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THE NOTION OF SACRAMENTAL EVENT IN ERIK PETERSON'S ESCHATOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF ST. PAUL'S *EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS*[*]

Abstract: This article explores Erik Peterson's theological reflections on the concept of the "sacramental event", particularly through his interpretation of St. Paul's *Letters* and the Pauline inspired notion of the new aeon. Firstly, it situates Peterson's engagement with Paul as central to his break with Protestantism and his conversion to Catholicism, emphasizing how Paul's eschatological vision shapes Peterson's critique of political theology. The notion of the new aeon is introduced as a decisive element in Peterson's thought, marking a radical temporal rupture inaugurated by Christ's enthronement, which ends the old cosmos and establishes a new cosmic order. The paper then develops Peterson's distinction between historical time and eschatological time, highlighting his use of the term *Geschehen* to describe the eschatological event as more than a chronological moment, namely, as the emergence of a new quality of time. Central to this theology is the role of baptism, which Peterson understands not merely as a ritual but as the sacramental event that effectuates the believer's passage from the old to the new aeon. This sacramental incorporation "in Christ" is both a present reality and an "eschatological reservation", an anticipation of the future resurrection and full fulfilment. Peterson's critique of Lutheran interpretations of the Gospel is also addressed, where he argues that Paul announces a cosmic victory over original sin rather than private forgiveness. The article furthermore examines Peterson's emphasis on the materiality and concreteness of the sacramental substances and their interaction with the believer's body, contrasting this with modern philosophical tendencies that spiritualize the sacramental meaning. In conclusion, the article situates Peterson's theology of the sacramental event within broader twentieth-century debates, highlighting its paradoxical character as an event where Christ is both revealed and concealed, historically present yet eschatologically awaited, thus offering a profound rethinking of the Christian conception of time and history.

Keywords: *sacramental event, Erik Peterson, eschatology, new aeon, Saint Paul of Tarsus*

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1. INTRODUCTION

This essay will examine the meaning of the notion of sacramental event within the interpretation of St. Paul's *Letters* offered by the theologian Erik Peterson. Peterson's reflection can be connected to several currents that have characterized a broad strand of contemporary thought. The notion of event has in fact had a decisive influence on contemporary thought and has also taken on a central role in the rediscovery of the thought of Paul of Tarsus, pursued from diverse philosophical points of view. Let us consider two examples among others. Martin Heidegger interpreted the *parousia* of which the Apostle speaks in the *Second Epistle to the Thessalonians* as an event.[1] In 1927, Heidegger defined rebirth, a Christian concept of eminently Pauline derivation, as an event that elevates existence to the "new creation" described by Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:17 ("So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come") and in Galatians 6:15 ("For neither does circumcision mean anything, nor does uncircumcision, but only a new creation").[2] Similarly, Alain Badiou, in light of his own conception of the "event-truth" as a radically new beginning that inaugurates a new life beyond the domain of perseverance in being and the finitude of death, interprets Paul's message about the resurrection of Christ as the subject's participation in the event-truth.[3]

The interpretation of Paul's proclamation in light of the notion of event has also significantly influenced twentieth-century theology. Rudolf Bultmann, for example, believed that the New Testament, and within it primarily the Pauline *Epistles* and the *Gospel of John*, proclaimed Jesus Christ as an eschatological event that puts an end to the old world and becomes present again each time. The prolongation of the historical event of Christ throughout history, according to Bultmann, takes the form of a recurring event that challenges us here and now through preaching and faith.[4] Similarly, Paul Tillich, in addition to his focus on the Christ event, considered Paul himself, as a missionary, a "revelatory event", and, as a theologian, the interpreter of that revelatory event.[5]

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1 Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens*, Gesamtausgabe, vol. 60. (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1995), 112.

2 Cf. Martin Heidegger, "Phänomenologie und Theologie (1927)," in *Wegmarken*, Gesamtausgabe, vol. 9. (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1976), 63.

3 Cf. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: La fondation de l'universalisme* (Paris: PUF, 1997); and for this synthesis of the connection between Badiou's interpretation of Paul and his reflection on the event cf. Erzsébet Kerekes, "The Figure of the Apostle Paul in Contemporary Philosophy," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 14, no. 42 (2015): 41–42.

