



# The Spirit in the New Millennium:

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**Featuring Special Guest**

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The Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, CA



**DUQUESNE  
UNIVERSITY**  
For the Mind, Heart and Spirit





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“The Spirit in the New Millennium: The Duquesne University Annual Holy Spirit Lecture and Colloquium” was initiated in 2005 by Duquesne University President Charles J. Dougherty as an expression of Duquesne’s mission and charism as a university both founded by the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and dedicated to the Holy Spirit. It is hoped that this ongoing series of lectures and accompanying colloquia will encourage the exploration of ideas pertaining to the theology of the Holy Spirit. Besides fostering scholarship on the Holy Spirit within an ecumenical context, this event is intended to heighten awareness of how pneumatology (the study of the Spirit) might be relevantly integrated into the various academic disciplines in general.

This lecture may be read online at [www.duq.edu/holy-spirit](http://www.duq.edu/holy-spirit). You can contact us at [holyspirit@duq.edu](mailto:holyspirit@duq.edu). Radu Bordeianu, Ph.D., serves as the director.

## 2009 Colloquists

- Dr. Radu Bordeianu  
*Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology, Duquesne University (Pittsburgh, PA)*
- Dr. Maureen Crossen  
*Associate Professor of Systematic Theology, Carlow University (Pittsburgh, PA)*
- Dr. Elochukwu Eugene Uzukwu  
*Associate Professor of Systematic Theology, Milltown Institute (Dublin, Ireland)*
- Dr. Christine Firer-Hinze  
*Professor of Theological Ethics, Fordham University (Bronx, NY)*
- Dr. Stephen Fowl  
*Chair and Professor of Biblical Theology, Loyola College (Baltimore, MD)*
- Dr. Sarah MacMillen  
*Assistant Professor of Sociology, Duquesne University (Pittsburgh, PA)*
- Dr. Anatheia Portier-Young  
*Assistant Professor of Old Testament, Duke University (Durham, NC)*
- Dr. Jaroslav Z. Skira  
*Associate Professor of Historical Theology, Regis College, University of Toronto (Toronto, Canada)*
- Dr. William M. Wright IV  
*Assistant Professor of Biblical Theology, Duquesne University (Pittsburgh, PA)*

Whose Sins You Shall Forgive....  
The Holy Spirit and the Forgiveness of  
Sins(s) in the Fourth Gospel

*Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM*

**Introduction**

When I was invited to give this lecture I was asked to speak about the Holy Spirit in relation to my own research interests. I am currently working on the Resurrection Narrative in the Gospel of John in relation to what I consider the most pressing issue in our world today, namely, violence. My overarching question is the following: what are Christians called to be and do in the face of the escalating violence in our world? In this lecture I am focusing on John 20:19-23, the scene in which Jesus appears to his disciples on Easter evening and commissions them to carry on his reconciling work in the world. I will focus on the second half of the pericope, vv. 21-23:

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; any you hold fast are held fast (my translation).<sup>1</sup>

Some Catholic readers think that this text recounts the institution of the sacrament of Penance in which ordained ministers exercise a power to grant or refuse forgiveness of sins confessed by penitents. As we will see shortly, this text is not about the sacrament of Penance.<sup>2</sup> There is nothing in the Greek text about "retaining sins." And the commission is not given to some specialized group among the baptized. Rather, this text is about the human conundrum of sin and the resources Christians have received, through the paschal mystery of Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit, for addressing it. I will be suggesting that the conundrum of sin is deeply rooted in violence.

So my question is the following: according to the Fourth Gospel, what is our mission as Jesus' disciples and what has the Holy Spirit to do with

that mission? The text, *prima facie*, says that whatever our mission is, it is a *continuation of Jesus' mission* from God ("as the Father has sent me, so I send you"). This mission has to do with handling *the problem of sin* ("if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them"). And carrying out this mission *requires the gift of the Holy Spirit* (he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit").

I will attempt to answer this question by making three interrelated moves in relation to the text. In Part One I will raise two exegetical questions necessary for us to understand Jn. 20:21-23 in its own context in the Fourth Gospel, namely, who are the disciples whom Jesus commissions and who or what is the Holy Spirit who will empower them to fulfill that commission. In Part Two I will make what might appear at first sight to be a detour through the thought of the French philosopher and anthropologist, René Girard. His work on violence and religion will provide a lens or a filter through which to read John's theology of Jesus' salvific work in which we are called to share and for which we are empowered by the gift of the Holy Spirit. In Part Three I will establish an *inclusio* relationship<sup>3</sup> between Jn. 20:21-23, the Easter evening commissioning scene, and Jn. 1:29-34, the inaugural scene in which Jesus himself is commissioned by God. By this I hope to clarify the meaning of Jesus' mission and how his mission is both unique to him and foundational for our mission. This will lead to an interpretation of the final verse, "Whose sins you shall forgive..." in a way that is historically and exegetically plausible, theologically sound, and, I hope, spiritually challenging in regard to the issue of violence in our world.

## **I. Meaning of "Disciples" and of the "Holy Spirit"**

Our first two questions, then, are the following: according to the Gospel of John, whom did Jesus commission on Easter evening, and who or what is the Holy Spirit by which Jesus empowers those he commissions?

### *A. The Disciples*

The first verse of our text, Jn. 20:19, says:

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, the doors

being closed where the *disciples* were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

This is the same group to whom Jesus, in the immediately preceding scene, had sent Mary Magdalene to announce the Easter kerygma. Jesus told her to "Go to my *brothers and sisters*...."<sup>4</sup> The next verse says that "Mary Magdalene went...to the disciples...." (see Jn. 20:17-18) thus equating the two designations. In the Fourth Gospel, "disciple" is a category that includes both women and men, is more extensive than "the twelve," and is not equivalent to "apostles." As Raymond Brown points out, "disciple" is the Fourth Gospel's primary category for followers of Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Apostles are never mentioned at all in this Gospel. And, although the Fourth Evangelist knew of the group of "the twelve" (see Jn. 6:67, 70-71) there is no account of a calling of "the twelve" in John and no list of them. Jesus called five disciples at the beginning of his public ministry (Jn. 1:35-51). One of them, Andrew's companion, remains anonymous, and one of them, Nathanael, is not in any list of the twelve anywhere in the New Testament. The term "the twelve" is used in only two texts in John (Jn. 6:69-71 and 20:24) and in both instances the term is used to emphasize the greater gravity of sins committed by those disciples. It is never used to suggest that they enjoy special prerogatives or status among the disciples.<sup>6</sup>

The group to whom Jesus appeared on Easter evening, "the disciples," certainly included at least some whom we know were among the twelve, e.g., Simon Peter, as well as people prominent among the disciples in John whom we know were not among the twelve such as the Beloved Disciple, Nathanael, Martha and Mary of Bethany, Mary Magdalene and others. Significantly, one of the twelve, Thomas, we know was missing when Jesus commissioned the disciples to forgive sins and he receives no special commission after his rehabilitation in the following scene. If the commission were intended specifically for the twelve and involved some exclusive power bestowed on them Thomas would have to have received the commission he missed.

Nor can we reason backwards that since this scene was the institution of a sacrament whose administration today is limited to ordained ministers

the Easter evening community consisted of their forebears. The sacrament of Penance in our sense did not exist until about nine centuries later<sup>7</sup> and there is no indication in the Gospels that Jesus “ordained” anyone. Our passage, in short, is about the commissioning of the ecclesial community, the community of Jesus’ disciples. This is important for our purposes because we, the baptized, are that community of disciples and Jesus’ commission to his disciples in this scene describes our mission today. In Part III we will take up the question of what exactly the ecclesial community, which will eventually be called the Church, is commissioned to do.

### *B. The Holy Spirit*

Our second exegetical question is who or what is the Holy Spirit that Jesus breathes upon his disciples in the commissioning scene, Jn. 20:21-23? John uses a number of terms for this mysterious reality that are equivalent in what they denote but diverse in theological connotation. The Evangelist speaks of the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, the *παράκλητος* (transliterated as Paraclete and variously translated as Advocate, Counselor, Helper, Comforter), and each term has particular nuances. Furthermore, the spirit language moves in a complex and highly symbolic semantic field of Old Testament evocations and technical johannine theological vocabulary. Spirit is associated symbolically with wind and water, with breath and breathing, with creation and re-creation, with the original covenant with Israel and the New Covenant with the New Israel. Given our space constraints, much of this rich spirit material will have to be passed over. Our purpose here is simply to grasp why the Spirit is so important in Jesus’ commissioning of his disciples and in our understanding of what we, as the community of Jesus’ disciples, are commissioned to do.

