

Girard and the “Sacrifice of the Mass”: Mimetic Theory and Eucharistic Theology

Anthony R. Lusvardi, S.J.

Pontifical Atheneum of St. Anselm, Rome

It is obvious that bringing to light the founding murder completely rules out any compromise with the principle of sacrifice, or indeed with any conception of the death of Jesus as sacrifice.

—Jean-Michel Oughourlain, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*

If anyone says that a true and proper sacrifice is not offered to God in the Mass . . . let him be anathema.

—Council of Trent, Session 22, Canon 1

René Girard’s thought has produced both admiration and unease among Catholic sacramental theologians struggling to come to grips with what his theory of scapegoating and sacrifice implies for “the holy sacrifice of the Mass.” The language of sacrifice permeates the liturgy itself, official Church teaching—including the documents of Vatican II—and centuries of Eucharistic theology, so Girard’s critique has the potential to upend concepts fundamental to the Church’s sacramental system. Indeed, many theologians who

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have embraced Girard have expressed unease with the Church's Eucharistic theology; some, as we shall see, have advocated replacing sacrifice as a paradigm for understanding the Eucharist with the model of a communal meal. Yet even Robert J. Daly, who more than a decade ago suggested avoiding the language of sacrifice altogether, admits that a Eucharistic theology that prescind entirely from sacrificial language cannot "still think of itself as Catholic."¹

Much of this theological unease, however, stems from claims made in Girard's early work, particularly *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, which takes a categorically negative stance toward sacrifice. In *Things Hidden*, for example, Girard finds himself unable to reconcile his antisacrificial position with the Letter to the Hebrews. In the years following the publication of *Things Hidden*, Girard's thought on sacrifice evolved, largely as a result of his engagement with Raymund Schwager.² Girard's mature position, as spelled out in *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, adds important qualifications to mimetic theory that make Girard's views possible to reconcile with traditional Catholic Eucharistic theology. Crucially, Girard clarifies his role as that of an anthropologist, not a theologian. Drawing on Schwager, he also makes a fundamental distinction between the sacrifice of others and self-sacrifice.³

With these distinctions in mind, I hope to show that mimetic theory offers a rich, though naturally limited, interpretive paradigm with the potential to deepen rather than undermine traditional Catholic Eucharistic theology. Many of the sacramental theologians who have made use of Girard's work have, unfortunately, conflated his theory with unrelated theological trends; distinguishing Girard's theory from such trends will allow us to see how his views can be reconciled with an understanding of the Mass as holy sacrifice. In fact, such an analysis suggests that Girard's theories more naturally align with the liturgical theology of Joseph Ratzinger than they do with more radically antisacrificial theologians.

GIRARD: MIMETIC DESIRE, CONTAGION, SACRIFICE

Girard's thought centers on his claim that the "mimetic cycle of violence" lies at the root of all human culture.⁴ Like St. Augustine, Girard understands human beings to be driven by a limitless sense of desire, which ultimately fuels this cycle.⁵ Unlike Augustine, Girard does not deal with the ultimate source of human desire nor its ultimate end because of a methodological limitation he understands to be crucial to his project. Girard frames *I See Satan* as an apology for Christianity made on anthropological grounds.⁶ Because an apology is an

explanation of Christianity attempting to make the faith credible to nonbelievers, Girard cannot assume God's existence at the beginning of his argument without it becoming irreparably circular. When we come to apply Girard's insights to theology, therefore, we will have to take into account what his historical picture necessarily leaves out.

Girard's theory does not so much explain the origins of human desire as how it comes to be directed in the way it is. He points out that aside from the biological basics, human beings come with no preset list of things to desire; once our basic needs are satisfied, our desires can turn toward almost any object.⁷ His explanation of how this otherwise aimless capacity to desire fixates upon the objects that it does is simple: we copy others. When we see other people with certain goods, we intuit that those goods must be desirable and we start to want them ourselves, a process Girard calls "mimesis."⁸ Because mimetic desire involves wanting what others have, mimesis fuels both growth and conflict. Without mimetic desire, we would have neither language nor culture,⁹ but neither would we have "mimetic rivalry"—the conflict, strife, and violence that break out when we want what other people have. When mimetic rivalry leads us to see other people as obstacles to our own desires, Girard refers to the resulting state of affairs with the Biblical term "scandal."¹⁰ He points out that mimetic rivalry can be particularly strong among people who see themselves as equals, which is why he devotes significant attention to myths that deal with conflict between brothers and, especially, twins.¹¹

If mimetic rivalry were the end of the story, any form of human community would be impossible. All of our relationships would be defined fundamentally by conflict, and we would persist in a constant state of ever-growing violence with one another. In fact, Girard argues, this does happen; envy and violence repeatedly spiral out of control. But at the point when rivalry and scandal boil over, when a community becomes divided to the point of fracture, a new phenomenon emerges that brings unity and peace: the phenomenon of the scapegoat, or what Girard calls the "single victim mechanism." When a community reaches a point of "mimetic crisis," when all are divided against each other, a sudden shift takes place, and the community's antagonisms are redirected against one individual.¹² This individual is the scapegoat, and the community unites against him; instead of a situation of all-against-all, the destructive tensions of the community are unleashed in a cathartic moment of all-against-one. The scapegoat is destroyed, but out of this act of violence the unity and peace of the community are reestablished. Because the death of the scapegoat provides the stability required for a community's growth, Girard speaks of the phenomenon as a "founding murder," the basis for all human institutions and cultures.¹³

Girard feels justified in making such a sweeping claim because he sees the phenomenon of the founding murder so deeply embedded in pagan mythology, from the sibling rivalry of Romulus and Remus to the Babylonian creation myth, the *Enuma Elish*. Girard is critical of pagan mythology—“myth” in the Girardian vocabulary takes on decidedly negative connotations—because he is convinced that real violence against innocent victims underlies such stories.¹⁴ Myth, for Girard, functions to disguise and legitimize violence, for example, by shifting responsibility for it from humans to the gods.¹⁵ The role of myth in masking the violence of the single victim mechanism is crucial because for the process to function—for it to create unity—all of those who participate must remain ignorant of what they are doing. In other words, they cannot understand that the victim is innocent and that they are not really resolving their communal conflicts by destroying him.¹⁶ If they were to realize the truth of what they are doing, they would see that the peace created by the destruction of the victim is illusory—unjust and unstable—suppressing mimetic rivalry for a time but requiring more future victims if it is to be maintained. The blind unanimity of the crowd, which Girard refers to as “mimetic contagion,” allows such ignorance to persist.¹⁷ No one questions what is happening because everyone—except the lone victim—is caught up in the same passions and actions. Girard identifies “Satan” with mimetic contagion, the entire process of covetousness, discord, and unity through violence.¹⁸

Part of the self-deception in which the perpetrators of the single victim mechanism engage involves the transformation of the scapegoat. While the crowd is uniting against the single victim, the scapegoat might literally be demonized—have demonic qualities ascribed to him—but after the victim has been destroyed and peace has emerged, the community will often begin to think of him as a deity, as the one whose death has inexplicably produced peace.¹⁹ The mysterious character of the entire process hints at how it begins to be interpreted religiously. Girard sees a fundamentally similar structure in the sacrificial rituals at the heart of all pagan religions.²⁰ Sacrificial rituals, he claims, reenact the scapegoating process as communities attempt to perpetuate the peace and unity the founding murder has produced. Girard argues that social institutions emerge out of these rituals—rather than the other way around—with religious rites of passage, for example, preceding and laying the foundation for educational institutions.²¹

This belief has important consequences. First, religion, for Girard, cannot be thought of as a cultural epiphenomenon, but must be recognized as the root of culture.²² Girard criticizes such philosophical paradigms as the social contract theory for attempting to explain the origins of human institutions without

taking seriously the role of religion. Second, religion, in Girard's treatment, has a decidedly ambiguous character. It is a human creation with false and violent origins. The mythic stories associated with religious rituals attempt to hide the murder of the innocent. Even here, however, we must be careful not to overstate what Girard is saying. For he is clear that, unlike the process of mimetic contagion, sacrificial rituals themselves are not "Satanic"; instead, they are an attempt to keep the power of mimetic rivalry and contagion at bay.²³ Even in *Things Hidden*, where Girard is more concerned with exposing the violent origin of sacrifice than exploring its nuances, he refers to religion as an "immense effort to keep the peace."²⁴ Religion itself does not prompt violence, though religion's attempts to hold violence at bay may themselves resort to violence. This problem is particularly apparent in the case of human sacrifice, though it is ameliorated somewhat as animals and other offerings come to take the place of human victims in rituals. Recognizing sacrifice as an ambiguous phenomenon leaves open the possibility—when we come to Christian theology—that it can be purified and transformed rather than rejected as simply false and negative.

