

The Christian Agape Meal: A Manifestation of *Koinonia* and *Diakonia*

The Contribution of Adalbert-Gautier Hamman

This study investigates the first and second-century Christian agape meal as an expression of two central facets in the life and mission of the earliest Christian communities, *koinonia* and *diakonia*. This study evaluates the contribution of Adalbert-Gautier Hamman (1910–2000) on the agape meal. The academic prominence of this French patristic scholar is to be understood against the backdrop of the prevailing socio-theological context in France in the 1930s, 40s and 50s, namely *la nouvelle théologie*, *the theology of earthly realities* and other social initiatives by the Church in that period.

Hamman's activities were manifold as a lecturer in various academic institutions in France, Canada and Rome, a prolific writer and initiator of the collections *Ichty*s and *Les Pères dans la foi*. He published widely on the liturgy, prayer, martyrdom and the social life of the early Christians, and founded the *Association J.-P. Migne* to promote a greater appreciation of the Fathers of the Church. Adalbert Hamman is internationally recognised as one of the leading scholars on Christian antiquity, and authored the widely-acclaimed works *Vie liturgique et vie sociale* (1968) and *La vie quotidienne des premiers chrétiens (95–197)* (1971). His input on the Christian

* Hector Scerri, Head of the Department of Fundamental and Dogmatic Theology at the University of Malta, lectures in christology, sacramental theology and eschatology. He is the President of the Interdiocesan Theological Commission of Malta and Gozo and the President of the Ecumenical Commission of the Archdiocese of Malta. He is a member of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain, the *Società Italiana per la Ricerca Teologica*, the *Association Internationale Cardinal Henri de Lubac*, and *Societas Oecumenica*.

agape meal in the first century is worth highlighting and exploring. The genesis of Hamman's interest and eventual research on the agape meal can be traced to his encounter with Bo Reicke.

The Encounter with Bo Reicke

In 1953, during a visit to Uppsala, Sweden, where he was attending a conference on charitable works in the first Christian centuries, Hamman met a young Lutheran researcher who was to exercise a far-reaching influence upon his later endeavours.¹ This was Bo Ivar Reicke (1914–1987), a Swedish disciple of the famous exegete Anton Fridrichsen (1888–1953),² and the author of the doctoral thesis *Diakonie, Festfreude und Zelos*, published in 1951.³ Like Franz Xaver von Funk (1821–1907) and Pierre Batiffol (1861–1929) before him, Reicke examined the available evidence and the discussion on the agape meal.⁴ Hamman refers to the thesis as a remarkable work which proved to be instrumental in stimulating him to discover the link which unites the liturgy to social action.⁵

¹ See Bo Reicke, Congratulatory Letter on the Occasion of the Presentation of *Ecclesia Orans*, Patristic Institute, Rome, October 25, 1980. Published in a booklet commemorating the proceedings, Paris 1980, 11.

² This Norwegian Scripture scholar developed the so-called *nouvelle exégèse 'réaliste'* at the University of Uppsala where he was professor of New Testament Exegesis from 1928 to 1953. One of his accomplishments was that of turning Uppsala into a centre of biblical studies. His disciples include Harald Riesenfeld who later succeeded him, Olof Linton, professor at Copenhagen and Bo Reicke, professor at Basle. See "Chronica: Suède," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 30 (1954): 298-299; C. Chanel, "Le protestantisme dans l'Europe du Nord," in *Histoire du christianisme des origines à nos jours*, XII. *Guerres mondiales et totalitarismes (1914–1958)*, ed. Jean-Marie Mayeur et al., (Paris, 1990), 691.

³ The complete title and details of the work are: *Diakonie, Festfreude und Zelos in Verbindung mit der altchristlichen Agapenfeier* (Uppsala, 1951):5 and *Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis* (Uppsala-Wiesbaden, 1951).

⁴ See Adalbert G. Hamman, "Quelle est l'origine de l'agape?," in *Studia Patristica X/1. Papers Presented to the Fifth International Conference on Patristic Studies Held in Oxford, 1967*, Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur 107, ed. Francis Leslie Cross (Berlin, 1970), 351.

⁵ See Adalbert G. Hamman, "Liturgie et action sociale. Le diaconat aux premiers siècles," *La Maison-Dieu* 36 (1953): 151; idem. Speech on the Occasion of the Presentation of *Ecclesia Orans*, Patristic Institute, Rome, October 25, 1980. Published in a booklet commemorating the proceedings, Paris 1980, 21; idem. *Études patristiques. Méthodologie-liturgie-histoire-théologie*, Théologie historique 85 (Paris, 1991), 7; idem. *La vie est un long jour de fête* (Paris, 1995), 241, 290.

The research carried out by Reicke brought together the biblical and the patristic sources which attest to the existential relationship between the celebration of the liturgy and the effort to better social life, especially through the diaconal initiatives of the community.⁶ Unfortunately, Reicke - hard pressed for time because he wanted to apply for a university post - presented his striking findings without having had the opportunity to draw out all the respective theological conclusions. Nonetheless, Hamman was so impressed by the research of Reicke that he continued to reflect upon the theme, determined to proceed in the path indicated by the Swedish scholar.⁷ In fact, Hamman explicitly praises *Diakonie, Festfreude und Zelos*, stating that it is ‘*fort documentée et riche de renseignements*.’⁸

The relationship between the sacraments and their social dimension is a dominant theme in the works of Hamman who found that it was unfortunately neglected, even in many important studies on the liturgy. Among these, he mentions *Il senso teologico della liturgia* by Cipriano Vagaggini (1965), and *Liturgia y espiritualidad* by Gabriel Marie Brasó (1956).⁹ The first contribution made by Hamman concerning the link between the sacraments and social involvement was the article “Liturgie et action sociale”, published in 1953 in *La Maison-Dieu*, the review of the French centre for pastoral liturgy.¹⁰ In the article, Hamman dwells upon the notion of *diakonia* which was developed in the early Church. Using the guiding principles of *ressourcement*, which he had imbibed from the great twentieth-century French theologian Henri de Lubac (1896–1991), Hamman points out the scriptural and patristic sources which illustrate

⁶ See Adalbert G. Hamman, *Vie liturgique et vie sociale* (Paris, 1968), 5.

