

THE PATTERN OF SACRIFICE

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PSYCHOLOGISTS, especially Jungians, have drawn our attention to the fact that in the myths and legends of the ancient world, and in the rites and ceremonies of primitive peoples, there is a recurrent pattern, varying in the arrangement of the pieces, but always conveying the same idea. There is a hero who challenges darkness, dragons, or deep waters, is slain, and rises, communicating new life to all his fellows. The hero-victim is more strong and glorious after his conquest, the light shines more brightly after its conflict with darkness, and the waters that close over the victim's head become the womb from which he is re-born, a man more complete and perfect than he was before.

The pattern is deeper down in the universe than the myths that express it. The earth itself subsists by a process of decay and renewal, of species striving after perfection, and the vegetable world repeats almost monotonously its theme of seed-time and harvest, fall, and winter sleep. Probably the scientist sees a repetition of the same design in the miniature worlds his microscope reveals.

What does it mean, and where does it come from? Nothing so constant could be meaningless. The facts are there, and if they give rise to fancies the fancies only serve to underline them. Why should birth, death, and re-birth, struggle and conquest, be world themes? If the pattern existed only at the level of rational beings they might perhaps have invented it, but they have not the power to impress it upon lower beings, in spite of the human tendency to project human qualities on to animal and inanimate surroundings. If will-less and mindless beings display a particular pattern then it must be impressed on them by the determining mind of God. Life and death are constants, and while they remain it seems pretty certain that the same principle of defeat and triumph will gloom and glow, and while non-Christians may see in the death of Christ, and his subsequent triumph in the world-wide Church, only the clearest example of the universal myth, Christians may ask themselves whether this myth is not based on the fact that the death and resurrection of the Lord is the

mainstay of creation. We know only a little of what redemption really means, and what effect it has on the substance of the earth, but we know the whole material universe is redeemed by being caught up to God in the material body of the Saviour. Not only does he not disdain what he has made but he embraces it in a manner past human comprehension.

But Christ was born to be sacrificed, and if we could extricate ourselves for a moment from the web of time we might see the sacrificial pattern spreading through seasonal decay and renewal, and even through the bloody struggles between beasts, like ripples widening out from that tremendous act when, as Moses cast sweetening wood into the bitter waters, God casts himself upon the cross into the bitterness of a sin-stained world.

We cannot measure the destruction caused by sin, but we know the 'holy thing' that was torn by whips and nails on Good Friday was the very flower of creation, the prototype of every human perfection. World's sacrifice fulfils and repeats world pattern, but would world's pattern be what it is if the Lamb had not been slain in sacrifice ever since time began? Christ's life, death, and resurrection are set in history, but every life has its effect on the whole life of mankind, and his redeems all time. Today, yesterday, and all tomorrows are gathered up to God in him, and God knows time simply, without division, in the light of his eternity.

The history of deliberate sacrifice seems to be co-terminous with human history. Whatever men have understood 'God' to mean, their dependence on him as their principle has always been expressed by offering sacrifice, and though it seems that there was always a people of God, from Adam to Christ, officially entrusted with the task of keeping the world united to him by sacrifice, yet the idea of priesthood and sacrificial offering is universal. It was not enough that God should safeguard the moral law by revealing in the decalogue what men would have known by nature if their minds had not been warped by sin. The law of worship too had to be preserved, and though the mass is a divine institution, a supernatural act accessible to faith alone, it could scarcely have been instituted if the idea of sacrifice had not been kept alive. As St John the Baptist summed up in himself the idea of the old law as precursor to the new, so the sacrifices of the old law may be seen as the direct preparation for the sacrifice of Calvary, and

its unbloody offering in the mass; but that is not enough. The mass is a wider, more all-embracing sacrifice than any Hebrew offering, and every sacrifice, however crude, was its veiled herald. Modern people recoil in horror at some accounts of ancient sacrifices (maybe we should have recoiled from the shocking sight of Calvary), but to God they may appear as the clumsy attempts of his younger children, trying with imperfect knowledge and skill to do what men should do. Acts that seem to us atrocious may seem to him as having a real likeness to the perfect sacrifice of Christ, through whom, although he was unknown to them, the prayers of pagans mounted up to God.