The similarities between the Passion of Jesus and the archetypal pattern of conflict and sacrifice described by Girard may already be apparent. The Gospels describe the growing tension and rivalry between Jesus and his opponents—the scribes, Pharisees, and temple priests—building up to his near unanimous rejection by the crowd and his sacrificial death. His death is described by the high priest Caiaphas in almost explicitly Girardian terms: "It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish" (John 11:50 [RSV]). Yet the high priest's very baldness contributes to what Girard argues is the decisive difference between the Gospels and pagan mythology. Whereas mythology attempts to disguise and justify the single victim mechanism, Christianity exposes this mechanism as false. The events depicted in Christ's Passion, according to Girard, fit within the pattern of mimetic violence perpetuated over and over again since "the foundation of the world," but Christianity's decisive break with paganism comes in the interpretation it gives to these events.²⁵ In the Gospels, there is no question that Jesus is innocent and that the powers of the world have acted falsely in crucifying him. Unlike pagan mythology, Christianity reveals a God who identifies with innocent victims.²⁶

Such an interpretation, from the point of view of the victims, is already hinted at in the Old Testament.²⁷ According to Girard, for example, the Psalms give voice to the victims of collective violence in a way mythology never allows.²⁸ Girard contrasts the Joseph story (Genesis 37–50) with the Oedipus myth to make this point.²⁹ The Hebrew Scriptures also resist the mythological pattern of

a god who is victimized or a sacrificial victim who is divinized.³⁰ When applying Girard's insights to theology, therefore, we will have to take into account the continuity he sees between the Jewish and Christian Scriptures.

Nevertheless, the events surrounding Christ's Passion, Girard argues, are unique. The emergence of the Church, "a small group of dissidents that separates from the collective violence of the crowd," after the death of Jesus has no parallel in mythology.³¹ The decisive factor in the birth of the Church, indeed, the decisive event for the entire New Testament, is the Resurrection of Jesus, the first event in the Passion story that cannot be explained by the mimetic cycle of violence. When he arrives at the Resurrection, Girard's anthropological project comes to an end because the Resurrection can only be understood as the divine breaking into the world. As he puts it: "The Resurrection is not only a miracle, a prodigious transgression of natural laws. It is the spectacular sign of the entrance into the world of a power superior to violent contagion."³² Girard's anthropology has demonstrated humanity's impotence in the face of mimetic rivalry and contagion; left to themselves, all human beings can do in the face of their own limitless and often destructive desire is to fight violence with violence or, at best, religious reenactments of violence in the form of sacrificial rituals. In the Resurrection, the cycle of contagion is overcome, not by human effort, but by an act exclusively God's.

FROM ANTHROPOLOGY TO THEOLOGY

The entrance of God into Girard's story changes the nature of our project. Girard's anthropological apology brings him to make a statement of faith in the Resurrection, but by doing so he also brings his apology to an end and opens the door to theology. Theology, to use St. Anselm's classic definition, is faith seeking understanding. In other words, while an apology aims to convince unbelievers, theology begins with belief in revelation and aims to deepen one's understanding of that revelation. Girard himself is utterly clear in *I See Satan* in insisting that he is not a theologian, nor is his work meant to eclipse theology or, still less, revelation itself.³³ Theologians can use mimetic theory to refine and purify our theological concepts, but we must be wary of the temptation to alter revelation in order to make it fit any theory. Such would be the case, for example, if we ignored the Letter to the Hebrews because it describes Christ's death as a sacrifice. Girard seems aware of this risk, insisting that his theory requires different, complementary perspectives to avoid becoming an intellectual idol, "totalitarian and infallible."³⁴ Nonetheless, mimetic theory brings to

the surface a number of nuances in the Biblical narrative that we might otherwise pass over. The fresh insights a Girardian reading of Scripture facilitates can be seen, for example, in James Alison's extensive and creative work.³⁵ Girard's interpretive paradigm can be applied not only to Scripture but, as we shall see, to sacramental theology.

Treating mimetic theory as an interpretive paradigm prevents it from becoming the sort of "totalitarian" system Girard fears while at the same time bypassing certain objections to it. For example, Girard's use of the words "theory" and "hypothesis" has generated the objection that he does not—and probably cannot—provide the sort of evidence that a truly historical, scientific account needs to support it.³⁶ While there is ample evidence to support some aspects of mimetic theory—such as the prevalence of ritual sacrifice in ancient religions—Girard cannot point us to the crime scene of the founding murder for Rome or Babylon. Nor should Girard's approach to Scripture be confused with that of the historical-critical method, which attempts to illuminate the historical processes behind the formation of Scripture.³⁷ Girard speaks to this question in far broader terms than what the historical-critical method would deem acceptable; the credibility of Girard's theory comes from our ability to recognize its elements at work in ourselves, in literature, and in historical and contemporary events rather than from its use of the linguistic and textual tools historical-critical analysis typically brings to bear. By suggesting we use mimetic theory as an interpretive paradigm, I have in mind, for example, feminist or liberationist interpretations of Scripture. A Girardian reading of Scripture resembles these paradigms not necessarily in content but in their usefulness and limitations. For example, a feminist approach to Scripture might enrich our understanding of a given text by calling our attention to its use of gender imagery. However, if we focused exclusively on gender-related concerns or if we forced such interpretations beyond the realm of plausibility, we would impoverish the text, turning it into a cramped mirror of our own preoccupations. Mimetic theory runs analogous risks.

Placing Girard's theory within certain interpretive bounds should not be taken as minimizing its value, as can be seen if we compare it to two other powerful paradigms. The first such paradigm is provided by the thinker who is Girard's intellectual archenemy in *I See Satan*: Friedrich Nietzsche. In Part I of his *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche tells the story of the origin of Western values; in his story, the natural, noble, and carefree values of pagan antiquity are gradually undermined and inverted by Jewish-Christian resentment.³⁸ Nietzsche's "genealogy" cannot be confused with scientific history; the philosopher makes no attempt to document his claims in anything approaching a scientific fashion.

In fact, at times he ridicules scientists and historians, and some of his claims about biology amount to little more than nineteenth-century quackery. But these flaws do not undermine the power of Nietzsche's story because the aim of his project is not to provide a history of events but an interpretation of history. Moreover, his interpretation is made more compelling by his insights into human nature—the power of resentment to distort our self-understanding—than by the evidence he presents from historical texts. Even though he is not writing history per se, none would deny Nietzsche's profound impact on our understanding of Christianity, morality, and values. Nietzsche and Girard do not really disagree about the basic facts of history; Girard even compliments Nietzsche for discovering the “anthropological key to Christianity,” its concern for victims.³⁹ On the crucial point that Christianity upends the Dionysian values of pagan mythology, Nietzsche and Girard agree—but they differ entirely in the interpretation they give to this history. Girard's work can be understood as a powerful counter-genealogy to Nietzsche.

The second paradigm that functions analogously to mimetic theory is found in Scripture itself. In his interpretation of creation in the Book of Genesis, the Jewish Biblical scholar Jon Levenson also discusses myth. Myth, according to Levenson, refers to “a cast of mind that views certain symbols in terms of an act of unlimited scope and import that occurred, in Brevard Childs' words, in ‘a timeless age of the past.’”⁴⁰ Myths tell of the “great founding acts, which order reality,” which Levenson notes must be “constantly reactivated in the drama of the cult.” Such a definition is broader and more positive than Girard's understanding of myth but reveals some similarities; Girard would see the “timelessness” of myths stemming from their expression of perennial patterns of human behaviors. Girard would also likely note that the victims that myths attempt to hide are real individuals.

