

# CHRISTIAN SACRIFICE

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POPULAR understandings of sacrifice are rather rudely challenged by the fact of Christ's passover mystery. This which is a source of our redemption, the supreme action of sacrifice in which all other sacrifice must participate, does not correspond to the common notion of 'giving up something'. True, in passing from this life into risen existence, Christ did give up the context of living which we humans now know; but in a very true sense his passover was much more a mystery of giving than of giving up, much more a matter of gaining than of losing. Hence, if christian sacrifice is to be genuine it must somehow be confronted by and conform to this mystery of death and resurrection.

When St Paul describes the life of a christian, he speaks of it as a constant living out of the mystery into which a man, when he became a christian, was initiated. The mystery is the mystery of Christ, not in some abstract sense, but the reality of the living Christ who now in his risen state stands in the last stage of the passover mystery. He still offers sacrifice to the Father, as St Paul assures us. If this be true, then it is clear that the gaining of life is of the very essence of christian sacrifice.

All christian existence can be understood in terms of the process of initiation by which one is introduced into the christian community and into the mystery of Christ. Through baptism, confirmation and participation in the holy eucharist, one is literally brought into a new way of living. We are not simply baptized in Christ, but baptized into Christ, into his death and resurrection. Our christian life is meant to be a 'living out' of this orientation implanted in us by the sacraments of initiation. Baptizing, confirming, are actions which are meant to go on incessantly during our earthly sojourn as christians, finding increasing expression in the mystery of the eucharist and finally terminating in the possession of glory with Christ.

Christian life is such only in proportion as it represents an identification with Christ, identification in consciousness and attitude, in love and objectives, in free acceptance of the realities of human existence. But there is only one Christ, the Christ who redeems mankind and achieves his human destiny by the passover mystery,

by death and resurrection. For us as christians, then, there can be no other path of becoming christian than to deepen our sharing in Christ's own passover.

If we examine the context of our sacramental living, we see that what is involved is a consecration to achieving this identification, an identification that must take place individually and socially. Each christian, as he passes through his life, is meant increasingly to move through death into resurrection. Along with his fellow christians, he is meant to form part of that community which socially is constantly passing in its historical existence through a process of death into ever fuller realization of risen life.

This, however, can all sound very abstract and mysterious. It is well enough to say that we have in sacrament some sort of symbolic identification with the mystery of the dying and risen Christ. But it is clear that Christ no longer dies, and to some extent it is hard to see exactly what it can mean for us to participate in death and resurrection until we actually come to the term of our earthly existence and, by facing the mystery of death, pass into the after-life which we trust to be a sharing in the risen existence of Christ himself. Revelation, however, is pointing to something more than this.

It is not simply that we live the mystery of death and resurrection by anticipation, speaking our future sharing in it only in terms of symbol. Sacramental symbol is meant to be an index to the significance of our daily living. This daily living is marked by the fact that we are beings who are sequentially – we have no firm grasp upon our existence which is constantly being given to us as we move from the past into the future. Try as we will, there is no way that we can halt this process, no way in which we can cling to the present moment which has already passed before we are fully conscious of it. There is no way by which we can halt the inevitable movement into the unknown which is the future.

One can, of course, live in oblivion of this radical contingency of existing, or one can try to hide from it. But either reflectively or subconsciously, we human beings are faced with the rather frightening prospect of having constantly to go from the known to the unknown. In such a situation it is only too easy to deceive ourselves that security lies with what has already been known of the past. It is an almost inevitable human tendency to want to cling to this, instead of being willing to let the future become our existence. While we cannot halt the actual physical movement from past to future, we can often in our consciousness refuse to give up the patterns, the

decisions, the experiences which already lie behind us and which, because they are known, represent security. However, it is of the very essence of christian existence to do this.

Christ himself, if we examine the mystery of his passover, faced precisely this human situation and redeemed us by his perfect willingness to give up the earthly existence which had become familiar to him and to enter the yet unexperienced life of resurrection. This for us, too, must be the essence of our participation in the mystery of death and resurrection. As we pass through our earthly days we must with willingness trust in the fatherhood of God the Father, relinquish the past with its false claims to be adequate and secure, and allow ourselves to face the life which lies ahead of us. Psychologically, this represents truly a passage from death to life, for that which has happened can never be regained. The past is in a very true sense the realm of death; to cling to it and regard it as if it were really life is to condemn ourselves to a personal commitment to death. If we participate in the passover mystery we must die to this past and move on, following that word of Christ, 'Let the dead bury the dead, but you come follow me'.<sup>1</sup>

As we reflect on this mystery of our need not to look back, having once put our hand to the plough, we see that it lays great demands on us. Constantly to look ahead requires on our part an appalling need to open ourselves to learning. Nothing that we yet know is adequate or definitive, nothing which we have been told can stand without some adjustment. Even in the area of faith there is a constant demand that the individual christian and the christian community re-evaluate, probe, and gradually alter the understandings which they possess, even the understandings of those realities which in themselves are absolute.