4 Rudolf Bultmann, *Geschichte und Eschatologie.* 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1964), 180–181.

5 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Reason and Revelation — Being and God* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 121.

In none of these cases, however, is a connection between event and sacrament identified, an aspect that makes Peterson's interpretation particularly interesting and distinctive.

2. NEWNESS AND EVENT IN PAUL'S *EPISTLES*

In the New Testament and Pauline Greek, the concept of "new" is expressed by two adjectives: νέος and καινός. According to a well-established interpretative tradition, the term νέος indicates newness linked to a more recent event, therefore a chronological newness, something that did not exist until the moment of its appearance. Conversely, καινός acquires the meaning of a reality that is new in kind, characterized by a qualitative difference that sets it apart from what preceded it, a newness that is no longer merely chronological but qualitative, different from what existed before and established as an improvement and overcoming of a condition of oldness.[6] Indeed, in the Pauline corpus, this distinction in meaning appears quite nuanced and, while showing a preference for καινός, the Apostle uses νέος as well, with a substantial synonymy. The Pauline semantic field of the idea of newness is, in any case, very varied and significant: Paul speaks of the very idea of newness (καινότης, Rom 6:4 and 7:6), of the concept of renewal (ἀνακαίνωσις, Rom 12:2, Ti 3:5 and 2 Cor 4:16), of the figure of the new man (καινός/νέος ἄνθρωπος, Col 3:10, Eph 2:15 and 4:24), of the fundamental notion of the new covenant (καινή διαθήκη 2 Cor 3:6) and of the idea of a new creation (καινὴ κτίσις 2 Cor 5:17 and Gal 6:15), a decisive notion in understanding the Christological event. The latter expression appears in the *Letter to the Galatians* and in the *Second Letter to the Corinthians*. In Gal 6:15, the *Letter* states, "For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is important, but the new creation (καινὴ κτίσις)", while in 2 Cor 5:17: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation: the old has passed away (τὰ ἀρχαῖα παρῆλθεν), behold, it has become new (γέγονεν καινά)." Numerous, very different, and sometimes conflicting interpretations have been proposed on the idea of new creation. In light of the relevant exegetical data, however, the interpretation according to which the new creation should be considered as an expression with a soteriological meaning in an

[6] Cfr. Johannes Behm, "Art. νέος," in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, vol. 3, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1932), 899–903; Hans Haarbeck and Friedrich Thiele, "νέος," in *Theologisches Begriffslexikon zum Neuen Testament. Ausgabe mit aktualisierten Literaturangaben*, eds. Lothar Coenen and Klaus Haacker (Witten: SCM R. Brockhaus, 2013), 13–14; Johannes Behm, "Art. καινός," in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, vol. 4, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1932), 450–453; Hans Haarbeck, Hans-Gerog Link, and Friedrich Thiele, "καινός," in *Theologisches Begriffslexikon zum Neuen Testament*, rev. ed., eds. Lothar Coenen and Klaus Haacker (Witten: SCM R. Brockhaus, 2013), 9–12; and Roy Harrisville, "The concept of Newness in the New Testament," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 74 (1955): 70.

ontological-sacramental sense, closely linked to the rite of baptism, is definitely feasible. This interpretation is also confirmed by Paul's reflection on the concept of newness itself, used by the Apostle in his *Letter to the Romans*. In verse 6:4 of the *Letter*, it is explained that "we were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life (ἐν καινότητι ζωῆς)". Baptism takes place in Christ, as incorporation into his death and resurrection. The particle εἰς makes it clear that Paul is referring here to an event with a concrete, spatial dimension.[7] Although there is much debate as to whether Paul is actually referring to the rite of baptism here, scholars such as Udo Schnelle and Samuli Siikavirta firmly believe that the key event of baptism marks the actual death of the old man and the gift of new life to the believer.[8] The reference to baptism should therefore not be considered as a mere metaphorical or spiritual reference, nor a projection of the "end of time" *(Äonenwende)* into each person's personal *Dasein*,[9] but a tangible and concrete reality that occurs in a unique and real historical event. What happens in baptism, according to Paul, is a sacramental experience of the actual and present death of Jesus by the individual Christian. Baptism means therefore an effective participation in the Christ-event. Since he died and resurrected from the dead, and since the baptized person received full participation in this event of salvation in baptism, the baptized Christian is also removed from the realm of death and sin. Dead to sin, from that moment on he lives for God. Nevertheless, the baptized person remains involved in a cosmic battle, as exemplified by the metaphors of combat and weapons in Romans 6:12–23. The transition to the new, which brings with it the actual death of the old man, is therefore an event that took place sacramentally in baptism, the unique act that follows the decisive event in history, the Paschal event, which occurred once and for all.[10] On the other hand, this absolute newness has not yet found its conclusion within the historical process. In fact, believers are also invited to serve in the newness of the spirit and to set out on the path of newness of life, because the old world continues to exist underneath the new order. The baptismal event must be constantly renewed in daily life.[11] Renewal consists in the historical extension of the event that marked a decisive change of life experienced by the recipients through conversion and baptism,