Levenson opens his discussion of Genesis by recounting the Babylonian creation myth, the *Enuma Elish*, a story easily understood in Girardian terms. The myth begins in a chaotic primeval realm ruled by the water gods, Apsu and Tiamat. After Apsu is killed by another god, his enraged wife Tiamat wages war on the other gods. The god Marduk persuades these oppressed gods to make him their ruler and is able to defeat and slay Tiamat. Out of Tiamat's slaughtered corpse, Marduk creates the world.⁴¹ In this myth, civilization's founding murder is given a cosmic justification. While the *Enuma Elish* is often contrasted with the later belief in creation *ex nihilo*, Levenson traces a substratum running through the Hebrew Scriptures that suggests the persistence of a myth similar to the *Enuma Elish* in the Hebrew mind. References to the mysterious sea monster Leviathan, who resembles Tiamat, are found in Psalms 74 and 104 and in

Job and Isaiah; these references all suggest the subordination of Leviathan to the Lord rather than Marduk.⁴²

The most thoroughgoing "demythologization" of the Leviathan tradition, however, comes in Genesis 1. This priestly creation story does not completely efface the mythic vision of creation out of a watery chaos; in fact, it begins, not with creation *ex nihilo*, but by calling to mind just such a chaos (Gen. 1:2). Perhaps even more to the point, the story singles out God's creation of "the great sea monsters" on the fifth day (Gen. 1:21), employing the same term used elsewhere to refer to Leviathan, thereby asserting God's absolute sovereignty over even the primeval creatures of pagan mythology.⁴³ These creatures, the text tells us, are not divine but merely another part of creation. The priestly writer of the first chapter of the Book of Genesis does not ignore the pagan mythology to which he is in important respects opposed. Instead, he offers us a counter-narrative—an interpretive paradigm—to be superimposed upon the older mythology. I would suggest that his project is analogous to that of Girard. For Girard, the ultimate counter-narrative to paganism is the Gospel, and mimetic theory is a way of formulating some of the Gospel's central revelations in anthropological terms that can be used to evaluate and interpret literature, history, and our own actions.

CHRISTIAN SACRIFICE?

I am not the first to point out that among the "texts" Girard's paradigm can help us to interpret is the sacred liturgy.⁴⁴ An unavoidable question mimetic theory raises for Catholics is whether or not the Mass can be rightly understood as a sacrifice in light of Girard's analysis. Here, however, we have to be careful to distinguish problems raised by mimetic theory from those posed by other intellectual trends having little to do with Girard. One such trend is the drift of contemporary Catholic sacramental theology toward what theologian Matthew Levering calls "Eucharistic idealism."⁴⁵ Eucharistic idealism tends to downplay the ritual or cultic aspects of the liturgy. It emphasizes the communal and ethical at the expense of the transcendent and the subjective experience of God at the expense of his objective presence in the sacrament. Eucharistic idealism prefers to understand the Eucharist primarily as a celebratory communal meal rather than an expiatory sacrifice, a position some theologians have employed Girard's work to bolster.

Levering, however, traces the origins of Eucharistic idealism not to mimetic theory but to the Reformation. Luther and Calvin both rejected the

idea of the Mass as sacrifice, with Luther preferring to understand the Eucharist as Christ's last will and testament and Calvin equating it with the proclamation of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, not participation in that sacrifice.⁴⁶ Calvin in particular argued that the Church Fathers had erred in seeing too much continuity between the Mass and Christianity's Jewish past. This trend was carried forward by Hegel, who praised Luther's "liberation" of Christianity from "external" Jewish rituals, freeing individual subjectivity from outward forms.⁴⁷ Hegel's influence contributed to a more abstract understanding of the Eucharist found in varying degrees in theologians from the Protestant Friedrich Schleiermacher to the Catholics Edward Schillebeeckx and Karl Rahner.⁴⁸ While there is scarcely space in this paper to evaluate the historical trajectory Levering posits, his argument at least hints at the variety of intellectual—and in some cases political—currents at play in contemporary debates over sacrifice and the Eucharist. Some of these influences come with presuppositions, such as the nonsacramental outlook of Hegel and Schleiermacher, which are decidedly hostile to Catholicism.

One theologian whose work falls into Levering's category of Eucharistic idealism and who makes extensive use of Girard is Patrick T. McCormick. McCormick's Eucharistic theology is built around the idea of the Mass as a celebratory, egalitarian banquet. Drawing on Girard's early works, McCormick rejects the notion that Christ's death on the cross improves or transforms sacrifice; instead, Christ's death undoes sacrifice, making the Eucharist an "un-sacrifice."⁴⁹ Thus, the only sense in which the notion of ritual sacrifice functions in the celebration of the Eucharist is as a false, pre-Christian practice to be rejected. McCormick therefore objects to the notion of the priest "offering" Mass, preferring to speak of the priest as presiding at a celebration.⁵⁰ In fact, one consequence of McCormick's theology is that the role of the priest is minimized and loses its sacral character; McCormick describes the priest as simply "play[ing] the servant."⁵¹ Such language, suggesting the priesthood is a role into and out of which one easily moves, hints at a drift toward a "dramatic" or "theatrical" understanding of the sacraments. McCormick is uneasy with the idea of priesthood in part because he is uneasy with any form of hierarchy, including that created by the distinction between lay and ordained Christians.⁵² Indeed, McCormick treats the idea of service as incompatible with hierarchy, just as he treats ethical living as coming at the expense of religious ritual.⁵³

McCormick's claims, however, are problematic, both as an interpretation of Girard and as sacramental theology. McCormick's extreme un-sacrificial position may stem at least in part from a reliance exclusively on Girard's early works, leading him to conflate central Girardian concepts that, though related, Girard

clearly distinguishes. So, for example, McCormick conflates mimetic contagion with religion and scapegoating with sacrifice. In both cases, McCormick equates one process Girard refers to as Satanic (contagion and scapegoating) with humanity's attempts to head off contagion (religion and sacrifice). In Girard's thought, mimetic rivalry produces contagion, which leads to the death of the scapegoat; religion is the ritual attempt to prolong the tenuous peace produced by the scapegoat's death—but it is not the same as the original founding murder. We must remember that, for Girard, not only religion and sacrifice, but *all* human institutions grow out of this founding murder. If we reject sacrifice because of its origins, then we must also reject culture, which itself originates in sacrifice.

Furthermore, though McCormick clearly wishes for the Eucharist to maintain its central role in Catholic life and theology, it is not at all obvious that the paradigm he proposes to replace sacrifice is weighty enough to fill that role. The Second Vatican Council, employing terminology repeated in nearly every subsequent Church document on the subject, refers to the celebration of the Eucharist as both "source" and "summit" of the Catholic faith. Whatever else one gleans from Girard's anthropology, the central, foundational role of sacrifice is unarguable; sacrifice is a rich and compelling enough part of the human experience to form the foundation of human institutions, including the Church. A symbolic celebratory meal divorced from any sacrificial roots simply cannot bear the weight the Church's theology places upon the Eucharist as the source of our faith.⁵⁴ The Eucharist is the source of Catholic life because it is a sacrifice.

Like McCormick, the French sacramental theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet has written on the implications of mimetic theory for a sacrificial understanding of the Eucharist. Chauvet, however, takes a more critical view of Girard, as well as some of the other currents underlying McCormick's more radical position. Chauvet warns against a theology driven by reaction against the perceived excesses of the past, a warning that applies to McCormick's at times rather stilted characterization of pre-Vatican II Catholicism, with which he associates the sacrificial paradigm.⁵⁵ Chauvet's tone is less polemical than McCormick's, and his position on sacrifice is more nuanced. In fact, many of Chauvet's criticisms of Girard, which are based on his early work, are blunted by the nuances Girard himself develops later in his career.⁵⁶ For example, Chauvet accuses Girard of treating the tension between ritual and ethics as an opposition so that a sacrificial religion necessarily comes at the expense of ethical teaching and vice versa.⁵⁷ Girard's later emphasis on the ambiguity of sacrifice, however, allows him to avoid such an either/or dichotomy. Chauvet also faults Girard for ignoring the Church's eschatological nature, though Girard's insistence in *I See Satan* that

his work is anthropological rather than theological explains why eschatology, which is dependent on revelation, would be missing from his work. Girard's relative silence on the subject stems from his methodological constraints and shows one area in which his work requires complementary perspectives.

