

THE PRIESTHOOD AND THE EUCHARIST

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HERE is a most intimate connection between the priesthood and the Holy Eucharist. *Priest* and *sacrifice* are correlative terms; the very notion of priesthood includes that of sacrifice. A sacrifice, strictly defined, is the supreme public and external act of divine worship by which the sensible offering of a victim is made to God, in recognition of His supreme dominion over all creation, and, in the supposition of sin, to express consciousness of sin and hope of pardon. A priest is the officially appointed minister of the highest act of divine worship, which is sacrifice. There can be no sacrifice offered, unless there is a priest to offer it.

The sacrifice of Christ on the Cross of Calvary was the one absolute and universal sacrifice. All the sacrifices of the Old Law were types of this supreme sacrifice; they culminated in it, and were abrogated by it. The sacrifice of the New Law is that of the Mass, which is one and the same sacrifice as that of the Cross, instituted by Christ to satisfy mankind's need for sacrifice, and as the means whereby the fruits of Redemption might be applied to men for the remission of their daily sins.¹ The Mass is a representation and a renewal of the offering made on Calvary. The Council of Trent teaches: "In this divine sacrifice the same Christ is present and immolated in an unbloody manner on the altar of the cross; . . . only the manner of offering is different."² Consequently it is from Christ's death on Calvary that the Mass derives its efficacy.

THE PRIESTHOOD OF THE CROSS IS THE PRIESTHOOD OF THE MASS

In that first universally effective sacrifice on the Cross, Christ Himself was both the priest and the victim. In the unbloody sacrifice of the Mass, the victim is the same Christ, true God and true man, who offered Himself on Calvary. The principal priest who offers the sacrifice of the Mass is also the same Christ.³ Our priests are ministers only, offering sacrifice in the person of Christ and executing His will.

¹ Cf. Council of Trent, sess. XXII, chap. 1. Denz. 938.

² *Ibid.*, chap. 2. Denz. 940.

The power by which they are made capable of validly offering sacrifice is instrumental power in which they participate in the sacrificial action of Christ Himself, the Most High and Eternal Priest. Hence, human priests act only in virtue of the power of the principal agent, our Lord Himself. Christ does not offer Himself in this sacrifice remotely, but immediately and proximately, in so far as He consecrates Himself as the victim through the minister who is His instrument. It is for this reason that the priest at Mass uses the very words of Christ in the person of Christ, saying "This is *my* body" and "This is *my* blood." "The minister," writes St. Thomas, "does nothing in perfecting the sacrament, except to pronounce the words of Christ."³

The sacrifice of the Mass differs from that of the Cross only in the mode of offering. The mode in which Christ exists in the Mass is obviously quite different from His mode of existence on the Cross. For on the Cross, Christ was in His own natural existence: He was visible, and able to suffer and to die. In the Holy Eucharist, our Divine Saviour conceals His natural existence: He is not visible except through the species of bread and wine, and by reason of His state He is not passible or mortal. The mode of offering on the Cross was bloody, but in the Mass it is in an unbloody manner that the bloody sacrifice on Calvary is reproduced. This is the reason for the consecration under the separate species "to represent Christ's Passion, in which the blood was separated from the body; hence in the form for the consecration of the blood, mention is made of its shedding."⁵ The Eucharist then, is a sacrifice because the Passion of Christ is represented in it. St. Thomas brings this out most effectively in his prayer for the feast of Corpus Christi: "O God, who has left us in this marvelous sacrament a memorial of thy Passion . . ." On the Cross, Christ was the only priest. In the Mass, He is still the principal and invisible priest; but in order to have a fitting sacrifice for his visible Church, He uses priests as visible ministers. Through them Christ offers Himself and is offered by them. Their instrumental priesthood is real; the human priest at the altar truly offers sacrifice to God, and fulfills in every sense the functions of a real priesthood.

A priest, then, is one who offers sacrifice; and with our priests, the sacrifice is that of Christ's Body and Blood in the Mass. There are many other offices which are connected with the Catholic priesthood: the administration of the various sacraments besides the Holy Eucha-

³ Cf. Lateran Council, chap. 1. Denz. 340.

⁴ III, q. 78, a. 1.

