

Response to “Sketch of a Phenomenological Concept of Sacrifice”

In this piece Marion attempts a phenomenological interpretation of sacrifice by relating it to his analysis of the gift. He concludes that the phenomenon of sacrifice makes visible or enables the appearance of the gift in its givenness. He illustrates this with the story of Abraham. Although Isaac was given to Abraham as divine gift (in several ways—as firstborn and as miraculous birth in his old age) Abraham and Sarah began to appropriate him as a possession. Isaac’s sacrifice reminds Abraham that Isaac is God’s and thus makes visible the givenness of Isaac. The literal (economic) sacrifice of killing Isaac need not happen because the phenomenological sacrifice has already been accomplished by God.

I believe this phenomenological analysis can illuminate some issues that have been raised in response to Marion’s article “The Banality of Saturation” in which he was himself dealing with concerns raised earlier to the notion of the saturated phenomenon.¹ I will briefly explain how this new piece might illuminate his prior exposition and conclude by illustrating these implications for the “gift” or “sacrifice” of the Eucharist.

In “The Banality of Saturation” Marion argues that saturation can indeed be considered as “banal” in appearance in the sense that it is accessible to all—he works through examples of phenomenality for all five senses (seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling) to illustrate how they can present both common and saturated phenomena (e.g. whether I recognize a sound as that of an aria sung by a famous soprano or an odor as that of a popular perfume, etc.). Thus, Marion suggests, a (or even any) phenomenon may move from “poor” or common phenomenality to saturation. This essay has created the impression for some commentators that Marion is reintroducing a much stronger notion of the subject.² Apparently, the recipient of the phenomenon must decide (or interpret) whether to “see” the phenomenon as “poor” or as “saturated.” If that is true, then Marion has not really accomplished his task of freeing the self-givenness of the phenomenon from the transcendental subject (and the horizon), because the

¹ “The Banality of Saturation,” in *The Visible and the Revealed* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

² See, for example, Anthony Steinbock, “The Poor Phenomenon: Marion and the Problem of Givenness” in *The Phenomenological Turn in French Phenomenology* (New York: Fordham University Press, forthcoming in 2009), especially his analysis of the “denigrated” and the “humble” phenomenon which imply a reduction of saturation to poverty in the phenomenon and his argument about the poverty of the “gifted” as determining the way a phenomenon is received.

recipient decides whether to control the phenomenon as subject or receive it passively as devoted and give him- or herself over to it. “The Banality of Saturation” does not really resolve this issue clearly.³

Yet drawing on the phenomenon of sacrifice, as Marion outlines it here, may illuminate this issue. Presumably, the sacrifice—as the gift—is a saturated phenomenon (certainly it is not a “poor” or “common” phenomenon).⁴ It would become “poor” if it were to return or succumb to economy. Abraham “forgets” that Isaac is a gift, a saturated phenomenon, and begins to treat him as a poor phenomenon, as a possession (one might suggest that the same happens to God; the giver of this gift who no longer is remembered or visible). The sacrifice enables Abraham to see differently and to receive Isaac back as a saturated phenomenon, as a gift. It is then not that Abraham “determines” or controls Isaac’s status as gift—Abraham’s forgetting does not turn Isaac into any less of a gift. Yet, by failing to treat him as gift (as saturated phenomenon), he is not allowing for the phenomenon to emerge, appear or become visible. God, in demanding the sacrifice, reminds Abraham to return to his status as devoted, given over to the gift, instead of as subject in possession of the object.⁵ Therefore, the recipient or devoted does not “determine” or in any way “control” the status of the phenomenon as “poor” or “saturated.” Yet whether the phenomenon becomes visible or is able to appear may well depend on the recipient’s response to it.

These insights might also enrich a phenomenological analysis of the theological event of the Eucharist, which is the supreme liturgical event of remembering God’s gift of Godself in Christ’s sacrifice. (In some Christian traditions—especially Marion’s—the Eucharistic offering itself is regarded as a sacrifice.) Already in *God without Being* Marion speaks of the Eucharist as a gift. He rejects a “memorial” interpretation of the Eucharist or one in which the “real presence” is attributed solely to the community and provides an (often criticized) defense of

³ Early on in the essay Marion suggests that the difference between a “poor” and a “saturated” phenomenon may depend on the way it is “described” or “interpreted” and thus that saturation would “depend upon the demands of my ever-changing relation to them” (VR, 126). Here (at least at first glance) the recipient seems to decide (and maybe even impose) the status of the incoming phenomenon as either poor or saturated. I want to suggest that this is not what Marion intends to say.