1. First, “Spirit” is a way of talking about Jesus’ special relationship with God which, by the time this Gospel was written, was understood as divine filiation. When Jesus begins his ministry in the Fourth Gospel we are not told that he is baptized by John or tempted by the devil. Rather, John testified that the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy

Spirit.” And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God (Jn. 1:33-34).

Later, in 3:34, as John’s ministry is drawing to a close, the Fourth Evangelist says that Jesus is the one who speaks the words of God because God has given Jesus the “Spirit without measure.”<sup>8</sup> So the Spirit is, first of all, a way of speaking about Jesus as Son of God, the repository of the Spirit in all its fullness, who therefore speaks the words of God and is able to give the Holy Spirit to his disciples making the community his presence in the world.

2. Second, there is a series of spirit texts in John 2, 7, and 19 that establishes a close connection between Jesus, the Jerusalem temple and its bloody sacrifices, the bloody sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, and the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church. This connection is central to our concern.

In ch. 2:13-22, at the outset of his public life, Jesus performed a powerful prophetic sign in the temple in Jerusalem during the feast of Passover. He drove out the large animals used for sacrifice and spilled out the Jewish coins that worshipers needed in exchange for their Roman coinage in order to perform legitimately their sacrificial obligations in the temple. Unlike the Synoptics who place this scene at the very end of Jesus’ public life where it functions as a “last straw” in the provocation of the authorities to arrest Jesus, John places this scene at the very beginning of Jesus’ public life as a kind of interpretive dramatization of what he has come to do. John does not present Jesus as “cleansing the temple,” that is, correcting abuses in order to restore the temple to its proper function. In John, Jesus is declaring the end of temple worship through blood sacrifice.<sup>9</sup> He is announcing prophetically that all substitutionary sacrifice, all killing to give glory to God, all trafficking in blood to obtain God’s favor or forgiveness would be ended with his death and resurrection. This is clear from the dialogue that follows the action.

When the temple authorities demanded a sign legitimating this stunning action Jesus replied, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will rebuild it” (Jn. 2:18). They thought he was predicting the destruction of the physical temple but the Evangelist intervenes with the explanation that the reader

will need to understand Jesus' death and resurrection as the end of bloody sacrifice: "But [Jesus] was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this" (Jn. 2:21-22). The risen Jesus will be a New Temple, as he explains to the Samaritan Woman in chapter 4 when she inquires where true worship is to take place, in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerizim. In both places God was worshiped by sacrifice. But Jesus tells her that this dispensation is over. In neither place will true worshipers worship the true God who is Spirit. Rather, Jesus will be the "place" where people will worship God, not by sacrificial slaughter as in the temple, but in Spirit and in Truth (see Jn. 4: 19-24).

In ch. 7 Jesus again goes to Jerusalem, this time for the Feast of Tabernacles in which water as a source of life played a major symbolic role:<sup>10</sup>

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'From within him shall flow rivers of living water.'" Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified (Jn. 7:37-39).<sup>11</sup>

Jesus here evokes the vision in Ez. 47:1-12 in which the prophet saw an ever more abundant river of living water pouring forth out of the side of the eschatological temple, the New Temple of the New Covenant, giving life to all the world. The Evangelist, again, breaks in to interpret what Jesus is saying through the symbol of water: "Now [Jesus] said this about the Spirit." Jesus is the New Temple from whose open side will flow living water, that is, the Spirit, but only after Jesus is glorified which is John's term for Jesus' death on the cross.

In ch. 19, at the moment of Jesus' death, we have a symbolic fulfillment of this prophecy. According to John, Jesus' last words are, "It is finished" (Jn. 19:30). And having said this Jesus "handed over his Spirit." "It is finished" evokes the Creation story in Genesis 2:1-2 when God finished the work he was doing, namely, the creation of the world including humanity, and

rested on the seventh day. But God's work, begun in creation, was not finally finished until humanity was reunited with God through the sacrifice of Jesus who then rested in the tomb on the seventh day, the Great Sabbath.<sup>12</sup> Only then can Jesus, through his glorification, "hand over" his Spirit. The expression "handed over (παρέδωκεν) his Spirit" is not a euphemism for "die." Jesus, according to John, is not simply expiring. He is literally giving, bestowing his Spirit which, until now, only he possessed in all its fullness. And immediately a soldier pierced Jesus' side and, out of the body that the evangelist had told us will arise in three days as the New Temple, flows the water and blood (Jn. 19:34) that will give life to all the world as did the water which flowed from the side of the temple in Ezekiel's vision.

So, when Jesus on Easter evening "rises up" in the midst of his disciples it is as the New Temple in the midst of the New Israel to inaugurate the New Covenant. He shows them his hands, the sign of his saving death, and his side from which the life-giving water and blood flowed, and bestows on them the Spirit. We were told in chapter 2 that it was not until Jesus was risen from the dead that the disciples were able to understand what he had said about raising the temple in three days. In chapter 7 we were told about the water of the Spirit which would flow from within that living temple once Jesus is glorified in death. Now, the disciples (and the readers) are able to connect the dots and understand that, through the bloody death and bodily resurrection of Jesus a whole new order of reality, a New Creation, is coming into being. The community is being constituted as a New People of God in whose midst is the New Temple, the risen Jesus.

3. Third, chapters 13-17 of John's Gospel comprise a series of discourses<sup>13</sup> by Jesus in which he prepares his disciples for his "going away." Soon, they will see him physically no longer but "[i]n that day you shall know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you (Jn. 14:20). [NAS translation]. This mutual indwelling of Jesus and his disciples is effected by the gift Jesus will give them from the Father, or the Father will give them in Jesus' name, which Jesus calls "the Paraclete" or the "spirit of truth." The Paraclete, as Raymond Brown beautifully wrote, is the Holy Spirit in a special role, namely, as the presence of Jesus after Jesus has gone to the Father.<sup>14</sup>

The Paraclete has a number of functions among the disciples but the one which is most important for our purposes has to do with understanding Jesus' violent death at the hands of his persecutors. Jesus predicts that his disciples will share his fate. They will be hated and violently persecuted by the world as he was (see Jn. 15:18-19). Jesus warns that "an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God" (Jn. 16:2) just as those who kill Jesus think they are honoring God. This mistaken connection between bloody sacrificial violence and the worship of God is precisely what Jesus will bring to an end by his own death and resurrection.

When the Paraclete comes, Jesus says, he will act as the defense attorney for the persecuted. The Paraclete will do for the disciples what he does in relation to Jesus' death and resurrection, namely, reveal the truth about what is really going on under the mythical disguise of sacred violence, of giving glory to God by the murder of a scapegoat. The Paraclete will prove the world wrong about *sin*, about *justice*, and about *judgment* (Jn. 16:7-11), that is, about the whole sacrificial system of judging and killing sinners in order to restore unity and peace in society and between society and God. The Paraclete will reveal that killing Jesus was not a religious sacrifice that gave glory to God and saved the Jewish nation but was a vicious lynching carried out under the prompting of Satan, the false "prince of this world." Executing Jesus, the quintessential expression of rejecting the revelation of the God of love in Jesus, is not only not pleasing to God; it is the real *sin*. Indeed, as we will see, it is "the sin of world" that Jesus came to take away. Furthermore, murdering Jesus was not a restoration of justice by expiating sin through the death of the sinner. The real *justice* was precisely God's vindication of Jesus through resurrection. Finally, the judgment they thought they had rightly rendered against Jesus the blasphemer will be revealed as false judgment. The true *judgment* falls on Satan, the "original liar," who is revealed as the "murderer from the beginning," the one orchestrating this and all sacralized killing (see Jn. 8:44).

This role of the Paraclete/Spirit in unmasking the evil and futility of the sacrificial system for reconciling humans with God and with each other

will be key to understanding the alternative to sacrifice which Jesus will inaugurate on Easter night by the gift of the Spirit and the commission to forgive sins.

