

ST. THOMAS' EXPLANATION OF THE MASS

With his customary clearness and brevity St. Thomas has given us a most beautiful explanation of the Mass, showing the signification of the various prayers which are said, the reasons for saying such prayers, and the excellent order and arrangement of the parts of the Mass. He first shows how fitting it is that this supreme act of our religion, this sublime mystery around which our entire life is centered, should be accompanied by the most exalted liturgical prayers, the most solemn ceremonies and rites of the Church. All the prayers of the Mass are intended to instruct us and lead us to a better understanding and truer appreciation of this continuation of the sacrifice of Calvary; to tell us of the dignity of the sacrifice and the greatness of the Victim; to explain to us the abundance of graces and blessings which flow into our souls from this act; and to stir up in our hearts feelings of love, devotion and gratitude towards Him who has left us this great heritage.

The Mass is divided into six parts: The Preparation; the instruction of the faithful; the Offertory; the Preface; the Canon, and the Communion. The Preparation has a fourfold division. First, the Introit, which is taken from the Psalms and constitutes a prayer of divine praise. Secondly, the recalling of our present misery and the petition for divine mercy by the saying of the Kyrie Eleison. The significance of this prayer is most striking. We call upon the Holy Trinity, saying Kyrie Eleison three times to the Father, Christe Eleison three times to the Son, and again Kyrie Eleison three times to the Holy Ghost. This cry for mercy is uttered three times that God may deliver us from our "threefold misery of ignorance, guilt and punishment."* Then follows the Gloria in excelsis, by which we are reminded of the eternal glory which shall be our portion after death. Finally, the priest prays for the faithful, that they may be made worthy to assist at the great mystery which is to follow.

The second part of the Mass is the instruction of the faithful concerning this mystery of faith. The lesson, taken from the Prophets or the epistles of the Apostles, constitutes the preparatory instruction of the people, either showing them the manner in which this great sacrifice was prefigured in the Old Testament,

* Summa Theol. P. 3, q. 83, a. 4.

and the longing and expectation with which the Jews looked forward to it, or else pointing out the virtues which should adorn the lives of those privileged to assist at such an august ceremony. After this the people listen to the sublime teachings of the Master Himself, as contained in the Gospel, and then the Symbol of Faith is said that they may acknowledge their belief in all the doctrines taught by Our Divine Saviour. Thus the people, having been fully prepared and instructed, enter upon the celebration of the sacred mystery.

The Offertory is very brief, being made up of two prayers, one an act of praise, signifying the joy of those offering the bread and wine which are to become the precious body and blood of the Divine Victim, and the other the prayer of the priest that this oblation may be acceptable to God.

Then follows the Preface, so called because it is the introduction to the principal part of the Mass, the Canon. The priest begins by asking the people to increase their fervor and devotion, urging them to raise up their hearts to God and render to Him the thanks which are due Him. Then, while all the faithful stand in profound silence, he sings or recites the Preface, that sublime Canticle in which men join with the angels of heaven in praising and glorifying God. It is at the Preface that we are most forcibly reminded of the character of the priest as mediator between God and man. This prayer can be said only by the priest. We see him there as one chosen from amongst the people to stand alone before the throne of God, to offer Him their homage and to plead their cause. At the end of the Preface the celebrant and the people again give expression to the sentiments of joy and gratitude which fill their hearts by lifting up their voices in an exultant prayer of praise and worship of Christ Our Redeemer, extolling His divinity, with the words of the angels: "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts!" and His humanity with the cry of the people of Jerusalem: "Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is He Who cometh in the name of the Lord!"

And now the priest begins the Canon, the essential part of the Mass, wherein takes place the awful mystery in which Christ the Man-God becomes present upon the altar and the sacrifice of Calvary is repeated. From now on, all the prayers are said in secret. Just as of old the High Priest alone drew aside the veil of the temple and entered the Holy of Holies, so now the priest alone and in secret enters upon the celebration of this most

sacred mystery. And as the Jews in the temple remained in the outer room waiting while the High Priest communicated with God in the Holy Place, so also the faithful assisting at Mass take no active part in these solemn rites, but kneel in silent adoration while the Divine Victim is offered at the hands of the priest. There are no more beautiful and inspiring prayers in the entire liturgy of the Church than those of the Canon of the Mass. They are the same in every Mass, and have come down to us practically unchanged from the very earliest ages. Having first poured forth his earnest supplications to Almighty God, Our Blessed Mother, and the saints that the fruits of the Mass may be granted to all the faithful, and in a special manner to those for whom the Mass is offered, the priest slowly and solemnly pronounces the words of consecration used by Christ at the Last Supper: "This is My body; This is My blood." Then having adored Our Divine Saviour present before him on the altar, he continues to pray for those who are assisting at the sacrifice, for the souls of the faithful detained in purgatory, and for himself, whose duty it is to offer the sacrifice.

The sixth part of the Mass is the Communion. The people are prepared for the reception of the sacrament, first by the Lord's Prayer, said by the priest in a loud voice, followed by another secret prayer which he offers for them, that they may be freed from all sin and be made worthy to receive this precious Food. Secondly, "through the Pax, which is given by saying the *Agnus Dei* for this is the sacrament of unity and peace."*

Finally, after having partaken of this Bread of Angels, the priest and people together render thanks to God by saying the Communion and Post Communion prayers. And thus they end the Mass with this common prayer of thanksgiving, after the manner of Christ and His disciples, who recited a hymn when they had finished the Last Supper.

—Richard Walker, O. P.

* Ibid.