⁷ See Adalbert G. Hamman, “De l’agape à la diaconie, en Afrique chrétienne,” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 42 (1986): 214. Here, Hamman states that Reicke’s book “a servi de détonateur et m’a permis d’exploiter plus complètement un filon précédemment mis au jour.”

⁸ Adalbert G. Hamman, “Les repas religieux et l’agape chez saint Augustin,” *Augustinus* 12 (1967): 181 n.2.

⁹ See Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 5-6.

¹⁰ See Hamman, *Études patristiques*, 7. Hamman refers to Reicke on many occasions in his works, as for example: idem. *L’apostolat du chrétien. Réflexion sur les données bibliques*, Collection Credo (Paris, 1956), 79; idem. “Prière et culte dans la lettre de saint-Jacques,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 34 (1958): 35-36; idem. “Les repas religieux et l’agape,” 181, 184; idem. *Vie liturgique*, 25, 27, 45, 54, 59, 74, 76, 82, 90, 92, 97, 141, 153-154, 156, 163, 197, 199, 209, 217, 221, 223, 241, 252; idem. “Liturgie, prière et famille dans les trois premiers siècles chrétiens,” *Questions Liturgiques* 57 (1976): 85; idem. “La comunità cristiana e i poveri nei primi secoli della Chiesa,” in *Seguire Gesù povero*, ed. Adalbert G. Hamman, Jacques Dupont and Giovanni Miccoli (Magnano, 1984), 93, n.11.

the diffusion of the concepts of *koinonia* and *diakonia*. The doctoral thesis defended by Reicke examines the thorny question of the agape meal. His insights clearly serve as a point of departure for the research undertaken by Hamman on the same theme.¹¹ One underlines both his paper at the Fifth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford in 1967,¹² and one of his more important works, *Vie liturgique et vie sociale*, published in 1968. Hamman nurtured his friendship with Reicke by remaining in regular contact until the latter's untimely death in 1987 at Basle, where he was a Scripture professor.¹³

The *Agape* Meal as an Expression of *Koinonia*

Throughout his various books and articles, it is evident that Adalbert Hamman is aware of the many questions surrounding its origin, celebration and implications. Was it a meal organised by the community or by private individuals? Who was invited to it? Was it connected in any way to the celebration of the Eucharist?¹⁴ What do the Fathers of the Church mean when they use the term? In attempting to answer these questions, Hamman often refers to Bo Reicke who bases his reflections on the Johannine text: "Jesus, knowing that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father, having loved those who were his in the world, loved them to the end" (Jn 13,1).¹⁵

¹¹ See Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 153, n.1. Elsewhere, Hamman states: "Mon livre *Vie liturgique et vie sociale* doit à B. Reicke son existence" ("De l'agape à la diaconie", 214).

¹² See note 4 above.

¹³ See Hamman, *La vie*, 281. Evidence of the bond uniting Reicke and Hamman can be found in the former's message of congratulations on October 25, 1980, on the publication of the *mélanges* in Hamman's honour, *Ecclesia Orans*: "Als einer dieser Besucher kamen auch Sie anfangs 1953 nach Uppsala. Bei einem theologischen Kolloquium erkundigten Sie sich nach dem Verfasser einer neulich erschienen Studie der alchristlichen Festfreude, und ich wurde Ihnen als der Autor vorgestellt. Das führte zu einer dauernden, für mich ausserordentlich ergiebigen Freundschaft. Es ist symptomatisch, daß sie vom Anfang an unter dem Vorzeichen der Festfreude stand" (Congratulatory Letter on the Occasion of the Presentation of *Ecclesia Orans*, 11). In his autobiography, Hamman echoes these words: "Là [that is, the symposium at Uppsala in 1953] commença une amitié durable [...], pour moi extraordinairement enrichissante. Il est symptomatique que, dès le départ, elle se présenta sous le signe de la fête", the latter being an allusion to the doctoral thesis by Reicke (*La vie*, 290).

¹⁴ See Adalbert G. Hamman, *La prière, Les trois premiers siècles* (Tournai, 1963), 2: 29, 245, 267; idem. *Vie liturgique*, 151, 154, 223; idem. "Quelle est l'origine de l'agape?", 351.

¹⁵ See Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 154. It might be interesting at this point to refer to the distinction which Hamman makes between *agape* and *agapé*. He explains that the former is the evening meal which the Christians organised as an expression of their charity and unity, especially towards the needy.

