

THE MASS: SOURCE AND CENTRE OF THE LITURGY

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ONCE the central position of the liturgy in the plan of redemption is recognized¹ and when it is distinguished from the protocol of its administration (the rubrics), then it is seen, not as an end in itself, but the *function* of communication for divine life so that we, who come from the Trinity, may live by the Trinity and go to the Trinity. All definitions of liturgy imply its divine source, the Mass.

The Liturgy is the official dispensation of the Mysteries of Christ. It is 'the whole body of official prayers and sacramental actions whereby the communication of men with God is carried on in the Church', 'the life-dispensing, life-preserving and life-restoring activity of *Ecclesia*, the mystical Christ'. It is the official distribution of Christ's life by which through the Church he communicates grace to individuals by means of the four inter-related parts: the sacraments, the sacramentals and ritual prayers, the Divine Office, and the Liturgical Year—all centred about and finding their source in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

There are many aspects of the Mass, to any one of which a lifetime of study could be devoted, but this article will consider it as source and centre of the liturgy. In any study, we begin with the fact that the Mass is the unbloody sacrifice of the Cross. To get a true focus, to see our subject in its true position and its true proportions, it is well to review summarily the steps in the Plan of Supernatural Adoption so as to recognize the relation of the liturgy to the historical life of Christ and, in particular, to Calvary.

- (a) From all eternity, there is one God in three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, knowing and loving each other.
- (b) To show forth his goodness and to share his happiness, God made out of nothing other beings, each a unique reflection of himself.
- (c) To further share his happiness, God raised angels and men

¹ See first article of this series, November, 1955.

above their natures to a created participation in the divine nature, that is, to the state of grace.

- (d) Some of the angels, and Adam, the head of the human race, refused to accept this supernatural endowment as a gift from God.
- (e) In order to repair to his Father for the offence made against divine love, and to restore divine life to mankind, the Son, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, Jesus Christ, became man, was born of the Virgin Mary, and, by his life—especially his Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension—redeemed the human race.

Here a problem arises. Calvary is the source of redemption for all men, yet no individual is to be saved against his free will or without his personal efforts. Calvary must be made accessible to each of us. To quote from Pope Pius XII's Encyclical, *On the Sacred Liturgy*:

This purchase, however, does not immediately have its full effect, since Christ, after redeeming the world at lavish cost of his own blood, still must come into complete possession of the souls of men. Wherefore, that the redemption and salvation of each person and of future generations until the end of time may be effectively accomplished and be acceptable to God, it is necessary that men should individually come into vital contact with the sacrifice of the Cross so that the merits which flow from it should be imparted to them. In a certain sense it can be said that on Calvary Christ built a font of purification and salvation which he filled with the blood he shed; but if men do not bathe in it and there wash away the stains of their iniquities, they can never be purified and saved (Section 77).

Our Lord solved the problem with divine graciousness. He did not delay the glorification of 'the substance of our frail human nature which he had taken to himself' (*Communicantes*, Ascension Day), but chose to continue his life on earth by a different mode, that of the Mystical Body. There was no time-lag; from the opened side of Christ, when his Sacred Heart was pierced, the Church was born (Pius XII, *The Mystical Body*, Section 35).

The God-Man, now in heaven, is the Head of the Mystical Body, the Church, through which he continues until the end of time his life of teaching, directing, and sanctifying individual persons. Of these three offices, obviously, the most important is that

of furnishing means of sanctification. The Liturgy is the official dispensation of the Mysteries of Christ which are actualized sacramentally in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. But it is not sufficient passively to receive Christ's life through the liturgy; we must deliberately and continuously co-operate with actual graces, exercising and developing the supernatural virtues and gifts received at Baptism. The divine power received through the liturgy must be used to keep the Commandments, to practise the temporal and spiritual works of mercy, to observe the duties of our state of life, and, by prayer, to develop a sensitive ear to the suggestions of love. Each correspondence with grace gives a new capacity for God and his grace. All this activity is inseparably associated with the offertory, consecration and communion of the Mass. Its end or purpose is our return to the Trinity.

