

Catholic-Maya Sacrificial Commitments

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Abstract

In their annual festival in an eastern village of the Yucatan state, participants verbalized, discussed, and disputed two main understandings of Catholic commitment after a Catholic priest asked his parishioners to reconsider the effects of their ritual offerings. His teachings about *compromiso* signaled other ritualized practices, which compose the concept: promises and sacrifices. In direct contrast to the priest's teachings, local ritualists understand that solemn promises and sacrificial exchange work, however, as encompassments of the notion of commitment. On the other hand, the priest's notion of engagement with the sacred takes its main force from the representation of the work of dying of sacrificial victims. Overcoming an apparently insurmountable pair of opposites, ritual and sacrificial, he defines commitment as vicarious sacrifice, inaugurating for his audience a new representational dimension.

Keywords

Commitment, sacrifice, eucharist, catholicism, offerings, promises

Introduction

Despite the arrangements of Euro-modern states “with [their] putatively neutral public civil domain, clearly separated from the realm of private commitment and belief” (Comaroff 2009, 22 after Asad 2003), the concept of “commitment” has been transformed into a sort of keyword for public politics elsewhere, entailing also a private sacrificial contribution to the public domain in political utterances. In many modes of Latin American Catholicism, and, in particular, in the Maya case I analyze here, the word “*compromiso*,” engagement or commitment, encompasses an ongoing “mediation of a [sacrificial] victim” (Hubert and Mauss [1898] 1964, 97) that, by dying, makes a return of life possible for the community, represented by an individual sacrificer. Commitment, as encompassment of mediation, thus, is intended to represent the victim's work of dying not only as necessary but also as a common destiny. In this Maya-Catholic case, identification with the victim's fate of dying is a condition of possibility for the further composition of death's remains into new

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combinations (Durkheim 1995, 203). Therefore, in the ritual compound I will describe (for further details see Dapuez et al. 2011), Maya participants experience dying as necessary for rebirth, not because they engage in typical “representational practices” as “non-modern and nonwestern” people but because they signify by exploring “multiple modalities of representing as object creation, decontextualization, and distantiation” (Keane 2007, 11-12). However, some of the most influential sociological scholarship concerning commitment (Giraud 2011) and, specifically, religious commitment (Stark and Glock 1974; Stark and Bainbridge 1980), have overlooked representations of such complex agency in its making. Perhaps due to complexities that can take the form of paradoxes, authors have overlooked sacrificial procedures for the difficult composition of what Gilbert has called joint commitment.¹

In Xocén, Yucatán, México, during 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2010 and 2011, I carried out ethnographic fieldwork, archival research and in-depth interviews with *J-meno'ob* and ritual sponsors, which ranged from 1 week in 2011 to almost 6 months in 2009. I observed and participated in cargo rituals during 2003, 2007, 2009, and 2010 in the Agriculturalist Guild Festival, and in 2005 and 2009 in the Village Festival and The Change of the Dress of the Christ, among others. In all of my fieldtrips, I contributed with beer, liquor, soft drinks, and food to the main sponsors. By describing and comparing not only specific tasks of some ritual specialists (see Dapuez et al. 2011 for further sponsorship details) but also, and more importantly, their representations of how it would work the sacrificial victim upon themselves. In a few words, I intend to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of Catholic joint commitment in its making.

Therefore, in this paper I examine how sacred exchange is carried out and represented by promises in a Maya village of Eastern Yucatan, Mexico. My aim is then to understand how people seek commitment not as an end in and of itself but as a means of regeneration. Through promises to saints and the Eucharistic sacrifice, or through stricter pacts and sacrificial offerings of animals for life renewal, commitment is an important part of ritual exchange. It would be a mistake, however, to isolate commitment from the intentional aims of ritual. Instead, commitment is best understood as a complexity of promising, sacrificial exchange, and the work of dying—processes that have heretofore been referred to using the simple term of “mediation.”

At least since Hubert’s and Mauss’ essay, mediation was a key concept to understand the development of the anthropology of religion. First, Hubert and Mauss needed to overcome Lucien Levy-Bruhl’s use of the concept of “participation” (see Keck 2005), rendered as “fusion” (in Hubert and Mauss 1964, 11 and quoted in Robbins 2017, 465). Scholars such as Webb Keane (2007), Matthew Engelke (2007), Birgit Meyer (2009, 2013 and 2014) and Robbins (2017, 2004 and 2001) have noted the value of this communicational approach to religious phenomena. Robbins, for instance, has shown that a sacrificial mediator connects and separates the sacred to and from the profane realms. Tying and disconnecting practitioners among themselves (2017), sacrificial communication works twofold. It avoids “fusion” between the two realms while also builds mediating bridges, to put it in Robbins’ words. As the Urapmin people have taught us, after Robbins’ insights (2004; Robbins also refers to de Heusch 1985, 10 and Willerslev 2009), a sacrificial token is needed to build up a mediation that also isolates. To translate this well-known lesson into a Maussian language, one can say that practices of sacrificial exchange require a sacrificial *gage* to succeed in a double movement: engagement and disengagement. Therefore, if the *gage* operates as a fulcrum upon which involvement and detachment are balanced, or in Robbins’ terms “disjunction and conjunction” (2017, 472), the *gage* in itself requires attention in its own work. In short, when Robbins remarks on the virtues of disengagement he, following Hubert and Mauss, he makes us aware that when one withdraws from the sacrificial relationship safely and more alive, one necessarily leaves something behind—in this case, a sacrificial token. Therefore, a first

model based on total communion (or its opposite, of total annihilation) seems to have been overcome by a second one based on discrete commerce, in which a built-up sort of “exit,” to use Hirschman’s trope (1970), is possible.

