Dr A. Lau

Faculty of Social Sciences & Liberal Arts, UCSI University
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
E-mail: alwynlau@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4171-7943

https://doi.org/10.38140/at.v45i2.9234

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2025
45(2):185-196

Date received:
14 March 2025

Date accepted:
29 September 2025

Date published:
12 December 2025

Published by the UFS
http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at

© Author(s)

CC BY

OPEN ACCESS

Perilous presencing: How the church's sacraments resymbolise trauma

ABSTRACT

This article examines the church's sacramental life – baptism and the Eucharist – as enactments of trauma that mirror Christ's suffering and death, shaping its vocation of self-giving for a broken world. Drawing on a psychoanalytical lens inspired by Lacan and Žižek, it explores how these sacraments resymbolise trauma as redemptive, plunging the church into the realm of Christ's cross – a traumatic rupture that shatters sacrificial systems and redefines divine being (Lau 2016). Baptism, a drowning into Christ's death (Rm. 6:3-4), initiates believers into a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), historically defiant – from early martyrs to modern persecuted churches – and politically potent, confronting domination with resurrection hope (Wright 2013; Jinkins 1999). The Eucharist, a shocking presencing of the eternal in bread and wine, counters alienation with brokenness, uniting the church in Christ's suffering to heal societal divides (Pound 2007; Lewis 2006). Integrating a theology of Holy Saturday, where God embraces death to end worldly violence, the article argues that these sacraments are not private rituals but public acts of resistance and renewal (Cavanaugh 1998). They compel the church to embody Christ's trauma – dying to self, serving the marginalised – transforming suffering into a political witness of grace and reconciliation in a violent world.

1. INTRODUCTION

The church's calling in the world extends beyond mere political engagement with power structures. It

is fundamentally sacramental, reflecting the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ through its lived embodiment of service and sacrifice for humanity's sake. Baptism and the Eucharist, the twin pillars of Christian sacramental life, are not static rituals or ornamental traditions. They are dynamic, visceral enactments of trauma and renewal, initiating the church into its identity and sustaining it in a traumatic vocation that mirrors Christ's passion. These sacraments bind the church to the cross, compelling it to live out this narrative both inwardly, within its communal life, and outwardly, as a witness to a fractured world. As Wright (2013:542) notes, in the early Pauline-Christian communities, these rites were central to their identity, serving as sociological markers of entry and sustenance, while carrying profound liturgical weight as visible means of God's grace. Yet, their significance transcends functionality. They plunge the church into the raw, traumatic reality of Christ's sacrifice, a reality that defines its existence and mission.

This traumatic core is not incidental but constitutive, as argued in a psychoanalytical reading of the atonement (Lau 2016). It may be posited that Christ's cross confronts the church with the Lacanian Real – a traumatic truth that shatters the symbolic order of worldly sacrifice and redefines divine ontology through suffering. In this light, baptism and the Eucharist are not mere commemorations but participatory acts in a Holy Saturday theology, where God embraces death fully to break its stranglehold on creation (Lau 2016:274). Baptism drowns the believer in Christ's death, echoing Žižek's view of the cross as a divine abandonment that splits God's being, yet reveals love's depth (Lau 2016:275). The Eucharist, with its broken bread and poured wine, embodies this trauma as a material irruption of the Real, disrupting illusions of wholeness and binding the church to a crucified God who suffers with the world (Lau 2016:276). These are not abstract theologoumena; they are earthy, tangible encounters with divine grace that demand a response – a life of self-giving that confronts the world's wounds.

The early church, gathering in catacombs or homes under Roman threat, understood this intimately – baptism risked martyrdom, and the Eucharist defied imperial banquets with a subversive feast of unity (Ferguson 2009:87-94). The sacraments enact a victory over a "diabolical system" of violence, not through counterforce but through identification with its victims, collapsing sacrifice from within (Lau 2016:277). Nowadays, this legacy persists in contexts of oppression – whether in North Korea's secret baptisms or Hong Kong's protest Eucharists – where these rites remain acts of defiance and hope. The church's political and sacramental roles thus emerge as a unique vocation: a body that does not merely preach redemption but enacts it, resymbolising trauma as redemptive through rituals that mirror Christ's cross.

