TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY IN
EARLY CHRISTIAN ANAPHORAS

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1. Introduction

This will be a *lex orandi—lex credendi* reflection on the context and implications of the emergence of a mature theology of the Trinity that was taking place in the late fourth- to late fifth-century patristic golden age, and the concomitant appropriation of that theology in the shaping of the classical Eucharistic Prayers of that time. The reflection will take place within the parameters of the critical methodological questions as they have been outlined and refined by recent scholarship, especially, for example, by Paul Bradshaw.1 In his final chapter, “The Coming of Christendom in the Fourth Century,” Bradshaw has two subheadings: “Doctrine Shaping Liturgy” and “Liturgy Shaping Doctrine.”2 He points out the grounds for concluding that the shaping came from each direction, but leaves open the question whether the one or the other direction was dominant. I share with Bradshaw the assumption that this shaping must have come from each direction, but leaves open the question whether the one or the other direction was dominant. I share with Bradshaw the assumption that this shaping must have come from both directions. This article might be able to shed some small light on this issue, but this is not its primary purpose.

For it is from a contemporary liturgical-theological rather than historical-doctrinal position that the particular question of this article begins. Far more clearly than was possible for earlier ages, and especially for Western theologians who often suffered from a kind of “Christomonism,” liturgical theologians are now able to articulate a theology of the Eucharist that is consistently trinitarian,3 and along with that a

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trinitarian theology of Christian sacrifice. In addition, they can claim to find that theology at least implicitly—but indeed actually—present in the classical Eucharistic Prayers of the patristic golden age. One of the purposes of this article is to explore the validity of this claim.

First, the mature trinitarian theology of the Eucharist that contemporary theologians can claim to find in the classical anaphoras of the patristic golden age, especially those associated with the names of Basil and Chrysostom, and the many contemporary Eucharistic Prayers that descend from them, can be summed up as follows:

The Eucharist . . . is the high point of both the expression of and the inchoative realization of the Church’s marital covenant relationship with God. The center of this Eucharist is the Church’s ritual action and prayer in which the assembly, led by its duly appointed minister, addresses God the Father, through the Son, and in the Holy Spirit, praising and thanking God for the salvation-historical gifts of creation, covenant, and redemption, especially redemption in Jesus Christ, and asking God to send the Holy Spirit in order, by means of the transformation of the eucharistic gifts, to continue the transformation of the community and its individuals toward their eschatological destiny as the true Body of Christ. The ritual celebration culminates in the assembly coming forward to receive, as Augustine put it, “what you are,” the Body of Christ. But this, of course, is still just the beginning. The full realization of the ritual celebration continues beyond what takes place in church. It continues as the assembly is sent forth to live out this eucharistic mystery in the world of everyday life. And it will finally be completed only at the eschaton when the universalistic hope expressed in the prophetic proclamation—“Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb”—(see Rev 19:9)—has been fulfilled.¹

Second, the specifically trinitarian understanding of sacrifice that contemporary theologians can claim to find at least implicitly present in these classical patristic anaphoras can be summarized as follows:

Christian sacrifice has three interconnected “moments.” It begins not with us, but with the self-offering of God the Father in the gift of the Son. The second moment is the totally free, totally loving response of the

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