It is necessary to review one more preliminary concept if the Mass is to be understood as the source of the liturgy. There is the basic statement: The Mass makes present the Mysteries of Christ. An analysis of the orders of 'mystery' in religion shows that in the *intellectual order*, a mystery is a divinely revealed truth which we cannot fully *understand* (e.g. the Blessed Trinity); in the order of activity, in the *operational order*,² a mystery is a divine fact whose meaning *and power* can never be exhausted (e.g. the Resurrection). But every act of our Lord's life, not just the astounding miracles, was that of a divine person acting with his two natures. So we apply the term 'mysteries' of Christ' to the events of Christ's historical life (or to the Mass where they are re-presented) when it is desired to accentuate the fact that the essence of the words and acts of a divine person cannot be limited by time or space but continue to be actualized sacramentally in the Church through the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice.

The Mysteries of Christ are ours. Christ lived them to redeem us. Christ lived them to communicate his divine life to us. Christ associated us with him in his Mysteries. As he performed them he had us in mind—how the graces they earned would be offered to us; how we would accept these graces to co-operate with his will for us to develop into the unique reflection of himself which he has designated each to be; how we would give back love for love by offering now the homage of affection, sympathy, zeal, reparation. Christ made these mysteries accessible to us through the

² Cf. Humbert Clérissac, O.P., *The Mystery of the Church*.

liturgy, especially at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass which is the source of the liturgy. This review has brought us into focus so we can see the place of the Mass in the liturgy, in the communication of divine grace restored by Calvary.

1. The Mass is the re-presentation of Calvary, the source of grace of the liturgy. As we know from the Ordinary of the Mass, the whole of Christ, with *all* his Mysteries—Birth, Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension—is always present in the Sacrifice of the Mass. It is because the Sacrifice of the Cross was the culmination, climax, summary of all the events of Christ's historical life, that the Sacrifices of the Mass, in re-presenting Calvary, represents all the mysteries of Christ. Christ, now glorious in heaven, is the same person responsible for all the acts of his historical life; the re-presenting in the Mass re-presents the Person of Christ.

In describing the manner of re-presentation, we must be very precise in the choice and accent of words. The Mass sacramentally re-presents or re-enacts Calvary. It does not 'represent' Calvary as a crucifix or the Passion Play does; then the Mass would be a mere symbol for Calvary, not its sacramental actualization. It does not merely represent Calvary *effectively* as the *cause* of our salvation; each of the sacraments does this. Abbot Vonier, in his *Key to the Doctrine of the Eucharist*, translates clearly from the *Summa Theologica*:

The sacrament (i.e., any sacrament, not just the Holy Eucharist) properly called, is the thing ordained to the purpose of signifying our sanctification; in these, *three* phases may be taken into consideration, namely: the *cause* of our sanctification, which is the passion of Christ; the *essence* of our sanctification, which consists in grace and virtue; and then the ultimate *goal* of our sanctification, which is eternal life. Now these three things are signified by the sacraments; therefore a sacrament is a commemorative sign of what has gone before, I mean the passion of Christ; and a demonstrative sign of what is being brought about in us through the passion of Christ, that is grace; and a prognostic, that is a prophetic sign, of the future glory (III, 60:3). Though all the sacraments do these things, the Eucharist alone *actualizes* sacramentally the Mysteries of Christ because it alone contains Christ substantially.

The Mass does not repeat the Sacrifice of the Cross. Unfortunately, many outsiders believe that we hold this and, therefore,

they think that we nullify the sufficiency of the Sacrifice of the Cross which Christ offered to God, once, for all time and eternity, a perfect sacrifice, an infinite sacrifice which would never need to be offered again and, as a matter of fact, cannot be repeated because Christ can die physically no more. In the Mass, Calvary is re-enacted or re-presented; if it were repeated, it would be another sacrifice. The liturgy of the Mass is the re-presentation of the *original* act in an unbloody manner. The words of the New Baltimore Catechism are clear as well as precise.

