



THE LIFE OF THE APOSTLE AS WORSHIP¹

ROMANS 1:9

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The first remarks in the general thanksgiving in the letter to the Romans (cf. Rom 1:8-15) center on worship: «God is my witness, whom I render worship with my spirit, through the gospel of his Son, that I constantly remember you, always asking in my prayers that it might be granted to me at long last by the will of God the opportunity to come to you» (Rom 1:9-10). Thus Paul expresses an intense desire to reach his readers so as to share spiritual gifts with the Roman domestic communities.

The ritual language in the Pauline letters presents different angles because it includes “sacrifice” (*thysia* cf. Rom 12:1); “libation” (*spendomai* cf. Phil 2:17); “liturgy” (*leitourgia* cf. 2Cor 9:12); the “pleasing odor” (*osmē euodias*); “offering” (*prosfora* cf. Rom 15:16) and naturally “worship” in the strict sense (*latreia* cf. Rom 1:9, 2 Tim 1:3). It is important to seek to identify the contexts and contents that characterize worship in the Pauline letters: to whom, with what and through whom is the worship of believers in Christ directed? Let us immediately clarify that Paul never connects such language with the Temple in Jerusalem, which was still at its peak at the time of the authentic letters, much less did Paul refer to the priestly class that oversaw Jewish worship above all at the times of the chief festivals: Passover, Pentecost and the feast of Booths and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). On the other hand, Paul does not give importance to the Sabbath understood as a day dedicated to ritual rest. Instead we can assert that in the perspective of Pauline mysticism, worship assumes a lay and everyday dimension not characterized by the exceptional.

Therefore, we will seek to deepen the principle lines along which the life of Paul can be understood as worship. I propose four areas for deepening: the Pauline mission and apostolate as worship; the ritual libation as worship; rational worship; and the cultic dimension of economic support. Meanwhile it is fitting to clarify that the principal receiver of worship for Paul is not Jesus Christ, nor is it the Spirit, but it is God to whom he renders worship in Christ and by means of the Spirit, as is typical in Jewish reverence and its deep-seated monotheism.

¹ Translator’s Note: Throughout this paper, the Italian “culto” is rendered as “worship,” rather than “cult” (which has an unhealthy, rather psychological connotation). However, “cultuale” will sometimes be rendered as “cultic” or “ritual” as seems best in the context. Scripture quotes are generally taken from the NABRE.

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MISSION AND APOSTOLATE AS WORSHIP

The citation from Rom 1:9 indicates a first and principle act of worship: prayer that Paul might finally be granted his desire to go to Rome and sharing his gospel with the local domestic communities. That prayer contains the missionary impulse of the preaching of Paul or the service on behalf of the Gospel of [God's] Son. Throughout the letter to the Romans Paul will not revisit this bonding of worship and mission, but in the *postscript* he returns precisely to this motive in order to develop a few details: «I have written to you rather boldly in some respects to remind you, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in performing the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering up of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the holy Spirit» (Rom 15:15-16).

The proposal of Rom 15:15-16 is among the most rich in worship language of all the Pauline letters. Paul presents himself as *leiturgón* or minister in the service of Christ Jesus for the Gentiles. The term is used with all its richness because it relates the apostolate of Paul to Christ Jesus insofar as content, and to the Gentiles insofar as receivers. If God is the principle receiver of Christian worship, Christ Jesus is its content; and he becomes such when he is announced as the essence of the gospel for the Gentiles. The dynamic of the mission contained in the original action of worship carried out by Paul is significant: It is not the Gentiles or foreigners who must go to a place of Jewish worship like the Temple of Jerusalem or a synagogue in the diaspora; rather, the apostle is sent to serve the cause of Jesus Christ and of the Gospel with his ministry. In that dynamic is contained the central content of the mission: different from proselytism and from other forms of religious recruitment characterized by a centripetal force, mission is characterized as a centrifugal force that leads one towards the outer edge, there where the Gospel has not yet reached.