At this point it is useful to recall the spiritual significance of certain Old Testament sacrifices, in which it was stipulated that half of an oblation was to be given to God, while the other half was to be consumed by those offering it and by those who were accompanying them. Such a meal signified both the union with God and the unity among those who shared it.¹⁶ Even pagan religious cults were characterised by similar practices.¹⁷ Yet, it should be noted from the start that the Christian agape meal was marked by its *terminus a quo*, namely, the Gospel message. Hamman maintains that the agape meal, in which Christians in North Africa participated from the earliest times, was not derived from pagan practices, but from the Gospel:¹⁸ it was inspired primarily by Christian feelings of benevolence and generosity.¹⁹ In fact, Hamman states that the advantage of the agape meal was that it brought the Christians together, motivated as they were by charity.²⁰ Later on, Clement of Alexandria affirms that the meal is “an expression of a goodness which is ready to share and to give.”²¹

The agape meal took place in both an ecclesial and a prayerful setting.²² A prayer was said at its beginning, so as to remind those who were present to eat and drink with moderation.²³ Although he distinguishes this meal from the Eucharist,²⁴ Hamman affirms that it was “a cultic act, carried out in God’s presence, by a people which offers itself to him

Regarding *agapé*, Hamman states that this means charity, and conveys the nuance of something which is gratuitous, especially when speaking of the love of God for humanity. See *L’apostolat du chrétien*, 223.

¹⁶ See Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 17.

¹⁷ See Hamman, “Quelle est l’origine de l’agape?,” 354.

¹⁸ See Adalbert G. Hamman, *La vie quotidienne en Afrique du Nord au temps de saint Augustin* (Paris, 1979), 75. Elsewhere, Hamman explains that at a certain stage in its history the Christian community integrated the mentioned (pagan) meals, purified them of superstitions and other elements, and “christianised” them. See “Quelle est l’origine de l’agape?,” 354.

¹⁹ See Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 168; idem. “Quelle est l’origine de l’agape?,” 352; idem. “Liturgie, prière et famille,” 87.

²⁰ See Clément d’Alexandrie, *Le Pédagogue*, Collection Les Pères dans la foi 44-45 (Paris, 1991), 121, n.27.

²¹ Author’s trans. of Clément d’Alexandrie, *Le Pédagogue*, 117 (2 [1],1,6): “Le repas n’est pas la charité [...], il est le signe d’une bonté prête au partage et au don.” See Hamman, “Liturgie et action sociale,” 164.

²² See Hamman, *La prière*, 2: 245; idem. *Vie liturgique*, 159; idem. “Pour une lecture concrète des textes,” in *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen*, Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur 125, ed. Franz Paschke (Berlin, 1981), 291.

²³ See Hamman, *La prière*, 2: 245.267; idem. *La vie*, 203-204.

²⁴ See Hamman, *La prière*, 2: 245; idem. “Quelle est l’origine de l’agape?,” 352.

in adoration.”²⁵ Looking back at the established practice of this meal, Tertullian gives a full and explicit description of this meal, in his *Apologeticum*.²⁶ In Tertullian’s day, therefore, the *agape* — distinct from the Eucharist — was a fraternal meal, liturgical in character,²⁷ inspired by mutual love and openness to the needs of the poor.²⁸ Thus, Tertullian both contrasts the Christian meals from those conducted by the pagans, in which debauchery and revelry were commonplace, and distinguishes them from the Eucharist.²⁹ However, it has to be made clear from the outset that the Christian *agape* meal was *inspired* by the Eucharistic meal which commemorated the paschal mystery of Jesus.

In order to emphasise these opinions, Hamman states that the behaviour of the Christians during the *agape* meal was: “at the antipodes of the pagan customs.”³⁰ Despite this clear-cut distinction, Hamman nonetheless affirms that

of [the features characterising] the Eucharist, the *agape* retains not solely its meal format, but also the social import of ‘*koinonia*’ [and] the equality in the community between rich and poor, within a brotherhood which counterbalances classes and social differences (...) The presence of a member of the hierarchy [and] the liturgical texts which frame the *agape* stress even more its being inspired by the Eucharist.³¹

²⁵ Author’s trans. of Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 173: “Il s’agit en définitive d’un acte cultuel, en présence de Dieu, de la part d’un peuple qui s’offre à lui en adoration.” Hamman suggests that with reference to the first two centuries (for example, with documents such as the *Didachè*), it is more precise to talk of a religious meal, rather than an *agape*, thus avoiding an anachronism. See *ibid.*, 158, n.2.

²⁶ See Hamman, “De l’*agape* à la diaconie,” 214-215.

²⁷ This is attested, for example, by the Sybilline Oracles, compiled by the end of the second century. See Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 163, 173-174.

²⁸ See Hamman, *La prière*, 2:267; *idem. Vie liturgique*, 175; *idem. “Quelle est l’origine de l’*agape*?”* 353; *idem. “La comunità cristiana e i poveri,”* 101; *idem. Abrégé de la prière chrétienne*, 106; *idem. La vie*, 203.

²⁹ See Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 172-174; *idem. “La prière chrétienne et la prière païenne, formes et différences,”* in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung*, Part 2/23.2, ed. Hildegard Temporini and Wolfgang Haase (Berlin-New York, 1974), 1203.

³⁰ Author’s trans. of Hamman, “Quelle est l’origine de l’*agape*?” 354: “C’était précisément le témoignage d’une vie en rupture avec le paganisme, de mœurs aux antipodes des mœurs païennes.”

³¹ Author’s trans. of Hamman, “Liturgie, prière et famille,” 87: “L’*agape* conserve de l’eucharistie, non seulement son caractère de repas, mais aussi sa signification sociale de ‘*koinonia*’, de peréquation dans la communauté entre riches et pauvres, dans une fraternité qui nivelle les classes et les différences sociales [...] La présence d’un membre de la hiérarchie, les textes liturgiques qui encadrent l’*agape*, accentuent encore son inspiration eucharistique.”