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7 Udo Schnelle, *Paulus: Leben und Denken*, 2nd rev. and expanded ed. (Berlin / Boston: de Gruyter, 2014), 347.

8 Cf. ibid., 346–350; Samuli Siikavirta, *Baptism and Cognition in Romans 6–8: Paul's Ethics beyond "Indicative"and "Imperative"*, WUNT II / 407 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 109–110.

9 Cf. Ernst Käsemann, *An die Römer*, 4th rev. ed. (Tübingen Mohr Siebeck, 1980), 155.

10 Cf. Bernard Rey, *Créés dans le Christ Jésus: La création nouvelle selon saint Paul*, LD 42 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1966), 106.

11 Cf. ibid., 111.

thus excluding any continuity between the former life of sin and the present saving reality.[12] In any case, it is not only an individual process, relating to the single soul, but also a cosmic one. "Old man" and "new man", therefore, do not in themselves anthropologically designate the individual man, yet at the same time they concern persons taken in their singularity. The individual and community aspects are intertwined: every single human being has to be involved in the event of non-existence in Christ, and through this involvement, they merge their entire being into the communal essence of the Church, into the sacramental union between the individual, the community, and God.[13]

With his conception of eschatological reservation and his interpretation of history in the light of the new aeon, Peterson aligns closely with the Pauline exegetical tradition.

3. Erik Peterson as an Interpreter of Paul

Erik Peterson is best known in the field of political theology for his 1935 work *Der Monotheismus als politisches Problem.*[14] The presence of Paul also echoes in this work. In the final words of the text, Peterson includes a reference to verse 4:7 of the *Epistle to the Philippians* ("Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus"):

> Nur auf dem Boden des Judentums oder Heidentums kann es so etwas wie eine »politische Theologie« geben. Doch die christliche Verkündigung von dem dreieinigen Gotte steht jenseits von Judentum und Heidentum, gibt es doch das Geheimnis der Dreieinigkeit nur in der Gottheit selber, aber nicht in der Kreatur. Wie den auch der Friede, den der Christ sucht, von keinem Kaiser gewährt wird, sondern allein ein Geschenk dessen ist, der »höher ist als alle Vernunft«.[15]

Thomas Söding emphasizes that Paul's influence permeates Peterson's work, not only his courses dedicated to the Apostle, but also his commentaries on the *Gospel of Luke*, on the *Gospel of John*, and on the *Book of Revelation*. Peterson's relationship with Paul was evidently profound, revealing an interest in the figure of the Apostle that went beyond religious or academic life. Peterson saw himself in Paul and observed a

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12 Cf. Michael Dübbers, *Christologie und Existenz im Kolosserbrief: Exegetische und semantische Untersuchungen zur Intention des Kolosserbriefes*, WUNT II / 191 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 296.

13 Jürg Buchegger, *Erneuerung des Menschen: exegetische Studien zu Paulus*, TANZ 40 (Tübingen: A. Francke Verlag, 2003), 198–199.

14 Erik Peterson, "Der Monotheismus als politisches Problem," in *Theologische Traktate*, AS 1 (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1994), 23–82.