The point of the original liturgy as Paul supports/sustains it, is the offering of the Gentiles: that it be well received and consecrated by means of the Holy Spirit. At first glance the mention of the Spirit might seem out of context, because the Gentiles present the offering to the Lord. In reality, it is precisely the cultic and sacrificial context that motivate the reference to the Holy Spirit in Rom 15:16. So that sacrifice might be accepted by God the transforming action of the Spirit is necessary, a transforming action like that of the fire for the sacrifices in the Old Testament (cf. Gen 15:17). The relationship between the Spirit and the offering for the sacrifice is well expressed by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews: «... how much more the blood of Christ, will purify our conscience...» (Hebrews 9:14). In an analogous process, this Spirit renders the offering of the Gentiles acceptable and consecrated. While in the Jewish context of the time the Gentiles were considered “sinners” (cf. Gal 2:15), in the ethnic sense, with the Gospel of Paul they are put in a condition to offer to the Lord an acceptable offering consecrated by means of the Spirit, without passing through submission to the Jewish law.

A RITUAL LIBATION

Before broadening the horizons of worship to all the believers let us remain within Paul's autobiography and pause on a cultic metaphor that is most unusual for someone whose background is Judaism: «but even if I were to be poured out as a libation on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and urge you to rejoice with me» (Phil 2:17). For the various strains of Judaism in the same second Temple period, cultic libations were done with oil (cf. Gen 35:14), with wine (cf. Num 28:14), or with water (cf. 2Sam 23:16), but not with blood: that would be considered idolatrous, because the life contained in the blood belongs only to the Lord. On the contrary, in the Greco-Roman environment of the first and second centuries after Christ a libation was carried out with blood to indicate a suicide or a noble death. One can think of the death of Seneca as narrated by Tacitus in the *Annals* 16,35-1-2.

With the expression in Phil 2:17 Paul is not upholding the idea of a noble death seen as a ritual libation for the Lord; rather he makes use of the metaphor to emphasize that he intends to participate in an active way in the final outcome of the possible death which he was facing, transforming it into a gift of self for others. Already in Phil 1:21 he claimed that for him to live is Christ and to die is gain, attributing the highest value in relation to Christ, compared to which even dying is seen as a benefit. In the dynamic of active participation in death, without any reference to suicide which is completely unmentioned in the Pauline letters, what is central is the model of Jesus Christ who became obedient unto death, even death on a cross (cf. Phil 2:8). As Jesus Christ with his value system (and not only with his sentiments) became obedient even to death, transforming it into a gift of self for others, so Paul confers active value to the imminent possibility of death in his imprisonment.

Cultic language permeates the expression of Phil 2:17, in that Paul refers to the libation of himself, to sacrifice, and to the liturgy of faith among the Philippians. The two metaphors should be looked at together: The principal sacrifice is that of faith which matures and perseveres within the Philippians, notwithstanding adversities. The libation offered by Paul even to the very end of his life upholds faith as the sacrifice and liturgy of the believers. In this way two forms of existential worship coexist: libation and sacrifice, understood however not as the privation of something but as the transformation of the life of faith itself. At the center of the ritual metaphor is the sacrifice of the faith or faith in as much as it is sacrifice; the libation is at the service of sacrifice and not sacrifice at the service of libation. In this way Paul communicates to the Philippians a way of thinking and of judging marked by humility, like that of Christ Jesus (cf. Phil 2:6-8).

The Pauline tradition of 2Timothy follows in the trajectory of Phil 2:17 and develops it with the metaphor of navigation, expressed in Phil 1:23 as unfurling the sails to set out on the final earthly journey: «I am already being poured out like a libation; the time of my departure is near» (2Tim 4:6). The spiritual testament of Paul, which is what 2Timothy is, puts the accent on the libation inasmuch as it is a cultic act unto the very end of one's life, when it is necessary to open the sails to the wind and set sail on the final journey to be with Christ. The expression in Philippians 2:17 shows that the apostolate is constitutive of the humanity of Paul and not secondary moment or a parentheses within his life. He is not a believer and thus an apostle, as it would be natural to assume, but is an apostle insofar as he is a believer and vice versa, because the apostolate permeates his identity as a man given to the cause of the gospel.

RATIONAL WORSHIP

Let us return to the Letter to the Romans and dwell on the opening lines of the exhortative section of Rom 12:1-15:13: «I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect» (Rom 12:1-2).