⁵ III, q. 76, a. 2, ad 2.

rist, along with the powers and duties to pray, to bless, to preach, to teach, and to do everything possible to accomplish the end for which the Church was established among men: the salvation of souls. These activities of the priestly state are manifold; yet one thing, and one thing alone, makes a priest a priest: the power to offer sacrifice. If a man had every other power associated with the priesthood, but lacked the power of sacrifice, he could in no sense be called a priest. But if a man were to have no other power except that of offering sacrifice, he would be a priest in the most proper sense. It is the celebration of Mass—the consecration of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ—which is the essence of the Catholic priesthood. Everything else is secondary.

THE INSTITUTION OF THE PRIESTHOOD AND THE EUCHARIST

When our Lord instituted the two sacraments of the Holy Eucharist and Holy Orders, He demonstrated how closely interwoven they are. The sacrament of Holy Orders, embracing all the powers of the Christian priesthood, was not instituted all at once or at any one time, but partly at the Last Supper, when Christ gave the Apostles the power to consecrate;⁶ partly after the Resurrection, when He gave them the power of forgiving sins;⁷ and, again, when He established them as shepherds of the Church.⁸ While all these powers pertain to the sacrament of Holy Orders, they do not pertain to the priesthood in its strictest sense, which involves the notion of sacrifice as a necessary element. Christ instituted the priesthood in its entirety, at the Last Supper, at the same time that He instituted the Blessed Sacrament of His Body and Blood. St. Paul indicates the intimacy of the priesthood and the Eucharist when He tells how the Eucharist is really the Body and Blood of Christ and how at the same time the Apostles and their successors were empowered to perpetuate the act: "The Lord Jesus, on the night in which he was betrayed, took bread and giving thanks broke and said, 'This is my body which shall be given up for you; *do this in remembrance of me.*' In like manner also the cup, after he had supped, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; *do this as often as you shall drink it, in remembrance of me.*' For as often as you shall eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the

⁶ Cf. Council of Trent, sess. XXII, chap. 1. Denz. 938.

⁷ John 20, 21 seq.

⁸ Matt. 28, 19.

Lord, until he comes.”⁹ The very words with which Christ ordained His Apostles the first priests, followed instantaneously upon the words of the consecration in the first Mass. And today in every Mass offered upon our altars those words of sacerdotal institution are repeated: *Haec quotiescumque feceritis, in mei memoriam facietis*, as the priest proclaims by what right and power he sacrifices the Incarnate Son of God to His Heavenly Father.

Archbishop Cicognani, our eminent and beloved Apostolic Delegate, in a recently published sermon,¹⁰ stressed beautifully this essential conjunction between the priesthood and the Blessed Eucharist:

Among the wonderful gifts that Christ the Redeemer has given to men, two stand out: the divine Eucharist and the Priesthood. Since to priests alone has the divine Eucharist been entrusted, and through priests alone is the divine Eucharist possible, the greatness of the priesthood shines forth in double splendor. The Catholic priesthood has been in existence now for twenty centuries—from the time when Jesus Christ instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper, and consummated His sacrifice shortly afterward on Calvary. . . . Endless is this series of men consecrated to God and the service of souls. Inasmuch as men constitute the Mystical Body of the Lord, and the Eucharist is His real and actual Body, the priest by virtue of his sacred ordination acquires power and jurisdiction over both the Mystical and the real Body of Christ. He calls Christ down upon the altar through the words of consecration; he brings the Savior to the souls of men; he is the ambassador of Christ and the dispenser of the divine mysteries. The priest teaches men the truths given for salvation, guards the deposit of faith, spreads the Gospel through preaching and the apostolate. With his sacred teaching office and ministry, the priest is a bridge between earth and heaven, admonishing, consoling, and accompanying man through all the stages of life from baptism to the last anointing.

THE PRIESTHOOD AND THE OTHER SACRAMENTS

The power conferred in Holy Orders extends to the dispensation of the other sacraments. This sacrament has a social character in which it differs from the personal sacraments, which are designed for the sanctification of the individual through grace. The increase of personal grace, which ordination effects, comes about only as a consequence; the sacrament is ordered directly to manifest transmission of

⁹ I Cor. 11, 23-27.

¹⁰ The Most Reverend Amleto Giovanni Cicognani, *Addresses and Sermons (1942-1951)*. Sermon entitled “Ambassadors of Christ” delivered at La Crosse, Wisconsin, October 17, 1948, on the occasion of the ground-breaking for Holy Cross Seminary.

power and to confer it permanently. Holy Orders, therefore, is ordained to a social good: Christ in the Eucharist.