The theme of solidarity between different, yet equal, members of the community is central to the significance of the agape meal. Hamman criticises as ‘modern extrapolations’ the opinions of those authors who have identified the agape meal with the meals in honour either of the dead³² or of the martyrs.³³ This criticism is confirmed by the fact that, later, Augustine never designated as agape meals funerary repasts³⁴ or feasts held at the martyrs’ tombs.³⁵ The latter were organised by some rich members of the community,³⁶ so that the needy could attend. At the time of Augustine, this practice was still in use in North Africa, just as it was in Rome.³⁷ This is corroborated by an earlier witness, Tertullian, in his work *De Ieiunio*.³⁸

The variant use of the term *agape* by Ignatius of Antioch is not to be overlooked. He describes the Christian milieu of the end of the first century and the beginning of the

³² See Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 201, 204.

³³ See Hamman, “Quelle est l’origine de l’agape?,” 353-354; idem. “De l’agape à la diaconie,” 216, 221. Hamman affirms that despite the similarities between these various “religious” meals, each one is distinct from the others. He also states that the term *agape* does not feature in the patristic and liturgical traditions (which he classifies as “*bien informée*”) when reference is made to funerary meals and those held in honour of the martyrs (see *Vie liturgique*, 223). Regarding the relationship between the two latter repasts, Hamman asserts that “the cult of the martyrs grew out of the cult of the dead but also out of the memory of Christ the Martyr. Like the pagans, the Christians visited the tombs and partook of a meal there, the refrigerium, which all too easily degenerated into pagan superstition. The Church, especially at Rome, sought to give it a charitable purpose in the feeding of the poor.” (“The Turnabout of the Fourth Century. A Political, Geographical, Social, Ecclesiastical and Doctrinal Framework of the Century,” in *Patrology. The Golden Age of Latin Patristic Literature from the Council of Nicea to the Council of Chalcedon*, ed. Angelo Di Berardino, vol.4 (Westminster/MA, 1986), 24-25. See also idem. *La prière*, 2:134; idem. “Refrigerium,” in *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, ed. Angelo Di Berardino, vol.2 (Cambridge, 1992), 731.

³⁴ See Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 206, 208. It should be noted that the Christians of the fourth century found it very difficult to abandon customs which were inextricably bound to their culture and way of life. This was the case with funerary meals, an unquestioned aspect of social and family life at the time of Augustine. This practice declined only very gradually. Simultaneously, the Church endeavoured to give a new orientation to this custom by transforming it into a form of assistance for the needy.

³⁵ See Hamman, “Les repas religieux et l’agape,” 184, 189, 191; idem. *Vie liturgique*, 210, 212, 216, 217; idem. “De l’agape à la diaconie,” 218-219; idem. “The Turnabout of the Fourth Century,” 24; idem. “Refrigerium,” 731. Instead of openly opposing this custom, the Church prudently attempted to give a religious and charitable orientation to the meals held at the shrines of the martyrs. Augustine attests to the grave abuses into which these celebrations often deteriorated.

³⁶ See Hamman, “Quelle est l’origine de l’agape?,” 352; idem. “Pour une lecture concrète,” 290; idem. “De l’agape à la diaconie,” 219.

³⁷ See Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 181.

³⁸ See Hamman, “De l’agape à la diaconie,” 217.

second, when the term *agape* was equated with the Eucharist. Reflecting the Johannine influence which he imbibed, Ignatius used the noun *agape* to indicate either the love of God and one's response to it, or the fraternal love which binds the members of the community together. Regarding his use of the verb *agapan*, different scholars have made various interpretations.³⁹ Considering all these contributions and scrutinising the pertinent texts, Hamman concludes that Ignatius refers to the celebration of the Eucharist when he employs the terms *agape* and *agapan*.⁴⁰ This can be illustrated, for example, by his *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*. Underlining the importance of an authentic sense of unity with the local bishop, Ignatius states: "Nor is it permitted without the bishop either to baptise or to celebrate the agape; but whatever he approves, this too is pleasing to God."⁴¹ Hamman queries what '*celebrate the agape*' means, and decides for two reasons that in this case it is synonymous to the Eucharist: firstly, Ignatius places the celebration on the same level as Baptism; secondly, in the *Letter to the Romans* (7,3), he regards the Eucharist as 'incorruptible love (*agape*)'.⁴² It is only in later works, from the third and fourth centuries, that it becomes more clear that *agape* refers to a community meal which was not the Eucharist, but which could have been related to it.⁴³ Thus, Hamman offers an important clarification when he affirms that the third-century agape meal did not have its genesis in practices which marked the first two centuries of Christianity. He also explains that there was no continuity between the meal celebrated in the first two centuries and having Jewish origins, which preceded or followed the Eucharist, and the differently-inspired meal which took the name *agape* in the third century.⁴⁴

As has been noted above, Hamman reflected on the relationship between the agape and the Eucharist on several occasions. Writing in 1953, he proposed that the agape meal was either a preparation for the Eucharist, or a prolongation of it. Later works

³⁹ See Hamman, "Liturgie et action sociale," 163; idem. *Vie liturgique*, 155.

⁴⁰ See Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 155; idem. "Il sacerdote nel secondo secolo," *Communio* (I) 10/59 (1981): 22; idem. *Les Pères Apostoliques. Ignace d'Antioche*, Connaissance des Pères de l'Église 1 (Paris, 1981), 7; idem. *Les racines de la foi. La catéchèse des Pères de l'Église* (Paris, 1983), 202.

⁴¹ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistula ad Smyrnaeos*, 8,2, as quoted in Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 156; English trans. William A. Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers* (Collegeville, 1970):1, 25.

⁴² See Hamman, "Il sacerdote nel secondo secolo," 22.

⁴³ See Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 156; idem. "Quelle est l'origine de l'agape?," 352-353.