4. A fourth and final clue to the meaning of the Holy Spirit in our passage comes from the Old Testament resonances we hear in the Easter evening pericope. The Greek word in this text for Jesus' action of "breathing on" his disciples as a way of gifting them with the Holy Spirit is ἐνεφύσησεν (ἐμφυσάω), a New Testament *hapax legomenon*, that is, a word that occurs nowhere else but here in the whole New Testament. It occurs only twice, once in Genesis and once in Ezekiel, in the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament.<sup>15</sup> Because it is such a rare word in the Old Testament it would immediately evoke the right associations for John's community reading or hearing this narrative.

"Breathed on" occurs for the first time in the Old Testament in Gen. 2:7 where God breathed into the face of the human creature, the ἄνθρωπος created from lifeless clay, the breath of life and the ἄνθρωπος became "a living being" (Gen. 2:7). The second occurrence is in Ezekiel 37, the famous dry bones passage. God shows the prophet a vast valley of dead bones, the decimated house of Israel whose unfaithfulness to the Covenant has brought them to total ruin. At God's command Ezekiel prophesies to the bones and they begin to come together to form skeletons which are then covered with flesh and skin. But they are zombies, the walking dead, because there is no breath in them. Then God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath or the wind or the spirit (breath, wind, and spirit are the same word in Greek: πνεῦμα) and the spirit breathes into the dead house of Israel and they come to life; they rise up as a new people (v. 10). With this recreated Israel God will make a New Covenant:

I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary [or temple] among them forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations shall know that I the Lord sanctify Israel, when

my sanctuary [or temple] is among them forevermore (Ez. 37:26-28).<sup>16</sup>

The scene on Easter evening picks up every element of this promise of the New Covenant to a New Israel. Jesus rises up in their midst as the *new temple* predicted in Jn. 2 and greets them with “*Peace to you.*” He *gives them his Spirit* predicted in Jn. 7 and handed over in Jn. 19 by means of which he will dwell with them always, being their God as the community will be his people. The New Covenant promised repeatedly in the Old Testament is realized when the Risen Jesus returns to his own to establish them as his ongoing *presence among the nations forevermore.*

In summary, then, the Holy Spirit in John is the Spirit of Jesus, the principle of his divine sonship which he came into the world to share with all who would believe in him (see Jn. 1:12-13). His public life unfolds as a progressive revelation of what the Spirit, who will be poured forth from the New Temple of Jesus’ body when he is glorified on the cross, will be and do for his community. The Spirit will be a stream of life-giving water, a defender when they are being sacrificed as Jesus was, and a revealer of where true justice lies and why human violence can never bring it about. The Spirit will make them a New People of God, a place where the presence of Jesus will be encountered as the presence of God once was in the Temple of Jerusalem. The Spirit that Jesus gives them will enable them to find another way to create justice and peace in this world, a non-violent way of reconciliation that will consist in extending to all people, through forgiveness of sins, the peace Jesus brings to them and breathes into them.

## **II. René Girard and Followers on Religion and Violence**

We turn now to the theory of René Girard and his biblical and theological colleagues which will provide a lens through which to interpret John’s presentation of Jesus’ saving work which he commissions his disciples to continue and make effective throughout time and space.

René Girard is a French scholar, born in 1923, who began his academic career in medieval cultural studies. He has become best known for his

interdisciplinary studies in literature, cultural anthropology, and religion. Girard discovered in literature, especially in the Greek tragedies and the works of Shakespeare and Dostoevsky, an anthropological pattern that he, and those who have followed him, believe is virtually universal, namely, the intimate connection by means of violence between religion and culture. It is a theory about the use of scapegoating sacrifice, that is, of violent religious ritual, to keep cultures from self-destructing. Good (i.e., sacred) violence, the killing of the scapegoat for the glory of God, is the means of keeping bad (i.e., social) violence under control. Biblical scholars concerned with the issue of violence in both Old and New Testaments, and theologians concerned with the violence in the substitutionary atonement theory of redemption<sup>17</sup> saw the significance of Girard's thought for their fields.<sup>18</sup> It is important to realize that Girard's theory, like other major theories in fields like psychology or sociology, is not really "his," something he invented. It is something he discovered in the material he was studying. What we owe the theorist, like Jung, Weber, or Girard, is not the truth of the theory (which has to be determined by its explanatory power) but its discovery and explication. How we use such theory depends on our own ability to see connections between the theory and our own fields of inquiry. In my case, I have found Girard's theory extremely helpful in dealing with the question of how Jesus' violent death, which can only be seen as evil, can be understood as saving the world and how we, his followers, can participate in that saving work in a non-violent way.

I will first synthesize Girard's very complex thought<sup>19</sup> and then exploit the synthesis in relationship to a single problem, albeit a very central one, namely the "paradox of the Cross."<sup>20</sup> Feminists, liberation theologians, post-colonial thinkers as well as students of such unspeakable human tragedies of violence as slavery and the Holocaust have charged, in ever more convincing and disturbing ways in recent decades, that the Christian teaching that we are saved by the violent death of Jesus has contributed to the justification of violence in society and to the effort by oppressors to render victimized people passive in the face of their suffering.<sup>21</sup>

The paradox of the Cross is that immeasurable good, namely, the salvation of the world, was brought about by something that was unqualifiedly bad, namely, the murder of Jesus. How is it possible that a totally evil cause produced an infinitely good effect? And how do we explain the fact that a good God either decreed Jesus' death which was evil or at least approved of it? The notion that God was somehow pleased, or pacified, or rendered benevolent toward sinful humanity by an act of sheer evil, namely, the murder of God's own Son carried out by God's permission, is increasingly experienced as a theological brick wall. More descriptively perhaps, it is a theological/spiritual Gordian Knot, a problem that cannot be solved on its own terms. Every intellectual move toward a solution seems to make the problem worse. Incomprehension before this contradiction is exacerbated by the fact that the Passion of Jesus is often presented as motivation for innocent victims to bear their sufferings in mute imitation of the victimized Jesus.

The understanding of two interconnected dynamics is at the heart of Girard's thesis. The first dynamic is *mimetic or imitative desire* which causes social and cultural breakdown and the second is *scapegoating sacrifice* which provides the religiously sanctioned remedy for the social breakdown. Social reconciliation is achieved through the exile, punishment, or death of the victim.

Put very simply, we find in literature of all ages and cultures and in our own experience at every level that we humans do not simply desire things because we see them as good. Rather, we learn to see something as desirable because someone else has or desires that object. The mother evinces infinite delight as she tastes the spoonful of orange mush and the baby opens wide its mouth to share in the delicacy of mashed carrots. The child in the playpen drops the toy with which he was contentedly playing when he sees his companion enjoying her toy which now he must have. The teenager must have a particular brand of sneakers only because that is what the coolest kid in the class wears. The same dynamic drives adults' competition over houses, cars, jobs, and salaries. The fuel of the advertising business is mimetic desire which stimulates the compulsion to acquire what the model possesses. Envious greed leads to rivalry, competition, and eventually conflict. Business

and military conflicts evince the same dynamic of envy leading to rivalry which escalates into violence, overt or covert, in the effort of each to obtain what some other has. But winning only incites retaliation against the victor which keeps the cycle of violence going.

Imitative desire and the resulting acquisitive rivalry in a society leads inevitably toward the war of all against all as everyone struggles to be at the top of the mimetic pile-up. As violence escalates, social chaos threatens the survival of the group. Enter the second dynamic in Girard's theory, the remedy for contagious violence, namely, scapegoating sacrifice. Something must be done to divert everyone from mutual destructiveness and channel their violent energy into a common and unifying effort. The age-old and universal remedy for social chaos, for the disunity of "all against all," is the unification of "all against one." Nothing unites like a common enemy. The scapegoat is simply the designated enemy.