Among all the sacraments, the Holy Eucharist is the most noble, and in it every other sacrament has its consummation. St. Thomas, in asking "Whether the Eucharist is the greatest of the Sacraments?" clearly shows how all the other sacraments seem to be ordained to the Eucharist as to their one end:

For it is manifest that the sacrament of Orders is ordained to the consecration of the Eucharist: and the sacrament of Baptism to the reception of the Eucharist: while a man is perfected by Confirmation, so as not to fear to abstain from this sacrament. By Penance and Extreme Unction man is prepared to receive the Body of Christ worthily. And Matrimony, at least in its signification, touches this sacrament; in so far as it signifies the union of Christ with the Church, of which union the Eucharist is a figure. . . . Nearly all the sacraments terminate in the Eucharist: thus those who have been ordained receive Holy Communion, as also do those who have been baptized, if they be adults. The remaining sacraments may be compared to one another in several ways. For on the ground of necessity, Baptism is the greatest of the sacraments; while from the point of view of perfection, Holy Orders comes first; while Confirmation holds a middle place. The sacraments of Penance and Extreme Unction are on a degree inferior to those mentioned above; because they are ordained to the Christian life, not directly, but accidentally, as it were, that is to say, as remedies against supervening defects. And among these, Extreme Unction is compared to Penance, as Confirmation to Baptism; in such a way, that Penance is more necessary, whereas Extreme Unction is more perfect.¹¹

As we have seen, the power of Orders is directed to the dispensing of the other sacraments; and of all the sacraments, the Holy Eucharist is the most sublime and perfect. In the light of this, it is evident that the power of Holy Orders must be considered chiefly in its relation to the Holy Eucharist. Since the power of Sacred Orders extends to the production of Christ's Body and of its distribution to the faithful, it follows that the same power should extend to the preparation of the faithful, in order that they be fittingly disposed for the reception of so great a sacrament. Sin is the basic indisposition for the reception of a sacrament which is the unutterable antithesis of sin; hence the faithful are made worthy to receive the Blessed Sacrament by being freed from the guilt of sin. Without this freedom from sin, spiritual union with the sinless Christ is impossible. Consequently, the power of Orders must extend to the forgiveness of sins, by the administration of those sacraments which are directed to the remission

¹¹ III, q. 65, a. 3; cf. q. 73, a. 3, and *In Joann.* 6, lect. 6, n. 7.

of sin: Baptism and Penance. Our Lord, therefore, once He had entrusted to His Apostles the consecration of His Body, gave them also the power to forgive sins.¹²

THE PARTS OF HOLY ORDERS ARE ORDERED
TO THE EUCHARIST

In the Roman Church ever since the earliest centuries, there have been seven parts or seven separate orders making up the whole of the sacrament of Holy Orders. The sacrament of Holy Orders is a potential whole, with each of its distinct parts or orders participating in various degrees in the nature of the whole. There are four minor orders: doorkeeper, lector, exorcist, and acolyte; and three major orders: subdeacon, deacon, and priest. There is frequent mention of bishops, priests, and deacons in the Scriptures. Pope Cornelius, in the year 251, in a letter to Fabius of Antioch in which he enumerated the Roman clergy, specified for the first time in any known document all the orders as they are at present in the Church. Previous to this, Tertullian mentioned lectors in his writings; St. Hippolytus of Rome spoke of the lectorate and the subdiaconate; St. Cyprian wrote of a minor clergy. The subdiaconate and the minor orders do not seem to have appeared before the third century. It should be noted that, although these inferior orders did not appear at once in the very earliest years of the Church, nevertheless they can be of divine institution, for they existed implicitly in the diaconate, and they participate in the sacramental character of the diaconate. The Church, in constituting them, did not institute a new sacrament; it explicitly distributed among several orders the power which had been contained implicitly in one order. In this regard, St. Thomas writes: "In the early Church, on account of the fewness of ministers, all the lower ministries were entrusted to the deacons. . . . Nevertheless all the power to do all these things was included in the one power of the deacon, though implicitly. But afterwards the divine worship developed, and the Church committed expressly to several persons that which had hitherto been committed implicitly to one order."¹³

St. Thomas assigns three reasons why it is fitting that there should be many orders in the Church: "Multiplicity was introduced into the Church for three reasons. First to show forth the wisdom of God, which is reflected in the orderly distinction of things both natural and spiritual. . . . Secondly, in order to succor human weakness, be-

¹² Cf. *Contra Gentiles*, Bk. IV, Chap. 74, 75.