However, in the Maya case, a committed ritual practitioner most often represents himself as bound by pacts or promises to an agency more powerful than himself. By enunciating the aims of his commitment in tropes such as “dying for others” or “rebirth,” he also clarifies that commitment should be understood as a means of an already sought sacrificial return. Therefore, and in addition to the “means of communication” with the sacred realm, as Hubert and Mauss describe it in their essay’s conclusion, there exists also, at least in the local Catholic imagination, a sacrificial victim’s work of dying that allows, in the terms of the people of Xocén, the “miracle” of “rebirth.” Wrongly pursued, ritual labor can bring the people the “punishment” of a weak commitment.² In a context of communal objectification of death as a means for something else, for instance a sought-after “rebirth,” commitment expresses its full potential for encompassing other concepts.

“Compromiso” a common word for different concepts

During one of the several five-day-long Gremios’s festivals I participated in between 2003 and 2011 in the eastern Yucatan state village of Xocén, I attended a sermon delivered by an invited priest. In this episodic mass, Padre Carlos promoted an understanding of “compromiso” that implied an unending immolatory process in which the beneficiary, the token of sacrifice and the executor are represented as discrete agents of the Eucharist rite. Padre Carlos strategically used the word “compromiso” to produce tension, to correct and to subsume his parishioners’ notions of commitment into those of the orthodoxy he represented. Sentences such as “*Ustedes no pueden coprometer a Dios; ustedes no pueden obligarlo con comida*” (You cannot compromise God, you cannot oblige him with food [offerings]) still resonate in my mind as repeated commands addressed to prohibit idolatrous practices. But the import and intent of this priest’s sermon must be understood in the context in which it was given.

The first day of the Guild Festival, 15 February 2003, was sponsored by a sixty-year-old man representing the “Xocén’s Farmers Guild.” In the village of Xocén, “compromiso” cargo rituals usually take place in the headquarters of the main sponsor.³ During the festival, sponsors and ritual specialists go back and forth between their homes, the ceremonial center two kilometers away, called the “center of the earth” or *chumuk lu’um*, where the Holy Cross Tun is located, and the church in the village square. Designated “guards” take their respective turns managing and caring for both the church and the ceremonial center. As long as the *kucho’ob*, or sponsors, live or have a kinship home in the village, food and beverages are prepared there. Otherwise, the sponsors and their families reside in the ceremonial center for some days. In the latter case, the food that will constitute the offerings and festive meals are prepared in the same ceremonial center where they will be consecrated. While each guild’s festival lasts twenty-four hours, preparation for that one day can take a whole year.⁴

On February 20th of that year, the last day of celebrations, the responsibility was carried out by the people of the nearby village X-Kabil. The person in charge of this “fifth guild” invited a Catholic priest to give a mass and to conclude the long day of rites, prayers, and meals. As the Catholic mass is a rare occurrence in Xocén, many of the “xocenences” considered this a very special moment. Later, when I asked why the mass would be given two kilometers from the church, some *xocenences* told me that this was “the tradition” of the people of X-Kabil and that it had to be respected. Although the vast majority of the village’s residents call themselves Catholic (about 95% according

to my estimates in 2011, with the remaining 5% identifying as Pentecostals), Xocén does not have a local priest and the people depend on the services in Chichimilá.

Xocenences considered Padre Carlos a very kind person and most of them held him in very good esteem. Originally from Sinaloa, he came to live in Chichimilá following “the church” mandates. Although he had never before been invited to give mass in the ceremonial center, this Dominican priest had been asked to do so in the village church on numerous occasions. That February 20th, Padre Carlos was a kind of guest celebrating a mass two kilometers away from the village church and eight kilometers away from his church. At that time, his parishioners consisted of customary officiants of cargo ceremonies, “singing masters,” *jmeno ’ob* (shamans), guardians of the cross, and some family members of the sponsors. At the ceremonial center mass, where the people of X-Kabil were temporarily residing, and the guild festival was taking place, the priest spoke out against the “Mayan traditions.” Specifically, he dedicated his sermon in Spanish to denouncing practices currently being carried out in the cargo festival—including sacrifices and ritual offerings of food and drinks. To my surprise, he began by reading a few paragraphs of Genesis (IV), which features God’s rejection of Cain’s agricultural sacrifices. It narrates, consecutively, the murder of Abel by his brother. Here is one of those paragraphs.

Now Abel became a shepherd and kept flocks, while Cain tilled the soil.³ Time passed and Cain brought some of the produce of the soil as an offering for Yahweh,⁴ while Abel for his part brought the first-born of his flock and some of their fat as well. Yahweh looked with favour on Abel and his offering.⁵ But he did not look with favour on Cain and his offering, and Cain was very angry and downcast.⁶ Yahweh asked Cain, ‘Why are you angry and downcast?’⁷ If you are doing right, surely you ought to hold your head high! But if you are not doing right, Sin is crouching at the door hungry to get you. You can still master him.⁸ Cain said to his brother Abel, ‘Let us go out’; and while they were in the open country, Cain set on his brother Abel and killed him. (Genesis 4:2-8, [New Jerusalem Bible 1990](#))

While interpretations of these passages are varied and often extremely complex, the main hypothesis I pose here intends to respond to the question of why this priest choose to confront his attendees’ notions of sacrifice, of promises and, more importantly, of “compromiso” or commitment. In this sense, I dedicate the following pages to a conceptual dispute proposed by Padre Carlos. His confrontational strategy was fared by using the Catholic notions of “compromiso” against Maya Catholics’ conception of “compromiso,” with more contract-like meanings when explained through *mokthan* deals and promises in Maya Yucatec. Leaving aside the Mayan speaking ritualist’s point of view, I am analyzing the Mexican-Catholic priest’s advice, teachings, and admonitions in reference to the indigenous notion, as an encompassment of both terms in a complex of opposites.