Despite such reservations, Chauvet takes Girard's work seriously. In fact, he argues that in light of Girard, the Eucharist should be thought of as an "anti-sacrifice."⁵⁸ This terminology is meant to distinguish his position both from a naive embrace of sacrificial language and from the rejection of the sacrificial paradigm we see in theologians such as McCormick ("un-sacrifice"). Chauvet does not mean to reject the idea of sacrifice with his use of the prefix "anti-"; instead, he intends both to limit the concept's importance and to reinterpret it. He argues that sacrificial imagery is one of several sets of symbolism that may be used to talk about the Eucharist, but he refuses to accord it any privileged place.⁵⁹ I would suggest that this argument puts Chauvet at odds with Girard, for mimetic theory treats sacrifice as foundational.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, even if one treats sacrificial symbolism as foundational, this by no means excludes other symbolisms, such as that of meal or banquet; in fact, both Scripture and tradition suggest that an adequate theology of the Eucharist demands multiple symbolisms. While retaining some notion of sacrifice, Chauvet recognizes the necessity of distinguishing between Jesus's action on the cross and all other forms of sacrifice. Christian sacrifice, he suggests, has the character of gift rather than transaction.⁶¹ In fact, because on the cross Christ's self-gift is complete, so far beyond any expectation of repayment, the very possibility of understanding Christ's sacrifice as transaction is precluded. Unlike the priesthood of pagan religions, Chauvet claims, the essence of the priesthood of Jesus, as described in the Letter to the Hebrews, is self-emptying.⁶²

Even though Chauvet's use of the term "anti-sacrifice" is intended to signify a middle position between un-sacrifice and sacrifice, the term has a rather negative connotation and emphasizes the way in which the Eucharist is discontinuous with previous forms of worship, including Jewish temple worship. In fact, some of contemporary theology's unease with sacrificial symbolism stems from an unduly negative attitude toward Jewish worship or a neglect of temple worship entirely. As already noted, though he acknowledges that we "do not have much choice" about whether to engage the concept of sacrifice in theology, Robert Daly is so uneasy with the notion that he at one point suggests "a realistic pastoral strategy" might be to avoid the word.⁶³ Part of Daly's unease with the concept of sacrifice comes from what he perceives as its negative connotations, namely that it requires giving up what we love.⁶⁴ More deeply, Daly's objections stem at least in part from the sharp distinction he draws between the

"history-of-religions liturgical-ritual sacrificial act" and Christianity; according to Daly, "sacrifice, in the history-of-religions sense of the word, [has] been done away with by the Christ-event."⁶⁵

The dichotomy Daly creates, however, and the conclusions that he draws are too absolute. In particular, he fails to grapple with the role of Jewish temple worship as occupying an intermediate place between the sacrifice of "world-religions" and the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Girard, it should be recalled, sees the Old Testament beginning the process of unveiling the single victim mechanism, which is brought to completion in the Gospels. However, he leaves largely unexplored the implications of the cult of temple sacrifice that pervades the Old Testament and figures heavily in the New Testament as well. The Gospel of Luke, for example, begins and ends in the temple. Because in the Old Testament, God both institutes the temple cult and demands sacrifice, reading such worship as just another example of the scapegoating mechanism is theologically inadequate.

Equally inadequate is the tendency, at one time prevalent though today largely rejected by Biblical scholars, to read the Bible as describing a progressive movement away from ritual sacrifices or cultic worship. Such a reading is at least implicit in McCormick's sharp distinction between ritual sacrifice and ethical living.⁶⁶ In this understanding, the general trajectory of the prophets is away from sacrifice and toward social justice. This reading, however, is a misleading oversimplification. Such a trajectory ignores entirely the postexilic prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, as well as (arguably) the greatest prophet of the exile, Ezekiel.⁶⁷ Even a scholar inclined to emphasize the tension between justice and sacrifice, such as Abraham Heschel, admits that, while the prophets condemn those who offer sacrifices with impure motives and dispositions, they never condemn sacrifice as such.⁶⁸ Contemporary Biblical scholarship has largely rejected the simplistic dichotomies on which McCormick relies.⁶⁹ As Biblical scholar Bruce Vawter explains, the Israelite prophets took Israel's temple religion as a given, condemning particular abuses to that religion as they arose; they were simply not concerned with sacrifice as an abstraction. If one were to read Isaiah, for example, out of his very particular context, one would have to reject not only sacrifice, but prayer itself (Isa. 1:15).⁷⁰ In fact, Isaiah foresees an expansion of the temple's significance, as it becomes the center of worship for all people, including the Gentiles: "their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar" (Isa. 56:6-7).⁷¹

Instead of rejecting sacrifice, the prophetic tradition argues consistently for a more expansive notion of sacrifice, a notion that includes right ethical conduct as a necessary prerequisite for Temple worship.⁷² Such a movement is

seen, for example, in Psalm 51, the great prayer of a repentant sinner who says to the Lord: “Thou hast no delight in sacrifice; were I to give a burnt offering, thou wouldst not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit” (Psalm 51:16–17). Taken alone, these verses might seem to devalue ritual sacrifice, but the psalm ends with a return to the temple and sacrifice, now rendered pleasing to God by a proper spiritual disposition: “Then wilt thou delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on thy altar” (Psalm 51:19). In the New Testament, such an approach is adopted by Jesus, who demands reconciliation with one’s neighbor not as a substitute, but as a prerequisite for offering ritual sacrifice (Matt. 5:23–24). Paul uses the metaphor of sacrifice in order to describe the whole of Christian life (Rom. 12:1). In all of these cases, Scripture presents the unity between worship and the rest of life as desirable; it does not reject the former in favor of the latter.

Furthermore, Jesus refers to his own body as the temple (John 2:21), a reference that would make little sense if he saw the temple in primarily negative terms. Several Jewish scholars have noted the significance of Jesus’s appropriation of temple imagery to describe himself, in part perhaps because they may be more inclined to see the temple in a favorable light than their Christian counterparts. Joseph Ratzinger quotes Rabbi Jacob Neusner as recognizing Jesus’s implicit identification with the temple in his dispute with the Pharisees over the Sabbath (Matt. 12:1–8): “[Jesus] and his disciples may do on the Sabbath what they do because they stand in the place of the priests of the Temple; the holy place has shifted, now being formed by the circle made up of the master and his disciples.”⁷³ Jesus indisputably presents himself as greater than the temple in this passage (Matt. 12:6). Such a claim has some force if we see the temple as an expression of falsehood, but it is even more radical if we accept the temple as good. Levenson unpacks the rich meaning of the temple in Jewish thought: not only is the temple a place of peace (96) and a specific place where God dwells in the Israelite community (91), it is the “meeting place of heaven and earth” (111), the fulcrum of the universe (122), the world’s moral center (111, 124), the place of creation and eschatological fulfillment (133, 126–27), the epitome and essence of the world (138), and the “locus of communication between God and man” (125).⁷⁴ Here the work of James Alison is especially valuable, for Alison’s extensive appropriation of Girard’s insights into his own systematic theology includes an interpretation of the Jerusalem temple cult consistent with the vital role it played in ancient Judaism. Like Levenson, Alison emphasizes the temple’s place at the center of creation, as the point out of which God’s creative power radiates toward the rest of creation.⁷⁵ This allows Alison to interpret the sacrificial actions of the priest within the temple as representing God’s own

self-giving, rather than a human attempt to placate a god in need of meat and blood. The work of atonement or forgiveness, Alison rightly points out, is an act of God toward us, rather than something achieved through human effort.⁷⁶ Alison's insights allow us to see Jesus's self-sacrifice in continuity with, rather than in opposition to, the temple liturgy.⁷⁷

While putting temple worship into a positive light, Alison does not ignore the bloody slaughter of animals at its heart, indeed providing a vivid description of the sounds and odors that would have characterized the experience of the temple.⁷⁸ This feature of temple worship is among the most clearly offensive to modern sensibilities. Some have attempted to answer objections to the notion of sacrifice in religious worship by arguing that Christianity represents the interiorization of such sacrifice.⁷⁹ Interiorizing sacrifice, however, only masks the problem rather than solving it. If sacrifice is objectionable because, for example, it involves pain—the pain of giving up what we love, as Daly puts it—it does not become unobjectionable because that pain has become psychological and interior. Furthermore, it is hard to see how such an abstract notion of sacrifice has much to do with Christ's Passion; whatever the torture and death of Jesus were, they were most certainly not an abstraction.

While Alison interprets temple worship as representing God's actions toward his people, Levering argues that it expresses Israel's longing for intimacy with God, a desire that finds its ultimate fulfillment in the Eucharist. According to Levering, this desire for intimate communion with God unifies both the prophetic and the sacrificial streams of the Hebrew Scriptures.⁸⁰ Leaving out the irreducibly bodily nature of Jewish temple worship undermines the expression of real intimacy because it leaves out our humanity, which includes our physical bodies and ultimately our mortality. Jewish philosopher Michael Wyschogrod puts the argument in stark terms:

Enlightened religion recoils with horror from the thought of sacrifice, preferring a spotless house of worship filled with organ music and exquisitely polite behavior. The price paid for such decorum is that the worshipper must leave the most problematic part of his self outside the temple, to reclaim it when the service is over and to live with it unencumbered by sanctification.⁸¹

Far from undermining Wyschogrod's argument, Girard's analysis supports it by emphasizing just how deeply rooted the phenomenon of sacrifice is in human life.

