

A HOLY SACRIFICE

By J. D. CRICHTON

It is sometimes remarked that the Eastern liturgies retain a sense of the holy and the sacred, a quality of mystery and other-worldliness which the liturgy of the Roman rite seems to have lost. In the liturgy of St John Chrysostom, for instance, the celebrant cries out before the Communion *ta hagia tois hagiois* – ‘Holy things for those who are holy’; and before the peoples’ communion, the deacon appears at the door of the iconostasis and says to the congregation: ‘Come with *fear*, with faith and love’. At the same time, the Roman liturgy constantly speaks of the *sacrosancta mysteria* – the most sacred mysteries, and does not hesitate to describe them as ‘the source of all holiness’.¹ Most priests of the Latin rite will own to feeling a sense of reverential awe whenever they recall the words which are addressed to them in the Ordination-liturgy: *imitamini quod tractatis* – ‘be like the mystery you celebrate’. Priest and people are to be ‘sanctified in truth’ by these mysteries,² whose mighty power cleanses and purifies.³ We are left in no doubt that the Mass is holy because it makes present to us the infinitely holy mystery of Christ in the redeeming work of his passion, death and resurrection.⁴ It is holy because in its celebration this work of redemption and sanctification⁵ is enacted and effected in us.⁶ It mediates to us, the holy people of God⁷ gathered round his altar, holiness as from its source.

In order to honour God worthily as his creatures, and still more as his adopted children, we need holiness.⁸ In the economy of divine salvation, the holy mystery of Christ may be said to be the approach God makes to man in his need, offering him his redeeming love. The wonder of God’s love, as St John says, is not that we have loved him first, but that he has loved us first and has anticipated our needs by sending his Son into the world to be an atonement for our sins.⁹ The Mass makes present amongst us, here and now, this ‘prevenient’

¹ Secret: Feast of S. Ignatius Loyola, 31 July.

² *Ibid.*

³ Secret: First Sunday of Advent.

⁴ Cf. the prayer after the Consecration *Unde et memores*.

⁵ Secret: third Sunday after the Epiphany; Post-communion: ‘For those at sea’ in the *Orationes diversae*.

⁶ Secret: ninth Sunday after Pentecost.

⁷ The prayer *Unde et memores*.

⁸ Pius XII, in the encyclical *Mediator Dei* (Christian Worship) 28.

⁹ Jn 4, 9–10.

love of God. The sacrifice of Christ, as he gives himself for his Church, has for its purpose unitive love and holiness: 'Christ shewed love to the Church when he gave himself up on its behalf. He would hallow it . . . summon it into his own presence, the Church in all its beauty . . . it was to be holy, it was to be spotless'.¹

In his great encyclical on Christian Worship, Pope Pius XII points out that the purpose, office and function of the Church is the same as that of the Incarnate Word – to re-establish the harmony of unitive love and holiness between God and man which Paul describes: 'You are no longer exiles or aliens; the saints are your fellow citizens, you belong to God's household . . . the chief corner-stone of it is Jesus Christ himself'.² Through the Sacrifice and sacraments which Christ instituted, the Church grows and becomes more closely knit in one body. 'This happens when Christ is, after a manner, built into the souls of men and grows in them . . . and when souls are also built into Christ and grow in him'.³ This building and growth, which is the due and acceptable worship of the divine majesty, is effected by the liturgy, for 'in the whole conduct of the liturgy the Church has her divine Founder present with her'. It is in these terms that Pius XII defines the liturgy: 'The sacred liturgy is the public worship which our Redeemer, the head of the Church, offers to the heavenly Father and which the community of Christ's faithful pays to its Founder, and through Him to the Eternal Father; briefly, it is the whole public worship of the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, Head and members'.⁴

We note first that the Liturgy is *public* worship: that is, a visible action, made up of visible signs, whose purpose is to gather together Christ's community into him. These visible signs are not merely the bread and wine, but all the gestures made, the words said, the things used and done. It is through the whole complex of sacrificial gestures and words – the liturgical action – that the Church re-presents Christ's sacrifice. The more perfect our use and understanding of them the more fully we enter into the sacrifice, to experience the infallible effect of the loving work of Christ's redemption, the sanctification which is God's will for us.⁵

The Church has always insisted, however, that attention to 'fine words and theatrical gestures' brings its own dangers. The liturgy is not merely external worship or the outward splendour of ceremo-

¹ Eph 5, 25–7.

² Eph 2, 19–20.

³ *Mediator Dei* 18.

⁴ *Mediator Dei* 20.