Commitment, promise and sacrifice

The use of the above quoted bible paragraph told the story of Cain, the firstborn, who is dedicated to cultivating the land and making offerings to God with his fruits. God does not welcome his offerings, nor Cain. Abel, on the other hand, pleases God with the immolation of his sheep’s offspring. This angers his brother and motivates Cain to lead his brother into a field to murder him. According to the biblical narrative, after being stained with fraternal blood, the countryside turns barren. This punishment, the priest explains to us at the end of his sermon, is the very same that threatens the farmers of Xocén. Addressing the Mayan-speaking farmers in his sermon, Father Carlos admonishes them from ending up like Cain, he says, “suffering the divine punishment that may condemn” them “to wander around the world, without rest, unless they reflect on their sacrificial

practices.” In his sermon, as I will explore below, Padre Carlos contraposes different sets of “compromisos,” “promesas,” and “sacrificios”—one set pertaining to the true “Catholic believers” and the other, to Cain-like agriculturalists.

Saying that he knew that Maya agriculturalists and their ritual specialists “come here to make offerings,” Padre Carlos warned them that the word of God was clearly “against” such practices. Back to his homily, the priest stressed that “God did not accept Cain’s offerings and punished him.” Such godly reactions definitively established “the need for intermediaries” between God and his people. The priest elucidated this indirect sacrificial economy in his sermon. Beginning with the essential need for intermediaries, the priest admonished the audience, including the few Pentecostals in the village, that “You are not as important and great as you think you are.” In his reasoning, he argued that “it is not possible to deal directly with him [god].” Gesturing to the offerings already set out, the priest asked all those present in the second person singular,

What? Do you think God needs food? Do you think God needs this [while he indicates the tables where the tortilla offerings, the ritual food called *relleno negro* and *atole* were]? No, my friends. You cannot compromise [“comprometer” also meaning to commit] God with these offerings. Imagine what God could ask from you. Not food...

The priest continued by speaking of an omnipotent god, one who “has and can do everything” and that what he would be really asking from them is their commitment with him. However, what those of us listening to his speech need to do, he said, is to establish links and relationships with God’s intermediaries. Among these, the priest included priests, the bishop, the pope, and the Catholic saints. The function of these church representatives, he maintained, is to intercede on behalf of the faithful who need some “miracle.” For the priest, who has partially identified the farmers with Cain in his sermon, God’s rejection of the peasants’ offerings is not only based on their content. The priest is not suggesting a different sacrificial economy in terms of its object but in its relationships. Just as a farmer cannot commit God simply with sacrificial offerings, he cannot directly commit himself to God without the help of various intermediaries.

Immediately after sketching these sets of opposition (commitment one against commitment 2; promise 1 against promise 2; sacrifice 1 against sacrifice 2, etc.), Padre Carlos called for reflection. At this point it is not only necessary to retain the theological complexity of the anecdote but also the shared opinion that any sacrificial act is, for both parties, the festival sponsors and the priest, an instance in which one commits oneself definitively. Mayan-speaking ritualists and the Dominican priest identified the sacrificial giving (of pigs, food or of the Eucharist) as the moment in which one is forced to commit another or oneself to a series of future actions and passions. In both cases, commitment arises from shared promises and sacrificial deliveries.

Padre Carlos recommended that his attendees stop making sacrificial offerings for renewal. Instead, they should communicate with intermediaries through promises and prayers. The priest opposed the Maya purchase of life but through a typical accommodation, he attempted to encompass Maya commitments within a Mexican-Catholic notion that, in and of itself, features trust in the work of consecrated intermediaries. Accompanying this trust is an understanding that God himself has much more agency as a sacrificial victim than pigs and turkeys ever could. Before finally taking the form of sacrificial victim agency, the sacrificial agency Carlos described travels along a series of mediations: from the father-sacrificer (both Padre Carlos and God the father) to the sacrificer (or *sacrificiant* in Hubert and Mauss’ terms, i.e. the person benefiting from the sacrifice), in this case also Padre Carlos and the committed church, the moral person whom the priest represents. In short, joint commitment for Padre Carlos has more to do with the constitution of a

salvific congregation than with discrete life renewals. He aimed to construct and reconstruct an institution, rather than bring rebirth to the crops, animals, and practitioners' bodies.

Complexes of opposites and the work of representing commitment

After kindly reading an earlier version of this article, a doctoral student and Jesuit Priest informed me that there are many strategies of inculturation, or the "practice of bringing the Good News to different cultural milieus" (Zatycka 2013, 7).⁵ He told me of the existence of the Jesuit mission of Bachatón (Aguilar 1999; Zatycka 2013) and other places in the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas (Catholic Church 1999), where the Autochthonous Church, long ago promoted by Bishop Samuel Ruiz, inculturated itself into Maya rituality instead of the contrary.

However, as Norget (2011, 347) has also noted, the "indigenous pastoral" progressive tones have gradually been replaced by more conservative methods, such as the Padre Carlos' representative practice of holding the "other within the Catholic Church paternalistic fold" (Mayblin 2017, 20). In this latter case, understanding sacrifice through oppositional political forms produced an encompassment of one term by the opposition by the other, as Schmitt (1996) has explained. If, as Mayblin (2017) maintain, "in Schmitt's reading the church has a unique capacity to hold any possible plurality of interests and parties because there is no other realm of life and sociality that she—the gendered pronoun used by the church—cannot embrace," I suppose that is because of the church's belief in its self-ascribed power of representation. This power of representing, to use Mayblin (2017) terms, may theoretically "hold" any contradictory pair of opposites together.

The priest, by comparing the biblical story of Cain and Abel with the Eucharistic sacrifice and sacrifices of the local farmers, argues that the Eucharist is more "advanced" than the direct giving of food and drink to the local idols. He asks his parishioners to commit themselves because Christ's sacrifice encompasses all other possible sacrifices. However, when he warns the people against "trying to commit [or to compromise, as he uses the Spanish verb "comprometer" which denotes both] god with food offerings," he is also asking that the attendees acknowledge his own power of representation. He is not simply comparing the efficacy of various sacrifices. Otherwise put, he informs them that they cannot oblige God to their ends through sacrificial offerings, but they can "commit themselves to God" through him and the Eucharistic sacrifice he provides. Devaluing agriculturalist sacrifices, Padre Carlos maintains that commitment only functions if practiced according to the sacrificial logic of Christianity and, above all, as prescribed by the Catholic sacrificial bureaucracy.