In the plan of the exhortation, the expression of Rom 12:1-2 carries out the role of the *propositio* or principle thesis: It introduces the key that guides the various ethical exhortations of the section. Sustained by the choice and mercy of God, demonstrated in Rom 9:1-11:36, how and what are believers in Christ permitted to offer in worshipping God? Paul's attention focuses on the transformation and the renewal of the *nous* seen as the center of one's system of thinking and judging. It is not a matter of intelligence separated from the rest of the human person, but of one's whole mindset which conditions and orders the believers' way of relating with the Lord and with the times or the era in which they live.

In Rom 12:1-2 the ritual language appears again: the believers offer (*parastēsai*) their own bodies as in a sacrificial action of victims in a place of worship. One's own body, understood as the fullness of the human person, is thus what the believer offers the Lord in sacrifice (*thysian*). And that sacrifice is seen as worship that is *logikēn*, a difficult adjective to translate and that we will return to shortly.

Even the adjectives chosen by Paul belong to the ritual sphere of victims offered and accepted in the Temple: for the sacrifice to be properly done, the victims must be holy, pleasing and without defects. At any rate now there are no longer calves, lambs or doves that are offered, but believers offer themselves: from the mind to the body in its integrity.

The dense expression of Rom 12:1-2 conveys some angles on worship in the Pauline letters that should not be left aside. Above all an existential and personal awareness of worship comes through: Every believer, with his or her community, offers the self as a living sacrifice to the Lord. And that sacrifice is to be understood not as a privation or negation of the self or of something, but as “transformation” (*metamorfousthe*) and “renewal” (*anakainōsis*). This positive view is noteworthy for its contrast with the usual understanding of sacrifice: “to accomplish or make a sacrifice” usually means to deprive oneself of something. On the contrary in Rom 12:1-2 the appeal starts from the negative to reach the positive: not to let oneself be framed or boxed in by the mentality of the era in which one lives, but to transform and renew oneself. It is transformation that is above all the issue: worship is a transforming action that makes holy whatever is profane or sacred, where holiness is identified with a place or person’s state of “belonging to the Lord”.

In that vision of personal or existential worship I hold that a decisive role was carried out by Paul's formation as a Pharisee (in the positive sense of the term). Thus Flavius Josephus describes the concept of worship for the pharisaical movement from which Paul came:

They (the Pharisees) hold that everything is governed by Destiny, but they do not rule out the human will doing what is within its power, since it has pleased God that there be a fusion: that the human will with its virtue and its vice should be admitted into the Council Chamber of Destiny...” This approach meant that the Pharisees had a powerful influence on Paul, with all the prayers and sacred rituals of divine worship transformed according to their understanding (see *Jewish Antiquities*, 18:13-15).

According to the Pharisaic line of thinking, worship is not limited to the offering of sacrifices in the Temple of Jerusalem, but involves the human person. Typical of the movement is the “secularization” of the sphere of worship which we have noted in the Pauline letters.

As noted, it is difficult to translate the adjective *logikēn* that describes the worship in Rom 12:1. Nevertheless, I hold that the term is not to be rendered as “logical” (a merely linguistic transfer), nor with “spiritual,” much less with “reasonable.” I would modestly propose that the term that best renders the idea is “rational” or “mental,” without this being taken as “intellectual.” What is invoked is the *nous* or mind, understood as the center of one’s value system in view of discernment for the sake of personal or existential worship. The successive exhortations of Rom 12:3-15:13 develop the idea of rational worship expressed in Rom 12:1; they go from communitarian relationships marked by *agape* and the appreciation of charisms in the ecclesial body, to external relationships with civil authorities, to the eschatological tension with the Day of the Lord and mutual acceptance among the strong and the weak in the Christian communities of Rome.

Therefore the expression of Rom 12:1-2 extends the personal worship of Paul, with his own mission towards the Gentiles and the participation in the sacrifice of the faith of those he writes to, to the rational worship that every believer is exhorted to offer the Lord with and in his/her own body.

ECONOMIC SUPPORT AS WORSHIP

Up to this point we have dwelt on the general features of worship for Paul; now we will focus attention on one specific area of human relations seen as an expression of worship. I am referring to economic support among the Christian communities and in Paul’s regard. Concerning the first we see the value Paul confers on the collection for the poor in Jerusalem (found in 2Cor 8:1-9,15). It is easy to see that in the entire section he never uses the specific term for collection, which he knows well and uses in 1Cor 16:1: *logeia*. Instead, to heighten its importance, in 2Cor 8-9 he makes use of euphemisms that enrich the worth of the initiative among his communities: “grace,” “generosity,”

“love,” “blessing,” “service” and “liturgy.” The expression “the service [*diaconia*] of this liturgy,” used in 2Cor 9:12, is typically cultic; it is a matter of a service promoting collection as liturgy in the proper sense of the term: an action done on behalf of God and of the people who belong to him.