Perhaps the ascetic teaching of the past few hundred years, and some of the teaching of the Fathers too, has blurred the value of a truly natural act. For St Thomas it is good habits that are natural, vices that contradict the nature of human beings. This truth stands stressing, for we tend to think of good as something we can achieve only by quarrelling with nature and treading it underfoot; yet the real value of ascetic discipline is not that it overthrows but rather that it restores wounded nature, like an astringent tonic. And is it only wounded nature that demands reasonable abstinence? Wouldn't the world pattern of sour-sweet, hard-soft, a-dazzle-dim, have existed even if no man had ever sinned? The aim of asceticism is not repression but fulfilment, even when it moves along the thorniest paths of denial and deprivation. On the whole the lives of saints, however strange, impress us by their fullness rather than their emptiness. They do queer things, especially in their first attempts to set themselves free from clutter, but their poverty is not mean, shabby, or narrow. Their lives are like the Christian symbol of a cross not just surmounting a globe but going right through it so as to be its axis. Pruning is healthy, not wasteful.

Primitive pagans understood this very well, but modern pagans, and to some extent modern Christians, who after all have to share in the life of the world as they find it, have too little love of life to bear the touch of the knife. They clutch it fearfully, tensely, but without joy because they are rootless. They hang, as it were, in space, without a God to look up to or an understanding of the earth beneath their feet. Is it because the natural link between the two has been broken, and they no longer take earthly things and raise them towards heaven, bridging the

gap both ways? The Church exists to offer sacrifice, and to preserve the idea of sacrifice on earth is to preserve the very shape of human nature.

Sacrifice and sacrament are so closely united as to be inseparable, and both meet a human need, and express a human condition. There are compassionate men in the world who ask like the disciples of old: 'Whence can a man satisfy these men with bread here in the wilderness?' They do not know that there is corn in Egypt, stored in a granary that never fails.

The reality of physical famine, and of whole nations living on the brink of starvation, must not blind us to the fact that the richest nation may be spiritually hungry. Materialism as a philosophy has nothing to do with riches or poverty but it breeds more quickly in the extremes of either, and even those who would sturdily deny and oppose it find it seeps in like fine dust. Un-directed seeking for an antidote has led to a sometimes delirious interest in natural mysticism of all sorts, but the cure is as bad as the complaint. It still divides men, forgetting the essential body-soul unity, and encouraging soul to preen itself at body's expense.

Christ's way is different. The gospels say he made men whole, but was it not because he gave them back both their natural roots and a freedom to stretch up to the height of heaven? In sacrament and sacrifice the entire man finds full satisfaction for body and soul. Sacraments are not only *for* us but remarkably like us. We are bodies ensouled, or spirits that know and act through bodies; they are sensible signs, giving us audible or tangible assurance of grace conveyed. It is through things lower than our own bodies, simple inanimate things, that we receive the highest graces. There is a lovely curve here, a grand embrace, drawing together lowest and highest—earth, where the wheat grows, rain-fed and sun-ripened, and heaven. Man, who belongs to both, can look up securely, without being embarrassed by his own earthiness.

Redemption ties up with creation, and though that may seem too obvious to be worth writing, obvious things can be forgotten. Christians grow up with the idea that God made them, and almost grow out of it, but what a thing it is to be created! It is a matter of faith, of course, but one that tends to be assented to with a brisk nod on the way to the sacraments. Yet until we begin to

think about it, and to realize that God, with the deliberation of a supreme artist, conceived us individually in his mind, we hardly know that we are persons, and the phrase 'God loves us' floats on a sort of void. Foundation truths, like the ground we walk on, tend to be overlooked while we admire the view, and yet there, in the origin of things, the sacrificial pattern is laid down.

It seems to be assumed sometimes that if there had been no sin there would have been no sacrifice, no thread of scarlet running through the gold. That is not St Thomas's idea, for in the *Summa Theologiae* he insists that sacrifice is a natural act, something all men instinctively know to be right, and from which human beings can escape only if they lose part of their humanity. His definition of sacrifice is worth a lot of study for its few words are packed like a folded fan, opening out wide and stirring the air refreshingly.

It differs, he says, from mere offering, because something is done to what is offered, but the doing is not necessarily or primarily the killing of a victim. Something is made holy, given over to God in an unqualified way, made holy by him, and for him, at the petition of the offerers.