The scapegoat ritual has a simple structure and dynamism. And what is vitally important is that it really does work. It is effective. In the group convulsed by mimetically inspired social chaos someone, by the mere fact of being somehow different from the majority, is identified as responsible in some way for the social disunity. The coming together to expunge that foreign element restores peace. Almost any kind of difference will do: skin color, sexual orientation, a speech defect, poor grooming, "uncool" clothes, a foreign-sounding name, "nerdy" glasses, living in the wrong part of town, even just being "new" in the neighborhood or school yard. The point is that someone must be responsible for all the trouble in the group and it cannot be anyone like "us" because that would suggest that "we" might be the source of our problem, that "we have met the enemy, and he is us."<sup>22</sup>

As antagonism toward the scapegoat spreads through the crowd it becomes a mob, a single collectivity moved by motives for which no one responsible, at least until the next morning when some individuals begin to wonder how they ever could have participated in "what happened" (not "what we did") last night. But the renewed peace that miraculously descends on the group now that the victim is gone proves that the destruction of the scapegoat

was something that “needed to happen.” Everything is back to normal. The scapegoat principle is vindicated: “it was expedient that one person die to keep the whole group from perishing” (cf. Jn. 11:50).

Historically, and still in many societies, the scapegoat mechanism is orchestrated within the context of religious sacrifice. The victim is offered to the god or gods whom the people have somehow offended and the deity, pacified by the offering, responds by restoring peace and unity to the community. Once the sacrificial murder had united the people they were able to disguise the violence and injustice of the victimization by creating a myth or sacred story which retold the event, not as murder but as sacrificial service of the divine necessary for the survival of the people. They then created a ritual or sacred drama which allowed the sacrifice to be re-enacted, through either bloody or unbloody repetition, whenever social chaos, infertility, crop failure, plague, or war made renewal necessary.

The function of sacrificial myth was to render the scapegoat’s victimization invisible either through vilification of the scapegoat as one who deserved to die or through posthumous exaltation of the victim as the selfless savior of the people who willingly went to death for them. In some cases the myth began as vilification and was later transmuted into divinization. Jesus enraged his opponents by pointing out to them how often they had killed the messengers God sent to them and buried them in unmarked graves thus bringing together the group which had been fractured by the prophet’s troublesome proclamation that God was not pleased with sacrifices but demanded justice. Later the vilified and murdered prophet was acclaimed as a voice crying in the wilderness even as the descendants of the murderers claimed that they would never have done what their ancestors did. Jesus, of course, was warning them that they were already plotting to do to him precisely the same thing they had done to the prophets before him (see Mt. 23:29-39 and Lk. 11:47-51). Scapegoating is always a temporary fix. It has to be renewed again and again because the cure is identical with the disease. Violence is used against violence begetting more violence. It is well known, for example, that jurisdictions in which capital punishment is used against murderers have higher murder rates than those in which capital punishment

is not used.

Wherever one might be on the political spectrum, or how one feels about the Bush-Cheney presidency, it is easy to discern this mimetic desire and scapegoating mechanism in the cultural upheaval in the United States following the 9/11/01 terrorist attack in New York City. Society was thrown into chaos by the attack on the Trade Towers. We were all glued to the television feeding our terror on endless re-runs of the hijacked planes crashing into the towers and the feverish speculation of pundits about who was responsible. In such a case of social destabilization someone must be responsible or the whole society remains vulnerable to forces totally beyond its control. The scapegoat was quickly identified, a man who was different from us religiously, racially, culturally, linguistically. We were told that he hated us because he did not share our love of freedom and our respect for human rights, that he was insanely jealous of our high standard of living and civic virtue. He was a madman possessed of weapons of mass destruction which, unlike us (the only nation that, in fact, has ever used weapons of mass destruction on a civilian population), he was prepared to use. The traumatized society, feeling ultimately vulnerable, united quickly in a single-minded march to war to hunt him down regardless of the human “collateral damage” incurred in the process. It was expedient that one man die rather than that the whole nation perish.

His capture unleashed the socially unifying euphoria of “mission accomplished,” ecstatic cheers as his statue was toppled presaging his imminent personal destruction for guilt already established beyond a shadow of a doubt on the basis of evidence we were assured existed even though it could not be, and never was, found. And in the surge of social unity expressed in flying flags and yellow ribbons it was essential to suppress any trace of dissent, to silence any “unpatriotic” voice that might suggest that beneath it all could be mimetic desire for oil, or that our own cultural imperialism might have provoked a desire for revenge. The newly unified society did not address the truth or falsity of such suggestions. They were simply rejected out of hand, not as untrue but as “unpatriotic,” as taking the side of the scapegoat and thus weakening the newfound unity of all

against one. Of course, and this is quite instructive, this particular instance of scapegoating fizzled because someone got to the scapegoat before we did. The sacrificial ritual could not be carried to completion. This left us in a state of widespread indecisiveness and mounting disunity as some people called for re-evaluation of the whole project while others called for “staying the course” because, they assured us, there was an even worse scapegoat on the loose. A major obstacle to socially effective scapegoating today, for reasons I hope will become clear, is that for Christians the whole dynamic has lost its legitimating basis in religion precisely because of the execution of Jesus, the innocent scapegoat.<sup>23</sup>

No great stretch of imagination is necessary to see how this Girardian analysis applies to the passion and death of Jesus. Both the civil and the ecclesiastical establishments in Jerusalem were in chaos on the eve of Passover that year. Pilate was the representative of the Roman Empire in a fractious Jewish province<sup>24</sup> that was prone, especially at religious holidays, to riot. Caiaphas was the Jewish high priest, basically kept in power by that Roman governor. Jesus was a provincial preacher whose teaching challenged both the political and religious power structures and thereby stirred up the Jewish people. If the people got out of order, for any reason, Pilate would turn against the Jewish leadership whose job was to keep the people pacified. As Jews from all over, domestic and foreign, poured into the Holy City for Passover, both Empire and Temple were sitting on a social powder keg.<sup>25</sup>

Jesus was “different” enough to make him an ideal scapegoat. He was from the Galilean “boonies,” despised by the Jerusalem religious pure bloods. He was very possibly illegitimate. He was in his thirties and not married which could have several unsavory explanations. Someone had heard him say something threatening about the temple, although they could not remember exactly what, and his claiming to be God’s Son was certainly blasphemous. Who needed a trial? Obviously, the riot simmering in the streets was due to this “odd man out,” this messianic pretender.

Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent, and in John’s Gospel announces it three times.<sup>26</sup> So did Caiaphas who had declared to his colleagues the real

reason Jesus had to be stopped: if he was allowed to go on the whole world would follow him and the Romans would wipe out the Jewish nation (see Jn. 11:48). The scapegoat principle was clearly enunciated by Caiaphas, “It is expedient that one man die rather than that the whole nation perish” (see Jn. 11:50 and 18:14).

Pilate and the Jewish elders play off each other in the scenes in John 18-19. They whip the Passover crowd into a mindless mob screaming for the death of someone against whom most have not even heard charges and for the release of Barabbas, already convicted of the very crimes of which Jesus stands accused. The scapegoat is offered to them, dressed as a fool, so brutalized that he in no way resembles their respectable religious selves (see Jn. 19:5). The path to civil and religious peace clearly lay in the unification of all against one.

A few hours later, after the lynching on Calvary, calm descends over the land. In all three synoptic gospels one of the executioners acknowledges that their victim was innocent, a Son of God (Mt.27:54; Mk. 15:39; Lk. 23:47). Luke says the crowd dispersed beating their breasts (Lk. 23:48). Pilate is relieved to get Jesus’ body out of sight before people come to their senses and realize what they have done. The religious go “off to church,” home for the solemn celebration of Passover, while the Roman soldiers wash their hands of another gruesome tour of duty, just following orders. The important thing is to relish the restored order, the closure, that the scapegoating sacrifice has accomplished and try not to think too much about the details.

### **III. The Meaning of Jesus’ Commission of His Disciples**

In this third part we will read the paschal mystery of Jesus through the lens of Girardian mimetic theory in order to understand how his violent death and resurrection brought about the salvation of the world and how his disciples’ mission to forgive sins is a non-violent continuation of that saving mystery. The scene at the end of the Gospel in which Jesus sends his disciples as his Father had sent him forms an *inclusio* with the scene at the very beginning of the Gospel in which Jesus is commissioned by God.<sup>27</sup>

In Jn. 1:29-34 emissaries from Jerusalem were sent to ask John the Baptizer, who was attracting a crowd, who he was, what he was doing, and by what authority. John emphatically denied being Elijah, the Mosaic prophet, or the messiah. He was merely a voice crying in the wilderness, one sent to bear witness to someone coming after him whose status far surpassed his own.