The perspective is dense with meaning, because it unifies liturgical language with that of charity. We are frequently taken up with the ecclesial tension between the table of the liturgy and that of charity. The proposal in 2Cor 9:12 overcomes these separations and without any transition, reads the liturgy as charity or agape among the Christian communities. The collection for the poor is not a consequence of the liturgy; rather, it is itself a liturgy that by meeting the economic needs of the brothers and sisters, manifests itself as an act of worship of God. Far from Paul’s mind is any kind of split or separation between worship and love for the brethren; everything works toward a synergy between the two dimensions of relationship.

Later, as he writes the Letter to the Romans he returns in the final remarks to the collection that he is about to bring to Jerusalem at the end of the third missionary journey. In Rom 15:27 Paul again has recourse to “liturgical” language to describe the initiative: «They (the churches of Macedonia and Achaia) decided to do it, and in fact they are indebted to them, for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to serve them in material blessings». The verb *leitourghēsai* [rendered here as “to serve”], which simply cannot be translated by a single word, richly expresses the liturgical action of the collection for the poor in Jerusalem carried out by the churches of Macedonia and Achaia. The collection is thus seen as a ritual debt of gratitude for the Gospel received, and to which the Gentiles are obligated with regard to the believers from the Jewish communities.

We began with the personal worship of Paul and now we return to this dimension of his existence. At the close of the Letter to the Philippians, Paul discretely acknowledges the economic aid that his recipients sent him through the hands of Epaphroditus: «I have received full payment and I abound. I am very well supplied because of what I received from you through Epaphroditus, ‘a fragrant aroma,’ an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God» (Phil 4:18).

The relationship between Paul and the community of Philippi is unique with respect to the other Pauline community, so much so that it is only from the Philippians that he accepted economic support brought to him in prison by the hands of Epaphroditus. The expression in Phil 4:18 is remarkable because of the wedding of personal economic aid and ritual language. Economic support, sent to him by the Philippians, is a sacrifice to God, acceptable and pleasing: the same adjectives which we found in the passage of Rom 12:1-2. It is easy to understand that Paul’s concern is not focused on the benefit that the personal collection offers him to continue the work of evangelization (notwithstanding his imprisonment), but on the fragrant perfume that this sacrifice creates because the ultimate recipient is the Lord. Because of this, Paul’s is a thanksgiving without thanks, in the sense that there is no need for him to say it without paying a debt. If in the whole Letter to the Philippians Paul does not give thanks for the economic support received from the Philippians, it is because his debt of gratitude for a poor community like that of Philippi will remain forever.

Conclusion

Worship is constitutive of Pauline mysticism because it touches various aspects of existence both for Paul and for his communities. The path we have traced of worship in the Pauline letters manifests some facts worthy of deepening.

Above all the apostolate for the spread of the Gospel in mission is a cultic expression: chosen for the Gospel, Paul offers worship to the Lord with the Gospel. Paul’s entire existence, and not just one part or dimension of it, is seen as worship, to the point of becoming a paradoxical libation: himself, ready to be poured out as a libation over the sacrifice of his receivers’ faith. The rational worship in which all believers take part in Christ marks sacrifice as the transformation of the mind, or of one’s own system of thinking and judging. Finally, a concrete expression of worship is the economic support shared by the churches, and on behalf of those who, like Paul, no longer able to support

themselves because of frequent imprisonment, dedicate themselves to evangelization and to mission. We can rightly then take the notion of worship in the Pauline letters as lay/secular, without falling into the sort of secularization that would be the antithesis of clericalism.

I would like to close by returning to one of the most fitting statements on Pauline mysticism, which applies equally well to worship:

According to its deep nature, Pauline spirituality is mysticism. Certainly, it can also be thought of in the eschatological and juridical teachings on the redemption: but his true and proper life he lives in mysticism. Paul is therefore a mystic. But he does not have the mindset of the mystic” (A. Schweitzer, *Die Mystik des Apostels Paulus*).