The Mexican Catholic church has been described as an institutional "hierarchical order that moves very efficiently to muffle any dissent within its ranks and impede the entrenchment of alternative pastoral praxes" (Norget 2004, 156). However, Padre Carlos, among others in the Mexican church, may find the existence of heretics quite convenient (1 Corinthians 11.8). Claiming for himself a certain power of representation, Padre Carlos uses two sacrificial cases to contrast modes of commitment.

The first, which I will refer to here as "compromiso" number 1 (or C1 for simplicity's sake), is Padre Carlos's version of his Maya parishioners taking the sacrificial work required by rites of renewal into their own hands. There are, of course, multiple ritual specialists among the Mayan speaking farmers, and the complexities of the cargo system are still far from being clear and well-known, but Padre Carlos set aside these complexities to represent them all as if they were directly dealing with God through sacrifices. Believing that experiences of illness or disgrace are in fact requests from spiritual-lords, these farmers understand that such requests result from unfulfilled promises they may have made in the past (I have described in detail some of these features

elsewhere; [Dapuez et al. 2011](#); [Dapuez 2013](#)). As such, C1 entails, then, a direct communication with the sacred. At first sight, C1 is only a sort of a very simplified notion of commitment the priest constructed to produce a starting point for his inculturation. Speaking of the necessity of a far more responsible set of tasks for a true believer, the priest objectifies the deficiency in C1 to be corrected in C2. The simplified direct commitment called here C1 is then used, by the priest, to construct C2, a commitment that overcomes the false commitment of his audience.

Encompassing and de-encompassing catholic sacrifice

My own experience with Catholicism preceded my time in the village of Xocén. My path away from Catholicism, until the age of 14, was similar to what Mayblin described as “lapsedness” ([2017](#)). Although I do not consider myself Catholic today, I should recognize that such deviation from Catholicism may have been devised by Catholicism itself as an always open door that serves as both exit and re-entrance. In this way, I understand commitment as something more complicated than a disposition ([Dapuez et al. 2011](#)).

[Scheid \(2002, 2007\)](#) and [Mayblin \(2017\)](#) have shown that engagement with the sacred, in ancient Rome as well as in contemporary Brazil, involves more than initial doses of disengagement. Their portrayals of non-committed lay people depend, first of all, on institutional norms that define them as non-committed. Relying on a specialized division of sacrificial labor, one class is represented in opposition of another, allowing the first not to be contaminated by, or worse, lost in, the sacred realm. Just as lay people are expected to be disengaged most of the time, a category of consecrated persons is expected to be almost always in communication with the sacred.

The notion of one set of persons representing others gained ascendancy in the bureaucratic political theology of Rome. As John [Scheid \(2002\)](#) points out, there was a radical difference between the Roman lay people and the sacred bureaucracy of magistrates, in that “[t]he divinities could not demand anything from their human partners other than gestures, as humans were incapable of directly contemplating them or of moving beyond relations that had been codified for a long time and were governed and controlled by the magistrates.” Similarly, most people believe they should not handle sacrificial tasks for themselves but must trust in the work of the priesthood, or of other intermediaries, to carry out these tasks on their behalf. Nevertheless, both sacrificial classes of people must rely on the work that the dying sacrificial victims assume themselves for representing the other’s. The act of sacrificial killing may be directed and controlled by different norms and procedures and the victim’s reciprocal action of dying may also entail diverse consequences and imaginations, but it is always sought to be purposeful. It is likely, then, to think of no place where we can find such a thing as an immolation without representation. “No immolation without representation” could sound as a horrible paraphrase of “no taxation without representation” but it is aimed towards the very impossibility of a truly individual sacrificial act, into which only a person would be involved as a monad. Therefore, when I propose, in this article, a three-step model to understand commitment, I am doing so to expand, even further than three, the series of events that seems to take only two parts in a businesslike transaction of a dying token and a lively grace in return. There is first a sacrificial gage, upon which all the work of dying rests. As a dying being becomes a dead token, it connects and establishes a petition of one subject upon another (on the Maya asking rituals see [Vapnarsky 2012](#); on the importance of dying in Mexico see [Lomnitz’s 2005](#)). However, a second movement of disengagement provides a new sense of sacrificing. The dying agent’s recognition and separation allows the laity to improve their living conditions for a period of time. Sometimes this sacrificial return in Xocén is called “Gracia,” when it refers to the harvest, or more broadly speaking, as “life.”

For the laypeople, ritually produced lapsedness induces a second sort of representation of the work of dying, different from the businesslike transaction of one life for a life return of the sacrificer. This represented work, now managed by a series of religious specialists, establishes the base of Catholicism as a sacrificial bureaucracy where, as Padre Carlos said, you need someone else who represents you well. Its bureaucrats do more than manage sacrificial representations. They ask this newly produced class of the laity to engage in their work. Commitment is then a task for the lapsed laity now to be produced through sermons, prayers, masses, exercises, and various sorts of representations. Catholicism's ritual and religious bureaucrats assert themselves through their own functions of sacrificial management to produce a new subject: the committed lay person. As she receives the beneficial actions and results of sacrifice it is because, and only because, she has left sacrifice in the hands of some sacrificial bureaucrats. In other words, as she is represented by others, commitment becomes a relationship of relationships. Sacrifice indirectly produces committed agents. Commitment is then both a political and institutional task, and one with a sacrificial core: the work of vicariously dying.

Back to sacrifice

Padre Carlos' warning to the Maya farmers and shamans to dispense with ecclesial intermediation does not address sacrificial ritual efficacy issues but, rather, asserts what *compromiso* must mean. Reprimanding those who act without the church's mediation, the priest speaks to those who sacrifice directly. He does not ignore the ritual practices of the Mayan peasants, their aims, and their theology. Padre Carlos takes the opportunity to urge his listeners to incorporate these elements into the Church's procedures. He does not concern himself with any ritual orthodoxy but, from his initial interpretation of the rites of the farmers to the Eucharistic sacrifice, he seeks to produce their transformation into "committed" Catholics by incorporating farmers' rites through the church arbitration.

