THE PISCINA

The piscina is a basin built into the south wall of the chancel near the credence or somewhere in the sacristy and equipped with a drain running directly to the soil. It is used for the reverent disposal of the consecrated wine left over from the Holy Communion service and of the water with which the chalice, flagon, and cruets are cleansed, as well as of the water used in Holy Baptism. It would not be proper to pour these elements into a common drain. If the church is not equipped with a piscina, the vessels may be carried outside and their contents poured on the ground.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**✠**  **✠**  **✠**  **✠**

**BLOOD SHED AT THE ALTAR**[[2]](#footnote-2)

At Christ’s cross, as at the Bronze Altar, the blood is the key atoning element.[[3]](#footnote-3) The blood of the animal sacrifices was not burned on the Bronze Altar, but it was poured (shed) at the altar’s base, after part of it had been daubed, sprinkled, or dashed upon the horns or side of the altar.[[4]](#footnote-4) The term translated “poured out” is often alternately translated “shed.”[[5]](#footnote-5) With this altar-related terminology, the Son of God spoke of both the Eucharist and His death when He held the chalice of wine and said, “This is My blood of the covenant, which is to be shed [poured out] on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins” (NASB).[[6]](#footnote-6)

Shed blood signaled the death of the sacrificial creature.[[7]](#footnote-7) Such a creature’s life-blood was always poured out in the sacrificial process. The blood of a sacrificial creature was never burned, however; hence it was not destroyed. For this reason several theologians have explained that Old Testament worshippers believed that the blood (the life) of an Old Testament sacrifice lived on. S. C. Gayford explains this: “‘Blood’ in the sacrificial sense always means a ‘Risen’ life, one that has passed through death, but is alive.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Sacrificial blood was then a sign of continued life, even after the creature had died. Christ clearly fulfills this picture in His resurrection![[9]](#footnote-9) As the location of sacrificial blood, the Bronze Altar represented both Christ’s death for sin and His resurrection. As it was shed Christ’s blood demonstrated His death, for His life was drained. Christs blood also represented His continued life as it remained unburned, unconsumed. Christ’s people now miraculously drink of this life-blood; we drink His “life.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

WINE AND WATER POURED AT THE ALTAR

In the tabernacle liturgy wine was almost always poured at the base of the Bronze Altar, at the same place where the sacrificial blood was poured.[[11]](#footnote-11) From this practice one observes a sacrificial reason Christ chose wine as the “vehicle” of His blood in the Lord’s Supper. In Christ’s day the Bronze Altar in the temple had two permanent channels at its base. Into one of these channels the blood and wine were both poured, and into the other channel the water from special ceremonies would be poured.[[12]](#footnote-12) Particularly at the festival called the Feast of Tabernacles (Booths), water was poured with the blood and wine at the base of the Bronze Altar.[[13]](#footnote-13) Such sacrificial blood and water demonstrate what was noted emphatically by St. John, as he reported the blood and water flowing from Christ’s pierced side: “But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.”[[14]](#footnote-14) He then magnified this observation by declaring, “He who saw it has borne witness . . . and he knows that he is telling the truth.”[[15]](#footnote-15) The foot of the cross where sacred blood and water flowed thus related directly to the foot of the Bronze Altar, where blood and water were officially poured into the two channels. The church through the ages has understood this highlighted blood and water passage in John’s Gospel to refer to the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist. Robert Daly explains:

As for Jn 19:34f., the simultaneous flowing of blood and water from the side of Christ may also be an allusion to that specific rite of the Feast of Tabernacles in which water and wine poured out simultaneously from bowls on the altar. If so, then it would serve the function of bringing in the idea of Jesus and those who follow him as the new temple, an interpretation which harmoniously supports the customary sacramental-ecclesial interpretation of the water and blood from Christ’s side.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Thus the water, wine, and blood rituals in the temple foreshadow the connection between Christ’s pierced side and the New Testament sacraments.[[17]](#footnote-17)

1. Paul H. D. Lang, *What an Altar Guild Should Know* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964), 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Daniel Brege, “Pastoral Care in (and from) the Old Testament,” in *Pastoral Theology In Light of the Lutheran Confessions:* (Chelsea, MI: Sheridan Books, 2012), 13-15. [Papers presented at the Congress on the Lutheran Confessions Bloomington, Minnesota March 25-27, 2008] [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 51. E.g. 1 Pt 1:2, 18-19; 1 Jn 1:7; Acts 20:28; Heb 9:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 52. Edersheim, *The Temple*, 83-84. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 53. For example, in Lv 4:7, 18, 25 the blood for the sin-offering is “poured” (shed) at the altar’s base. Sin-offering blood was the only blood truly “shed.” For the sin-offering the LXX uses the same word for “shed” as Christ used in instituting His Supper in Mt 26:28. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 54. Mt 26:28. The Greek can be translated literally “blood being shed,” which explains the imminence of His crucifixion. The NASB quoted above captures the implication that His blood is soon to be shed. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 55. In fact every time the Bible uses the word “shed” to refer to blood, the creature (whether man or beast) died. Hebrews 12:4 may be the exception to this. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 56. Gayford, *Sacrifice and Priesthood*, 170. Gayford further remarks (68): “The Hebrews regarded the life-blood almost as a living thing inside the body which it quickened; and not only was it the vitalizing life while it pulsated within the body, but it had an independent life of its own, even when taken from the body.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 57. F. C. N. Hicks, *The Fullness of Sacrifice: An Essay in Reconciliation* (London: Macmillan, 1930), 18: “The death is vital to the sacrifice, because it sets free the blood, which is the life. But the victim is, in a true sense, operative, not as dead, but as alive ‘as it had been slain.’” Page 243: “So St. Paul brings out the backward look of death, as death, and the forward look of blood, as life—‘while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by His blood, shall we be saved.’” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 58. Gn 9:4; Lv 7:11-14. That blood was the substance of life also made observational sense: all living tissue could bleed. When blood was drained, life ceased. A dead body would not bleed, but all conscious life contains blood. Pagans also held that eating a creature’s blood or fat endowed the eater with that creature’s power and strength. Thus God forbade it (Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 85). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 59. Edersheim, *The Temple*, 97-103. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 60. Ibid., 220. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 61. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 62. Jn 19:34. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. 63. Jn 19:35. Similar emphasis, apparently sacrament-related, is found in 1 Jn 5:6-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. 64. Daly, *Christian Sacrifice*, 291-92. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. 65. Christ’s pierced side was also seen as Passover fulfillment. See Daly, *Christian Sacrifice*, 206: “The piercing of Christ’s side in John 19:34 recalls the Mishnah prescription to ‘slit the heart and let out its blood.’” [↑](#footnote-ref-17)