Levenson also argues that God's command to Israel to sacrifice is concrete and irreducible; it cannot be reduced to ethical principles.⁸² Determined not to

avoid the most difficult questions raised by Israel's religion, he takes up the most troubling form of sacrifice, child sacrifice, in *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*. Levenson claims that child sacrifice played a significant role in the religions of the Mediterranean world, perhaps even into the Christian era, and that Scriptural evidence shows that such sacrifice played a role in the religion of Israel as well.⁸³ The fact that child sacrifice remained at least a compelling memory in Israel's history can be seen, Levenson argues, in God's command in Exodus 22:28,⁸⁴ as well as in Genesis 22, the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac. Instead of following the theological consensus that Genesis 22 represents a simple repudiation of human sacrifice—Abraham is, after all, praised for his willingness to sacrifice Isaac—Levenson suggests that a far more complex process is at work in the Jewish Scriptures.⁸⁵ The sacrifice of the first-born, he claims, is not simply eradicated from Israel's history but is transformed from “a barbaric ritual into a sublime paradigm of the religious life.”⁸⁶ Levenson here expresses a sentiment very much in line with Christian thought, in which the brutal death of the Son of God is transformed into the gateway to eternal life.

The sacrifice of Isaac is particularly important for Levenson, who treats it as the foundation of Jewish temple worship and Jewish national identity.⁸⁷ The story also provides an Old Testament account of sacrifice that diverges in important ways from the Girardian model of mimetic contagion. God's command to sacrifice Isaac and later to substitute a ram for the boy⁸⁸ does not emerge out of mimetic rivalry, as does the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael in the previous chapter. Of course, one could simply dismiss the story as part of the Old Testament's not-yet-completely-overcome mythic baggage. But a theological reading of Genesis, as opposed to a merely anthropological reading, suggests the presence of a self-giving love not entirely explicable in mimetic terms. It is this dimension of self-giving, not whether one is bodily and the other spiritual, that Girard himself recognizes as the key factor differentiating the sacrifice of Jesus from the sacrifices of pagan religions.⁸⁹ In fact, Jesus's teaching about the nature of love is expressed in terms of self-sacrifice: “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). When God himself is understood as love, self-sacrifice, laying down one's life for one's friends, becomes a participation in the very nature of the divinity.

The strange and disturbing elements of Genesis 22 might cause us to overlook any traces of self-giving love, though Levenson points out that Jewish thought, particularly around the time of Christ, interpreted the story in terms of Isaac's willing self-surrender. In 4 Maccabees, most likely dating from the first century after Christ, Isaac is depicted as consenting to his own death, which is presented as an act of martyrdom.⁹⁰ Later rabbinic commentary likewise

focuses on Isaac's self-sacrifice.⁹¹ This emphasis on Isaac should not, however, imply that the story contains no self-sacrificial elements if seen from the point of view of Abraham. We must remember that, as Abraham's only son (a detail emphasized through repetition in verses 2 and 16), Isaac is Abraham's future; all that Abraham's life has meant, all that he has hoped for, all that God has promised him is embodied in Isaac. Thus, Wyschogrod argues that in sacrificing Isaac, Abraham shows himself willing to sacrifice "what is even more precious than the self."⁹² The depth of Abraham's self-gift might be difficult to grasp in a culture such as ours in which the individual rather than the community is the primary locus of identity, but it is more readily appreciated in Jewish exegesis. Levenson quotes a fourteenth-century commentator who explains, "If Abraham had had a hundred bodies, it would have been suitable to give them all up for the sake of Isaac."⁹³

Of course, reading the story as one about self-sacrifice does not make Abraham's long trek through the land of Moriah to kill Isaac any less anguishing. Levenson rightly criticizes the tendency toward sentimentalizing love in some Christian circles; his treatment of sacrificial violence in the Old Testament, as unflinching as Girard's, gives him penetrating insight into the nature of Christian love: "the father's gift that the Fourth Gospel has in mind is one that necessarily entails a bloody slaying of Jesus, very much, as we have seen along the lines of the slaughtering of the paschal lamb that Jesus becomes and also supersedes."⁹⁴ Sacrifice, in other words, involves real loss—even to the point of death. Daly's criticism of sacrificial language for having unavoidably negative connotations is, therefore, perceptive. The loss sacrifice entails should disturb us, just as the image of an innocent man tortured, nailed to a cross, and left to die, should disturb us. But Christianity teaches that it is precisely in such a place, with just such an innocent victim, that we find God. In contrast, Daly's attempts to avoid the negative or painful connotations of Christian love occasionally veer in the direction Levenson criticizes. He goes particularly wrong in arguing that the "true love stories" we see on TV implicitly express divine love; in fact, the popular culture's secular understanding of love, largely sentimental and often selfish, demonstrates the peril of preaching a version of love divorced from self-sacrifice.⁹⁵ In attempting to avoid overemphasizing suffering, Daly argues that there is no absolute divine necessity for Christ's suffering.⁹⁶ This may be true in an abstract philosophical sense, but, if so, there is no absolute divine necessity for Christ's Incarnation, either. On Calvary, Jesus does, in fact, reveal his divine nature, which is *infinitely self-giving love*. Expressing such infinite love in a finite world means real death, real sacrifice.⁹⁷ Seeking forms of love that do not involve suffering, in this world, can only lead away from Christ. The

cross is a nonnegotiable condition of discipleship (Matt. 10:38, 16:24; Mk. 8:34; Lk. 9:23).

This insight is entirely consistent with Girard's argument that in Christianity God identifies with innocent victims. What a theological perspective adds to Girard's anthropology is the belief that, in identifying with innocent victims, God is not only revealing to us a disturbing aspect of human nature, exposing the mimetic cycle of violence. He is at the same time—and here I agree with Daly's central insight—revealing the infinite self-giving love of the Trinity.⁹⁸ This theological perspective cannot be overemphasized, for without it the crucifixion remains merely didactic. In other words, we can gather from Girard's anthropology that the crucifixion teaches us a disturbing truth about ourselves, but the Christian faith proclaims much more than this. Christianity teaches that in the crucifixion, God's true nature is expressed, and the door to eternal life is opened. That door is self-sacrifice, losing our lives in order to be born anew in divine life. Such sacrifice is disturbing—even repugnant—to many today, but resistance to it should not surprise us, for, as Paul reminded the disturbed and perplexed Corinthians, “we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles” (1 Cor. 1:23).

Christian sacrifice is such a disturbing reality, in fact, that it can be faced only in the light of the Resurrection, that transformation of reality so radical that we dare to call the Mass, this act of God's self-sacrifice, a celebration. Far from rendering self-sacrifice irrelevant or obsolete, mimetic theory tells us why it is so necessary: because if we do not die to ourselves, to our egos and our limitless desires, we will sacrifice the innocent instead. To pretend that the choice is not terrifying would be to misunderstand it: we face idolatry or the cross.

GIRARD AND EUCHARISTIC THEOLOGY

Girard forces us to confront the cross as the decisive moment in the history of religion. Both man's self-deception and God's self-giving love are expressed on Calvary; both are expressed through sacrifice. As Gerald O'Collins and Michael Keenan Jones extensively document, the New Testament consistently uses sacrificial language to describe Christ's death.⁹⁹ At the Last Supper, moreover, Christ's death is explicitly connected to the Eucharist: “this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28). This understanding can be found in both Paul and the Gospels. However, in a crucial break from pre-Christian sacrificial paradigms, the New Testament portrays God, in the person of Jesus, as offering the sacrifice.¹⁰⁰

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Instead of leading us to avoid the use of sacrificial language in the celebration of the Eucharist, Girard's work reemphasizes the foundational nature of sacrifice. Instead of requiring an entirely new theological paradigm to understand the Eucharist, as McCormick advocates, Girard's work supports the traditional Catholic view that "the Eucharist [is] not only . . . a meal, but also and pre-eminently . . . a Sacrifice."¹⁰¹ Before attempting to integrate Girard's insights more deeply into Eucharistic theology, it is important to again clarify the limits of a Girardian reading of the liturgy. Girard provides us with an interpretive paradigm, but he cannot provide us with a complete Eucharistic theology. A Girardian reading can help to shed light on certain elements of the Eucharistic celebration that might otherwise be neglected and to correct erroneous interpretations, but it should not be understood as necessarily excluding other interpretive perspectives.

Nonetheless, the paradigm mimetic theory offers theology is both rich and powerful, and I believe it can aid our celebration of the Eucharist, participation in which is ultimately more important than theological discussion. Girard, I have argued, forces us to see the Paschal Mystery—the death and Resurrection of Jesus—as a divine act, distinct from the purely human sacrifices of pagan antiquity, which manage to delay the inexorable cycle of mimetic violence only temporarily. The sacrifice of the Mass cannot be understood as anything other than being present to the Paschal sacrifice, apart from which it cannot stand alone as sacrifice. This principle means that, if the Paschal Mystery is understood as divine act, the Mass also must be understood as God's action—an understanding consistent with Alison's claim that liturgy is something we undergo, something God does "for, towards, or at" us.¹⁰² That the Mass is fundamentally God's action, and not a function of human creativity, is perhaps the central idea of the liturgical theology of Joseph Ratzinger.