In a modern nursery or infant school little children are taught largely by doing. They are not expected to learn by hearing only, but by using all their senses, and all at once if possible. We admit the goodness of such teaching methods, but why are they good if not because they are natural in the sense of corresponding with some permanent reality that belongs not only to the children but to all human beings, at any stage of development? We have no choice in the matter. We have to know by means of sense, and can express our thoughts and desires only through sensible acts. The pure intellectual is not a man but an angel—yet even angels have had to learn sign language, so to speak, since God became incarnate. They too must worship a being of flesh and blood, and a mysterious fragment of bread which that being says is his body. The incarnation renews something that exists. It is God doing something with what he has made, something tremendous, but not destroying or over-ruling the first creation. Matter is real, not artificial, and dear to God because he made it. Like the infants we can learn only by a kind of doing, and tell God by plain acts that we know he is our beginning and our last end, and that we are glad to own ourselves, and all we have, to be his, depending

utterly on him. He does not need to be told but it is only by telling him that we come to a living knowledge of it ourselves.

The outward act of course is not enough. If the words we say are not meant to express what is in our minds we lie. In the same way the outward sacrifice must express the deepest conviction of our minds, the direction of our wills, or at least the direction we would like them to have; otherwise it is a mockery.

What is this sense we have of owing God a death? Why is it that sacrifice is so often thought of only as a knife plunged into the heart of humanity? The pattern of the world is a chequering of life and death, and yet the killing of a victim is not the essence of sacrifice. Even Christ's death is a sacrifice because of something other than his crucifixion. The death he freely endured is the sacred sign of his entire consecration to God, and by it he shows the divine will that all men should be made holy. But redemption does not stop short at death, any more than the world pattern aims at destruction or leaves us to suppose that suicide is a natural goal. The end of all the sacrifices offered by men is not death but friendship with life at its source—God.

The all-containing, all-fulfilling sacrifice of Calvary has its fruit in the final conquest of death, and Christ, being raised from the dead, gives life to the world not in some hazy and distant future but here and now. The hero-victim dies, and his death, like his birth, affects the whole created universe. In a sense there is no death but his, for his death swallows up all mortality, however hideous the deaths we have still to witness or undergo. If there had been no sin the scarlet thread might not have been needed to throw up the gold, but man's first need would always have been God's friendship, and the creaturely seeking of it by the open sign of sacrifice.

But we must neither narrow it, nor give it a dreary tinge as if nothing pleasant could be a means of holiness. Whatever can be offered to God as a sign of friendship, and that means everything except unrepented sin, can be a sacrifice. The proper note is lively, even festive, dance music almost, for who should rejoice so much as those who have become the friends of Life? Any virtue, St Thomas writes, assumes the character of sacrifice when it is done in order that we may cling to God in holy fellowship. But virtues are not confined to great acts and solemn occasions. They may be little things, brief courtesies, pleasure at another's

success, all the friendly give and take of life. No need, in St Thomas's view, to be tiresomely pious about it. If we want God's friendship, and make the sign he tells us to make before him, then our acts, like Bo-peep's sheep, can be left to come home by themselves. They are the fragments that remain, the left-overs as it were of the mass, gathered up by our Lord himself, and included in his offering to the Father.

THE SPIRIT IN THE WORLD—I

An African Catholic Action

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ALAY organization whose major work is the giving of closed retreats is exceptional enough to be interesting. Such is the Banyakaroli movement to be found in parts of Tanganyika. This organization has changed somewhat during its existence but only in the sense that as a need was found the movement adapted itself to meet it.

The story began in 1941 when a Father Heise was at Kashozi, Tanganyika. This priest examined the local Catholic Action organization critically and decided that it had no influence in the parish, that its members were all getting on in years, their zeal had diminished and they were unable to adapt themselves to the problems of the younger generation. Considering that a complete renewal was necessary Father Heise selected three young married men to be the core of a new movement and sent them out to the villages to gain recruits. The nucleus were trained through a monthly day of recollection, observed in complete silence and followed by an instruction.

The aim of the new group was to assist the missionaries in a drive for a renewal of fervour in the parish. This was a necessity, for the record of this area at that time was of a falling-off of attendance at mass and the sacraments and an increase in the number of broken marriages.

The new movement had some seventy members during its