According to Padre Carlos, a sacrificial giving (*missum*) is unlikely to achieve any success if it is not carried out by institutionally-fit intermediaries. Priests, bishops, Catholic saints and virgins, he tells his community, act as specialized, and necessary, arbitrators. But while the Mass contains a sacrificial act, in which the priest, community, and divinity enter into communication, it does not exhaust the overarching relationships the priest wants to establish with his parishioners. In other words, the Eucharistic sacrifice is framed in a complex ceremony called Mass which, in turn, indicates other more important relationships: those of commitment.

By conceptually and perceptually articulating the sacrifice in the more complex structures of the promises to the saints, Padre Carlos highlights Catholic *compromiso* as the all-embracing relationship among Catholics. His recommendation that believers should make promises to the saints is an attempt to subsume the exchanges of the Mayan-speaking farmers under a specific logic of co-optation. However, to him, a promise is no longer a conditional exchange (*do ut des*; I give with the aim that you give me) or sanctioning exchange (*da ut des*; if you give me, I will give you; [Scheid 2002](#), 16). By incorporating farmers' exchanges and sacrifices into a more complex institution and language, and by devaluing them in comparison to the gift of the Son of God, the priest seeks to redefine these exchanges as unconditional promises to the saints. His proposal of unconditional promises to the saints is only possible if these promises are encompassed into hierarchical commitments of the lower members of the church to the higher intermediaries of the Catholic sacrificial bureaucracy.

In short, the priest annuls any possibility that farmers might perform sacrifices and direct exchanges with spirits, saints, and other types of non-human persons. Taking the place of the

sacrificer, the priest seeks to promote the generation of unconditional promises and indirect commitments or, rather, he seeks to transform conditional promises and direct commitments of Mayan-speaking ritualists into unconditional promises that only lead to indirect commitments. In this sacrificial transformation, he celebrates the words *promesa* and *compromiso* undergoing a first transfiguration. If, as the priest says, “we all need intermediaries (*intermediarios*) before God,” this representative mediation may be the church’s main activity. With him, with the ecclesiastical hierarchy that he represents at that time, with the saints, the Virgin Mary, and all the humans who participate in the church, the central scene of the sacrifice (whether agricultural or Eucharistic) loses effectiveness. While the priest clearly wants his audience to reach the conclusion that certain brokers are necessary for the attainment of salvation and eternal life, the process of arbitration becomes an end in itself and mediation becomes representation.

On the other hand, in referring to the notion of commitment communicated by the priest, Maya ritualists may be producing a negative accommodation, or *dissimulation*. By silencing their supposedly erroneous ideas of commitment, however, they do not allow for any confrontation. When asked, they respond that “there is not only tradition” and that “*compromiso*” should be finally considered in ritually efficacious terms.

Commitment as membership in a sacrificial bureaucracy

Humphrey and Laidlaw have argued that the more a sacrifice is ritualized, the less clearly sacrificial it is in a religious sense (2007, 263). However, I suggest here that the more a sacrifice is represented, the more it becomes a means of church-making. In a very simplistic manner, I can say that Padre Carlos created an opposite concept—in this case, by opposing the Eucharistic offering to other food offerings—to intermediate. At the very least, by opposing C1 against C2, the priest produced a meaning in Peirce’s sense of something standing in the middle of the opposed pair, he called thirdness (1998, 160). In noting that C1 against C2 implies three terms (C1, C2 and the “against”), the priest seemed to take control over the third term “against” to create a whole representation (not only of the “against” but also of C1 and C2). In mediating between meanings of sacrifices Padre Carlos situated himself as a broker who only multiplied the representational necessity of more brokers (the Virgin Mary, saints, local idols, Jesus, etc.).

At the end of this brokerage chain stands a “an almighty god who needs nothing.” The priest’s god, who apparently can do anything, also seems to ask for everything. “Imagine,” the priest suggests to each one of the mass attendees, “what God could ask of you?” The priest leaves this question unanswered, perhaps because God is asking for everything and, as Padre Carlos suggests, we should simply “commit” ourselves to God. The construction of a sacrificial bureaucracy appears to depend on representation as much as on sacrifice.

Padre Carlos confirms the impossibility of committing God through food offerings when, moments later, the priest offers communion to the faithful. The sacrificial economy (Coleman 2011) established by such communion certainly suggests a commitment that God requests from us. That is, while committing God through sacrificial offerings is impossible, one should commit oneself to him fully, first by receiving communion and then through performing a series of actions, including developing relationships, giving, asking, promising, and, once again committing, this time to the ecclesial and heavenly bureaucracy.

By devaluing the food and drink offered by the ritual sponsors, Padre Carlos re-appreciates the Eucharistic sacrifice he is about to perform. Through the comparison of peasant offerings against the body and blood of Christ, he asserts the Catholic church’s sacrificial monopoly. By underestimating the sacrifices of the Xocenences, discrediting any sacrifices that might compete with communion,

the Catholic priest exalts his own sacrificial function by seeking consecration. This typical sacrificer consecration depends on “discrediting the pagan religion whose gods cannot, by definition, be gods if they require human gifts for their own subsistence” (Zachhuber and Meszaros 2013, 2-3). Following the Catholic orthodoxy, the priest constitutes himself as a bureaucratic representative of a God who was, is, and will continue to be, simultaneously both sacrificial victim and sacrificer.

By openly confronting local sacrificial practices, the Dominican priest leads the Maya ritualists to represent their practices under a new light. They should produce, now, a formal and institutional commitment in which the mediation of the Catholic Church, in almost any sacred exchange, would then be the main characteristic. Representing antagonism, or a paradox, in between sacrificial exchanges consolidates a representational power more than it constitutes a new mode of exchange. By taking advantage of a particular, local, and well-defined sacrificial economy, on which C1 is based, the priest derives an overarching but phantasmatic sacrificial bureaucracy. In it, by the work of Catholic intermediaries, the priest represents commitment 2, or C2. And this C2, even when it refers to local and sacrificially produced agency negatively, nevertheless transforms it, via a hierarchical encompassment, into a much more institutional complex. In this sense, representing sacrificial agency cannot be isolated even from the act of sacrificial killing.