Before being elected pope, Ratzinger—with no little controversy—critiqued the creeping marginalization of the divine in contemporary liturgical practice and theology.¹⁰³ To understand Ratzinger's critique, as well its connection to mimetic theory, one only has to look at Bernard Cooke's article on the liturgy "*Sacrosanctum Concilium*: Vatican II Time Bomb." Like McCormick, Cooke sees the celebration of the Eucharist primarily in terms of the gathered community. In fact, Cooke "demands the *abandonment* of 'the God who is up in heaven' in exchange for 'the God who is present to creation and especially to God's people.'"¹⁰⁴ He rejects the notion of sacramental grace as something external, something originating from a transcendent—totally other—God.¹⁰⁵ Remarkably, he seems to imply that grace is the natural product of human activity.¹⁰⁶ Cooke bases his case largely on anthropological grounds, claiming that

recent research into “the effectiveness of ritual as such” eliminates the need to posit external divine causation.¹⁰⁷ Cooke seems to see the goal of the liturgy as producing “a eucharistic experience.”¹⁰⁸ He argues that research into non-Christian ritual shows that ritual as such, as the product of human creativity, is effective at producing such an experience.¹⁰⁹ Because he refuses to allow any vertical—from God down—causation in the liturgy, the effectiveness of the liturgy becomes totally dependent on the assembly, with even “the risen Christ” reduced to the role of “co-agent of the ritual.”¹¹⁰

Cooke’s liturgical theology provides a dramatic example of the theological trends lamented by Ratzinger, not to mention Matthew Levering. His explicit appeal to the rituals of world religions, however, allows us to demonstrate how mimetic theory challenges such trends. Girard would agree that non-Christian religious rituals do produce results; in fact, they produce the conditions necessary for the formation of community. But Girard would also point out that until we reach the sacrifice of Christ, such rituals are also inevitably tainted with falsehood; rituals can hold contagion at bay for a time, but human beings are incapable of overcoming the cycle of mimetic violence on their own. The notion of the Eucharist as the product of human activity is as problematic on the grounds of Girardian anthropology as it is on the grounds of Ratzingerian theology.

Moreover, mimetic theory forces us to go deeper in challenging the assumptions underlying Cooke’s claims. In doing so, however, it also challenges some more broadly cherished Western values. Girard’s analysis highlights what is one of the more disturbing aspects of the Passion accounts for those of us shaped by the ethos of the democratic West: the role of the crowd. The democratic sentiments of our time tend to idealize “the people,” with politicians of all parties invoking “the will of the people” as their guide. An inscription I recall from a high school visit to the Minnesota State Capitol—*Vox populi, vox Dei*, “the voice of the people is the voice of God”—expresses just such a sentiment, a sentiment thoroughly undermined by Girard’s account of the single victim mechanism. In Girard’s paradigmatic story, the people unite against the innocent single victim, just as in the Passion accounts the crowd turns against Jesus with the cry “Crucify him!” When Pilate offers the crowd the opportunity to release Jesus or Barabbas, the people choose to free the guilty and kill the innocent. If there is one thing Girard’s reading of the Passion makes clear, it is that the people are not God. To replace a heavenly God with a democratic God and reduce Christ to “co-agent” in the liturgy, as Cooke suggests, amounts to a sophisticated form of idolatry.

In stark contrast to the unanimous crowd in Girard's narrative stands the single victim, in the case of the Passion, Jesus, abandoned even by his disciples. A Girardian reading highlights the significance of Christ as a lone individual, abandoned by all, who, it must be added, nonetheless represents the whole of humanity. Translated into the language of ritual, this insight means that when re-presenting Christ's sacrifice, the symbolic importance of the priest, a single individual who nonetheless represents the Church, should not be overlooked.

This emphasis contrasts sharply with the work of both McCormick and Cooke, who minimize the role of the priest, seeing him mostly as coordinator of the assembly's actions rather than mediator between God and humanity. Ratzinger also criticizes the erosion of an intelligible understanding of priesthood in theologies that ignore the foundational role of the Jewish temple in Christian worship, theologies Levering would label as Eucharistic idealism.¹¹¹ Girardian anthropology, on the other hand, provides a basis by which priesthood can be understood as necessary for sacrifice; Christian priesthood originates in the "single victimhood" of Christ.¹¹²

Christ's priesthood, therefore, cannot be understood as separable from his victimhood. As Chauvet points out, the essence of Jesus's priesthood is self-emptying.¹¹³ This accords with a major emphasis of Ratzinger's critique of contemporary liturgical practice in which an overemphasis on human activity and liturgical "creativity" has placed an undue spotlight on the personality of the priest, even to the point of overshadowing the objective work of God.¹¹⁴ In a real sense, the role of the priest, Ratzinger argues, is to "[step] back and [make] way for the *actio divina*, the action of God."¹¹⁵ In other words, both Girardian and Ratzingerian sensibilities tend to highlight the role of the individual priest precisely as they minimize the priest as individual.

Far from being the center of attention, then, the priest as an individual becomes a placeholder for Christ; he is meant to be, in a sense, transparent. Mimetic theory's emphasis on Christ as a single victim highlights the way in which the priest is "set apart" at the liturgy. However, it also helps us make sense of the Second Vatican Council's proposition that being "set apart" does not mean that the priest's work is "separate" from that of other Christians.¹¹⁶ Indeed, Christ's sacrifice is something to which all Christians must be joined; whereas the scapegoating mechanism unites a community *against* a victim, the Church is a community united in solidarity *with* a Victim. This solidarity should not be confused with a shallow egalitarianism, for a Girardian analysis suggests that some sense of noncompetitive distinctiveness is necessary.¹¹⁷ In order both to preserve the uniqueness of a priestly role and to avoid mimetic rivalry, theology must articulate a sense of lay participation that can be understood as

complementary to the priest's role and vice versa. The Second Vatican Council hints at just such an understanding, insisting that the ordained priesthood and the "common priesthood of the faithful" differ "not only in degree" but also "in essence."¹¹⁸

Some contemporary theologians seem dogged by the anxiety that emphasizing the uniqueness of a priestly role in the Mass will necessarily entail a diminished role for the laity, though this need not be the case. Girard's analysis suggests that the starting point for understanding lay participation in the liturgy would also be self-sacrifice. In this context, Paul's exhortation to the Romans seems particularly apt: "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" (Rom. 12:1). In other words, the essence of lay participation in the liturgy must also be self-offering, though in a more personal and subjective way than what is allowed to the priest.¹¹⁹ Such an understanding is consistent with the vision of the Second Vatican Council.¹²⁰ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the council's constitution on the sacred liturgy, treats the self-offering of the laity as indispensable for the sanctification of the world. Here, as distinct from the objective offering of the priest, the subjective nature of the laity's offering is of primary importance. For it is by bringing their own diverse experiences of the world to the altar—and then returning to the world transformed by the sacrifice—that the laity do the work of extending the impact of Christ's sacrifice beyond the duration of the Mass. On a personal note, I have observed in my own catechetical and pastoral work that the notion of self-offering can be a powerful tool for opening up deeper participation in the liturgy. Emphasizing this idea moves the focus away from the anxious question "What am getting out of Mass?" to the question "What am I offering to God at Mass?" Such a shift in emphasis runs counter to the instincts of a consumer culture focused on acquisition but is more conducive to the worshipper's participation in the self-sacrificing love of Christ.

Here we are entering into questions that move beyond the scope of Girard's work and require the full resources of a theological tradition to address. Nonetheless, I hope that by raising such questions as the nature of priesthood and the participation of the laity in the liturgy, the potential for Girard's work to contribute to that tradition has become apparent. Mimetic theory can make a constructive contribution to theology by challenging certain of our cultural assumptions and by highlighting concepts that focus our attention on the choice between competitive acquisition and self-offering.

