



## The Body of Christ: The Eucharist and Politics

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THERE IS NOTHING THAT UNNERVES AN ACADEMIC THEOLOGIAN MORE THAN being told that his or her work has been found useful. I received an e-mail recently from a pastor who was dealing with a crisis in his church. One of his faithful congregants, a man who had undergone a conversion of life in the church, had been arrested for complicity in a murder committed some years ago. The pastor and the congregation were convinced of the man's innocence, but the police had isolated him and were trying their best to cut off contact between the man and his community. The pastor had just read my book *Torture and Eucharist* and saw many applications of my analysis of state power to the reality which was unfolding before his eyes. In continued reflection with him on this situation I have been forced to think more deeply and more specifically about the pastoral commitments embedded in my work.

*Torture and Eucharist* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) is about the church's resistance to abuses under the Pinochet regime in Chile, but very few Chileans have read it. It has appeared so far in English and French, and is clearly directed at a North Atlantic audience. Though the analysis of the church in Chile is detailed, the book enters broader conversations about the way power is configured in modernity and how Christians negotiate that power. Until now, however, I have never

*The church, as body of Christ, is called to be an alternative to the atomization of U.S. society promoted by individualism, the market, and the state. As an alternative social body, the church realizes the eucharistic imperative to be what we receive, to become the body of Christ and allow others to feed on us.*

had to think through the pastoral implications for the church “on the ground” in the United States. At the invitation of the editors of *Word & World*, I offer a few such thoughts here. Chile under military dictatorship is, in one sense, both literally and figuratively a world away from the North American context. In another sense, however, the isolation of individuals and the atomization of the body politic in both contexts share very similar pathologies. I will make some suggestions, therefore, on how the eucharist can be a source of Christian discipleship in the United States as it was in Chile.

### I. THE ATOMIZATION OF THE BODY

After spending two years living and working with the Catholic Church in a poor neighborhood of Santiago under the Pinochet regime, I immersed myself in research of the archives of the regime’s abuses compiled by the Archdiocese of Santiago. In reading first-hand accounts of torture, I began to suspect that the goal of the procedure was not the one stated. In very few cases was information actually sought, regardless of what the interrogator said. Torture was used instead as a type of ritual, a liturgy, which realized the power of the state on the bodies of its victims. Because armed resistance to the military regime was practically nonexistent, the regime had a need for enemies. Torture, its atmosphere of fear and fabricated confessions, helped produce the enemies the regime needed to justify itself as the defender of Chile against an enemy it had itself created. What happened is not adequately described as “repression” but rather the *production* of chaos from which the violence of the regime was necessary to rescue the country.

Victims of torture were silenced, their voices and their very identities disarticulated by the trauma undergone. The intended target was not so much individual bodies, however, but social bodies that would rival the state’s power. With the spread of fear in the body politic, people learned to keep to themselves and avoid contact with others. Parties, unions, cooperatives, women’s groups, base communities all were dismantled and “disappeared.” At the same time, the secret police apparatus itself remained invisible, making people disappear off the street without a trace, taking them to clandestine torture centers, causing horrific pain but leaving no marks on the bodies of its victims. The overall effect in society at large was that of Foucault’s Panopticon: people were cut off from each other but perfectly visible to the secret police, which could see but was not seen.

Unfortunately, the Chilean church’s resistance to this discipline was initially sapped by its own ecclesiology. In a well-intentioned attempt to extricate itself from coercive politics, the Catholic Church since the 1930s had accepted a distinction between “political” and “social” realms, vacating the former and trying to influence the latter through the articulation of general values to individual Christians. The church saw itself not so much as a body in its own right, but as the “soul of society,” effectively handing the bodies of Christians over to the state.

When the state began to torture those bodies, the church was at first at a loss to respond, having already “disappeared” itself through its own ecclesiology.

Fortunately, a significant portion of the church was able to break out of this paradigm and, drawing on the theology and practice of the eucharist, made the church a visible body in direct contradiction to the regime’s strategy of atomization. The church reappeared by excommunicating torturers, providing a space for grassroots groups to organize, and participating in street protests against the regime and its policy of torture. If the regime’s strategy was one of scattering, the contrary Christian strategy was one of gathering, what I describe as the eucharistic counter-politics of the body of Christ.