⁴⁴ See Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 161-162.

seem to denote a shift in opinion on the part of Hamman.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, he consistently affirms that the agape is invariably linked to the Eucharist⁴⁶ and is based solidly on the example of Christ. The solicitude for the needy in the agape⁴⁷ becomes an expression of the love of God for human beings. Christian love for others and their spirit of sharing lead them to ‘*vivre l’agapè de Dieu*.’⁴⁸ Besides offerings of bread and wine, the *Traditio*

⁴⁵ This has been confirmed by Adalbert Hamman himself in the first of two meetings which the author of this article had with him in August 1996 at the Association Migne in Paris. He confessed that there had been a gradual development in his thought over the years. He pointed out that his final position on the question of the agape meal is stated clearly in “Quelle est l’origine de l’agape?” (delivered at the International Patristic Conference, Oxford, 1967) and in his book *Vie liturgique et vie sociale* (1968). Hamman affirmed that the agape was a meal prepared by a rich individual who invited the poor and the needy. He categorically ruled out the opinion that the agape was a “christianisation” of pagan funeral meals, although similarities exist between the two. Quoting his own book, Hamman firmly asserted that “des rites identiques peuvent avoir des origines et des significations différentes” (*Vie liturgique*, 226). In “Quelle est l’origine de l’agape?,” 353, he affirmed the same point of view. On the other hand at the meeting in August 1996, he pointed out that he does not discard altogether the possibility of a relationship between pagan funeral meals and those offered by Christians at the tombs or shrines of the martyrs.

⁴⁶ See Hamman, “Liturgie et action sociale,” 163–164; idem. *Prières eucharistiques des premiers siècles*, La Croix de saint Pierre 2 (Tournai, 1957), 291; idem. *La prière*, 2:15-16, 20-21; idem. *Vie liturgique*, 225. In another article, Hamman states that the repast which either preceded or followed the Eucharist was not an agape meal: he says that “the shift of this meal to after the celebration of the Eucharist undoubtedly corresponds to a later period and corresponds to other criteria [...] But this meal is not the agape” (Author’s trans. of “Quelle est l’origine de l’agape?,” 351: “Le déplacement de ce repas après l’eucharistie correspond sans doute à une époque plus récente, et répond à d’autres critères [...] Mais ce repas n’est pas l’agape.”) He also holds that “it is important to refrain using the term *agape* with reference to meals preceding the Eucharist, in order to avoid ambiguity and the extrapolation of a later institution to a primitive ritual.” (Author’s trans. of *ibid.*, 352: “Il faudrait bannir absolument le mot d’agape, quand il s’agit du repas introductoire à l’eucharistie, pour écarter toute ambiguïté et ne pas projeter des institutions postérieures sur un rituel primitif.”)

In *Vie liturgique et vie sociale*, Hamman states that “one cannot but affirm sharply that there is a continuity between the introductory ritual meal preceding the Eucharist and the charitable meal which took the Greek name *agape*.” (Author’s trans. of *Vie liturgique*, 225: “Il faut affirmer fermement la solution de continuité entre le repas rituel introductoire à l’eucharistie et le repas de charité, qui prend un nom grec, *agapè*.”) Yet, as indicated in the previous note, he affirms that “identical rites may have different origins and meanings.” (Author’s trans. of *ibid.*, 226: “Des rites identiques peuvent avoir des origines et des significations différentes.”) Hamman refers to the similarity between the agape and the Eucharist, and the existence of factors which led to ambiguity in the Christian community: for example, when a bishop or a priest presided at the *agape*, or when expressions such as *breaking of the bread* and *the Lord’s Supper* were used in the context of this meal (See *ibid.*, 188, 192).

⁴⁷ See Hamman, “Liturgie et action sociale,” 164.

⁴⁸ See Hamman, “Liturgie et action sociale,” 168; Clément d’Alexandrie, *Le Pédagogue*, 14.

Apostolica mentions those of oil, milk and honey within the context of the celebration of the Eucharist. Although the genesis both of the Eucharist and of the fraternal meal could one day be traced to the same nucleus in the early Church, a possibility which he ultimately rejects, Hamman claims definitively that at a certain point *the two realities developed apart from each other*.⁴⁹

The relationship between the Eucharist and the *agape* is further corroborated by Hamman when he studies some of the characteristic features of the prayers which were used during the latter meal. Quoting Pseudo-Athanasius, he points out that one of the prayers repeats the well-known text, with strong Eucharistic connotations, from the *Didachè*, namely that concerning the multiplicity of grains which form the one bread. Furthermore, he observes that the prayers spoken at the *agape* usually manifest an ecclesial, moral and eschatological tone.⁵⁰ In attesting to a fraternal meal which followed the celebration of the Eucharist, John Chrysostom implies that such sharing, especially with the poor, is a continuation of the sacrament, and a concrete expression of the *diakonia* associated with it.⁵¹ Like Augustine in the West, Chrysostom mentions funerary repasts, and points out that these have a different origin from the *agape* meal, although he affirms that both have a common feature - the practice of providing a meal for the needy.⁵²

The *Agape* Meal as an Experience of Shared Brotherly Love

The previous section has focused upon how Hamman viewed the genesis, the development and the characteristics of the *agape* meal in the ecclesial context of the early Christians. The scope of this section is centred on an investigation on the relationship between the *agape* meal and the exercise of *diakonia* in the everyday life of Christians. The many allusions which Hamman made to the charitable role of the *agape* meal merit further discussion.