The next day [John] saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Behold, the *Lamb of God* who *takes away the sin of the world!* .....

[T]he one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the *Spirit descend and remain* is the one who *baptizes with the Holy Spirit.*' And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God" (Jn. 1:29-34).

John's witness to Jesus at this inaugural moment, seen in light of the commissioning of his disciples in Jn. 20:19-23, shows the continuity between his vocation and theirs: here the Spirit descends and remains on Jesus empowering him for his mission to "take away the sin (singular) of the world." When he has accomplished this great work through his life, death, and resurrection Jesus will "baptize," that is, empower his followers with the Holy Spirit for their mission to "forgive sins (plural)."

So we need to ask three questions: 1) what is the "sin of the world"? 2) how does Jesus, take away the sin of the world? 3) how does the empowerment of the disciples to forgive sins continue Jesus' salvific work? Central to answering these questions is the identification of Jesus by John as the "Lamb of God" (ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ), a mysterious title that appears nowhere else in the New Testament.<sup>28</sup> Scholars recognize three Old Testament passages as possible background for this title:<sup>29</sup> the "sacrifice of Isaac" in Gen. 22:1-20 in which God provides the lamb for Abraham's holocaust; the Suffering Servant in Is. 53:7-8 who is silent like a lamb led to slaughter;<sup>30</sup> the Paschal Lamb whose blood saves the Hebrews in Egypt and whose flesh becomes their Passover meal (Ex. 12:1-14). This Old Testament typology and symbolism will illuminate our investigation of Jesus' mission.

### A. The “Sin of the World”

First, what is the “sin of the world” which Jesus came not just to forgive but to definitively take away? Jesus, in the Last Supper discourses, says that the Paraclete will convict the world of sin (in the singular), that is, will reveal the true nature of sin. Jesus says that the world, meaning those under the influence of Satan, is wrong about sin because it thinks that Jesus is the sinner, a blasphemer whose elimination will give glory to God. But the real sin, which the Spirit of Truth will reveal, is that “they (the world) do not believe in me” (Jn. 16:9), that is, in Jesus.

In his great final prayer to God Jesus says, “...this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3). So “eternal life” or salvation is to believe in God who is revealed in Jesus and its opposite, “the sin,” is to refuse to believe in Jesus and thus reject God.

What Jesus reveals is not some abstract theological proposition to which people are obliged to give intellectual assent, but that Jesus and the Father are one, something readily visible in the signs Jesus had been doing which are clearly beyond human power (see Jn. 10:37-38): opening the eyes of a man blind from birth, healing a man lame for 38 years, feeding a huge crowd of hungry people with five loaves and two fish, raising someone long dead. The person who sees Jesus sees the Father, that is, sees God at work in the world (see Jn. 12:45 and 14:9). In other words, Jesus is the manifestation of God precisely as love: “God so loved the world as to *give* the only Son” (Jn. 3:16). Jesus says to the Samaritan woman, about himself, “If you knew the *gift of God* and who it is who is speaking to you...” (Jn. 4:10). God is love expressed in the Gift who is Jesus. Jesus manifests God’s identity as love by doing the loving works of God in their midst (see Jn. 10:37-38;14:11). The “sin of the world” is not to accept that Gift, not to believe that God is love. Humans refuse that gift, quite simply, when they refuse to love, when they choose other paths to “life” and security such as rivalry and violence. “The world” includes everyone involved in the Good Friday murder: Pilate the Gentile, the leaders of the Jews, the disciples of Jesus who betray, deny, and

abandon him, the Jewish mob screaming for his blood, the Roman soldiers who execute him. When the world seizes the Gift of God and crucifies him they manifest the true nature of the “sin of the world,” that is, the rejection of the God who is love.

The story of the binding of Isaac (Gen. 22:1-20) probes this perversity of humanity in the face of God’s gift of gratuitous love. In the Old Testament, the holocaust or whole burnt offering was the symbol of wholehearted love of God. God must wrench humanity free from the conviction that true holocaust requires destruction of that which is offered, that equates love with violence.

You will recall that God told Abraham to take his only, beloved son Isaac, the gift of God through whom the covenant would be extended to all people, to a mountain God would show him and there offer Isaac as a holocaust. Abraham understands that to respond with his whole heart to God’s wholehearted love he must destroy God’s gift. Abraham places the wood for the sacrifice on Isaac, the intended victim, and ascends the mountain. On the way, Isaac says to his father, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the holocaust?” Abraham replies, “God himself will provide the lamb for the holocaust, my son” (Gen. 22:7-8). As Abraham raises the knife to slay Isaac, God stops him and provides a sheep caught in the thicket to replace Isaac as the symbol of Abraham’s self-gift. A major point of this story, which at this point loses all interest in the sheep or the slaughter and turns to the relation between God and Abraham, is that God does not desire human sacrifice. God prizes the total self-gift, the holocaust of the heart expressed in Abraham’s willingness to offer even his son, that responds to God’s total self-gift to humanity expressed eventually in the gift of God’s son. But gratuitous slaughter of what is precious, of God’s gift, is not the appropriate way to give glory to God.

Like Isaac, Jesus appears as the beloved Son of his Father, the gift of God, the holocaust of God’s heart, the Lamb of God provided by God to take away the sin of the world. John alone among the Gospels tells us that Jesus carried by himself to the mount of sacrifice the wood upon which he would die (Jn.

19:17). The difference, of course, is that no substitute victim can be provided for Jesus because he is the victim, not of an agonizing father who thinks he is doing God's will but of scapegoating human violence. He will go to his death as the innocent Suffering Servant, not because God wills his death, but because we do. Jesus' murder has to be read in light of the meaning of the Isaac story, namely, *God does not desire human sacrifice*. God did not send Jesus into the world to be murdered. Rather, God gave the only Son to the world, as God gave Isaac to Abraham and Sarah, that everyone might have eternal life through him (see Jn. 3:16). By giving the only Son, God has indeed supplied the Lamb, as the father of the Prodigal Son provided the inheritance that would be squandered, but it is human malice, not God's will, that turns God's gift into the bloody execution of an innocent victim. As God was pleased with Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only Son so God is pleased with Jesus' willingness to carry God's love for the world into the very heart of human evil. But God wills neither the death of Isaac nor that of Jesus.

#### *B. Jesus' Death to "Take Away the Sin of the World"*

How, then, does Jesus' death "take away the sin of the world," humanity's refusal to accept that God is love revealed in God's gift of the only Son? Mark Heim in his remarkable book, *Saved from Sacrifice*, says that two features of Jesus' death make it possible for him to confront and defeat, once and for all, the sacrificial dynamic, the scapegoating mechanism of reconciliation through violence by the collective murder of an innocent victim. Jesus had to be simultaneously a victim *like all other scapegoats* and completely *unique*. His death had to be real, part of the endless series of murders he came to stop, not some magical escape that was *sui generis* in relation to the deaths of other innocent victims. And it had to be the once and for all sacrifice, so that reconciling violence need not be and must not be used ever again. It had to end the need for ceaseless repetition that is built into the scapegoat ritual.

Jesus was *one more victim like all the others* in the line that stretches back to Abel, the innocent victim of Cain's mimetic rivalry. If Jesus were not like

other scapegoated victims, framed and lynched, helpless to prevent his murder for crimes of which he was innocent, his death would not be relevant to theirs. Jesus really went through what all such victims go through and he truly died. And while he freely accepted what happened to him, as do many of the bravest and noblest of humanity's victims, it could only have been prevented by a miracle, something which is not accessible to other victims. He prayed as many victims do, to be spared his suffering, but prayer in such circumstances often cannot save the victim from resolute human evil. Jesus' prayer, like that of all the others, did not save him.

But at the same time Jesus was *not like other victims* in two important respects. First, Jesus was absolutely, rather than relatively, innocent. All scapegoated victims are, like all of us, guilty of something, even many things. But they are innocent of that for which they are really being persecuted, namely, being the cause of the social disorder to which only sacrifice can bring closure. Scapegoating involves imputing to the victim something of which the persecutors are convinced they are not guilty. The capital crime is something that makes the victim totally different from the executioners and justifies the "all against one" strategy. The purpose of the guilt imputed to the scapegoat is to disguise simultaneously the innocence of the victim (by imputing to him or her such enormous guilt that only death can eradicate it) and the guilt of the persecutors (who think their murder of the victim gives glory to God who can only be pacified by such violence). The absolute difference between them establishes that the victim deserves to die and that the murderers are licensed to kill. The "rightness" of this transaction, this sacrifice, reestablishes social order. The execution of the victim brings "closure."