## II. THE NORTH AMERICAN CONTEXT

In common conversation “torture” is sometimes used in a hyperbolic way to denote any type of oppression or inconvenience: sitting in traffic for two hours was “torture,” my boss is “torturing” me, and so on. In the strict sense of the term, however, there is very little torture in the United States. We enjoy civil liberties that, we are told, are the envy of the rest of the world. There is simply no comparison between the fear that pervaded Chile under military rule and the sense of security that a U.S. citizen feels when she sees the police pursuing their duties.

On closer examination, however, the gulf between the two situations begins to narrow a bit. Amnesty International has issued reports highly critical of the use of solitary confinement in U.S. maximum security prisons, as well as of scattered cases of police brutality. In the wake of the September 11 attacks, anti-terrorism legislation has already been passed which curtails certain civil liberties and expands police surveillance powers. Hundreds of people are being held in connection with the attacks, but the government has so far refused to identify them or reveal where they are being held. As Kate Martin of the Center for National Security Studies has recently said, “The secret detention of more than 800 people over the past few weeks is frighteningly close to the practice of ‘disappearing’ people in Latin America.” Senior FBI and CIA officials have been publicly debating the use of “physical pressure” or torture on uncooperative terrorist suspects, the targeted assassination of suspects, and the possibility of extraditing suspects to countries such as Israel and Saudi Arabia that use torture. Indeed, American exporting of torture is not new. After years of denials, the Pentagon was forced to admit officially on September 20, 1996, that Army intelligence manuals used to train Latin American military officers at the School of the Americas at Ft. Benning, Georgia, contained instructions on torture techniques. In the case of Chile, the coup that put Pinochet in power on September 11, 1973, was supported and in part engineered by American intelligence operatives. Chileans have their own reason to remember the date 9/11, and it does not reflect well on the United States’s role in the region.

Amnesia about the United States’s foreign policy history in the third world has defined official responses to the September 11 attacks. We are now in a posi-

tion of “responding” to the attacks; there is no sense that the attacks themselves—while horrific and entirely unjustifiable—stand in a chain of events with a much longer historical trajectory. Islamic fundamentalism first burst into American consciousness in 1979, when our TV screens were filled with Iranians chanting “Death to America.” Absent from our consciousness was the fact that the Shah’s regime of torture that the Ayatollah had just overthrown was established by the United States in 1953 through the overthrow of a democratically elected government. Now, however, we are told that Islamic extremism is irrational and inexplicable, and can only be dealt with militarily. We are also being asked to prepare to sacrifice some of the niceties of a free and democratic society for this cause. There is little sense that the U.S. government has helped create the threats from which it now vows to protect us.

Nevertheless, while it would be unwise to downplay the erosion of civil liberties in the war without end that is now upon us, I am more interested in a more generalized dynamic of atomization that defines our context. For although torture is largely absent from American domestic life, the fragmentation and atomization of social life in the United States is a cause of ongoing concern to many within and without the church. It is a reality that pastors confront on a daily basis, and it is a reality that threatens the very coherence of the body of Christ. At least since Robert Bellah’s landmark study *Habits of the Heart* (1985) explored American individualism and fragmentation, many in the church have been concerned with how to preach the gospel in a world for which community is at best a “lifestyle option.”

We live in the most litigious society in the history of the world, a place where even Christians drag each other before the law courts to settle any differences. Paul excoriates the Christians at Corinth for doing the same (1 Cor 6:1-6). It is a sign that we live in a society of strangers, where interpersonal relationships are mediated by presenting claims of formal rights against one another. And while individual rights may seem to be the very antithesis of the all-powerful state, in fact the state and individual rights appear together in the formation of modern western society. In medieval society, power and responsibilities were diffuse, residing in an overlapping jumble of local bodies. The loosening of the individual from the claims of custom, town, church, landowner, guild, and clan coincided with the establishment of one single, unquestioned political center, the state. The main conflict of modern politics is not state versus individual, but state versus intermediate social group. The main actors today are the state and the individual. To protect the individual from interference, the state has had to overcome the power of other social groups. To cite but one example: laws requiring underage girls to notify their parents when having an abortion have been struck down as an infringement of individual rights. The individual is seen to need protection by the state against her own family. The power of the state has thus grown exponentially to guarantee the rights of the atomic individual against interference from groups and to protect the individual from all the other individuals it confronts as strangers.

Ironically, then, both torture and the language of rights issue from the same dynamic of atomization on which the modern state is founded. Rights transfer power from social groups to the state in order to build a protective wall around the individual. Torture also aims at building walls around the individual—except the walls have ceased to be protective. This is not, of course, to say that rights and torture are equivalent. It is only to say that atomization is a common pathology of modern states and is a severe problem for the church wherever it is found, as the church is one of the groups that is compromised in the calculus of state and individual.