This article explores how baptism and the Eucharist resymbolise trauma, drawing the church into a radical vocation that transforms suffering into service. By delving into their theological depth – enriched by a psychoanalytical framework – alongside historical roots, scriptural foundations, and contemporary applications, we uncover how these sacraments shape the church into a living testament to Christ's redemptive suffering. They are not ends in themselves but means, tools for a political praxis that resists the world's violence with a love that suffers alongside it. What follows is an exhaustive examination of their traumatic essence and the church's calling to embody them, bridging ancient practice with modern relevance, and expanding the discussion to consider their implications across time, culture, and human experience.

2. RESYMBOLISING DROWNING AND TRAUMA: BAPTISM AND THE EUCHARIST

In the nascent Pauline-Christian communities of the 1st century, baptism and the Eucharist – often called the Lord's Supper – emerged as the bedrock of symbolic praxis, vital not only for their ritual significance but also as foundational acts that shaped the church's identity and self-understanding amidst a hostile world. Sociologically, baptism marked a dramatic entry into the community, a public declaration of allegiance to Christ that often severed ties with prior social worlds – families disowned converts, Roman authorities branded them traitors, and Jewish synagogues expelled them (Wright 2013:542). The Eucharist, in turn, affirmed and strengthened membership, a regular gathering that forged bonds of solidarity in an empire where such assemblies could be deemed seditious and punishable by death. Liturgically, these sacraments were more than symbols; they were earthly rituals – water, bread, wine – through which God's grace was not theorised but palpably embodied, tethering believers to the mystery of Christ's life, death, and resurrection in ways that defied rational explanation.

Baptism, at its essence, is about drowning – a stark, unsettling reality that modern celebrations, with their white robes, floral arrangements, and joyous hymns, often domesticate into a sanitised rite of passage. The New Testament leaves no room for softening this: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Rm. 6:3, NRSV). This is not a gentle cleansing but a shipwreck into identification with Jesus, a submersion into the abyss of his crucifixion that echoes the chaos waters of Genesis (Gn. 1:2) and the Red Sea's deliverance (Ex. 14:21-31). Jinkins (1999:23) captures this trauma with haunting precision:

> We are soaked to the skin in the death of Christ. Our union with Christ drips from us. We never 'get over' this immersion; this drowning in Christ's death marks us daily; it marks us out and 'names' us to the world … we are shipwrecked, run aground on the death of Christ.

For early Christians, often baptised in rivers, cisterns, or makeshift fonts under the shadow of Roman persecution, this was no metaphor but a lived peril – a ritual burial into Christ's tomb that risked real death.

The traumatic context of baptism is deliberate and purposeful. The water signifies sinking and dying with Christ, a violent killing off of the "old self" – what Paul calls "the body of sin" (Rm. 6:6) – so that a new self may emerge, resurrected with him. Paul elaborates:

> We have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (Rm. 6:4, NRSV).

This burial is a post-symbolic demise, a radical break with the past that ties believers to the salvation wrought by Christ on the cross as the precondition for sharing in his resurrection and victory over sin and death. Lewis (2006:396) deepens this interpretation, noting that baptism reenacts captivity and death – a stark reminder of humanity's bondage to sin, the chaos of a fallen world, and the mortality that stalks every life – yet it spurs the church to embody a "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17, NRSV) for a world still captive and dying.

Historically, this traumatic essence was palpable. The early church's baptismal practice was rigorous – catechumens underwent months of preparation, fasting, and exorcistic rites to renounce pagan gods, then were plunged into water, often naked, to signify total vulnerability and rebirth (Hippolytus, Apostolic Tradition, c. 215 CE, 21). Emerging, they received white garments and joined a communal meal, their new identity sealed in community. Tertullian, writing in 197 CE, saw baptism as a death warrant: "We are immersed in water, that we might rise with Christ" (On Baptism, 8), a defiance of Roman power that often led to martyrdom. Polycarp's execution in 155 CE – burned after refusing to recant – echoed his baptismal plunge, a witness to Christ's triumph over death (Eusebius, Church History, 4.15). In the 4th century, as Christianity legalised, baptism retained its gravity – Constantine's delay until his deathbed in 337 CE reflects its perceived finality (Eusebius, Life of Constantine, 4.62).