⁵ 1 Thess 4, 3.

nial,¹ much less is it to be identified with mere rubrics. 'God can be worthily honoured only if the mind and will are intent upon what this union with Christ is designed to effect; spiritual perfection.² The external exists for the internal. We can best understand this by considering the Church's part in the offering of the Sacrifice. There is a great measure of agreement that the external offering made by the Church consists in the bread and wine. The Secret of the Mass constantly refers back to what we have presented at the Offertory. These gifts which are to be offered and consumed, are 'to purify us and daily transform our lives to a heavenly pattern';³ they are to bring us 'perpetual sanctification'⁴ and 'effect God's holiness in us'.⁵ Through these material offerings the Church (priest and people) sets in motion the sacrificial action of Christ, for they are offered by his ordinance. Through them we are enabled to be drawn into Christ's sacrificial act, to be offered by him and to offer with him.

The simplicity and comparative insignificance of this external action – the offering of the bread and wine, is itself indicative of the proportion between the external and internal, and puts 'active participation' in its proper perspective. We share in the action of Christ not because we do and say and sing, but because by this doing, saying and singing at the behest of his Church we effectively lay ourselves open to his action, so that his redeeming power can work in us. Our offerings themselves are already God's gift⁶ and the sign of our complete dependence on him.⁷ We come to the Sacrifice with nothing but an intense need and desire of God's holiness who has no eye for what our offerings are worth in themselves, but merely wishes to give us, through his Son, his generous pardon.⁸ The offering is a liturgical symbol of our self-offering, through Christ; it is an external gesture by which we declare our will and desire to surrender our material goods to God, as a token of the giving of ourselves to him, as we are, 'with all our innumerable sins, offences and negligences'.⁹ We detach ourselves from the material offering to show that we wish to hand over all that we have and are to him, and by doing so, to share in what he wishes to give us. In desire, at least, this surrender is complete and total, even though, because of our

¹ *Mediator Dei* 25.

² *Mediator Dei* 28.

³ Secret: 2nd Sunday after Pentecost.

⁴ Secret: 3rd Sunday after Pentecost.

⁵ Secret: Tuesday after the 2nd Sunday in Lent, and the 2nd feast of St. Agnes, 28th January.

⁶ Cf. the prayer *Unde et Memores*.

⁷ Cf. the words *oblationem servitutis nostrae* in the *Hanc igitur*.

⁸ Cf. the prayer *Nobis quoque peccatoribus*.

⁹ Cf. the Offertory prayer.

radical selfishness, we need to make this gesture again and again. Simple as the idea is, the reality it covers lies at the heart of all religion, from its humblest levels – where most of us are – to its topmost heights, where the genuine mystic surrenders himself completely and without reserve to the transforming action of the all-holy God.

When a man wishes to consecrate something to God, although he knows that it already belongs to God, he sets it aside, takes it out of the order of the profane, dedicates it and so transfers it to the order of the sacred. In the holy Sacrifice both we and our offerings become truly sacred because Christ's power is there to transform them and us, rather as the offering itself is transformed into his body and blood. It is thus that we achieve in him an eternal value; our offering becomes holy, and our very living, all that we do, is permeated by his saving power. In this context the Church does not hesitate to say that through her liturgy she wants her children 'like Peter on Thabor, to surrender themselves wholly to God in the mystical transports of contemplation.'¹ For here we are in vital contact with the power that transformed a John of the Cross or a Teresa of Avila.

Our holiness consists in a loving union with God in Christ, a dynamic union that grows richer and ever more fruitful. It is in the Mass that this union is made available to us. Man, the human race, had been separated from God by original sin, thrown into disharmony both within himself and in his relationship with the world. The re-unification of man with God and the process of restoring all things in Christ² was begun on the Cross. 'Your world was a world without hope and without God. But now in union with Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near through the shedding of Christ's blood'.³ It is through the sacrifice of the Cross that we achieve this holiness of union: 'Now by Christ's death in his body of flesh and blood God has reconciled you to himself, so that he may present you before himself, as dedicated men, spotless and innocent in his sight'.⁴ All that was present on the Cross is present in the Church's continual celebration of Christ's sacrifice. As St Thomas says, because the Eucharist is the re-presentation of Christ's passion, what his passion effected in the world is wrought in man by this sacrament: *effectus quem passio Christi fecit in mundo, hoc sacramentum facit in homine*.⁵

¹ *Mediator Dei* 26.

⁴ Col 1, 22.

² Eph 1, 10.

⁵ *Summa Theologica* III, 79, 1.

³ Eph 2, 12-13.

In the celebration of the Liturgy of the Passion and Death of the Lord on Good Friday, we pray for all the ranks of the faithful in the Church, for the whole body which the holy Spirit rules and sanctifies through Christ.¹ The supreme moment of this sanctification is the consecration, when the whole Church is drawn into the action of Christ, and begins to achieve her union with him in the one Spirit. In this dynamic moment Christ begins to send out, through the members of his body the Church, the impulses of his saving grace upon all men and all creation. A more vivid awareness of this 'moment of sanctification' would enable us to be built into Christ more effectively and to offer him to the World.