Witness the way the church has largely allowed the care of the poor to be taken over by the state. From the gospel imperative to feed the hungry person, clothe the naked person, visit the sick person, at a personal sacrifice, we have moved to a model of state social programs that remove the poor person from our sight. Money is extracted from our paychecks and sent to state bureaucracies that eliminate the burden of face-to-face contact from our list of evangelical requirements. When the poor are not being fed, the churches can often think of nothing better to do than to lobby the state legislature.

It should be clear, however, that resistance to state control is not necessarily a plea for reliance on market forces to guide the distribution of social goods. This is not an appeal to “get government off our backs and let the market decide.” In fact, the ideology of the “free” market is a greater threat than an overweening state to the true freedom of the church to live the gospel. Indeed, despite the common rhetoric, the state and the market are most commonly *not* mutually opposed. The very development of capitalism depended on the “liberation” by the state of the freely contracting individual, unfettered by medieval community and custom. The market, in turn, has been the most powerful solvent of all types of constitutive community, because it evangelizes the person to believe in the absolute and final sovereignty of individual choice.

This is why, in Pinochet’s Chile, a free market economy was perfectly compatible with a strong state governed by the military. Pinochet brought in a group of economists known in Chile as “Los Chicago Boys” to restructure the economy. Most had studied free-market ideology under Milton Friedman and Arnold Harberger at the University of Chicago. Friedman’s explicit anthropology dictates that society is nothing more than a collection of individuals. On a highly publicized visit to Chile in 1975, Friedman announced that the economy needed “shock treatment.” This was much more than a metaphor for those being tortured with electricity in Chile’s clandestine secret police centers. As Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano said, “People were in prison so that prices could be free.”<sup>1</sup> The free-market economists oversaw the dismantling of every type of workers’ organization, the

<sup>1</sup>Eduardo Galeano, cited in Lawrence Wechsler, *A Miracle, A Universe: Settling Accounts with Torturers* (New York: Pantheon, 1990) 147.

privatization of social security, and a host of similar reforms aimed at the atomization of the body politic.

In the United States, market forces are accompanied by a different kind of state. Nevertheless, the dynamic of atomization is endemic to the logic of the free market. Market ideology is built around the sovereignty of individual choice. What is supplied, we are told, is based on what individuals demand. What is demanded is not guided by any sort of objective standard of good larger than the individual. Each person chooses his or her own standards, his or her own subjective values. What is demanded is therefore based on personal preferences, and it does not matter if the individual prefers Pushkin, pushpins, or pornography; all consumption greases the wheels of production. When recession looms, as it does now, we are told to buy, it matters not what.

As many pastors know, the church is hemorrhaging from the inability of Christian discipleship to out-narrate the ideology of the market. The most important imperative for many people is to build their own “personal theology,” much as one fills one’s plate at a salad bar. Often such personal theologies, or “spiritualities,” consist of an eclectic mix of Christian and non-Christian elements. A broadly ecumenical vision can be very salutary for the Christian, but true ecumenism and religious consumerism are worlds apart. The tragedy is that we have been trained by the market that desire is self-validating, and so we become incapable of escaping the confines of the self. The landscape of postmodern spirituality is one of lonely and isolated individuals fabricating their own small gods. Even for those that seek community, it is often understood as a “lifestyle choice,” which, like every choice, is terrifyingly arbitrary and optional. Many churches can only hope, through “church growth” strategies, to market their spiritual wares better than the competition and lure a few more religious consumers through their doors. What gets buried too often is the idea that a person does not choose the church, but the church calls the person, and to be called out of oneself is precisely what saves us from ourselves.

Part of the difficulty is that the church in the United States, as the church in Chile, has helped to “disappear” itself through its own ecclesiology. The church is charged with the care of the soul; the body, in effect, is handed over to state and corporation. We are sometimes not shy of talking in our churches about, for example, a “spirituality of work,” but often this goes little further than learning how to “cope” in soul while the body continues to punch the same clock. How we might begin to change the nature of the work itself often seems like too daunting a task, and better left to professional accountants.