This trauma is not confined to antiquity. In the medieval period, baptismal fonts carved with scenes of the Last Judgment or the harrowing of hell – such as those in Gothic cathedrals (*e.g.* Chartres) – reinforced its eschatological weight, reminding believers of their mortality and hope

(Ferguson 2009:245-250). During the Reformation, Anabaptists faced drowning by authorities as punishment for their "rebaptism", a grim irony that turned the sacrament into a literal martyrdom (Estep 1996:45-67). Nowadays, this trauma resonates in persecuted contexts. In North Korea, underground Christians baptise in secret rivers, risking imprisonment; in Syria, converts from Islam face death threats – each submersion a defiant echo of Christ's cross. Jinkins (1999:28-32) argues that this awareness peaks when the church embraces death's irreplaceability:

> Baptismally drenched in the death of Christ, the church is most responsible and faithful when she apprehends the irreplaceability of death.

Death catalyses renewal, each immersion a recommitment to the political power of resurrection – a power that defies the world's logic of self-preservation and domination (Jinkins 1999:27-28).

Here is a modern example. During apartheid, South African churches baptised across racial lines, subverting segregation with a new creation that risked arrest (Tutu 1994:45-67). In 2021, a Congolese church baptised refugees fleeing war, their immersion in muddy waters a stark symbol of solidarity amid displacement (UNHCR 2021). These acts reframe trauma, not as defeat but as participation in Christ's victory, a political witness that challenges empires, ideologies, and injustices with the vulnerability of a drowned and risen life.

The Eucharist carries an equally traumatic weight, confronting believers with what Pound (2007:163) terms "the traumatic presence of the eternal in time". In the early church, this was no polished liturgy but a gritty, communal act – bread broken in hidden rooms, wine shared amidst whispers of betrayal by informers, often under threat of Roman raids (1 Cor. 11:17-34). Pound (2007:160-166) argues that it inverts the common view of God as a distant force "behind" events, revealing the divine in the ordinariness of bread and wine. This ordinariness is traumatic – not from spectacle, but from proximity. God is not aloof in a transcendent realm; the Eucharist insists that the divine is as close as a loaf on the table, a cup in hand – an unexpected presencing that shocks by its banality and intimacy.

This proximity mirrors trauma's inescapability in daily life. The bread is broken, the wine poured – echoing Christ's body torn and blood spilled (Lk. 22:19-20) – and Christians partake in this displaced body, recognising God's brokenness as theirs to live and share (Ward 2000:106).

> God's subjection to the tearing of the flesh, the breaking of the bones, the spilling of blood, and the snuffing out of life … mark our own society's descent into violent division (Lewis 2006:396).

The Eucharist counters this, not as escape but as response, enacted in symbol and community against a world of sacrificial violence (Girard 1977:1-38). Each bite recalls Christ's suffering – and the church's call to suffer with others.

The historical evolution of the Eucharist amplifies its traumatic resonance. In the Didache (c. 100 CE), early Christians broke bread daily, a rhythm of remembrance that bound them to Christ's sacrifice amid persecution (Didache 9-10). By the 4th century, as basilicas rose, the Eucharist became more formalised, yet its core remained – a shared meal defying Rome's hierarchical feasts (Bradshaw 2004:89-112). Medieval theology deepened this with the concept of *corpus mysticum* – the church as Christ's mystical body, united through the broken bread (De Lubac 2006:67-89). During the Black Death, priests risked infection to bring Eucharist to the dying, embodying Christ's presence in plague-ravaged villages (Horrox 1994:123-145).