To be constantly learning means to be constantly giving up the sufficiency of what we already know. When we reflect that many of these areas of knowing impinge upon our understanding of ourselves, upon our self-identification, we can see that we are constantly relinquishing ourselves as already known and running the risk of a discovery which still lies in the future. To participate in death and resurrection means that we are open to constant change. We recoil almost instinctively from this process, for change is always unsettling. We always wish to possess the absolute forms which would not have to be altered, so that finally we could say that we have achieved the

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<sup>1</sup> Mt 8, 22.

security for which we so long.

Yet if we are to be truly christian, we must be willing to undertake the tasks demanded by the future. This would not be so difficult if we knew what these tasks were, but for the moment these things are unknown to us, at least in their detail. This represents a deep risk, for to choose means always for a human being the possibility of choosing wrongly. If we have succeeded in the past, we can still fail in the future. And it is so easy simply to look to the past and to revel in the successes already accomplished, rather than to risk all in the yet undetermined area of the future. Yet the real situation in which we find ourselves demands that we do move ahead, for this is the price of life. Not to change, not to grow, not to evolve, is really to die. Real life means a constant growth into life. Life for every man lies ahead of him, rather than behind; and, for a christian, life is in a very special way a process of moving into that future which is resurrection.

This is perhaps one of the most radical re-evaluations of human existence given by the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. We tend to think of the present moment of our existing with reference to the past, as something which has grown out of the past. Now this is true. But the truly christian point of view is not one of seeing the present essentially as a moving out of the past, but rather as a moving into the future. The past is not something which is; it no longer exists except in our memories. For a christian, the future is an already existent reality; the future is the risen Christ. The exact details of our participation in the mystery of Christ remain yet undetermined, and must be worked out by the choices we make in the given situation of our life. Yet the essence of that existence is assured for us, because Christ is present to us, he who is our future and our destiny.

Another aspect of the mystery of death and resurrection, seen in this light of willingness to move into the future, is that it requires a very radical acknowledgement of the fact that we are creaturely. Very few things can so bring home to us the fact that we receive all that we have and are, than the insight into the contingency of our present existing. Knowing that we do not possess the future, we cannot but grasp the fact that the being which we will have is something which comes to us; while determined in some extent by our free choice, it is still something which is given to us by a gracious God.

For a christian the context of recognizing the reception of being has a much more profound dimension. It is not simply the acknowledgement of a creator God from whom existence comes; it is ac-

knowledge of a person who is the Father. Because he is Father, he will know what to give us that will best lead us to the fulfilment of our individual destiny and our participation in the common destiny of the men of our day. Being Father, he will be faithful to his identity as such, and will see to it that the future leads to life rather than to personal destruction. The christian attitude of looking to the future with openness is trust in the fact that life lies ahead of us – life such as we by our own human efforts could never be able to achieve. It is a trust in that transformation to life which divine love will work in us, provided that we leave ourselves open to its transforming effect. One can put all of this very simply by saying that the true christian attitude is one of total and willing acceptance of sonship, of personal identification and fulfilment in terms of receiving life and identity from this person who is the Father. Old Testament trust in the fidelity of Yahweh finds its christian transformation in terms of the Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Christian life is a mystery of vocation, but vocation of its very nature says that we are called to something which we are not yet. Moreover, it is a call to seizing the present moment. But the present moment is one filled with directedness toward the future, with demands that the potential of our lives and of the world in which we find ourselves be fulfilled. The present moment is one of multiple possibilities; and therefore the christian vocation is one that demands the exercise of freedom. The christian, in the act of continuing sacrifice, dedicates his exercise of freedom, not just in the present moment, but in the yet unknown 'givenness' of the future situation.

Again, the radical risk of the human condition becomes apparent. However, this is balanced by the deep security that comes to one who believes in the now present reality of the risen Christ, the ground of our future. We must, though, face in freedom the risk to which we are called; the mystery of death and resurrection is not simply one of enduring passively the passage from past to future. It is not a dumb passage from the known context of past experience into an unknown future. It is rather determining by free choice what precise direction the future shall take. While the future is something given, yet upon us has been laid the responsibility of deciding what the future is to become. Upon the christian is laid the task of making sacred a world yet unborn. He must dedicate himself to moulding the world in the image and likeness of Christ – and that within the concrete givenness of the world situation into which he will move.

Christian sacrifice, a participation in the mystery of Christ's own sacrificial death and resurrection, is a process of making sacred the entire context of human living. This is the most radical meaning of the word sacrifice: 'to make something sacred'.