CONCLUSION

René Girard's work, I hope to have shown, can be understood in a way that complements rather than undermines orthodox Catholic Eucharistic theology. Any theology of the Eucharist must necessarily grapple with the complexities and tensions posed by the concept of sacrifice. Girard presents sacrifice as a foundational human act that, as a human act, expresses both violence and a yearning for peace. His anthropological story brings us to the threshold of the Resurrection, in the light of which we can see sacrifice also as the means by which—in both the Old and New Testaments—God projects his infinite self-giving love into a fallen and finite world. Girard's thought draws attention to the importance of sacrifice as a paradigm for understanding the Mass and should be distinguished from the theological trend of Eucharistic idealism, which minimizes the importance of religion, worship, and sacrifice. At the same time, mimetic theory does not allow us to use the word "sacrifice" naively, without carefully distinguishing between self-sacrifice and the destruction of others. While not an "infallible theory," Girard's work can make a constructive contribution to Catholic sacramental theology precisely by highlighting the necessity of emphasizing the sacrifice of the Mass as a divine and not merely human act. In fact, reading Girard gives new life and meaning to the traditional phrase "the holy sacrifice of the Mass," allowing us to see that this act of worship makes present that central moment in human history when seemingly endless cycles of violence and falsity are brought to a halt by the limitless self-offering of God.

NOTES

1. Robert J. Daly, "Sacrifice Unveiled or Sacrifice Revisited: Trinitarian and Liturgical Perspectives," *Theological Studies* 64 (2003): 41; Robert J. Daly, *Sacrifice Unveiled: The True Meaning of Christian Sacrifice* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2009), 5.
2. For an overview of Girard's evolution on this question, see Michael Kirwan, *Girard and Theology* (T&T Clark, 2009), 76–79. For a concise evaluation of Girard's engagement with Schwager, see James G. Williams, "Dialogue on Sacrifice and Orthodoxy: Reflections on the Schwager-Girard Correspondence," *Contagion* 21 (2014), an issue that dedicates five articles to the Girard-Schwager relationship.
3. Williams, "Dialogue on Sacrifice and Orthodoxy," 50.
4. René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 3.
5. Augustine understands such infinite desire to be directed toward God. But, as his biography suggests, he also believes that until our limitless desire comes to rest in God, it will fix on almost any variety of ultimately unsatisfying objects: "to praise you [Lord] is

- the desire of man, a little piece of your creation. You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you” (Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick [New York: Oxford University Press, 1992], I.1).
6. Girard, *I See Satan*, 3.
 7. Girard, *I See Satan*, 15.
 8. Girard, *I See Satan*, 9–10.
 9. Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 7; Girard, *I See Satan*, 10, 16.
 10. Girard, *I See Satan*, 16.
 11. Girard, *I See Satan*, 12, 22.
 12. Girard, *I See Satan*, 22–4.
 13. Girard, *I See Satan*, 85.
 14. Girard, *I See Satan*, 64.
 15. Girard, *I See Satan*, 68.
 16. Girard, *I See Satan*, 41.
 17. Girard, *I See Satan*, 19.
 18. Girard, *I See Satan*, 32–46.
 19. Girard, *I See Satan*, 65–6.
 20. Girard, *I See Satan*, 79.
 21. Girard, *I See Satan*, 89–90.
 22. In his emphasis on the religious roots of culture, we can already begin to see a certain consonance between Girard’s thought and the intellectual and pastoral project of Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI, who was critical of contemporary secularism’s blindness toward the Christian foundations of European culture. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 82; Girard, *I See Satan*, 92.
 23. Girard, *I See Satan*, 98.
 24. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 32.
 25. Girard, *I See Satan*, 114–115.
 26. Girard, *I See Satan*, 72–4. This claim needs to be supplemented to be theologically adequate, for those who act falsely by destroying innocent victims do damage to themselves—sin—which God alone can repair. In different senses, Christ identifies with both sinners and victims (Rm. 5:6–8). The claim that all are implicated in sin, which Paul makes so memorably in the opening chapters of Romans, can be reconciled with Girard’s thought because of the universality of contagion. Schwager’s emphasis on Christ’s internal “identification with the anxiety, distress, and alienation of human beings due to sin” seems aimed at addressing this lacuna in mimetic theory (Williams, “Dialogue on Sacrifice and Orthodoxy,” 51).
 27. Girard, *I See Satan*, 123.

28. Girard, *I See Satan*, 115–16.
29. Girard, *I See Satan*, 108–9.
30. Girard, *I See Satan*, 106.
31. Girard, *I See Satan*, 123.
32. Girard, *I See Satan*, 189.
33. Girard, *I See Satan*, 190. A remark in *Things Hidden* foreshadows the evolution of Girard's thought on sacrifice by expressing awareness of the potential for mimetic theory to overreach in condemning "sacrificial Christianity" (Girard, *Things Hidden*, 245). This early self-awareness matures into the insistence in *I See Satan* that his work is only "indirectly theological" (Girard, *I See Satan*, 191–92).
34. Girard, *I See Satan*, 192.
35. For example, see Alison's wide-ranging *Jesus the Forgiving Victim* (James Alison, *Jesus the Forgiving Victim: Listening for the Unheard Voice* [Glenview: Doers Publishing, 2013], 239–45. Kindle Edition.) Girard himself also provides examples of Scriptural interpretation, such as a trenchant reading of the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3–11; Girard, *I See Satan*, 54–58).
36. Michael Kirwan, *Discovering Girard* (Lanham: Cowley Publications, 2005), 90–93. It is worth noting that others, such as Alison, emphasize the scientific nature of Girard's theory to a much greater extent than I do here, arguing that recent research in neuroscience supports Girard's understanding of how our behaviors are shaped through mimesis (James Alison, "We Didn't Invent Sacrifice, Sacrifice Invented Us: Unpacking Girard's Insight," *Concilium* 2013/4, <http://www.jamesalison.co.uk/pdf/eng73.pdf>, 3–4).
37. "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," Pontifical Biblical Commission, last modified August 1, 2005, http://catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/PBC_Interp1.htm.
38. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 2000).
39. Girard, *I See Satan*, 171.
40. Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (New York: HarperOne, 1985), 103.
41. Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 3–4.
42. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, 53–54.
43. Levenson, 1988, 54.
44. Drasko Dizdar, for example, makes extensive use of mimetic theory in his recent commentary on the liturgy *Sheer Grace: Living the Mystery of God* (New York: Paulist Press, 2008).
45. Matthew Levering, *Sacrifice and Community: Jewish Offering and Christian Eucharist* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 8.
46. Levering, *Sacrifice and Community*, 12–15.
47. Levering, *Sacrifice and Community*, 17–19.

48. Levering, *Sacrifice and Community*, 16–24.
49. Patrick T. McCormick, *A Banqueter's Guide to the All-Night Soup Kitchen of the Kingdom of God* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004), 130–36. McCormick goes somewhat further than Luther or Calvin by calling into question not just the Eucharist as sacrifice, but Christ's death as an expiatory sacrifice as well. The Reformers did not deny that Christ's death was a sacrifice, only that the Mass could be seen as participation in that sacrifice. Traditional Catholic theology is clear in maintaining that the Eucharist can never be understood independent of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross (Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan and Madeleine Beaumont [Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995], 291).
50. McCormick, *A Banqueter's Guide*, 111. The erosion of a role for priesthood is the inevitable consequence of the rejection of a sacrificial paradigm, for, as St. John Chrysostom put it, "there is no priest without a sacrifice." Chrysostom was paraphrasing Hebrews: "every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices" (8:3) (Gerald O'Collins and Michael Keenan Jones, *Jesus Our Priest* [New York: Oxford, 2010], 79).
51. McCormick, *A Banqueter's Guide*, 68.
52. McCormick, *A Banqueter's Guide*, 61–68.
53. McCormick, *A Banqueter's Guide*, 64, 132–33.
54. To put the issue pragmatically, if the Eucharist is merely a symbolic communal meal, why not replace it with a genuine communal meal? Why not skip Mass and go straight to brunch?
55. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 290–91; McCormick, *A Banqueter's Guide*, 111–15.
56. Alison's delineation of what Girard does and does not claim at least implicitly addresses many of Chauvet's concerns (Alison, "We Didn't Invent Sacrifice," 3–6).
57. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 307.
58. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 311.
59. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 302.
60. Church documents also seem to accord sacrifice a special prominence. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* uses sacrificial language to describe the Mass more often than other paradigms, such as those of meal or banquet. More recently, *Redemptionis Sacramentum* refers to the Eucharist as "pre-eminently" a sacrifice (38).
61. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 298, 310.
62. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 298.
63. Daly, "Sacrifice Unveiled or Sacrifice Revisited," 24, 41; see also, Daly, *Sacrifice Unveiled*, 230.
64. Daly, "Sacrifice Unveiled or Sacrifice Revisited," 40.
65. Robert J. Daly, "Robert Bellarmine and Post-Tridentine Eucharistic Theology," *Theological Studies* 61 (2000): 245.
66. Daly correctly critiques as inadequate the claim that the prophets rejected sacrifice, noting that "the very criticism of the prophets assumes the existence and the