¹³ *Suppl.*, q. 37, a. 2, ad 2.

cause it would be impossible for one man, without his being heavily burdened, to fulfill all things pertaining to the Divine mysteries; and so various orders are severally appointed to the various offices. . . . Thirdly, that men may be given a broader way for advancing (to perfection), seeing that the various duties are divided among many men, so that all become the co-operators of God; than which nothing is more God-like."¹⁴

In an article of great beauty, the Angelic Doctor shows the relation of each of these seven orders to the greatest of the sacraments, the Holy Eucharist. The significance of these different grades of Holy Orders is determined and explained by their relationship to the Eucharist.

For just as temple, altar, vessels, and vestments need to be consecrated, so do the ministers who are ordained for the Eucharist; and this consecration is the sacrament of Orders. Hence the distinction of Orders is derived from their relation to the Eucharist. For the power of Orders is directed either to the consecration of the Eucharist itself, or to some ministry in connection with this sacrament of the Eucharist. If in the former way, then it is the Order of *priests*; hence when they are ordained, they receive the chalice and wine, and the paten with the bread, because they are receiving the power to consecrate the body and blood of Christ. The co-operation of the ministers is directed either to the sacrament itself, or to the recipients. If the former, this happens in three ways. For in the first place, there is the ministry whereby the minister co-operates with the priest in the sacrament itself, by dispensing, but not by consecrating, for this is done by the priest alone; and this belongs to the *deacon*. Hence in the text (iv *Sent.* D. 24) it is said that it belongs to the deacon to minister to the priests in whatever is done in Christ's sacraments, wherefore he dispenses Christ's blood. Secondly, there is the ministry directed to the disposal of the sacramental matter in the sacred vessels of the sacrament; and this belongs to *subdeacons*. Wherefore it is stated in the text (*ibid.*) that they carry the vessels of our Lord's body and blood, and place the oblation on the altar; hence, when they are ordained, they receive the chalice, empty however, from the bishop's hands. Thirdly, there is the ministry directed to the proffering of the sacramental matter, and this belongs to the *acolyte*. For he, as stated in the text (*ibid.*), prepares the cruet with wine and water; wherefore he receives an empty cruet. The ministry directed to the preparation of the recipients can be exercised only over the unclean, since those who are clean are already apt for receiving the sacraments. Now the unclean are of three kinds, according to Dionysius. For some are absolute unbelievers and unwilling to believe; and these must be altogether debarred from beholding Divine things and from the assembly of the faithful; this belongs to the *doorkeepers*. Some, however, are willing to believe, but are not as yet instructed, namely catechumens, and to the instruction of such persons the Order

¹⁴ Suppl., q. 37, a. 1.

of *readers* is directed, who are therefore entrusted with the reading of the first rudiments of the doctrine of faith, namely the Old Testament. But some are believers and instructed, yet lie under an impediment through the power of the devil, namely those who are possessed: and to this ministry the Order of *exorcists* is directed. Thus the reason and number of the degrees of Orders is made clear.¹⁵

THE INEFFABLE DIGNITY OF THE EUCHARIST

The Holy Eucharist—Christ Himself as our food—is God’s greatest gift to men. It is impossible to extol the magnificence and dignity of this supreme sacrament in terms which adequately express the reality. It is the gift of the divine Christ Himself. This is sacramental, living food which has come down to us from heaven. The inspired text of the Book of Wisdom, in praising God for the deliverance of the Israelites from the power of the Egyptians, speaks of the manna which foreshadowed this most Holy Sacrament: “Thou didst feed thy people with the food of angels, and gavest them bread from heaven, prepared without labor; having in it all that is delicious and the sweetness of every taste.”¹⁶ This is the bread which our Lord, to the utter astonishment of His followers, identified with Himself, after He had fed the five thousand from five barley loaves and two fishes: “I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the desert, and have died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that if anyone eat of it he will not die. I am the living bread that has come down from heaven. If anyone eat of this bread he shall live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.”¹⁷

The Holy Eucharist is the most august of sacraments because it is the most perfect sacrifice by which God is adored and glorified. The dignity of the gift of Christ’s Body becomes overwhelmingly impressive when thought is given to the three most precious elements of which it consists: the unspotted flesh of our Redeemer, His just soul, and His infinite Godhead: God in Christ, soul and body; the Saviour of the world: undiminished Deity, yet true man. Our sacrifice excels

¹⁵ Suppl., q. 37, a. 2. Cf. *Contra Gentiles*, Bk. IV, Chap. 75. References to the *text* means the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. It will be recalled that St. Thomas died before he finished the *Summa*. The unfinished part, known as the *Supplement*, was gathered from St. Thomas’ commentary on the Fourth Book of the *Sentences*; hence, the frequent allusions to this work.