But, alone among humans, Jesus was actually not guilty of anything. This difference between the person justly accused of a finite offense for which they might actually be justly punished by the state and the innocent victim who is being scapegoated was clearly expressed by the "good thief" on the cross to his partner in crime, "... we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong" (Lk. 23:41). Jesus as scapegoat is unique in his total innocence. As totally innocent victim he reveals the innocence of all such victims and the

guilt of all those who sacrifice them. He exposes the inner mechanism of the scapegoating process which can only function as long as it is hidden from the eyes of those who are carrying it out. Once it becomes clear, once we “know what we are doing,” namely, murdering the powerless in order to unify the fractured society, it becomes more and more difficult to maintain that there is some real difference between the “good violence” of the executioners and the “bad violence” they are supposedly stopping.

Secondly, Jesus is unique as victim because he does not stay sacrificed. He truly died; but he rose from the dead. In the resurrection God gave back to us the Gift we had rejected. Jesus returned with forgiveness on his lips to his disciples who had been complicit in his unjust death by their betrayal, denial, abandonment. “Peace be to you,” he greets them, and they “rejoiced at seeing the Lord.” He comes not to retaliate, to accuse, to extract a confession, to demand contrition, to impose penance, to set conditions for rehabilitation.<sup>31</sup> He comes only to forgive, and by forgiving to give them, as he had promised at the Last Supper (see Jn. 14:24), the peace the world cannot give. This is the peace that conquers the “sin of the world,” something only Jesus can do. No amount of human violence can truly reconcile, really establish the lasting peace for which the human family longs and which cannot be taken away. The grace Jesus imparts outstrips the sin in which they have participated and removes all the sins they have committed (cf. Rom. 5:20).

By the time Jesus commissions his disciples to forgive sins they have experienced what it means to be forgiven, not just for some particular sins although they are all guilty of something, and not just to the extent that they have earned forgiveness by repentance or reparation because there is, in fact, no way to make reparation for their participation in the sin of the world. They now know by experience the connection between “sins” and “the sin of the world.” God’s reversal of Jesus’ sacrificial death did not annul or cancel that death. He returns to them bearing the marks of the crucifixion. But his death is integrated into his gloriously alive body-person. No other sacrificial victim of scapegoating violence has ever reversed the mob’s violence in a victory not only over personal fate but over death itself. Jesus has put death to death by his Resurrection (see Rom. 6:9; 1Cor. 15:26, 54-55).

This is where the mysterious predictions of the ultimate victory of the Suffering Servant, the silent and unprotesting Lamb led to the slaughter, are concretely realized and where the promise of the salvific benefit from the Servant's death as healing for his persecutors is fulfilled.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future?....[but] through him the will of the Lord shall prosper (Is. 53:7-8,10).

The Suffering Servant is not killed by God or according to God's will but by "a perversion of justice," by human malice. God enters the scene to make this atrocity work for the salvation of those who perpetrated it, just as Jesus' return to his own will make their participation in the sin of the world the raw material of forgiveness and peace which they will now be empowered to extend to others. God's will to save can work even through and despite the evil will of humans.

### *C. The Empowerment of the Disciples to Forgive Sins*

Immediately after reestablishing his relationship with his disciples Jesus says again, "Peace be with you." This peace, which is first that of forgiveness, now becomes the solid foundation for the challenging mission he is about to commit to them, namely, to make effective in the world Jesus' overcoming of the sin of the world. At the Last Supper he had spoken to them of his death and their defection "so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" (Jn 16:33). Now he draws them into that work. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And, as the Father had poured forth the fullness of the Spirit on Jesus to empower him to take away the sin of the world, so Jesus now breathes into his disciples that same Holy Spirit to re-create them as the new Israel, the community of reconciliation which requires no scapegoating sacrifice to create or maintain it.

Here the third Old Testament reference to the Lamb, namely, the Paschal Lamb, becomes revelatory. The death and resurrection of Jesus will remain salvifically effective in his community in the Eucharistic celebration whose prefiguration they saw in Israel's Passover meal. On the night before God rescued the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt each Hebrew household was to take an unblemished lamb, slaughter it, and share it in a communion meal that would prepare them for the Exodus journey to the promised land. With a branch of hyssop they sprinkled the blood of the slain lamb on the door frames of their houses so that the angel of death who passed through the land that night to slay the first born would pass over the houses of the Hebrews. Thus were they saved from death through the blood of the lamb and united as one liberated community through the sharing in its flesh (see Ex. 12:1-14).

John's Gospel makes several clear connections between Jesus and the Paschal Lamb. In John's Gospel, unlike the Synoptics, Jesus died on Calvary not on the feast of Passover but on the preparation day, just as the Passover lambs were being slaughtered in the Jerusalem temple. The sour wine that is put to Jesus' lips, the symbol of the bitter cup of suffering he had freely chosen to drink (see Jn.18:11 in light of 12:27-28), is offered to him on a sponge affixed to a hyssop branch (Jn. 19:29). When the executioners come to break the legs of the three crucified in order to hasten their deaths, they saw that Jesus was already dead and did not break his legs. The evangelist says that this was to fulfill the prescription (see Ex. 12:46; Num. 9:12) that no bone of the Paschal Lamb was to be broken (Jn. 19:32-36). Jesus in John is the Paschal Lamb.

The Paschal Lamb symbolism in Jesus' death must be read in light of John 6:26-66, the Bread of Life discourse that Jesus gave after multiplying the loaves for the crowd. Jesus performed this sign in John at Passover time. The Passover meal was not an expiatory rite but a communion sacrifice. The point was not the killing of the lamb but the sharing in the meal. In John 6 Jesus says his flesh and blood, that is, his living self, would become the food and drink of the community. But it is as bread that he gives himself, not as meat as some of his shocked hearers (then and now!) thought. He says, "I am

the *living bread* that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this *bread* will live forever; and the *bread* that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (Jn.6:51).

“Flesh” here, as commonly in semitic languages, refers to Jesus as mortal. Because he is mortal Jesus can be killed and thereby become the spiritual or living food that gives life to the world. Jesus, like the Paschal Lamb, must die to become the communion meal of the community but the point is not his death and he is not received as dead. He is willing to die as God was willing to give him to the world which would murder him. But his desire, like God’s, is not his death but that he might save the world by becoming its living sustenance. Like the manna in the desert that came down from heaven to sustain the Hebrews, so the living bread that comes down from heaven, Jesus dead and risen, is the food for the New Israel. By symbolically eating him, i.e., by receiving him in the communion meal of the community, they will live by him as he lives by the Father (see Jn. 6:57), that is, as children of God (see Jn. 1:12).

The culmination of the lamb symbolism passes through and beyond the intended bloody sacrifice of Abraham and the murder of the Suffering Servant into a communion meal in which all partake of the Risen One who dies no more. The Eucharist is not an unbloody reproduction, like ancient sacrificial rituals, of a bloody sacrifice carried out in the past, but a sharing in the life of Jesus by a community that has repudiated all sacrifice, all trafficking in blood, all sacralized scapegoating. We eat the bread and drink the cup in remembrance of his life, death, and resurrection and we live by that which we eat; we become what we consume.

This brings us to the formulation of the commission: “Whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven to them.....” and then what? The second member of vs. 23 (23b) is usually translated “Whose sins you shall retain they are retained [to them, understood].” But there are multiple problems with that translation. In fact, I will argue that that is not what the text says.

The text reads:

20:23a ἄν τινων	ἀφῆτε	τὰς ἀμαρτίας	ἀφέωνται	αὐτοῖς,
If of anyone	you forgive	the sins	they are forgiven	to them

(subjective genitive)

20:23b ἄν τινων	κρατῆτε	κεκράτηνται.
Any	you hold fast	are held fast

(objective genitive)

To begin with, in v. 23b there is no direct object (sins) and no indirect object (to them) in the Greek text. Furthermore, the verb, κρατέω, does not mean “retain” in the sense of keeping the person’s sins unforgiven. No one, as far as I can ascertain, has found an instance in sacred or secular Greek where this verb means “retain” in that sense. Translators supply the missing words, “sins” and “of those” and (mis)translate the verb κρατέω in order to make v. 23b a juridical opposite of 23a. The underlying presupposition for this interpretive move is the mistaken presumption that this johannine text is a version of Mt. 16:19: “whatever you forbid (bind) on earth will be forbidden in heaven, and whatever you annul (loose) on earth will be annulled in heaven.” In Mt. 16:18 Jesus is speaking to Peter.