15 Ibid., 59.

series of parallels between the Apostle's life and his own.[16] Paul was in fact a key figure in Peterson's break with Protestantism and in his conversion to Catholicism, as revealed by the theologian himself in a letter to Gerardus van der Leeuw in 1924.[17]

There are many Petersonian reflections woven into Pauline themes. Most prominent among them is his reflection on the new aeon *(neue Äon)*, central to his exegesis of both Paul and John. The theological and eschatological view of history — according to which, in the time between the first and second coming of Jesus Christ, two aeons exist and coexist: The old aeon, destined for destruction but still present and insistent with its temptations, and the new aeon, which arose from the resurrection of Christ and into which Christians can already enter through baptism but whose full fulfilment they must await until the end of time — is an essential concept for understanding Peterson's rejection of any political theology developed on the basis of Christianity.[18]

Not coincidentally, at various points in his lectures on Paul's letters, Peterson accompanies his exegetical interpretation with reflections on current historical and political events, revealing a perspective that sought to frame exegetical study in a broader context.[19]

Peterson discussed his theology of the aeons for the first time in a lecture given in 1924–1925[20] and then gave it a decisive role in his lectures in subsequent years devoted to the *Letter to the Romans* (1925–1928). During those years, he also gave lectures on the *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, collected in the seventh volume of *Ausgewählte Schriften*, alongside with other studies published over the years on various aspects of Pauline exegesis.[21] However, it is in his commentary on the *Epistle to the Romans* that Peterson's interpretation of the new aeon most fully develops in a way that is particularly relevant to a sacramental understanding of the event.

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16 Cf. Thomas Söding, "Ein Ausnahme-Exeget: Erik Peterson in der Theologie seiner Zeit," in *Erik Peterson: Die theologische Präsenz eines Outsiders*, ed. Giancarlo Caronello (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2012), 185–187.

17 Cf. Erik Peterson, *Theologie und Theologen: Briefwechsel mit Karl Barth u.a., Reflexionen und Erinnerungen*, AS 9 / 2 (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2009), 209–210.

18 Barbara Nichtweiß, *Erik Peterson: Neue Sicht auf Leben und Werk* (Freiburg / Basel / Wien: Herder, 1992), 794.

19 Cf. Romano Penna, "Erik Peterson, *Der Brief an die Römer.* Eine kritische Annäherung," in *Erik Peterson: Die theologische Präsenz eines Outsiders*, ed. Giancarlo Caronello, 245–246.

20 Erik Peterson, "Kosmos und Äon," in *Der erste Brief an die Korinther und Paulus-Studien*, AS 7 (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2006), 426–440.

21 On Peterson's interpretation of the *First Letter to the Corinthians* and, in particular, on Pauline ecclesiology as it emerges in these lectures, cf. Hans-Ulrich Weidemann, "'Paulus an die Ekklesia Gottes, die in Korinth ist': Der Kirchenbegriff in Petersons Auslegung des ersten Korintherbriefs," in *Erik Peterson: Die theologische Präsenz eines Outsiders*, ed. Giancarlo Caronello (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2012), 259–296.

4. THE NEW AEON AND THE EVENT

Peterson's theology of the aeons emerged from a fundamental concern: To provide Christian theology with a specific conception of time that would allow for an adequate interpretation of the Gospel that goes beyond mere historical time, not to abolish historicity but to think simultaneously about a tension between history and eternity through the dialectic between the old and new aeons.[22] From the first lectures on the first chapter of the *Epistle to the Romans*, therefore, Peterson considers it necessary to define the idea of the new aeon, which becomes a recurring theme throughout his lectures. Commenting on verse Rom 1:3, Peterson writes: "Mit der Thronbesteigung Christi hat natürlich dann auch der alte Äon ein Ende genommen, hat ein neuer Äon begonnen."[23] History is divided between an old passage of time and a new aeon that puts an end to the entire old cosmos following an event that interrupted history. This rupture is brought about by a political act: The *Thronbesteigung Christi*, the enthronement of Christ. With the *Thronbesteigung Christi*, the old aeon ended and a new aeon began. The present aeon is surpassed and transcended by the future aeon, the new one.[24] Christ's ascension to the throne is the final act of victory achieved in the underworld, victory over the old cosmos and over death. This triumphant event completes redemption and marks the beginning of the new aeon, in which the Church also triumphs, through which Christ reigns in the new aeon: "Die Thronbesteigung ist demnach der Abschluß eines in der Unterwelt errungenen Sieges. Mit ihr ist unsere Erlösung abgeschlossen, mit ihr hört die Herrschaftsmöglichkeit des alten Äons auf, mit ihr beginnt der neue Äon, mit ihr auch die Kirche, durch die hindurch Christus in dem neuen Äon herrscht."[25] Peterson begins to outline this theology of the aeons by distancing himself from Luther, revealing that he was already moving away from Lutheran faith and exegesis in those years. The gospel (εὐαγγέλιον) that Paul proclaims already in the opening verse of the *Epistle* ("Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God – εὐαγγέλιον θεοῦ – "), according to Peterson, essentially corresponds to the news of Christ's enthronement. What Paul means by the word "Gospel" is