¹⁶ Wisd. 16, 20.

¹⁷ John 6, 48-52.

all others because it is perfectly acceptable to God—it is the sacrifice of His own Son, revered by angels and adored by men.¹⁸

In the preparation, disposition, and ordination of this Blessed Bread, God included so many and such great miracles that we are reminded of the creation of the world. "He has made a memorial of His wonderful works, being a gracious and merciful Lord. He has given food to them that revere Him."¹⁹ The psalmist refers to the precious food of the glorious sacrament which Christ gave to His disciples. To understand the excellence and loftiness and dignity of this marvelous sacrament, it must be noted that, although all the sacraments of the Church have their power and effect through faith in the Passion of Christ, and only from faith and through faith are of use to the faithful for salvation, the Holy Eucharist is called most specially the sacrament of faith. In the Canon of the Mass it is called "the mystery of faith," indicating that it is a most holy secret manifest to faith alone; there are such great things present in the Eucharist that they are beyond natural reason and could never be understood by reason alone. Our intellect is not proportioned to the immensity of the divine light. There are many things which we cannot comprehend by reason. On this account Paul cries out: "O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God! How incomprehensible are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways."²⁰ Although we cannot comprehend the Eucharist in its entirety, we can come to a feeble grasp of its significance.²¹ It is this very incomprehensibility of the Holy Eucharist which gives it the greatest dignity in our eyes. We understand enough to acknowledge that it is too wonderful for us to understand. Yet we realize God's goodness to us in this divine gift, which prompted St. Thomas to cry out in the magnificent mosaic of Scripture which is the Office of Corpus Christi: "There is no other nation so great, which has gods so near to it, as our God is present to us."²²

THE SUBLIME DIGNITY OF THE PRIESTHOOD

The nobility of the Catholic priesthood is measured by the transcendent dignity of the sacrifice the priest is empowered to offer. We

¹⁸ Cf. *Opusculum LVIII*, Editio Romana, *De Venerabili Sacramento Altaris*, Chap. III (Mandonnet and Grabmann regard this as spuriously attributed to St. Thomas).

¹⁹ Ps. 110, 4, 5.

²⁰ Rom. 11, 33.

²¹ Cf. *Opusculum LIX*, Editio Romana, *De sacramento Eucharistiae ad modum praedicamentorum*, Chap. I (Mandonnet and Grabmann regard this as spuriously attributed to St. Thomas).

²² Deut. 4, 7. Seventh Responsory of Matins, Feast of Corpus Christi.

have seen that the essential phase of the priestly ministry is centered about the Blessed Sacrament: the consecration of Christ's Body and Blood in the Mass, and its distribution to the faithful as Holy Communion. We have seen, too, that the Holy Eucharist is the most eminent of created things containing in itself substantially the uncreated God in Christ as our food. When we put these two considerations together, we begin to realize the sublime dignity of the Catholic priesthood. We become aware of the tremendous power that is the priest's, greater than the power of any other earthly creature, greater than the power of saints or angels, exceeding the power even of the Virgin Mary. Mary's priesthood brought God to earth but once; the priest brings Christ down from heaven in every Mass he offers. The power of the priest so transcends the power of every other creature that it is truly God-like.

This year the young men ordained for St. Joseph's Province have the special joy of ordination to the priesthood on the feast of Corpus Christi—the day on which the entire Church praises the Blessed Sacrament in the incomparably beautiful Mass and Office composed by our Dominican Brother, St. Thomas Aquinas. It is their great privilege, together with the bishop, to bring Christ's Body and Blood down upon the altar for the first time in the Mass of their ordination. As they do, the Church in her liturgy will have them pray in the Offertory of that first Mass they celebrate: "The priests of the Lord offer incense and loaves to God, and therefore they shall be holy to their God, and shall not defile His name. Alleluia."²³ The Holy Eucharist is the very heart of the priesthood; may the hearts of our new priests be wholly absorbed in the love of His most precious Body and Blood.

Dominicana reverently congratulates our new Dominican priests, and prayerfully wishes them a long and fruitful ministry in God's service.

²³ Lev. 21, 6.