⁴⁹ See Aa.Vv., *Naissance des lettres chrétiennes*, *Lettres chrétiennes* 1 (Paris, 1957), 107; Hamman, *Prières eucharistiques des premiers siècles*, 10; idem. *La prière*, 2:232. See also the introduction by Hamman in Aa.Vv., *The Mass. Ancient Liturgies and Patristic Texts* (Staten Island/NY, 1967), 16.

⁵⁰ See Hamman, "Liturgie, prière et famille," 88.

⁵¹ See Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 225; idem. *Les racines de la foi*, 205.

⁵² See Hamman, *La prière*, 2:272; idem. *Vie liturgique*, 178-180; idem. "Quelle est l'origine de l'*agape*?" 354; idem. "Refrigerium," 731.

Writing shortly after his encounter with Bo Reicke who had just published *Diakonie, Festfreude und Zelos*, Adalbert Hamman explains that the principal scope of the meal was chiefly to feed the poor who lacked economic means. Organised by a private individual, it derived from a sense of solicitude for the unfortunate⁵³ and from a concern to assist those dedicated to serve the community, such as bishops, priests and deacons.⁵⁴ If the meal was organised by the Christian community, however, the necessary expenses were taken from some sort of common fund, and were justified by the humble merciful act of feeding the poor. At the very foundation of the agape, therefore, there was the desire to concretise the sense of *koinonia* within the community. This entailed the accumulation of pooled resources, in order to assist the poor.⁵⁵ Far from the pagan attitude which regarded the destitute as parasites, the charity shown by the Christians was inspired by what Hamman calls “a theological concept of the poor.”⁵⁶ Its *raison-d'être* lay in the urge to imitate the Lord Jesus who was ready not only to serve the poor but also to choose poverty.⁵⁷ The novelty of his ideas on table-fellowship and service challenged the Church in the first centuries to adopt an *ethos* based on social charity.⁵⁸ Any polemic over whether the *agape* preceded or followed the celebration of the Eucharist will not dampen an appreciation of the spirit of generosity which animated well-to-do persons to organise such meals.

⁵³ See Adalbert G. Hamman, *Le mystère du salut*, Collection Credo (Paris, 1954), 257; idem. *Vie liturgique*, 223, 227; idem. “La prière chrétienne et la prière païenne,” 1205; Jean Chrysostome *commente saint Paul*, Collection Les Pères dans la foi 35-36 (Paris, 1988), 177; Clément d’Alexandrie, *Le Pédagogue*, 116 n.12.

⁵⁴ See Hamman, “Liturgie et action sociale,” 163-164; idem. *Vie liturgique*, 279-280, 282, 296. References to the duty of the *ekklesia* to support its ministers are found both in the *Didachè* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, as well as in the writings of Irenaeus and Origen. Common funds characteristic of the early Church later took the form of tithes. In 581, a synod held at Mâcon in Gaul established juridical norms concerning tithes. See idem. “Oblations of the Faithful,” in *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, 2:609.

⁵⁵ See Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 225. These resources were utilised to nourish the hungry, to assist the orphans and the widows, to support those engaged in forced labour in the mines, to aid the exiled, and to bury the dead. See *ibid.*, 170-171, 256-257; idem. *La vie quotidienne des premiers chrétiens (95-197)* (Paris, 1971), 50, 53; idem. *La vie quotidienne en Afrique du Nord*, 132, 140.

⁵⁶ It is what Hamman describes as “une vision théologique du pauvre” (*Vie liturgique*, 173).

⁵⁷ See Hamman, “Liturgie et action sociale,” 163.

⁵⁸ See Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 226.

Hamman notes that in the early Church spontaneity was an important feature. Taking into consideration the fluidity of ecclesial structures, he states that adaptation to circumstances played an essential role in the origin and evolution of the agape meal. Charity was a *lived* rather than an *institutionalised* attitude. It was the practical expression of a resolute commitment by individuals.⁵⁹ Hamman explains that the agape meal

completely distinct from the Eucharist, was intended to put into practice the lesson of shared brotherly love. The hierarchy was invited and tried to keep control of it, removing abuses, preserving its religious character, avoiding confusion with the Eucharist (...) From the fourth century, it gradually gave way to other forms of charity.⁶⁰

Even though the *agape* was distinct from the Eucharist, Hamman claims that it was inspired by it,⁶¹ and that the atmosphere which prevailed during the feast was *eucharistic*. The liturgical breaking of the one Bread and the sharing of the one Cup offered a moral impetus to the members of the community as they tried to alleviate social problems. The assistance given - a praiseworthy expression of solidarity - is described by Hamman as having been discreet, heartfelt and efficacious. It was an outward sign of the Messianic community.⁶² Sharing, the underlying motivation of the agape, can be regarded as a foretaste of the equal division of goods to be enjoyed at the *eschaton*. This theme is underlined by Paulinus of Nola in his letter to Pammachius (340-410), a Roman noble who, on the occasion of the death of his wife Paulina, organised a meal for the poor of Rome in the atrium of the Constantinian Basilica of St Peter's:

In the basilica of the apostle you gathered together a crowd of poor people, the patrons of our souls, those from the whole of Rome deserving of alms. I myself feast on the splendid scene of this great work of yours (...) I see the gathering being divided amongst separate tables, and all the people being

⁵⁹ See Hamman, "Liturgie et action sociale," 166.

⁶⁰ Adalbert G. Hamman, "Agape," in *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, 1:16. See idem. "Quelle est l'origine de l'agape?," 354.

⁶¹ See Hamman, "Quelle est l'origine de l'agape?," 352; idem. "La comunità cristiana e i poveri," 102.