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22 Cf. Barbara Nichtweiß, "Das Neue durch den Abbruch hindurch schauen. Vier Miniaturen zur Einführung in das Denken Erik Petersons," in *Erik Peterson: Die theologische Präsenz eines Outsiders*, ed. Giancarlo Caronello (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2012), 78.

23 Erik Peterson, *Der Brief an die Römer*, AS 6 (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1997), 12.

24 For further examination of the concept of "transcendence" *(Transzendierung)* in Peterson's thinking in relation to the idea of the new aeon, cf. Gabino Uríbarri Bilbao, SJ, "Der neue Äon bricht im alten an. Zur Auffassung der eschatologischen Zeit bei Erik Peterson", in *Vom Ende der Zeit: Geschichtstheologie und Eschatologie bei Erik Peterson. Symposium Mainz 2000*, ed. Barbara Nichtweiß (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2001), 193–216, esp. 207–209.

25 Peterson, *Der Brief an die Römer*, 13.

therefore something very different from what "Gospel" means in Luther's interpretation, according to the theologian. For Luther, the Gospel was linked to the remission of sins, but Peterson points out that Paul mentions this association when he provides a definition of the Gospel. For him, the Gospel is news of Christ's ascension to the throne, not a "bulletin" on God's disposition toward men, as he notes with a touch of irony. When Paul speaks of the Gospel, he is not referring to the regulation of private relations between God and man, but to a cosmic-eschatological process *(kosmisch-eschatologische Vorgang)*: "Das Evangelium bezieht sich für ihn wirklich noch auf einen kosmisch-eschatologischen Vorgang und nicht auf die Regelung der privaten Beziehungen zwischen Gott und Mensch."[26] Peterson does not deny that Christ's crucifixion, his victory in hell, his resurrection, his ascension, and his presence on the throne at the right hand of the Father concern sin, but he interprets this relationship with sin very differently from Luther. In Peterson's view, for Paul, the εὐαγγέλιον does not concern private, individual sin and its forgiveness, but rather the cosmic sin of Adam and its overcoming through Christ, the new Adam: "Das εὐαγγέλιον bezieht sich eben nicht auf die Einzelsünde und ihre Vergebung, sondern auf die kosmische Sünde Adams und ihre Überwindung durch den neuen Adam."[27] When Luther argues that original sin is not erased in baptism, but only forgiven, according to Peterson, he not only misunderstands Paul's cosmological-eschatological conception, but completely ignores the very concept of original sin. Original sin, by its nature, cannot be forgiven, but only erased, and it can only be erased in an eschatological-cosmic event, the one announced by the εὐαγγέλιον:

> Gerade das heißt eben den Begriff der Erbsünde völlig verkennen. Die Erbsünde kann ihrem Wesen nach nicht vergeben, sondern immer nur getilgt werden, sie kann nur in einem kosmisch-eschatologischen Geschehen, eben jenem, von dem das εὐαγγέλιον spricht, ausgelöscht werden; aber sie ist nicht in dieser personal-privaten Sphäre präsent, in der es so etwas wie Vergebung der Sünden geben kann. Wenn Gott den Menschen ihre Privatsünden vergeben wollte oder wenn er ihnen in dieser Situation mitteilen wollte, daß er ihnen — trotz ihrer Sünden — freundlich gesinnt sei, wahrhaftig, es hätte nicht dieses Aufwandes bedurft, der Hölle und Himmel in Bewegung gesetzt hat, infolgedessen der Sohn Gottes den Himmel verlassen und am Kreuze sterben mußte, um nach seiner Auferstehung dann den Thron an Gottes Seite einzunehmen![28]

[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid., 14.