In the johannine text there is no question of correspondence between earthly and heavenly dispensations. Furthermore, the matthean text refers to human (specifically ecclesiastical) interpretation of laws by religious authorities, not to the forgiveness of sins. And the two members in the matthean text, “forbidding” and “annulling,” are in the reverse order from the Johannine “forgive” and “hold.” Finally, there is the theological problem of what “retaining” someone else’s sins could possibly mean. If a person is sorry for their sins God forgives the sins. No human words, positive or negative, affect God’s handling of sin.

What, then, *does* Jn. 20:23b say? The verb κρατέω (which is not the word in Matthew for “forbid,” namely, δέω) means “hold fast” or “embrace.” Κρατέω is the word used in Mt. 28:9 of the women leaving the empty tomb who encountered the risen Jesus on the road, fell down, “and took hold of

(or embraced) his feet” Translated literally, v. 23b says: “Those whom you embrace (or hold fast) are held fast.”

Deliberate ambiguity is often intrinsic to the text in John. Such, I suspect, is the case here. The sentence could be read at the communitarian level and also at the personal level. The communitarian reading would be, “Whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven to them and those (meaning the *people* whose sins have been forgiven) whom you embrace are held fast.” In this case the verse would refer to admission to the Christian community by baptismal forgiveness of all the “sins” (in the plural) which have been the expression in the catechumen’s life of the “sin of the world.” The second member of the verse would refer to the Church’s task of “holding fast” in ecclesial communion all those who have been baptized into Christ. As Jesus said of his own ministry: “...this is the will of the One who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me” (Jn. 6:39) or “they [my sheep] follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. The Father and I are one” (Jn. 10:27-30). In summing up the accomplishment of the mission he had received from God, Jesus said, “Of those whom you [Father] have given me I lost not one” (Jn. 17:12 and 18:9). Maintaining in union with himself all those whom the Father gives him is of the very essence of Jesus’ mission to the world.<sup>32</sup> It makes sense to interpret this text in which Jesus commissions his disciples to carry on his work to mean that the mission of his disciples has the same structure as his own. Embracing the people whom God calls into the ecclesial community and preserving them in fidelity is the Church’s continuation of Jesus’ work.

Another interpretation of Jn. 20:23 could refer more directly to the way in which believers personally make Jesus’ work of reconciliation effective in the world or, conversely, fail to do so. The text, in this case, would read: “If you forgive anyone their offenses (against you) those offenses are forgiven or released. If you hang on to them, cling to them (i.e., the offenses) they remain held (i.e., in you, against the person).” This is not a matter of manipulating God, obliging God to refuse forgiveness of what we refuse to forgive. We

have no influence on the person's status vis-à-vis God. This forgiveness has to do with how we handle the offenses of others against *us*. By refusing to forgive another we embrace the person's sin and reject the person. We keep that person out of our life, keep the community fractured. Our refusal says nothing about how God sees the person. But it does mean that we have lost faith in God's capacity and willingness to rehabilitate the sinner; we have fallen back on the human mechanisms of retaliation and vengeance which are at the heart of the scapegoating mechanism that Jesus' death overcame. We have taken up again "the sin of the world," the refusal to believe that God is love and has no need of our violence against each other to keep order in human society or the Church. This profound failure of faith, this conviction that we honor God by punishing our brothers and sisters," is probably most evident in the infliction of the death penalty or the punitive use of ecclesiastical excommunication because we think only our human violence can bring the sinner to repentance, can right the wrong and bring real "closure."

## **Conclusion**

Whichever way we read this text, on the communal level or on the personal level, it ceases to be about ecclesiastical officers being empowered to execute divine judgment on their fellow human beings, and becomes Jesus' commitment of responsibility for the divine work of reconciliation to his disciples as a community. Jesus, by becoming the "last scapegoat," has taken away the foundational sin of the world: the refusal to believe that God is unconditional love. He has made it possible and right for all expressions of that fundamental sin, all "sins" no matter how serious, to be freely forgiven through the loving action of his disciples who, individually and corporately, renounce all recourse to reconciliation by violence.

The Church of Jesus should be the one place every sinner can feel absolutely safe because there is no condemnation in this community.<sup>33</sup> The one who freely forgave his own murderers because they did not know what they were doing (see Lk.23:34), now empowers his disciples to drop their stones. Our solidarity in sin to which we were once blind and which we now recognize

through our experience of being forgiven must become grateful solidarity in forgiveness and reconciliation. Jesus says that unless we forgive we cannot be forgiven (see Mt. 18:35), not because God mimics our hardness of heart, but because only by forgiving can we continue to believe in, to accept being forgiven. Jesus said to the woman he had rescued from stoning: “Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go ... and from now on sin no more” (Jn. 8:10-11). The challenge to “sin no more” can only be met in the context of the experience of being freely forgiven. The mission of Jesus’ disciples, that is, of us, is not judgment of our fellow sinners or restoring order to society or Church by vengeance and retaliation. It is to make effective in the world Jesus’ work of reconciliation through the forgiveness of sins so that the community of the forgiven can gather around the table of the Lamb who has taken away the sin of the world. For this challenging mission we have the gift of Jesus’ Spirit: “Receive the Holy Spirit; whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven.”

#### **(Endnotes)**

<sup>1</sup>The translation of the Greek text of Jn. 20:19-23 throughout the paper is my own, which is often identical to that of the NRSV. The translation of other texts of the Old and New Testaments is that of the NRSV unless otherwise noted. The NRSV, as well as most others, translates Jn. 20:23b: “if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” I will argue later that this translation is not well grounded in the Greek text and is theologically problematic.

At times I will elide texts, supplying only what is necessary for the clarity of the argument, but all such elisions are indicated.

<sup>2</sup>John 20:23 is one of the very few texts in the New Testament that have been the object of a conciliar definition. The Council of Trent (1551) in session XIV (Denziger and Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*) 1703 and 1710, respectively, defined the ordained as minister of the sacrament of Penance and Jn. 20:23 as the institution of that sacrament. These definitions arose in the polemical context of Trent in its reaction to Reformation positions on the sacraments and there is much reason today, not only theological but also historical, and especially exegetical to apply to these decrees the hermeneutical principle that texts must be read in terms of their intention in their own context and not as if words have some absolute meaning which remains identical through time. Their purpose at the time was to insist, against the Reformers,

that there is a sacrament (besides Baptism) through which sins are forgiven and that the Roman Church's penitential discipline at the time was binding. Trying to root these positions in an institution text from the New Testament was an understandable move at the time but highly questionable today.

For a balanced Catholic position on this matter as it touches Jn. 20:23 see R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (xiii-xxi)* [The Anchor Bible 29A] (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), pp. 1044-1045.

<sup>3</sup>*Inclusio* is a literary device in which a "bookend" structure is created by the use of similar material at the beginning and end of a literary unit often suggesting the meaning of the intervening text. In this case, the intervening text is the public life of Jesus as a whole.

<sup>4</sup>The Greek text has πρὸς τοὺς ἀδελφούς μου which is usually translated "go to my brothers." However, Greek, like English, uses the masculine plural both for a group of male siblings and for a mixed gender group of siblings. In other words, ἀδελφούς, like the English "brethren," can mean either "brothers" or "brothers and sisters." The argument for translating the term "brothers and sisters" here is not linguistic inclusivity but the fact that Mary Magdalene understands herself as sent to "the disciples," a group that in John clearly includes women as well as men.

<sup>5</sup>See Raymond Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York/Ramsey/Toronto: Paulist, 1979) pp. 191-192 on women as well as men being identified as "Jesus' own" and as "beloved" disciples.