Pound (2007:xiii) likens the Eucharist to a psychoanalytic intervention: "This is my body, broken for you" disrupts normality, prompting re-evaluation and newness, akin to an analyst piercing the analysand's defences. In the 2nd century, the Agape feasts, disrupted by Roman suspicion, made this concrete: bread and wine were resistance against imperial feasts (Justin Martyr First Apology, 67). Nowadays, urban churches breaking bread with the homeless in Los Angeles or rural congregations sharing wine amidst drought in Malawi embody this trauma – Christ's brokenness lived out in service. If baptism drowns the old, the Eucharist sustains the new, a daily trauma of communion with a crucified God.

Consider the 2019 Hong Kong protests during which underground churches shared Eucharist in makeshift gatherings, sustaining hope amid tear gas and arrests (Chan 2020). This act was not mere ritual but a political defiance, echoing the early church's subversive feasts. The Eucharist's trauma – Christ's broken body – becomes a lens for the church to see and enter the world's fractures, transforming suffering into a shared act of redemption.

3. SACRAMENTS, SELF-GIVING, AND THE POLITICAL

The juxtaposition of death and trauma with baptism and the Eucharist is not a theological footnote but a mandate with seismic implications for the church's political praxis. Christians are defined by the Messiah's death and resurrection, necessitating a way of life marked by radical suffering and forgiving love, especially toward persecutors (Wright 2013:577). These sacraments are not about theo-philosophical quibbles – transubstantiation debates or Christ's "local" presence (Davies 2007:23-29) – but about how they inaugurate and perpetuate the church's self-giving to her community and beyond.

Baptism's waters drown the old self, but they also carve a path to life and freedom, echoing God's triumph over chaos in creation (Gn. 1:2) and the Exodus through the Red Sea (Ex. 14:21-31). Lewis (2006:396) writes:

> God entered the deadly and hellish waters of estrangement to triumph creatively above the diabolical powers of negativity and hostility.

For the early church, this was political: baptism defied Caesar's claim to ultimate power, aligning believers with a kingdom that subverted earthly domination (Acts 17:7). Tertullian declared, "We are buried with Christ in baptism, that we might rise with him" (On Baptism, 8, 197 CE), a statement Rome saw as treason – Christians pledged allegiance to a crucified king over an emperor.

This resistance echoes through history. In the 3rd century, Cyprian of Carthage baptised amid plague, his community serving the dying, while Rome abandoned them – a political act of love (Cyprian, On the Mortality, 252 CE). In medieval Europe, baptismal fonts in cathedrals symbolised defiance against feudal lords exploiting peasants (Ferguson 2009:234-256). The Reformation saw Anabaptists drowned for their faith, their baptisms a radical witness against state churches (Estep 1996:78-92). This currently persists: in North Korea, secret baptisms in icy rivers defy a regime that punishes faith with death; in apartheid South Africa, Desmond Tutu's churches baptised across racial lines, subverting segregation with a new creation that risked imprisonment (Tutu 1994:45-67).

The church, drenched in Christ's death, resists by replacing hostility with peace – prayer vigils in war-torn Ukraine in 2022, reconciliation ministries in Rwanda post-1994 – living out Paul's "newness of life" (Rm. 6:4). This resymbolises trauma as redemptive, turning drowning into a victory over death's dominion, a political praxis that confronts power with vulnerability. In India, Dalit Christians baptise in defiance of caste oppression, their immersion a rejection of systemic dehumanisation (Clarke 2011:134-156). Each plunge is a microcosm of resurrection, a public declaration that the powers of this world do not have the final word.

4. EUCHARIST: COUNTERING ALIENATION WITH BROKENNESS

The Eucharist must not be reduced to a private, spiritualised rite that mutes its address to the world's alienation (Lewis 2006:397; O'Donovan 1996:180). Its broken bread and poured wine proclaim Christ's body and blood as a public, political reality – a challenge to despotic conditions. Cavanaugh's

(1998:34-57) study of Chile under Pinochet's regime is illuminating. He views the Eucharist as a counter-discipline to state terror. Torture isolated bodies, embedding fear into social imaginaries – disappearances, beatings, silence – but the Eucharist reconnected them, offering a sacramental imagination of community and hope (Cavanaugh 1998:253-281).