The Mass is the same sacrifice as the sacrifice of the cross because in the Mass the victim is the same and the principal priest is the same, Jesus Christ.³ . . . The manner in which the sacrifice is offered is different. On the cross Christ physically shed his blood and was physically slain, while in the Mass there is no physical shedding of blood nor physical death, because Christ can die no more; on the cross Christ gained merit and satisfied for us, while in the Mass he applies to us the merits and satisfaction of his death on the cross (Confraternity Edition, Book 2, QQ. 360; 362, 1949 edition).

The re-enactment does not take from the uniqueness of the Sacrifice of Calvary nor from its infinite value; it makes accessible to our finite grasp the fruits of that sacrifice.

The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass makes present all the Mysteries of Christ's life but not all in the same manner as it does the central act of Calvary. The Proper of the Mass, especially by the choice of the gospel, high-lights one or more of all those to be actualized sacramentally at the consecration. One morning it is our Lord foretelling what great things will come about when he is lifted up; another day, he is defending his friends who indiscreetly express their love for him. But the extract of the Scripture, because of its position as part of the Mass, is more powerful than long, protracted meditation on Holy Writ. Virtue goes forth from him. Our Lord is infinitely greater than a 'model of perfection'. He gives us a share in his own divine nature to act on as we respond to some particular event of his life. As Saint Leo said on the Feast of the Epiphany:

Neither must this day be considered as if the virtue of the act

³ Cf. R. Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *Le Sauveur et Son Amour Pour Nous*, 1933, p. 367ff. 'Cette oblation intérieure, qui est toujours vivante au coeur du Christ, est-elle numériquement la même que celle par laquelle il s'offrit depuis sa venue en ce monde et surtout sur la Croix?'

which then took place has passed away and nothing has come down to us except the report which faith accepts and memory celebrates: rather, in the mercy of God, *we in our time daily experience the very same realities as were originally accomplished.*

But it has often been asked: If the Sacrifice of the Cross was infinitely perfect, why re-enact it by the Mass? The answer is two-fold: we have the divine command to do so, and; the *application* of Calvary's merits to us, because of our finite nature, will not be completed until the end of time—the Mass makes Calvary's fruits accessible to us and, at the same time, provides us with a worship form which is absolutely acceptable to God.

2. The second reason why the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the source and centre of the liturgy is that the Mass is our sacrifice-obliteration: through it we offer the sacrifice supremely pleasing to God. The liturgy is a two-way communication—it brings the Christ-life down to us, and it carries Godward our efforts towards union. All such efforts, hidden or public, are pleasing to God as tokens of our love, but all peoples have recognized the necessity of public expression through corporate sacrifice. There are sacrifices and sacrifices. A few years ago, there was an account of an earnest young priest in England who had given his teen-agers such an understanding of the Mass that it had changed a neighbourhood of hoodlums and delinquents into something like Junior Catholic Actionists. Yet this priest was thrown into a minor panic when it was announced that the diocesan inspector was coming to quiz the youngsters on the different kinds of sacrifice, Old Testament and New, divisions and subdivisions according to the seminary manual of theology. The incident aroused a side-line discussion on how to formulate a leading question that would really tap the student's grasp of the Mass's significance. This one was chosen: Why is the Offertory of the Mass so important for us? To answer that question, 'Why important for us?', one must know the *essence* of sacrifice, even if he mistakes Yom Kippur for the Paschal moon. To answer that question, one must know that deliberate self-surrender, in union with Christ's offering of himself, is required. It has been said:

There is no other act which makes so great a demand upon a person, upon all his energies of soul and body, as participation in the Sacrifice of the Mass.⁴

⁴ Sister Jane Marie, O.P., *Living in Christ*. Ann Arbor, 1943, p. 33.

To answer that question, one must feel the inner harmony of the liturgy which explains the first sequence of offertory prayers before the Consecration and a second sequence, again of offertory prayers, after the Consecration, with the True Victim.