Catholic formal supremacy

While Mosse (2017, 117) has questioned the assumption of the Catholic church as an already known container of politically fruitful oppositions, the classical notion of *complexio oppositorum* (complex of opposites, Schmitt 1996), might still be fruitfully employed to analyze ongoing semiotic processes such as Padre Carlos’s representation of sacrificial antithesis. Speaking of the universal nature of every empire in world history, and the deep local and national reactions to the church, Carl Schmitt tells us that the Catholic Church has served itself by giving rise to and, then, managing and containing (in both senses of containing) such reactions, since “[t]here appears to be no antithesis it does not embrace. It has long and proudly claimed to have united within itself all forms of states and government... Its history knows examples of astounding accommodation as well as stubborn intransigence...” (1996, 7). Nevertheless, while any sort of “imperialism” provokes antagonisms, for Schmitt “the essence of Roman-Catholic *complexio oppositorum* lies in a specific, *formal superiority* over the matter of human life such as no other imperium has ever known” (1996, 8; my emphasis). Schmitt, therefore, suggests that Catholicism employs an astounding semiotic capacity for formalizing antinomies and containing them in its own logic. By representing them as a unified complex, the church first produces fear. This fear, Schmitt continues, arises in the face of the formal apparatus of universal administration through which the Catholic Church constitutes itself as a representational machine of contradictions. Schmitt notes the Political-Catholic emphasis on forms: “Considered from the point of view of the political idea of Catholicism, the essence of this complex Roman Catholic *oppositorum* would be based on a *specifically formal supremacy* over the matter of human life as it has not known any empire until now” (Schmitt 1996, 10; my emphasis).

Although many Schmitt interpreters, and perhaps Schmitt himself, may have concentrated their analysis on the tensions arising between pairs of opposites, it is my argument that Catholicism represent itself as resolving the pair of opposites by a new, third order of higher hierarchy. From a controlled mode of production of confrontations, Catholicism may derive its political energy and preserves for itself a way out of the antinomy or an “externality” (Mosse 2017, 117) through the formal but paradoxical representation of one term of the opposition containing the other.

Resuming my findings, I would say that I have detected a particular procedure through which two sacrificial mechanisms have been opposed in a sermon. A formal scheme (Cain’s versus Abel’s sacrifices)

has led us towards the idea that, although some sacrifices can also go wrong, all sacrifices are contained by and within the church. In the production of a complex of oppositions between sacrifices (accepted or rejected by God; good or bad sacrifices), the Dominican priest produces fear and rejection to later accommodate the practices deemed heretical from within the Church. The priest's admonition creates the necessary tension between opposing concepts to facilitate further inculturation but, in the priest's homily, this occurs only when the all-encompassing notion of commitment appears as a formal container. The other commitment—the farmers' sacrifices—is minimized.

Compromiso finally solves the tension if, and only if, one takes the priest's encompassing perspective. Such proposed accommodation, once the sacrificial opposition has been delimited, is more important than the dichotomy itself. In his way, Padre Carlos does not urge his audience to choose one type of sacrifice over another. Rather, he asserts that his concept of "commitment," through representation alone, overcomes all others—including the sacrificial economy of the farmers. In other words, the priest composes a hierarchical opposition between the Maya parishioner's notion of commitment and the church's notion of commitment. By "encompassing the contrary" (Dumont 1980, 239) in a larger sense, Padre Carlos resolved the tension between the two.

Carlos did so by speaking, consecrating the host, and giving communion. From this representational sacrifice he derived a principle of hierarchy. The unequal relationship between the two forms of commitment, C2 now encompassing C1 in a hierarchical relationship (Houseman 2015 *pace* Dumont 1980), ultimately rests on the work of a sacrificial victim. According to Padre Carlos, this ultimate source of his Catholic religious enterprise of commitment, as moral soteriology, cannot but refer to Jesus Christ's sacrifice. Christ's sacrifice, then, imbues with hierarchy an apparently stable set of oppositions. Both terms of the constructed oppositions cannot but relate through what, following Dumont, Houseman has named the principle of hierarchy, one containing the other. According to Houseman:

The principle of hierarchy as put forward by Dumont essentially rests on the following proposition: most of the time, if not always, the terms of a given opposition are related in different ways to the whole they compose; it follows that any relationship that distinguishes between them is inseparable from a reference to the whole that orders them with respect to each other. It is nevertheless useful, for the sake of clarity, to discriminate between two versions of this principle. The first, which I will call the "restricted" version, specifies the nature of this difference: one of the terms is identical to the whole, and as a consequence, encompasses the other term, its contrary.... (Houseman 2015, 252)

The importance of such a principle is integral to the study of Catholicism, a religious ideology that prescribes from its own name its overarching formal universalism. It follows that, in any given universalistic opposition, the encompassed term cannot be but one element of a larger set that has been produced by hierarchical opposition. The encompassing term would finally be necessarily paradoxical, given that it would then be reduplicated as a set that contains itself, in the formulation of the paradox known as Russell's paradox. The interchangeability of killing and dying would then be apparent in any paradoxical formulation of sacrifice. From this perspective, the act of killing is no normal process for the cunning sacrificer but, above all, his first and only true attempt to appropriate, redirect, and to take advantage of, *natura naturans*, a common dying agency, belonging to both himself and his victim.

In other words, one important use of sacrifice would be to commit people through the paradox of sacrifice: the dying victim's transient agency acts on the living, making them, in part, identify as sacrificial victims. Although this conclusion can be read only as related to the politics of sacrifice,

I maintain that dying and death are considered active forces, especially in Catholic sacrificial practices in which they are projected for further ends. More than passion, dying is taken as an unending, difficult, and active task in Catholic Eucharistic or vernacular sacrifices. Dying for others, to be more precise, has been a quintessential lesson of Catholicism to existentialism and the other so-called engaged philosophies.