⁶² See Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 225, 296-297; idem. "Quelle est l'origine de l'agape?," 353, 354; idem. "De la célébration eucharistique à la vie quotidienne dans l'antiquité chrétienne," *Parole et Pain* 8 (1971): 301.

filled with abundance of food (...) Like the disciples who received from him [i.e. Christ] blessed bread to distribute, you apportioned it to the countless mouths of the poor (...) Here on earth, Christ reclines with you amongst his poor, and in you the Son of man has a place to lay his head.⁶³

Tertullian describes the agape meal as practised at Carthage at the end of the second century. It was held at supper time for a limited number of individuals. Instead of inviting their rich friends who could reciprocate the invitation, the hosts gathered together the poor of the community whom Tertullian described as ‘apprentices of the faith.’⁶⁴ In this way, the hungry were not humiliated, but honoured.⁶⁵ This was an active imitation of the example given by Christ when he broke the bread and distributed it to the tired crowds in the desert and, later on, to his disciples during the Last Supper.⁶⁶

Tertullian also describes the support lent by the community to Christians imprisoned as confessors of the faith. This support was not solely moral, since it included material assistance, in particular the supply of food (*Ad martyras*, 2,7).⁶⁷ Hamman comments that Tertullian fails to specify who was entrusted with maintaining contacts with those in prison. The *Passio Perpetuae* (3,7) mentions two deacons entrusted with this mission.⁶⁸ In the *Apologeticum*, Tertullian describes the agape as follows:

We therefore, who are united in mind and soul, doubt not about having our possessions in common. With us all things are shared promiscuously, except our wives (...) Even our little suppers [you] revile as extravagant also (...) Our feast [shows] its nature in its name. It is named by the word by which ‘love’ is [referred to] among the Greeks. Whatever expense it cost[s], expense incurred in the name of piety is a gain, if we aid every

⁶³ Paulinus of Nola, *Epistula* 13: 11-12, as cited in Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 205; English trans. Paulinus of Nola, *Letters 1-22*, 1: Ancient Christian Writers 35, ed. Johannes Quasten et al. (Westminster/MA, 1966), 127-128. See Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 227; Aa.Vv., *Lire la Bible à l'école des Pères*, Collection Les Pères dans la foi 66 (Paris, 1997), 174, n.2.

⁶⁴ See Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 175; idem. “Liturgie, prière et famille,” 86; idem. “La comunità cristiana e i poveri,” 102; idem. *La vie*, 203, 204.

⁶⁵ See Hamman, *La vie quotidienne des premiers chrétiens*, 205; idem. “Pour une lecture concrète,” 289.

⁶⁶ See Hamman, “Les repas religieux et l’agape,” 190; idem. *Vie liturgique*, 226; idem. “Quelle est l’origine de l’agape?,” 353; idem. “La comunità cristiana e i poveri,” 104; Clément d’Alexandrie, *Le Pédagogue*, 318.

⁶⁷ See Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 175; Aa.Vv., *Mariage et virginité dans l’Église ancienne*, Collection Les Pères dans la foi 39 (Paris, 1990), 57, n.51.

⁶⁸ See Hamman, “De l’agape à la diaconie,” 215.

poor man by this refreshment (...). If the cause of the feast be good, judge (...) what the rest of the course of our rules is, according to the duties of Religion. It allow[s] nothing vile, nothing immodest. Men [do not] sit down [for the meal] before (...) prayer to God. They eat as much as hungry men desire; they drink as much as is profitable for chaste men.⁶⁹

In this text, Tertullian thus illustrates the solicitude shown by Christians towards the unfortunate, by sharing their table with them, out of a sense of fraternal love.⁷⁰ One observes how the intense community spirit which animated the life of Christians led them to look beyond their personal needs and to share their resources with others. Most Christians felt that they could not keep to themselves the gifts they had received from God, and so became aware of their duty to support the needy.

Liturgical and canonical texts, such as the *Didascalía Apostolorum* (end of the third century) and the *Apostolic Constitutions* (end of the fourth century), refer to the *agape* within the context of the charitable duties of the community in their society.⁷¹ The author of the *Didascalía* showed his concern for the indigent elderly women, and hoped that the *agape* meal, at which offerings were distributed, was of assistance to them. Hamman points out that both the *agape* meal as well as the offerings - as attested by the *Didascalía* - underline the fact that the Christian community held its weaker members in high esteem.⁷² The *Traditio Apostolica* (circa the year 215) mentions as an ordinary and normal practice - mirroring what had been taking place in previous decades - the *agape* as a meal organised ‘*sub tecto eius*,’⁷³ that is, on the initiative of a rich individual who was encouraged to invite the poor. The section of the *Traditio* which refers to the *agape* (paragraph 26) records that not all the food available was to be

⁶⁹ Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, 39: 11, 14, 16-17; English trans. *Apologetic and Practical Treatises*, A Library of the Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church 83, ed. Edward Bouverie Pusey et al., (Oxford-London, 1842), 82-83. Emphasis is made on the moderation exercised by the Christians during these meals, as well as the practice of beginning and ending the meal by a prayer. See Hamman, *La vie quotidienne des premiers chrétiens*, 205; idem. “La prière chrétienne et la prière païenne,” 1205; idem. *La prière dans l’Église ancienne*, *Traditio Christiana. Texte und Kommentare zur patristischen Theologie* 7 (Berne, 1989), xxiv; idem. *La vie*, 203-204.

⁷⁰ See Hamman, “Pour une lecture concrète,” 288-289; idem. “De l’*agape* à la diaconie,” 216.

⁷¹ See Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 183, 189.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 184.