- 'effectiveness' of the sacrificial system" (Daly, *Sacrifice Unveiled*, 33–34). However, his work at times still suffers from the assumption that ritual worship can (and probably should) be reduced to or replaced by ethics (for example, see, Daly, *Sacrifice Unveiled*, 3, 69–70, 225–26).
67. The degree to which the preexilic prophets were themselves participants in the Israelite cult remains a matter of scholarly debate, which is unlikely to be entirely resolved due to the absence of definitive evidence (Vawter, 193).
 68. Levering, *Sacrifice and Community*, 169–171.
 69. See, for example, Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart's refutation of the idea of dichotomizing Israel's history into cultic/sacrificial vs. prophetic/ethical phases (Levering, *Sacrifice and Community*, 66–67).
 70. Bruce Vawter, "Introduction to Prophetic Literature," *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1990), 193.
 71. O'Collins and Jones, *Jesus Our Priest*, 5–6.
 72. Levenson highlights the ethical presuppositions implicit in temple worship, aiming to correct what he sees as a bias in Biblical scholarship that regards the temple as "a source of corruption" rather than "a place of electrifying holiness that cannot tolerate injustice" (Levenson, 1985, 169–70).
 73. Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 108.
 74. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*.
 75. James Alison, *Jesus the Forgiving Victim: Listening for the Unheard Voice* (Glenview: Doers Publishing, 2013), 239–45. Kindle Edition.
 76. Referring specifically to the liturgy for the Feast of the Atonement, Alison argues that the "lamb is a stand-in for the priest, who is a stand-in for YHWH" (Alison, "We Didn't Invent Sacrifice," 245). The sprinkling of the lamb's blood over the temple and the people represents God's "self-sacrifice for the people."
 77. Alison's use of the term "secularizing" to describe Christianity's relationship to Jewish temple worship strikes me as a false note in his presentation (Philip McCosker, "Sacrifice in Recent Roman Catholic Thought: From Paradox to Polarity, and Back Again?" *Sacrifice and Modern Thought*, eds. Julia Meszaros and Johannes Zachhuber [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013], 144). The more biblical language of "fulfillment" suggests a more positive relationship.
 78. Alison, *Jesus the Forgiving Victim*, 237–38.
 79. Kirwan, *Girard and Theology*, 77; Dennis King Keenan, "The Sacrifice of the Eucharist," *Heythrop Journal* 44. no. 2 (2003): 189.
 80. In a parallel way, Ratzinger argues that the theme of the Suffering Servant unites what may seem to be diverging trajectories in the Old Testament (McCosker, "Sacrifice in Recent Roman Catholic Thought," 141). What is perhaps most important is the fundamental insight that ethical and cultic, prophetic and priestly streams of thought should not be read as oppositions.

81. Quoted in Levering, *Sacrifice and Community*, 43.
82. At times even Alison seems to privilege the ethical over the cultic (Alison, “We Didn’t Invent Sacrifice,” 8–9). What strikes me as a false step, however, comes in the service of an overarching argument that we should seek an “uninterrupted flow” between participation in Mass and our daily actions. Elsewhere, Alison quite lucidly argues that Christianity cannot be reduced to morals (Alison, *Jesus the Forgiving Victim*, 11). I suspect that language that strikes me as reductionist may reflect just how thoroughly Eucharistic idealism has penetrated our theological discourse, even though the fundamental logic of Alison’s theology would seem to steer us away from the pitfalls of that trend. Though Alison’s work clearly merits exploring these nuances further, space does not allow us to do so here.
83. Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 13–25.
84. “You shall give Me the first-born among your sons,” Levenson’s translation.
85. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, 12–13.
86. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, x.
87. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, 174. The other Jewish scholars Levering surveys give the story a similar importance (Levering, *Sacrifice and Community*, 29–45).
88. Or, as many of the rabbis suggest, the young man. Midrashic calculations based on the age of Sarah put Isaac’s age at the time of the sacrifice anywhere between 15 and 26. An older age for Isaac bolsters traditions that emphasize his willing submission to be sacrificed (Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, 133).
89. “One has to make a distinction between the sacrifice of others and self-sacrifice. Christ says to the Father: ‘you wanted neither holocaust nor sacrifice; then I said: “Here I am.”’ I prefer to sacrifice myself rather than sacrifice the other. But this still has to be called sacrifice. When we say ‘sacrifice’ in our modern languages it has only the Christian sense. Therefore the passion is entirely justified. God says: If nobody else is good enough to sacrifice himself rather than his brother, I will do it. Therefore I fulfil God’s requirement for man. I prefer to die than to kill. But all other men prefer to kill than to die” (Girard, quoted in Kirwan, *Girard and Theology*, 79).
90. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, 187–89.
91. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, 190–92.
92. Levering, *Sacrifice and Community*, 45.
93. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, 128.
94. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, 223.
95. Daly, *Sacrifice Unveiled*, 235.
96. Daly, *Sacrifice Unveiled*, 106. Alison shares a similar concern that Christ should not be seen as acting out of a death wish (McCosker, “Sacrifice in Recent Roman Catholic Thought,” 143). However, once we are speaking of self-giving within a finite world, we are speaking of sacrifice. Indeed, the Incarnation itself represents a sacrifice—a self-emptying including the acceptance of death—in some ways greater than Jesus’s self-sacrifice on Calvary.

97. Herbert McCabe uses the metaphor of film projection to make this point. If God's nature is thought of as the light of the projection itself, and this light is projected onto the screen of human violence and cruelty, the image that emerges is the crucifixion, product of both elements. Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (New York: Continuum, 1987).
98. Daly, *Sacrifice Unveiled*, 228.
99. O'Collins and Jones, *Jesus Our Priest*, 1–67.
100. O'Collins and Jones, *Jesus Our Priest*, 31. If we accept Alison's interpretation of Jerusalem temple worship discussed above, we can see this divine self-offering anticipated symbolically in the Jewish liturgy.
101. *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, 38, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20040423_redemptionis-sacramentum_en.html.
102. Alison, *Jesus the Forgiving Victim*, 232.
103. Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 80.
104. Bernard Cooke, "Sacrosanctum Concilium: Vatican II Time Bomb," *Horizons* 31, no. 1 (2004): 108, emphasis in the original.
105. Cooke, "Sacrosanctum Concilium," 107, 112.
106. Cooke, "Sacrosanctum Concilium," 112.
107. Cooke, "Sacrosanctum Concilium," 105, 107.
108. Cooke, "Sacrosanctum Concilium," 111.
109. Cooke, "Sacrosanctum Concilium," 110.
110. Cooke, "Sacrosanctum Concilium," 108.
111. Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 49.
112. This emphasis on the aloneness of the priest, who acts in the person of Christ the priest and single victim, has profound implications for the spirituality of the priesthood. Among other things, such an emphasis hints at why celibacy would be considered a characteristically priestly discipline in the Latin Church.
113. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 298.
114. Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 80. Ratzinger's suspicion of "liturgical creativity" echoes the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, which grants authority for the regulation of the liturgy to the Apostolic See and bishop. "Therefore no other person, even if he be a priest, may add, remove, or change anything in the liturgy on his own authority" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 22, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html).
115. Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 172.
116. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_presbyterorum-ordinis_en.html.
117. Girard's observation that mimetic rivalry is strongest among twins helps to explain why the attempt to impose a secular notion of egalitarianism upon the liturgy feeds into what are colloquially called in Catholic circles the "liturgy wars." These "wars" are fueled by

an implicit clericalism in which only those things done (or once done) by the priest are deemed to matter; thus some communities experience disputes over who is allowed to distribute communion, to clean the sacred vessels, or to read parts of the Mass reserved to the priest. The push for lay people to perform functions officially reserved to the clergy stems from the failure to articulate (or appreciate) the importance of a uniquely lay form of participation in the sacrifice of the Mass.

118. *Lumen Gentium*, 10, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.
119. Avery Dulles notes that the priest's radical identification with Christ goes far beyond "play-acting"; it touches on his individuality, his being and personhood (Avery Dulles, "The Eucharist as Sacrifice," *Rediscovering the Eucharist: Ecumenical Conversations*, ed. Roch A. Kereszty [New York: Paulist Press, 2003], 183). The Church has traditionally used the language of "ontological change" to describe the effects of ordination on a man who is to become a priest. This ontological change is best understood in terms of self-emptying, a loss of self; the priest offers himself to God at his ordination so that when he acts in *persona Christi* at Mass, he can offer, not his own sacrifice, but the sacrifice of Christ.
120. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 48.

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