See for instance Michael Lambek's insights on sacrifice as an unending task of beginnings:

Once committed and remembered, sacrifice can be intrinsic to who one is, as a person or a society. Who one *is* thereby understood existentially rather than essentially, through the sheer initiation of being. And yet, despite the emphasis on intention and resolution, this is hardly the continuous 'freedom' that Sartre advocates. That is because each act of sacrifice is simultaneously a passion; each turns us irrevocably in a certain direction, locates us on a certain path; and each invites identification and repetition. Each undertaking we initiate must be made with respect to commitments always already engaged, subject positions already assumed, each new beginning with respect to beginnings already begun. (Lambek 2007, 33)

Catholic commitment, in short, is a paradox formulated to rework the always-present agency of dying and, at the same time, necessary for producing a new object from it. Through actions of mediation, as the priest has shown when he parasitizes the nested local concepts of *compromiso*, *promesa*, and *sacrificio*, for recreating them. These terms have been used in the last five hundred years as theological accommodations addressed toward "inculturating" Mesoamerican ritualized pact-making practices of various sacrificial economies. However, commitment as vicarious sacrifice depends on ritual practices and binding tropes to exist, or as Lambek says, for envisaging a new beginning.

Foundational for indigenous Catholics and for the Catholicism of indigenous descendants in Mesoamerica, sacrificial terms, which comprise both binding and cutting, are arguably the most important for discussing religion and ritual in Mesoamerica. They refer to ritual aims of arranging the human, spiritual, or social body; i.e. to transform them into a more coherent composite through pact-making, wrapping up and offering *bundles* for the ancestors, empowering human aggregates, such as *Cofradías*, households, villages, or obligating spirits, localized in natural landscapes, to serve people for a determined purpose. Used to obligate or to cut the bind of an obligation, accompanied by gift-giving and intended prayers, tropes referred to as "atar... trozarse" in Spanish (*titailpi... timokotonal*, in Nahuatl), i.e. to bind and to self-cut, for the Huicholes and Mayas (Alvarado Solís 2004, 70-72; following in her interpretation: Geist 1992, 334-335; Lemaistre 1997; Kohler 1995, 28-33) have been fundamental actions for composing, decomposing and recomposing any membership, body, or an aggregate of parts, from the American Southwest to Central America. Severing, destabilizing, fixing, and tying (materially or with words) are thought to be efficient actions to rework sets and states of being of composite entities. Therefore, more precise comparisons between our Western-biased understanding of what we term religious phenomena and the Mesoamerican languages of them may be needed to fathom what joint commitment entails.

Mesoamerican binding tropes usually emerge in ritual when someone expresses her aim of improving a situation through verbal phrasings such as "to tie" and to "fix," with rhetorical forces comparable to the composed terms of *re-ligare* and *ob-ligation*. Obligation, likewise, from the Latin *ob* and *ligare*, has no other literal reference than an action of *tying around* for dominion and appropriation that has to be remade in a different venue when done religiously. Every interpersonal pact in Maya communities has it been sanctioned and "sealed" (Chojnacki 2010, 28) with alcohol or food consumption, or with gifts, somehow imply "tying" features. Hanks has given some examples

of the reduced Maya⁶ when it expresses through verbal phrases of confession and absolution as “untie sins” or *choch keban* (2010, 137, 197, 202, 274, 360, 379, 392). Correspondingly, Hanks makes clear that the translation of “contract” is based on the verb *k’ax* “to bind, tie” and *mook* “to tie with a knot” (*mookt’aan*; i.e. tie + word), which “in both cases, the contract is construed as a verbal act that binds its maker by oath or commitment” (2010, 139). The co-presence of ancestral spirits, saints and gods (Hanks 1999; Chojnacki 2016; 2010), makes it impossible for an individual to think that his or her own disgrace, or rebirth, has been solely due to his or her own actions. Instead, he or she must have offended or pleased someone with her or his indifference, favor, or “by forgetting to fulfill a promise,” as my informants put it. Personal responsibility is still harder to pursue than in an individualist ethical frame because its consequences will never be attained solely by the individual or emerge outside of negotiations with others’ intentionalities.

Conclusion

In the case I analyzed here, a Catholic priest recommends that his parishioners not attempt to deal directly with God through sacrificial offerings but rather through “intermediaries.” With his admonishment, the priest first sets aside the materiality of the sacrificial *gage* (food offerings) for a less material set of verbal “promises.” More than that, the priest recommends the establishment of a sacrificial bureaucracy in which formulaic procedures to address God are ruled by personal representation rather than by sacrificial means of communication. However, representation through saints, virgins, and relics finally rests upon the work of dying, ritually signified by the Eucharist consecration.

In the establishment of a monopoly over sacrificial offerings in the Eucharist, the priest intends to order relationships of “compromiso.” This concept offers the laity a tool to alienate themselves into the specialized tasks of arbitrators (in the form of this priest, saints, virgins, popes, god, etc.), i.e. hierarchically and authoritatively ordered. The representational work suggested by the church bureaucracy intends to diminish the sacrificial materiality (mainly in the form of food) and the multifarious sensational forms (Meyer 2009; 2014) of cargo festivals but also restates the work of the sacrificial victim (of dying) as intermediation. This work of representation involves words more than material exchanges. However, words here are an anemic medium through which one must leave her representation in the hands of others.

Gestures, affects, sympathy or antipathy, imagination as well as dreams and, above all concepts, play a role in the complex negotiation called “commitment.” As anyone who has attempted negotiations with Latin American state functionaries knows, such representational work cannot be diminished to a well-defined exchange of favors. Likewise, authority, its recognition, promises, and compromises, cannot be rightly reduced to the discreteness of exchanges.