All our understanding of christian sacrifice must ultimately be governed by our understanding of the mass, the eucharistic action of sacrifice. This action is the supreme word of Christ and of his Church that explains the mystery of divine revelation. It is the occasion that explains most profoundly what it means for a christian to participate in sacrifice, for the mass is the supreme human expression of sacrifice.

Central to the eucharist as sacrifice is, of course, the presence of Christ's own act of offering sacrifice. Continuing that solemn choice which he expressed ritually at the last supper and which has continued unbroken in the mystery of his continuing passover, Christ still freely puts himself aside as someone dedicated to the work that his Father has given him to do, the work of transmitting risen life to mankind. Freely and with gratitude Christ accepts the fact that he stands at the termination of that passover which necessitated in its earlier stages a giving up of temporal earthly existence. Thus there is a constant ritual sanctification of his own humanity, so that it in turn can be the principle of sanctification for the rest of the created universe.

Essentially redemptive in its being, this human attitude of Christ is directed toward the sanctification of all mankind. Choosing not just for himself but for all his human brethren, Christ, as the first-born from the dead, continues to operate in human history to draw men through the mystery of death into the risen life which he himself now possesses. It will take the entire course of human history to achieve it. Christ's work in the world is one of drawing men toward himself. This is of the essence of his priestly activity as he himself expressed it: 'I pray, Father, that where I am these also may be'.<sup>1</sup>

Though the action of the eucharist is most importantly the sacrificial act of Christ himself, it is also the action of the christian community, offering itself to God the Father in union with Christ. The christians assembled for the eucharist come to sanctify themselves and the entire context of their living. Through the external sign of the bread and wine they indicate that they wish to dedicate themselves to the fulfilment of the kingdom of God. Theirs cannot be an

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<sup>1</sup> Jn 17, 24.

ordinary profane existence. They do not ignore the goodness and the truth and the beauty of the creation which surrounds them. They respect deeply the men who are their contemporaries. But they realize that a deeper meaning must be given all this through the mystery of Christ. To this end they dedicate their lives.

This acceptance of the christian vocation, a constantly deepening re-assertion of the choice made in the sacrament of baptism, is meant to be the controlling decision in all their individual and social existence. The fundamental choice of accepting christianity in its deepest implications is something which cannot leave untouched any aspect of human experience or achievement. Above all, one who has accepted christianity has implicitly accepted responsibility for the world of men in which he finds himself situated. The scope of the Church's redeeming zeal cannot be less than that of Christ himself who has come for the salvation of all mankind. Thus the christians who participate in the eucharist accept identification as a chosen people set apart for the fulfilment of the mystery of human salvation. As such they are a holy people, even though frailty, imperfection and even grave sin still mar their historical existence.

In the eucharist, the christian community participates ever more profoundly in the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. The eucharistic action, as a word, speaks the presence of the risen Christ in his continuing passover; and the christian community accepts this word. This is not a theoretical acceptance – a saying yes to the fact that redemption actually happened and still continues. It is a practical acceptance of the passover mystery as a key to human existence. Christians pledge themselves in the eucharist to an ever more total acceptance of the life-long process of moving from limitation and incompleteness to the fuller life of resurrection. In this way, the eucharist is meant to be a pivotal point in the process by which the christian community, in union with Christ its head, is gradually moving into full risen existence. The mass is an act of accepting risen life from the hands of God the Father in and through his Son whom he has raised up for us.

Just as the acceptance of the passover mystery represents for Christ supreme human acknowledgement of dependence upon his Father, so the action of the eucharist is for the christian community its supreme assertion of trust in the providential care of the Father. For the individuals involved, and for the Church as a social entity, fullness of life still lies in the future and demands a constant abandonment of the insufficiencies of what has already transpired. It is to

this that christians pledge themselves in the eucharist when they accept Christ himself as source of their life in the eucharistic food.

Here again, in analyzing the eucharist, we see that sacrifice in its most important christian expression is essentially a matter of accepting life rather than of losing something. Since it expresses the community's willingness to accept life from the Father, it is a most basic acknowledgement of filial dependence upon him. This action of sacrifice becomes, therefore, the uniquely acceptable form of human worship.

However, not just this moment of the eucharistic action is worship. Because it is a commitment to living christianity totally, it implicates christians in a way of life which in its entirety is worshipful acknowledgement of God the Father. Though the eucharist speaks more fully than any other action the Church's dedication of itself to fulfilling the mystery of Christ, it speaks it in view of the remainder of christian living. In eucharist; the christian community pledges itself to transform human life according to the mystery of Christ's passover. Christian sacrifice, then, is essentially a positive reality; it is essentially a mystery of seeking life; it is essentially a willingness to accept new being and new personal identity in terms of the gradually dawning reality of Christ's resurrection.