<sup>6</sup>After the multiplication of the loaves in ch. 6 many of Jesus' disciples turned away and ceased to follow him. When Jesus asked "the twelve" if they also wished to go away and Simon Peter replied, "To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" Jesus responded: "'Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.' He was speaking of Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him" (Jn. 6:70-71). The other text occurs right after the commission to forgive sins in chapter 20. The next pericope, 20:24-29, begins: "But Thomas... one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came" on Easter evening. So, one reference to "the twelve" is to Judas, a devil, whose betrayal is all the worse because he is one of the twelve, and the other is to Thomas who, contrary to our tendency to regard him as one caught in understandable doubt, the Fourth Evangelist presents as categorically refusing to believe the community's witness to the resurrection which is the post-Easter equivalent of Peter's denial of Jesus before the passion. Jesus has to

reintegrate Thomas into the group of the disciples in Jn. 20:29 as he has to rehabilitate Peter in 21:15-17. In other words, “the twelve” seems to designate a responsibility which, when not met, makes the offense particularly serious.

<sup>7</sup>The earliest provision for any ritual of individual reconciliation, which was not universal or even widespread in the early Church, is referred to in the writings of Hermas around 140. But that extremely severe ritual existed only for the three capital sins (publicly known adultery, apostasy, and murder), and could only be received once after baptism. In fact, many churches during this period maintained that these sins, if committed after baptism, could not be forgiven at all.

Sacramental theologian Kenan Osborne summarizes his treatment of the history of the sacrament of Penance during the first nine centuries by saying, “Most Christians spent their entire life without ever receiving the sacrament of reconciliation.” Kenan B. Osborne, *Reconciliation and Justification: The Sacrament and Its Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), originally published by Paulist, 1990, p. 82.

<sup>8</sup>This is my interpretation of this notoriously difficult text. Grammatically, it could mean that God gives Jesus the Spirit without measure or that Jesus gives the Spirit without measure. I have opted for the first under the influence of my reading of the context but this could be a case of deliberate johannine ambiguity because the very purpose of Jesus’ plenary possession of the Spirit is his gift of the Spirit to those who believe in him.

<sup>9</sup>See Mary Coloe, *God Dwells With Us: Temple Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2001), especially chapter 4, “The Temple of His Body: John 2:13-25.”

<sup>10</sup>For a fuller description of the Feast of Tabernacles, the role of water symbolism, and its relation to the johannine presentation of Jesus as the source of living water, see Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2nd edition, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), pp. 187-200. In this section Koester shows the relationship between this johannine text and a number of other Old Testament passages.

See also Larry Paul Jones, *The Symbol of Water in the Gospel of John* [JSNT Supp. Series 145] (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), esp. pp. 148-161.

<sup>11</sup>For a fuller exegesis of this text and a discussion of the difficult question of whether the one from whom living water will flow is Jesus (my position) or the believer, see Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Raising of the New Temple: John 20.19-23 and Johannine Ecclesiology." *New Testament Studies* 52, no. 3 (July 2006): 337-55.

<sup>12</sup>In Jn. 5 when Jesus is challenged by the authorities because he healed a paralyzed man on the Sabbath, he defends his action by saying, "My Father is still working, and I also am working." In other words, God's work, of which the Jews saw the Sabbath rest as signifying the end, was, in fact, not finished and would not be until Jesus rests from the work of re-creation after his death. That his questioners understood the significance of what Jesus was saying is attested by the next verse: "For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God" (Jn. 5:17-18).

<sup>13</sup>Most scholars, though not all, believe that there is more than one discourse in this five chapter section, e.g., an introduction, two discourses to the disciples, and the long prayer of Jesus to his Father in chapter 17. This question of composition is not significant for our purposes here.

<sup>14</sup>See Brown, *Anchor Bible* 29A, p. 1141. This remark occurs in Brown's Appendix V on "The Paraclete," pp. 1135-1144, which retains its value even four decades after its composition.

<sup>15</sup>Actually it occurs also in Wisdom 15:11 (ἐμπνεύσαντα) in a reference to the Genesis event and in I Kings 17:21 (ἐνεφύσησεν) where it is probably a (deliberate?) mistranslation of the Hebrew which means "stretched" but carries, in this narrative, the same sense of "giving life." So substantively, there are only two uses: creation of humanity and recreation of the house of Israel.

<sup>16</sup>The LXX has τὰ ἁγία μου which is translated "sanctuary" but is equally well translated by "temple." But particularly important for the connection between this passage and the Gospel of John is the use in the LXX of the Ezekiel passage of ἡ κατασκήνωσίς μου for "my dwelling place." In the Prologue (1:14) ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν describes the Word made flesh taking up his "dwelling" among humans.

<sup>17</sup>For an excellent study of the relationship of Girard's theory to a theology of the cross, see S. Mark Heim, *Saved From Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 64-104 and throughout the book on violence in

Scripture and pp. 297-329 on Anselm's penal substitutionary theology of atonement which has held sway in traditional soteriology since the middle ages.

<sup>18</sup>Some of the major figures in the biblical and theological academy who explicitly use Girardian theory in their work are James Alison, Gil Bailie, Robert Hamerton-Kelly, S. Mark Heim, Raymond Schwager, and more recently Rowan Williams.

<sup>19</sup>For a more detailed summary of Girard's thought see Michael Kirwan, *Discovering Girard* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2005) or James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), chapter 1 "René Girard's Mimetic Theory."

<sup>20</sup>I will be particularly dependent in this section on the work of Heim, *Saved From Sacrifice*. See especially chapter 4, "The Paradox of the Passion: Saved by What Shouldn't Happen" on this subject.

<sup>21</sup>See Heim, *Saved From Sacrifice*, pp. 20-33 on the liberationist challenge and critique of mainstream theologies of the Cross.

<sup>22</sup>This remarkable line was written by cartoonist Walt Kelly (1948-75) for an anti-pollution poster published in 1970. It may be one of the most subversive lines in western literature.

<sup>23</sup>Perhaps the best analysis of how the Cross of Jesus illuminates and makes ever less compelling the argument for sacrificial victimization in our time is Gil Bailie's *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroad, 2004), originally published in 1999.

<sup>24</sup>Pontius Pilate was prefect or governor of the Roman Province of Judea from 26-36 C.E.

<sup>25</sup>For an illuminating exposition of this situation as it engulfed Jesus in his passion, see Warren Carter, *Pontius Pilate: Portraits of A Roman Governor* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical, 2003).

<sup>26</sup>Jn. 18:38; 19:4; 19:6.

<sup>27</sup>See note 2 above on the literary device of *inclusio*.

<sup>28</sup>Jesus is associated with the paschal lamb in 1 Cor. 5:7 which refers to Christ as τὸ πάσχα ἡμῶν (our Passover [lamb or meal or feast]) and in 1Pet. 1:19 which says that we were ransomed τιμίῳ αἵματι ὡς ἀμνοῦ ἀμώμου καὶ ἀσπίλου Χριστοῦ (with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish) which is a clear evocation of the Paschal lamb. There is no reference to the “lamb of God.”

<sup>29</sup>C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* 2nd edition (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), pp. 176-177 gives most of the relevant exegetical data. For a more developed interpretation of the symbol of the “Lamb of God,” see C. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), pp. 216-224.

<sup>30</sup>The “Songs of the Suffering Servant” are poems describing the scapegoat death of an innocent victim. The four songs are Is. 42:1-7; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; and 52:13-53:12. The Servant, like other “suffering just ones” in the Old Testament such as Jonah, Susannah, and the Wisdom Hero, suffers unjustly and, in the case of the Servant, is killed, but ultimately vindicated by God, and his suffering plays some mysterious role in the salvation of his people, Israel.

<sup>31</sup>For an excellent extended treatment of this point, see James Alison, *Knowing Jesus* (London, UK: SPCK, 1998) originally published in 1993, chapter 1, “The Resurrection.”

<sup>32</sup>All of these “union” texts express the same twofold character of Jesus’ mission, to bring people into union with himself and hold them fast: 6:37; 6:39; 10:27-29; 17:12; 18:9.

<sup>33</sup>This was the insight that led to the understanding of early Christian churches as zones of asylum for criminals or those accused of crimes or soldiers under siege, as well as the declaration in the 20<sup>th</sup> century of certain cities, university campuses, and other places as “sanctuary” against deportation for people fleeing the violent civil wars in their own countries. The churches continue even today to provide sanctuary for the undocumented.

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