We are all familiar with the definition of sacrifice as an external act of public, social worship which a duly appointed priest offers in an approved formula to God alone, for the purpose of glorifying him and attaining union with him, some material object perceptible to the sense and representing the donor's entire being (therefore, usually food, the first necessity of life), and then, by some real or equivalent destruction of the object, expresses: (a) acknowledgment of God's complete dominion over us (adoration); (b) gratitude for past favours (thanksgiving); (c) petition for future benefits; and (d), reparation or atonement for past offences.

At the Offertory we present bread and wine which symbolize Christ and us, his members. To the external offering as a member of the Mystical Body, I must unite myself *with Christ* in the inner and most important sacrifice of striving to make my dispositions like those of the Sacred Heart on the Cross, surrendering my will to God as Christ did, by using his power—actively, by willing to do what he wants; passively, by accepting what he sends. Suppose that I *feel* this beyond my degree of generosity; still, it is not insincere to *will* these dispositions and beg our Lord to give them to me.

So the priest in the name of our Lord in our name takes bread and wine, which symbolize our Lord and ourselves, and offers them solemnly with prayers that express the four ends of sacrifice, begging that we may be partakers of his divinity who deigned to become a sharer in our humanity. We have done all that we can do, yet God is not obliged to accept this sacrifice. But there is a priest whom God cannot ignore and a victim whom he cannot reject, his own Son. And we have a claim on that Son, the claim of a common human nature. The bread and wine which represent Christ *and us* become the Body and Blood of Christ. Our offering of ourselves is accepted because it is united to that of him who is, in himself, perfect adoration, perfect thanksgiving, petition and atonement.

After the consecration, the liturgy curves back, but on a *higher* level, through a series of prayers by which our Lord, the Priest-

Victim, offers himself for us in solemn sacrifice *to God*. Then he turns and offers himself *to us* in Holy Communion.

Before going on to the Mass as Sacrifice-banquet, the meaning of the Offertory could be summarized. Where the Offertory Procession has been revived, as in the Blessed Sacrament Parish, New York City, since about 1930, for the principal Sunday Mass, all participants have found a new meaning in their daily life as well as greater recollection at Mass. In some schools, several times a year, the procession takes place, in a modified form. Naturally, it cannot be carried out as in the time of Pope Gregory the Great. Then, each brought a portion of bread and a small flask of wine and those who could brought additional gifts—clothing, jewels, foodstuffs, oil—anything that could be used for, or sold for, the upkeep of the church, the support of the clergy and the help of the poor. As the worshippers came up and laid the offering which represented themselves on the altar which represented Christ, the full psalm was sung, each verse alternating with the special versicle which served as a chorus and directed the thoughts in a spirit of self-offering. The Offertory chant that we have now is only the chorus versicle, though more and more choirs are reviving the original form.⁵

So, summarizing the importance of the Offertory, Doctor Pius Parsch draws our attention to six points which are condensed:

- (a) The gift represents the person of each individual giver.
- (b) The Offertory gifts of bread and wine are symbolic; that is, in their very nature they stand for something. Bread represents labour. Wine, the product of the press, stands for suffering and endurance. We bring the offering of our life.
- (c) The Offertory procession brings out the social or community spirit. All together the individual personal gifts make one united offering.
- (d) The bread and wine brought to the altar are to be transubstantiated into Christ; they represent us who are to be transfigured into Christ.
- (e) *The meaning expressed in the Offertory is the meaning of the entire Mass*, that is, the offering of self.
- (f) It is not simply self-offering, but self-offering in union with the self-offering of our Lord. In the ancient Offertory procession the faithful brought each one his personal gifts, and it was laid

⁵ On the complicated history of the offertory procession Fr Jungman's *Missarum Solemnia* may be consulted. (French translation II, 271-298.)

upon the altar which represents Christ. Thus, as it were, they mounted the cross with him. This is the deepest meaning of the Offertory; Christ's sacrifice is our sacrifice, and ours is his.⁶

3. Another aspect of the Mass as source and centre of the liturgy is seen when we consider the Mass as our sacrificial banquet through which God gives nourishment to the soul. At the Last Supper, our Lord fulfilled his promises to give his Body and Blood as food and drink, personally serving the apostles and, at the same time, establishing the liturgy by which every man could come to him. Among most peoples, there was at least one rite in which the victim offered to the deity was returned entire or in part to the donors that they might consider themselves guests at table or members of the household; partaking of food which was now identified with the deity, they might share his nature. Our Lord made it clear that it was his intention to give himself really, not figuratively.