⁷³ That is, at the host’s house; in the *Canons of Hippolytus*, however, the meal was held in church, at the *lucernaria*. See Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 191.

consumed during the meal, so that a portion could be sent to the sick and the needy who were unable to be present.⁷⁴ Hamman refers to another form of assistance, practised in the same milieu when the *Traditio Apostolica* was written. It could either have accompanied the agape meal or substituted it. This was the *apophoretion* which consisted in the distribution of a portion of foodstuffs to the poor who could consume them at home.⁷⁵

Augustine, too, refers to the agape meal, but an important clarification is needed before presenting his texts. In at least two of his sermons, Augustine speaks of ‘*agapes facere*’, but does not refer to the early institution of the agape meal to which the host invited a restricted number of poor individuals, usually from nine to twelve, to his table.⁷⁶ According to Hamman, Augustine indicated, ‘*par similitude et extension*’, the distribution of foodstuffs, or the meals organised on a larger scale by the rich to feed the poor.⁷⁷ In *Contra Faustum*, however, Augustine defends the early Christian practice: “Our agape meals are rather a substitute for the sacrifice spoken by the Lord [...] At our agape meals the poor obtain vegetable or animal food.”⁷⁸ In *Sermon 259*, Augustine refers to the agape meal in the following manner:

Because we are seen to be serving at them, it is our goods that are being given, and by us that they are being given; and yet only things are being given which God has given us. It’s good, brothers and sisters, to make the distribution with your own hands (...) But those of you who are not in a position to give to all and sundry, should give what they can to the poor, and cheerfully.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ See Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 187, 191. A similar suggestion is found in the *Testament of Our Lord Jesus Christ*.

⁷⁵ See Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 187, 194.

⁷⁶ See *Ibid.*, 203. Augustine uses the words “*agapes facere*” in *Sermons 178* and *259*. Yet, Hamman insists that “il faut dire *agape* et non *agapes*, qui est une déformation et un abus de langage” (*La vie*, 202). See also *idem*, *Vie liturgique*, 181, 223; Clément d’Alexandrie, *Le Pédagogue*, 116, n.12.

⁷⁷ See Hamman, “De l’agape à la diaconie,” 216, 219.

⁷⁸ Augustine, *Contra Faustum* 20: 20, as cited in Hamman, “De l’agape à la diaconie,” 219; English trans. Augustine, *The Writings Against the Manichaeans and the Donatists*, A Select Library of the Nicene and the Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series 4, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids/MI, 1983), 261.

⁷⁹ Augustine, *Sermo 259*: 5, as cited in Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 181; English trans. Augustine, *Sermons 230–272B on the Liturgical Seasons*, The Works of St Augustine 3/7, ed. John E. Rotelle (New Rochelle/NY, 1993), 182.

It should be noted that even funerary meals had a charitable and social dimension.⁸⁰ Having had to purify the pagan practices involved at such meals, Christians were led to provide food for the poor on the occasion of a funeral meal. In *Sermo* 22, Augustine points out that it was far more reasonable to feed the poor and the hungry rather than carrying out libations over the graves, pretending to ‘feed’ the dead.⁸¹ Instead of openly attacking the pagan funeral customs, however, Augustine suggested in a subtle way that the giving of alms to the poor was a means of intercession on behalf of the souls of the dead. Hamman explains how Augustine drew a parallelism between the celebration of the Eucharist and almsgiving, the latter being seen as a prolongation of the sacrifice of Christ.⁸²

In the text of the *Apostolic Constitutions*, this sharing of food in honour of the dead is never called an agape meal.⁸³ One encounters a striking similarity between the two practices, nonetheless, because at each meal, solicitude was shown towards the poor. That *apophoreta*, or foodstuffs, were distributed among the needy at funerals is mentioned by Ambrose in his *De Helia et Ieiunio*, and is also observable in palaeochristian art in the catacombs.⁸⁴ Hamman affirms that the lasting commitment to assist the poor was the result of a gradual evolution of the funerary meals, and eventually led to the establishment of a well-organised *diakonia* in the Church during subsequent centuries.⁸⁵

Conclusions

In order to understand the relevance and meaning of the Christian agape meal in the first two centuries, it has been useful to sift through various layers of evidence, even those from immediately subsequent centuries. It is clear from the research made by Adalbert Hamman that although there are striking similarities between the Christian agape and funeral meals of that era, the French patristic scholar makes it clear as to why the origins of the two sets of meals is distinct. While he juxtaposes the agape with its

⁸⁰ See Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 203.

⁸¹ See Hamman, *La vie quotidienne en Afrique du Nord*, 325.

⁸² See Hamman, *Vie liturgique*, 207.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 203, 207.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 208.

contemporary meals, Hamman is successful in drawing clear boundaries between them. He considers the hallmark of the Christian agape meal to be the unwavering social involvement of the members of the community in aid of the poor and the suffering.

While focusing upon the academic contribution of Adalbert Hamman to this greatly debated issue on the agape meal, one observes a gradual development in his thought. As illustrated in this article, his final position is that presented in the paper he had delivered on the same theme at the Oxford International Patristics Conference in 1967, and soon corroborated in his renowned work *Vie liturgique et vie sociale*, published a year later. His judgements are, in my opinion as a Hamman-scholar for the last sixteen years, very balanced, and his reflections mature. Furthermore, the research undertaken by Hamman and his eventual publications and pronouncements on the Christian agape meal are still appreciated today because they provide a solid foundation, as well as a bird's-eye-view, on this particularly interesting Christian social experience.

Dept. of Fundamental and Dogmatic Theology
Faculty of Theology
University of Malta
Msida MSD 2080
Malta

hector.scerri@um.edu.mt