The Catholic formal superiority, to use Schmitt’s words, is prone to constructing conceptual paradoxes, sometimes for the pleasure of representing that which has been otherwise thought impossible. Moreover, words and concepts should follow a determined procedure. They should be enunciated as a promise. According to the priest, the work of Catholic intermediaries cannot be equated with the “work” of a shaman. The shaman does his work and, as the need arises, he will carry out more work to counteract the consequences. The priest, however, follows a procedure that more closely resembles engagement of negotiations. This procedure involves a series of intermediaries promising and committing themselves in a representational work that involves different levels of responsibilities. While in the first scenario, shamans use concepts such as “buying” and “exchanging” as tropes for the obtention of a desired object—objects which can be as general as “life” or as “rain water”—marketplace tropes are totally inadequate to express the

convoluted procedure of allocation represented in the second scenario in which Catholic gratuity has been sought as normal. In contrast to the Maya tropes on sacrificial commerce, the Catholic church reaffirms itself as an obtuse distributional enterprise based on bureaucracy. Anything one might hope to request—health, grace, forgiveness—will ultimately depend on a series of petitions flowing upwards through a magnified institutional echelon. In turn, anything one might hope to receive will result from gracious favors flowing back down. Likewise, parishioners' promises become the tokens through which they first engage with saints, then with the ecclesiastic authorities and, finally, with God. To that end, the Catholic priest mandates that his audience stop the material practice of sacrificial offerings and to replace them with promissory words. Such promises require, paradoxically, personal involvement that is reminiscent of the action and passion of the work of dying as it is represented eucharistically.

As I already mentioned above, the priest's listeners seek ontic rebirth through exchange of a more commercially expressed sacrificial investment. After all, a cargo festival involves the slaughter of turkeys and pigs and many days of human work—far costlier than a half-liter of wine and a package of communion wafers. Cargo sponsors encompass much more than elementary forms of a contractualism into which a sacrificial or wordy *gages* work to bind people among themselves differently. In a hierarchical interdependence of the two commitment models, the offering of the work of dying for further life in return is seen from a much closer perspective in one case than from the other. Closeness to the work of dying moves the religious analysis from the concept of mediation, to the more or less formulaic sacrificial arbitration, which always assumes commitment as a condition for its success. Cargo ritualists' joint commitment, emerging from muted action, ritual work, and sacrifices helps expose the Catholic institutional understanding of commitment, as vicarious sacrifice, as an important bias of the anthropological and religious concept of mediation.

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Notes

1. Margaret Gilbert, dispelling the idea that joint commitment may be defined by singularist stances, clarifies: "It is important to be clear that a joint commitment is not a concatenation of personal commitments of the parties. It is not the case that you and I are jointly committed if and only if I am personally committed in some way and you are also. This is so however complex the content of the personal commitments, however well they mesh, and however well known the personal commitment of any one party is known to the other (Gilbert 2014, 7).

2. Xocén's ritualists may also concur with Christenson's appraisal that "[t]raditional Mayas believe that the world is under constant threat of disaster. If the proper rituals are not carried out at the proper time, all creation would sink back into the primordial world of darkness and endless death" (Christenson 2016, 136). In this sense, labors of killing, offering and, of course, dying, are much more immediately needed and their effects, supposedly, much more verifiable (in divination and in natural signs such as these of the clouds, birds, and rains) in the semiotic ideology of the Maya sacrifice than in the Maya-Catholic evangelization ideology. In the latter, the Catholic priest assumes his labor of sacrifice to be a mediation of another meditation (Christ's). Traditional ritual "doers" or *jmeno'ob* are of course representing sacrificial exchange when they enact it (doing what ancestors did before) but the Catholic priest makes clear that his actions for consecration are meta-representational.
3. Mexico's and Central America's cargo festivals are ritual reassemblages of numerous ceremonies, prayers, offerings, and ritualized practices. The literature is vast and the phenomena they involve is well known. Most of it focuses on the fabric of sociality through a civil-religious hierarchy (Cancian 1965; Rus and Wasserstrom 1980; Freidlander 1981; Chance 1990; Nash 1970 among many others), a popular fiesta system (Smith 1977; Fernández 1994; and Fernandez and Quintal 1992; Quintal Avilés 1993) or mayordomía system (Chance and Tylor 1987) in relation to socio-economic reproduction or patterns of social change. My contribution to it has highlighted ritual rationales of cargo festivals mainly in relation to its regenerative aims (Christenson 2016; Dapuez et al. 2011; Dapuez 2013).
4. As an anonymous reviewer of this paper noted, the Mayas produced a highly hierarchical version of Catholicism. This includes the organization of indigenous priests according to rank, by instituting a number of social and ritual mediations, and mediators, between a "True God" and the laypeople. Xocenenses also adopted military ranks from the Mexican army when organizing militias during the Caste Wars. The so-called civil-religious hierarchy of the Mayas seems to have been receptive to foreign hierarchies. However, ritual expected outputs of renewal were kept in the short-term horizon, which also produced a short-term ritual accountability.
5. One note from Norget (2011) makes this notion clear: "According to Angrosino, for example, inculturation occurs "when a dominant culture attempts to make itself accessible to a subdominant one without losing its own particular character" (Angrosino 1994, 825; see Norget 1997). As Allen notes, John Paul II developed the teachings of Vatican II that recognized the "elements of truth and grace" of other religions; yet the former Pope espoused the view "that God, through the person of the Holy Spirit, 'inspires' at least some elements of other religions" (Allen 2002)—a position that implies the Catholic "truth" still trumps any other. For an outstanding account of inculturation as a "translanguage" production, see Hanks 2010. In *Converting Words: Maya in the Age of the Cross*, Hanks offers the story of Maya evangelization crystalized in linguistic changes. In relation to the topic of this paper, it would be interesting to explore how the theological ideology of the Franciscans differed from the Dominicans on the idea of "compromiso" in Yucatan, during evangelization. However, this subject matter merits its own paper.
6. Synthetically put, the thesis of Hanks's book (2010) states that the Franciscan evangelization of Yucatan has also resulted in a linguistic conversion of the Maya language into a new translanguage that he has named "Maya reducido," after the metaphoric use of the political, juridical, and territorial Spanish institution of "reducción" for indigenous people.

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