The liturgy is the communication of divine life and the sacrificial banquet is the surest and the most divinely intimate means of nourishing that life. Saint Thomas says that we keep our ideas on Communion correct if we consider it as food with its five functions. Food sustains life, enables the organism to develop properly, builds up resistance to disease, cures many ailments, and gives pleasure. Significantly, our Lord told Jairus and his wife to give the child food.

4. The Mass is the centre towards which all the sacraments are administered. From the quotation of Saint Thomas, it was seen that each sacrament commemorates the Passion of our Lord and finds the source of its grace in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Towards the offering of that sacrifice all the sacraments are administered. Baptism gives us supernatural life, makes us children of God and sharers in the *priesthood* of Christ. As soon as we reach the age of reason, we must actively exercise this function of offering the sacrifice. Theologians, considering our Lord's dictum, 'Except ye eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, ye shall not have life in you', teach that Baptism implies 'Communion of desire' which fulfils the obligation for those prevented from ever receiving the Holy Eucharist.

Confirmation, maturing us spiritually, gives us a greater share in our Lord's *priesthood*, gives us the strength to live and to die,

6 Pius Parsch, *The Liturgy of the Mass*. St Louis, 1937, pp. 57-58.

violently perhaps, united to our Lord's sharing of himself on the Cross and in the Mass. Penance is the individual application of the fruits of Calvary and, if there has been mortal sin, this sacrament is necessary before one can participate in the sacrificial banquet. Extreme Unction helps the soul in its last struggle by supplying our Lord's power won on Calvary to the co-operation which the body finds difficult to give. Holy Orders, by its very title, proclaims that the primary purpose of ordination is the Mass. Its administration, even for the lower orders, is within the Mass structure. Matrimony is also in line. In the February 1953 issue of *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*, there was a beautiful article on the Nuptial Mass as integrally, though not essentially, linked with the marriage ceremony where the bride and groom unite the sacrifice they are making to each other for mutual love with the Sacrifice of Christ united with his Spouse.

In the concrete, if we remind ourselves of the relation of the Requiem Mass to Extreme Unction, recall the Reconciliation of Penitents on Maundy Thursday, the administration of Baptism and Confirmation in the services of the Easter and Pentecost Vigils, we see how the Holy Sacrifice is associated with these sacraments.

5. The Mass is also the action towards which the Divine Office is directed. The study of the Liturgical Year shows the Divine Office as extension of the Proper of the Mass which furnishes the prayer setting for the Holy Sacrifice. Beginning at Vespers the evening before the feast, and continuing at calculated intervals until Sext, the Office uses much of the proper of the Mass to point up the Psalms, to seed the mind with phrases that evoke memories and that prepare our dispositions for full participation in the Mass. None shows that these thoughts have matured in the context of the Mass. Second Vespers, repeating some antiphons of the day before and adding new ones for the coming feast, effects continuity in the setting of the Sacrifice which never ceases to be celebrated somewhere on the globe.

6. The Mass uses many sacramentals in its celebration; the others are used in our daily life as we live out the Mass. Some sacramentals are practically incorporated into the proper of the Mass—the candles at Christmas, the ashes on Ash Wednesday, palms on Palm Sunday, the Paschal candle at Eastertide, and so on. Others are outside the Mass but associated with it, such as the blessing of throats with St Blaise's candle, and the Christmas crib. Some

sacramentals are used in the ordinary of the Mass such as the altar stone, crucifix, vessels, linens, vestments, candles, book, cards, bread, wine, incense, words, gestures.

7. The Mass actualizes the Mysteries celebrated during the Liturgical Year; but that topic requires special development.

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