⁴ There is a chance that Marion might prefer to speak of it as a “phenomenon of abandon,” as he does in his article on the phenomenality of the sacraments mentioned below. Yet as he first develops his phenomenology of the gift (on which he draws heavily in this article) in *Being Given*, where “saturated phenomenon” is the only term contrasted to the poor or common phenomenon, I do think it is incorrect to stick with this terminology for the present.

⁵ See the final part of *Being Given* for Marion’s analysis of the impact of the saturated phenomenon on the subject who is turned into a devoted or one “given over” to the gift. *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. by Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 248-319.

transubstantiation.⁶ The more recent reflections might well enable him to hold on to what he sought to convey in that analysis without recourse to the theologically and historically loaded terminology.⁷

If the bread and wine truly are given as sacrifice by God, then—according to this phenomenological analysis of sacrifice—they enable the appearance of this givenness, make visible God’s self-giving in the “gifts.” Thus whether bread or wine are poor phenomena—simply humanly produced bread and wine—or indeed a saturated phenomenon—the body and blood of Christ—is not something the recipient determines. Reception does not “change” its status as sacrifice.⁸ Yet, the sacrifice “reminds” the recipient of its gift status and turns him or her into someone devoted. Only then can the givenness of the gifts and God as their giver appear. The gifts are recognized as saturated phenomenon, as mystery and not as hoax. The recipient, then, does not “change” the status of the phenomenon or “determine” it as a transcendental subject would. And yet a saturated phenomenon can only appear and be given, if a recipient receives it as gift. The liturgy of the Eucharist, as the work [*leitourgia*] and response of the people,⁹ then may be said to manifest Christ’s kenotic sacrifice as God’s gift of Godself.¹⁰

Christina M. Gschwandtner

⁶ See “Of the Eucharistic Site of Theology” and “The Present and the Gift” in *God without Being*, trans. by Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). In the chapter “The Present and the Gift,” in which Marion seeks to rethink the language of transubstantiation and real presence, he focuses more on the gift given by God (guarding against its becoming an idol) and less on its reception.

⁷ Marion has recently reflected more explicitly on a “phenomenology of the sacrament” in his article “The Phenomenality of the Sacrament—Being and Givenness” in *The Phenomenological Turn in French Phenomenology* (New York: Fordham University Press, forthcoming in 2009). I am drawing on some of his treatment in this piece. He quotes Augustine who speaks of the Eucharist as the “visible sacrament of an invisible sacrifice,” which is precisely what makes it possible to speak of the sacrament’s phenomenality. In fact, Marion uses the terminology of visibility/invisibility and sacrifice frequently in this treatment. He shows how regardless of which philosophical definition of sacramentality one employs, the phenomenon of the sacrament appears as “given without withdrawal, to the point of abandon.”

⁸ In the “Phenomenality of the Sacrament” Marion says in this regard: “It is not a question here only of the constitution of objects starting from a transcendental subjectivity, which controls them by the initiative of intentionality and certifies them by the insurance of intuitive fulfillment, but of the reception of phenomena that show *themselves*, beginning with the intentionality of God, such as he reveals in and from Himself, contrary to our expectations, predictions, and intentions, according to the deployment of an intuition that is ‘too much’ for our capacity (Mk. 9:3), even the glory of God. Before such phenomena—phenomena saturated by the characteristic of revelation—the usual problems of constitution give way to difficulties, otherwise more formidable, of intuition and its limits. It is a question of admitting phenomena where the excess of intuition given exceeds the range of concepts that we would have at our disposal to constitute them as objects.”

⁹ For this definition of liturgy, see Alexander Schmeemann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1973), 25.

¹⁰ It is not incidental, of course, that the sacrifice of Isaac is often interpreted by the tradition as a prefiguring of the incarnation.