In this passage, as in many others of the same tenor, Peterson uses terminology related to the event in an eschatological sense. The cosmic-eschatological process described by Paul through the notion of the Gospel arises from the event of Christ's resurrection and enthronement, which Peterson defines in the last passage quoted here and also in other parts of the text as an eschatological event, in the text *kosmisch-eschatologischen Geschehen*. These passages highlight a key terminological point. Peterson consistently uses the term *Geschehen* to describe the eschatological event in its full sense, rather than *Ereignis*, which he often uses more generally to refer to historical events or events belonging to the end of history. In fact, Peterson uses *Ereignis* about ten times in his lectures, while *Geschehen* appears almost forty times. By using *Geschehen* to describe the event, the theologian seems to want to express not only a newness whose meaning is manifested on the chronological level, but also the emergence of a new quality of time that points to an eschatological newness.

5. Sacrament and Event

These clarifications lay the foundation for Peterson's reflection on the sacrament. Christians, Peterson writes, enter into the new aeon through the sacrament of baptism, which extends to all humanity not only the anthropological-existential but also the fully eschatological meaning of the Christ event. It is not, therefore, the constant exercise of the act of faith, nor its continual re-presentation and enactment, that effects the transition from the old to the new aeon. The transition from the old to the new involves a change of status, not just of attitude. The εὐαγγέλιον, the message of Christ's enthronement and the faith that derives from it, are enacted through what Peterson calls "sacramental actualization" *(sakramentale Vollzug)*, which passes through the single act of baptism: "Im neuen Äon dagegen das Evangelium, die Botschaft von der Thronbesteigung Christi und der zu dieser Botschaft gehörige Glaube, der nicht durch den beständigen *Vollzug* des Glaubensaktes, sondern vielmehr durch die Taufe, also durch den sakramentalen Vollzug, den Übergang aus dem *status* im alten Äon zu dem *status* im neuen Äon erlangt."[29]

The numerous references to baptism lead Peterson to explore the concept of sacrament and another fundamental notion of his thought: The idea of "eschatological reservation" *(eschatologische Vorbehalt)*.[30] By eschatological reservation, Peterson

[29] Ibid., 94–95.

[30] On the category of eschatological reservation in Peterson's thought cf. Gabino Uríbarri Bilbao, SJ, "La riserva escatologica: Genesi del concetto in Erik Peterson," *PATH* 12 (2013): 278–279; Gabino Uríbarri Bilbao, SJ, "La reserva escatológica: un concepto originario de Erik Peterson (1890–1960)," *Estudios Eclesiásticos. Revista de investigación e información teológica y canónica* 78, no. 304

means present, real participation in an event, the Incarnation, which historically has already taken place, but which at the same time continues to be prolonged in the present through the sacraments and which, precisely through these, projects and draws believers towards the future as they live in a time of waiting for the final fulfilment. It is the condition of the intermediate stage *(Zwischenzustand)* in which Christians find themselves living since the resurrection of Christ, awaiting the future resurrection of the dead. When Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:17 speaks of "being in Christ" (ἐν Χριστῷ εἶναι) as the condition of the "new creature", according to Peterson he is therefore not describing a mystical relationship, but a new sacramental status: The believer is transferred into Christ through baptism. Before, believers were "in the flesh" (ἐν τῇ σαρκί, Rom. 7:5 and 8:3), now they are "in Christ", so if they are now in Christ, they are no longer in the flesh. No coexistence between the two conditions is possible. One follows the other, according to what Peterson defines as the temporal succession (*Nacheinander*) in the form of the present *(Einst)* and the now *(jetzt)*. This rupture between the old life in the flesh and the new life in Christ also explains, according to Peterson, the meaning of the event that leads to the new creation. The perfect transition *(vollkommene Wechsel)* from the old to the new is not experienced in an experience *(Erlebnis)*, but in the sacramental event *(sakramentale Geschehen)* that inaugurates entry into the new creation:

> Hier gibt es kein Nebeneinander, sondern nur ein Nacheinander: ein Nacheinander in Form des Einst und Jetzt. Deshalb sagt Paulus in auch 2 Kor 5,17: »Ist jemand in Christo, so ist er καινὴ κτίσις (neue Schöpfung). Das Alte ist vergangen.« Das heißt aber: es besteht nicht mehr fort. Dieser vollkommene Wechsel ist nicht in einem Erlebnis, sondern in dem sakramentalen Geschehen gegründet. Wer in Jesus Christus hineingetaucht ist, der ist eben in Christo. Von denen heißt es 6, 11, daß sie Gott leben ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. Sie sind jetzt, νῦν, in ihm, von jetzt ab in ihm […][31].

The notion of sacramental event in its eschatological character also manifests the concrete nature of Christian hope. Christians do not hope for abstract eternal beatitude but for "a new heaven and a new earth", a new man on a new earth, a new κτίσις. The sacrament of baptism therefore also implies the desire for a new body, the body of glory (δόξα, hence Peterson's expression δόξα-Leibes). However, the eschatological fulfilment of the sacramental event does not concern only the individual Christian who experiences the sacrament, but the human being as a whole,

(2019): 29–105; and Kurt Anglet, *Der eschatologische Vorbehalt: Eine Denkfigur Erik Petersons* (Paderborn / München / Wien / Zürich: Schöningh, 2001).

[31] Peterson, *Der Brief an die Römer*, 226.

as a corpus, as a new humanity summed up in Christ. Eschatology and the resurrection of the dead refer precisely to this reunifying aspect of Christianity. Even the resurrection of Christ itself, in this sense, according to Peterson, should not be considered as an isolated miracle that enters history, because the resurrection of Christ must also be followed by the resurrection of believers. The uniqueness lies in the newness of the eschatology of the resurrection, which initiates the new aeon and binds Christ and believers through their participation in the sacramental event, which, even if repeated for all who are baptized, remains linked to the uniqueness of the resurrected Lord:

> Es ist wichtig, daß hier nicht an eine in der Totenauferstehung sich auswirkende Vollendung des *einzelnen* Christen gedacht ist, sondern die Vollendung trifft immer eine Gesamtheit, ein *corpus*, eine neue Menschheit, die in Christus zusammengefaßt ist, wie die alte Menschheit in Adam zusammengefaßt war. Die ganze Idee einer rein individuellen Seligkeit ist sinnlos, wenn man an die Eschatologie und an die Totenauferstehung denkt. Die Auferstehung Christi ist auch nicht ein isoliertes, in die Geschichte hineinragendes Wunder. Nein, sie ragt eben nicht in die Geschichte hinein, sondern aus der Geschichte heraus, und sie ist kein isoliertes Wunder, da sie nur ihren Sinn hat unter der Voraussetzung, daß der Auferstehung Christi unsere Leibesauferstehung folgt. Ein und dasselbe neue eschatologische Geschehen, mit dem sich der Eintritt eines neuen Äons ankündet, verbindet Christus mit uns[32].

Although Peterson also attributes extreme importance to the Eucharist, the primacy of baptism is evident. Baptism is first and foremost the sacrament that most clearly expresses the dynamic of eschatological reserve. Paraphrasing the aforementioned verses from the sixth chapter of the *Epistle to the Romans*, Peterson states that believers died to sin once they died with Christ in baptism, but they have not yet risen with Christ, because they will rise with him in the future. In baptism, we are now "dead", then we will "rise again". If the parallelism were extended to the resurrection, baptism would not be a sacrament, but an act with a purely moral effect, similar to those that characterized the celebration of the mysteries. Conversely, according to Peterson, while in the celebration of the mystery a person, taken by a sort of imaginative μίμησις, is led to live the fate of the divinity of the cult, experiencing it as a moral force, in the sacrament, as an event, something happens and is accomplished, or rather, God makes something happen and brings it to fulfilment. For this reason and because of this

[32] Ibid., 260–261.

concrete expression with which baptism is given, the theologian can speak not only of a sacramental event, but also of a baptismal event *(Taufgeschehen)*:

> […] das Sakrament der Taufe so wenig wie übrigens auch das Sakrament des Abendmahls eine reine Mysterienhandlung ist. Gerade *als* Sakrament geht es über den Sinneiner bloßen Mysterienfeier hinaus. Man wird es als geradezu entscheidend für den Begriff des Sakraments halten müssen, daß hier etwas auftritt, was ich den eschatologischen Vorbehalt nennen möchte. Damit meine ich dies, daß hier zum Beispiel in Röm 6,7 der Parallelismus von Tod und Auferstehung in dem Taufgeschehen *nicht* restlos durchgeführt ist: daß wohl gesagt wird, daß wir der Sünde gestorben sind, als wir mit Christus in der Taufe starben, daß aber dann doch daneben nicht gesagt wird, daß wir mit Christus auferstanden sind, sondern daß wir mit Christus auferstehen *werden*. Wäre der Parallelismus im zweiten Gliede durchgeführt, dann wäre die Taufe kein Sakrament, sondern eine Mysterienhandlung mit bloß moralischer Wirkung. Was unterscheidet denn ein Sakrament von der Mysterienfeier? Daß im Sakrament etwas geschieht und vollzogen wird, und zwar von Gott aus geschieht und vollzogen wird, während in der Mysterienfeier nicht in diesem Sinne etwas geschieht und vollzogen wird, sondern der Mensch von sich aus in phantasiemäßiger μίμησις (Mimesis) die Schicksale der Kultgottheit miterlebt und als moralische Kraft erfährt.[33]

As Barbara Nichtweiß points out in her commentary on this text, the sacramental event cannot be experienced independently, unlike what happens during the celebration of the mysteries, and cannot be appropriated, since it can only be defined as accomplished in reference to another act.[34] In the same vein, Roger Mielke points out that Peterson, through his insistence on the concreteness of the sacramental event (which can also be extended to the Eucharist), contrasts the meaning of the materiality of sacramental substances with certain categories of modernity inherited from the Reformation and then transformed until they reached the thinking of authors such as Max Scheler, namely the tendency to eliminate the concept of substance from life and to use in its place some kind of dynamism and personalism or functional concept.[35] The sacramental event, on the other hand, cannot take place without the encounter between the materiality of the sacramental substances and the carnality of a creaturely

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[33] Ibid., 185.

[34] Nichtweiß, *Erik Peterson: Neue Sicht auf Leben und Werk*, 415.

[35] Cf. Erik Peterson, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther und Paulus-Studien*, 273; and Roger Mielke, *Eschatologische Öffentlichkeit: Öffentlichkeit der Kirche und politische Theologie im Werk von Erik Peterson* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 236.

body which, while losing its old age linked to abandonment to the flesh, is made new in its entirety in order to enter a new aeon.

6. Concluding Remarks

The sacramental interpretation of the event has not been widely embraced by contemporary thought. Rudolf Bultmann, for example, argues that the early Christian understanding of salvation as an eschatological event was misunderstood and reduced to a mere effect, i.e., the forgiveness of sins, which is appropriated through baptism.[36] Turning to philosophical interpretations of Paul, in his *Il tempo che resta* Giorgio Agamben relegates the sacrament to a performative and penitential aspect that strips grace and vitality from human relationships.[37] Peterson, however, offers a compelling alternative perspective, shared by a significant part of Catholic thought in 20th-century Germany, including figures like Heinrich Schlier and Joseph Ratzinger. The Petersonian idea of sacramental event, in its uniqueness as both act and encounter, is inseparably linked to historical events regarded to be real, yet opens itself to human experience and language in a way that reveals a paradoxical structure. The Risen appears in the sacrament, but in appearing, he also withdraws. He is present, but not graspable, seen, but not possessed. This paradox defines the sacrament as a true event: Not merely a symbol or moral imitation, but a gift, a concrete irruption of the new aeon into history. For those who witness this appearance in faith, the sacramental event is the form in which the resurrectional event becomes present, not as a past memory or future promise, but as a new and definitive experience of Christ's self-giving. Therefore, the sacramental event does not simply refer to Christ's resurrection: It participates in it. Its meaning is not detached from the event, but fulfilled in what it brings about: Not just a change of perception, but a change of being. And it is in this event, this gift that both reveals and veils, that the believer is made new, and in which the community of believers lives and moves toward the fullness of an absolute newness.

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