is a true priest, himself purified, who is there to offer the saving sacrifice.

A Concluding Comment

The hunger to understand—to know—is essential to the human, and it is at the heart of the theological enterprise as well. Catholic theology works through a text, but even more it works from a mystery, a mystery revealed at the breaking of the Lamb on the altar. It is not our understanding that heals us; our understanding itself needs to be healed by that which is beyond, beneath, its grasp: in this, light must come from darkness. The light shed on us is sheer gift, and it is a mystery which bathes us in the light- and life-giving blood of the Lamb, who takes our place as the lightning rod for God’s wrath and safely conducts it through death into eternal life. We are safe in His wounds, nourished by the openings created by His sufferings, and, in the words of the prayer, led to “praise Him with His saints for ever.”