It is through the Mass that we effectively share in Christ's sanctifying mission. If, as Pius XII says, our highest privilege is to offer the Mass with Christ,² 'we must reflect the image of the divine Redeemer through the mystery of the Cross, so that each of us may demonstrate the truth of St Paul's words: With Christ I hang upon the Cross; and yet I am alive; or rather, not I; it is Christ that lives in me. We thus identify ourselves with Christ as victim for the greater glory of the Father.'³ So the priest invites us all to pray at the close of the Offertory that our sacrifice may be acceptable to God the Father; and the Church offers herself to be immolated and consumed with Christ.⁴ It is not merely that our external offering declares our intention to consecrate the whole of ourselves and our possessions 'through him and with him and in him'; but that we come to the altar to submit ourselves wholly to the purifying effect of the sacred mysteries.⁵ 'On this altar let pride be sacrificed, anger immolated, all lust and evil desire done to death; let the gift of chastity . . . be your offering; and let innocence be your sacrifice'.⁶ Certainly what gives us most trouble is our sinfulness, a sense of our inadequacy to live with God in Christ, our inability to offer the discomforts and sufferings, great and small, which daily afflict us and which, as often as not, lead us away from God rather than to him. It is all this that we are to remember to offer in union with Christ crucified in the *Amen* of the great prayer which concludes the Canon.⁷ For his power finds its full scope in our weakness.⁸

The work of redemption has already lifted up a fallen world and

¹ *Orationes Solemnnes* 3.

² *Mediator Dei* 84, 98.

³ *Ibid*, 108.

⁴ Secret: Feast of the Epiphany.

⁵ A repeated theme of the post-communion prayers.

⁶ *Roman Pontifical*, Preface for the Consecration of an Altar.

⁷ *Mediator Dei* 110.

⁸ 2 Cor 12, 7.

rescued us from everlasting death.¹ One of the sublime effects of the consummation of the holy Sacrifice – Holy Communion – is to foreshadow in us the everlasting enjoyment of the Godhead.² Christ, in foretelling the gift of the Eucharist, promised that Communion would confer eternal life;³ and Paul remarks that the power of Christ is such that ‘he will form this humbled body of ours anew, moulding it into the image of his glorified body’.⁴ In holy Communion we receive Christ the redeemer ‘according to the flesh’.⁵ Through this contact with him, we make contact with the whole power of his sacrifice, and become, in a manner, one flesh with him. In this encounter with Christ we feel the effects of the Redemption.⁶ The purpose of the sacred meal is to establish and maintain union with Christ, and through him with the Father in the holy Spirit. This union is holiness; and the aim of the interior life is to deepen our awareness of it and to strengthen our desire for it.

One of the remarkable trends in modern spirituality is the emphasis on community, on society, on others who are our neighbours. The existentialist may say ‘Hell is others’; the Christian must say ‘others are my brethren in Christ’. The tendency to regard the interior life as a self-regarding soul-culture, which looks upon the world and all secular activity as irrelevant, if not hostile, to the life of the spirit, has now largely gone. Not only do we see that the spiritual life cannot be lived in a vacuum, and that the world is and must be the raw material of the life of the spirit, but we are more positively conscious of our function in the Body of Christ; conscious in other words, that the interior life does not exist without an apostolic emphasis and an apostolic issue. Even the highest and rarest mystical experiences have an apostolic witness; they are a testimony to the activity of Christ in his Church, and draw others along the path of perfection. It is no accident that a St Teresa of Avila as a child should have run away to seek martyrdom, or that the contemplative of Lisieux should be the secondary patron of foreign missions.

The constant emphasis on the Mystical Body and on the liturgy as the act of that Body, the teaching on Catholic action and the need for the redemption of society, all this is evidence that Christians, even in their most intimate and private strivings after the holiness of Christ, are acutely conscious of their brethren. We have realised

¹ Collect: 2nd Sunday after Easter.

² Post-communion: Corpus Christi.

³ Jn 6, 55.

⁴ Phil 3, 21.

⁵ Rom 9, 15.

⁶ Collect: Corpus Christi.

with a new vividness the meaning of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, and of the words of our Lord that whatever we do for our brethren we do for and to him.¹ Those other words of his: 'By this shall man know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another',² are the underlying theme of almost all the endeavour of the Church in the present century. We know also that if we are to enter into this life and effort of the Church it must be through the Mass. It is through the Mass we shall remain there. It is through the Mass, lived, offered and loved, that we shall bring our fellow-men to Christ and further the redemption of society and the world.

¹ Mt 25, 40.

² Jn 13, 35.