### III. THE BODY OF CHRIST

The atomization described above is not entirely new, if Genesis is to be believed. From a primordial unity and harmony among creatures, and between creatures and God, the fall takes the form of a scattering. The strife between man and

woman, and humans and creation, soon spreads to the whole earth. Cain kills Abel, Noah's generation is sunk in violence, and the residents of Babel are scattered abroad for their pride. The scattering of Gen 11 then gives way to the beginning of the gathering in Gen 12, when God begins to call a people through Abram, a people through whom all the peoples of the world will be blessed (12:3). The culmination of this story is the completion of Israel in the body of Christ, into which all the scattered are gathered in a final way.

Overcoming atomization, then, is a matter of taking seriously the reality of the church as the body of Christ. For Paul, this was more than a metaphor. So seriously did he take it that he believed that those Corinthians who were taking eucharist without "discerning the body" were getting sick and dying (1 Cor 11:27-32). The Christians at Corinth thought that the humiliation of the poor by the rich was unrelated to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Paul told them otherwise. Here we see that the eucharist not only produces unity but requires it. The eucharist is not just a balm for the soul; it is a public act of the church that disciplines the bodies of its members. Through the action of the Holy Spirit, the one body of Christ is formed, in which the sufferings of others become *my* sufferings and simultaneously the sufferings of Christ himself (1 Cor 12). The eucharist produces a radical identification of three terms: Christ, those who suffer, and me (cf. Matt 25:31-46).

This we need to proclaim boldly, if the church is to help heal the fragmentation of the world. To proclaim it, though, is more than a verbal act. It requires making the body of Christ visible through concrete practices. In Chile this began with the simple act of making the church a place where people could gather. At a time when secular organizations of any kind fell under suspicion and ban, the church used its moral authority to offer workers' cooperatives, soup kitchens, women's groups, legal assistance for victims of oppression, job training, groups for relatives of political prisoners, and much more. Despite the harassment this invited, the church understood that being an alternative social body was the realization of the eucharistic imperative to be what we receive, to become the body of Christ and allow others to feed on us. In the United States, there are many examples of this type of practice. In Minnesota, for example, churches are linking up with CSAs, Community Supported Agriculture farms. CSAs are small farms supported by people buying shares of the farm at the beginning the season, thus sharing in the risks of farming. Shareholders receive a delivery of produce each week, and may—if they wish—help with farm chores. In this way, churches help form a community of economic practice. People know the farmer, know where their food comes from, and help shield the farmer from the fluctuations of impersonal market forces. Atomization is resisted by opening the church into an alternative economic space.

In Chile, recognizing the disciplinary nature of the eucharist also resulted in making clear negatively what is *not* the body of Christ through the excommunication of torturers. This was understood not as presuming to kick them out of the

body, but as letting them know that they had already put themselves out, and inviting them back in through concrete repentance. Excommunication is certainly a last resort, but it does call for reflection on more everyday practices of holding one another accountable. Our churches have too often become dispensers of what Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace,” that is, doling out the sacraments without making clear what the sacramental life entails. We have become shy of conflict and unaccustomed to challenging each other on how we live, how we make our money, what we buy, how we raise our children, and so on. We may be abandoning our brothers and sisters in Christ to their isolation simply in the interests of getting along.

One example makes this abundantly clear for me. A few years ago, the Briggs and Stratton Company decided to shut down their operations in Wisconsin and move them to Mexico, where they could pay workers less than a dollar an hour. The *National Catholic Reporter* did a story on this, demonstrating the devastating impact on employees in Wisconsin, showing how workers in Mexico could barely feed their families on such wages, and revealing that the decision makers at Briggs and Stratton were practicing Catholics, all products of extensive Catholic education. The bosses at Briggs and Stratton sued the *National Catholic Reporter*, on the grounds that their religious affiliation was a private matter.<sup>2</sup>

To learn how our identity as Christians is not a private matter, how it implicates our entire lives and the lives of others, we must take seriously our identity as the body of Christ. To do so is also to resist a superficial application of the liturgy to “social justice” concerns. The eucharist is not a mere symbol, a source of meaning which the individual reads and then applies to social issues “out there” in the “real world.” There is nothing more real than the body of Christ. The eucharist is not to be applied to political issues; rather, the eucharist makes the church itself a political body. The church practices the politics of Jesus when it becomes an alternative way of life that offers healing for the wounds that divide us. In Chile, in the United States, in Pakistan, throughout the world, to belong to the body of Christ is to transgress national boundaries and to witness to what God has done in Christ to gather all people. ⊕

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<sup>2</sup>The Briggs and Stratton case is summarized in “Judge throws out Briggs and Stratton suit,” *National Catholic Reporter*, 24 April 1998.