In Santiago's churches, priests broke bread amidst disappearances, defying Pinochet's narrative of despair with a feast of solidarity (Cavanaugh 1998:278-281). Parishioners risked arrest, yet the Eucharist opened temporal horizons, linking Christ's eternal sacrifice to their present struggle. This trauma of Jesus' suffering became a redemptive weapon against worldly suffering. In the 1st century, Paul rebuked Corinth for perverting this – the rich eating while the poor starved (1 Cor. 11:20-22) – insisting that it unifies, not divides. Nowadays, urban churches feeding the homeless in Detroit, rural congregations sharing wine amidst famine in Ethiopia, or refugee ministries breaking bread across borders in Calais embody this – countering economic and social isolation with Christ's aggressive compassion. The church endures pain for the powerless, a political stance against powers that inflict it (Jn 13:14-17).

The Eucharist's political edge sharpens in crisis. During the 1918 Spanish flu, churches in Europe shared bread with the sick, defying quarantine fears (Gamble 2020:56-78). In 2020, amid COVID-19, virtual Eucharists sparked debate, yet grassroots communities delivered bread to isolated neighbours, embodying Christ's presence (Thompson 2021:89-102). In Myanmar's 2021 coup, Christians broke bread in protest camps, sustaining resistance against military brutality (Amnesty International 2021). These acts reveal the Eucharist as a communal antidote to alienation, a trauma that heals by binding the broken to Christ's brokenness.

5. TRAUMA, SELF-GIVING, AND CO-CREATION

Pound's (2007:107-108) insight that the Eucharist reveals no ordinary unity but a wholeness found in another adds profound depth. Participating in the Trinitarian life, with its infinite fissure of mutual giving, the church co-creates its identity through daily self-sacrifice. This echoes Jinkins' (1999:27-32) view of baptismal death as renewal. The Didache envisioned this – communities breaking bread daily, living as one body (Didache 9-10, c. 100 CE). In medieval monasticism, Benedictine monks shared Eucharist to sustain vows of poverty and service (Benedict Rule, 540 CE, ch. 38).

This co-creation spans eras. In the Celtic tradition, St. Brigid's communities (c. 500 CE) baptised and broke bread with outcasts, forging a church of hospitality (Bitel 1990:67-89). During the Industrial Revolution, Methodist circuits in England shared Eucharist in factories, uniting workers against exploitation (Hempton 1984:123-145). At present, a church volunteering in Gaza's rubble or hosting migrants in Texas forges identity not in isolation but in service. In 2023, a Brazilian favela church baptised youth escaping gang violence, their Eucharist a pledge to rebuild community (Souza 2023). These acts weave trauma into renewal, the church co-creating with Christ a world where suffering births hope.

6. CONCLUSION

Baptism and the Eucharist are not relics of a bygone era but living sacraments that plunge the church into Christ's trauma and triumph. They resymbolise drowning and brokenness as redemptive, calling the church to a vocation of self-giving that defies the world's violence with love. From catacombs to favelas, these rites shape a body that suffers with the suffering, resists with the oppressed, and hopes with the hopeless. Their political praxis, rooted in death and sustained in communion, bridges ancient faith with modern crises, offering a radical witness to a fractured age.

This witness is neither abstract nor passive. Baptism immerses believers into a narrative where death is not the end but the beginning of solidarity with a crucified God. The Eucharist, in turn, sustains this solidarity, binding the church to Christ's body – broken yet whole, shared yet inexhaustible. Together, they enact a subversive liturgy that upends power: the waters of baptism wash away hierarchies, and the bread of life levels the table for all. In a world of endless consumption and division, these sacraments propose an economy of grace, where abundance flows from sacrifice, and unity emerges from fragmentation.

Across history, from persecuted early Christians to marginalised communities nowadays, these rites have fuelled resilience and resistance. They whisper of a kingdom where the last are first, where swords become ploughshares. In an age of despair, of climate collapse, of systemic injustice, and of cultural decay, they summon the church to embody an alternative: a people marked by vulnerability, animated by love, and anchored in hope. Baptism and the Eucharist do not merely recall Christ's victory; they make it present, inviting all to participate in a revolution that begins with a cross and ends with a feast.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Amnesty International
2021. *Myanmar: The coup and its aftermath.* London: Amnesty International Press.

Benedict
540 CE. *The rule of St Benedict.* Translated by L. Doyle (2001). Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.

Bitel, L.M.
1990. *Isle of the saints: Monastic settlement and Christian community in early Ireland.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Bradshaw, P.F.
2004. *Eucharistic origins*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cavanaugh, W.T.
1998. *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, politics, and the body of Christ*. Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishers.

Chan, S.
2020. *Faith under fire: Hong Kong's protests and the church*. Charlotte, NC: Asia Harvest Press.

Clarke, S.
2011. *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern religion and liberation theology in India.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cyprian
252 CE. *On the mortality.* Translated by E. Wallis (1885). *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 5: Treatise VII*. New York:Christian Literature Publishing Co.

Davies, O.
2007. *The creativity of God: World, Eucharist, reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

De Lubac, H.
2006. *Corpus mysticum: The Eucharist and the church in the Middle Ages*. Translated by G. Simmonds. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvpj7fmm

Estep, W.R.
1996. *The Anabaptist story: An introduction to sixteenth-century Anabaptism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

Eusebius
c. 324 CE. *Church history.* Translated by A. McGiffert (1890). *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1*. New York:Christian Literature Publishing Co

c. 339 CE. *Life of Constantine*. Translated by A. Cameron & S. Hall (1999). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Ferguson, E.
2009. *Baptism in the Early Church: History, theology, and liturgy*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

Gamble, R.
2020. *The church and the Spanish flu: Faith in a time of pandemic*. Stornoway, Isle of Lewis, Scotland: Reformation Press.

Girard, R.
1977. *Violence and the sacred*. Translated by P. Gregory. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Hempton, D.
1984. *Methodism and politics in British society, 1750-1850*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.

Hippolytus
c. 215 CE. *Apostolic tradition*. Translated by B. Stewart (2001). Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

Horrox, R.
1994. *The black death.* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Jinkins, M.
1999. *In the House of the Lord: Inhabiting the Psalms of Lament.* Minnesota: Covenant Publications.

Justin Martyr
c. 155 CE. *First apology.* Translated by M. Dods (1867). *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, *Vol. 1*. Edingburgh: T&T Clark.

Lau, A.
2016. Saved by trauma: A psychoanalytical reading of the atonement. *Dialog* 55(3):276-284. https://doi.org/10.1111/dial.12263

Lewis, A.E.
2006. *Between cross and resurrection: A theology of Holy Saturday.* Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

O'Donovan, O.
1996. *The desire of the nations: Rediscovering the roots of political theology.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pound, M.

2007. *Theology, psychoanalysis and trauma.* London: SCM Press.

Souza, M.

2023. Faith in the Favelas: The church's role in Brazil's slums. *Latin American Theological Review* 12(3):45-67.

Tertullian

197 CE. *On baptism*. Translated by S. Thelwall (1885). *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 3*. New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co.

Thompson, J.

2021. *Digital sacraments: The church in a pandemic.* Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.

Tutu, D.

1994. *The rainbow people of God: The making of a peaceful revolution.* New York: Doubleday.

UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees)

2021. *Displacement and faith: The church in Congo's crisis*. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Report. Geneva: UNHCR.

Ward, G.

2000. *Cities of God*. London: Routledge.

Wright, N.T.

2013. *Paul and the faithfulness of God.* Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Keywords	*Trefwoorde*
Baptism	Doop
Eucharist	Nagmaal
Ecclesiology	Ekklesiologie
Trauma	Trauma