

THE SACRAMENTAL VICTIMHOOD OF THE PRIEST

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INTRODUCTION



TWO THOUSAND YEARS before Christ shouldered His Cross up Mt. Calvary, another man with a burden of wood upon his shoulders climbed the Mount "in the land of vision." This young man did not know that the wood he was carrying was intended for his own pyre. He knew that his father was to offer a sacrifice to God, but he wondered what it would be. "Behold fire and wood, where is the victim for the holocaust?" (Gen. 22, 7) His father answered, rather mysteriously, "God will provide Himself a victim for a holocaust, my son." Isaac did not dream that he was to be the victim.

Isaac's life was spared; Christ's was not. Neither are the lives spared of those who are ordained each year under the guidance of the Church; those who are raised above the mount in the land of vision to the supernatural heights of Calvary.

Like Abraham, the Church knows the purpose of her actions. But her command from God is: "do this in commemoration of Me" (Lu. 22, 19). Whereas Abraham went just once to the mount for the sacrifice of his son, the Church goes every year with innumerable sons. Her sons, unlike Isaac, know why they climb to the Mount; they know why they bear the burden upon their shoulders. This knowledge engendered by years of prayer and study builds that dynamic love which carries them forward. They are not bound unawares, but bind themselves with full knowledge of their purpose. These sons of the Church offer themselves in conformity with the spirit of Christ in His sacrifice. They know the wood is for their own sacrifice, hence the question, "where is the victim?" is never asked. To be configured to the victimhood of Christ in the immensity of His charity for souls is their ideal—to "walk in love as Christ also hath loved us and hath delivered Himself for us, an oblation and a sacrifice to God for an odour of sweetness" (Eph. 5, 2). This Pauline counsel is re-echoed by Pope Pius XII in our days, "priests must serve Jesus Christ with

perfect charity and consecrate all their strength to the salvation of their brethren . . . by reproducing in their habits and in their life the living image of Christ."¹

THE IDEAL

The pattern of life set before the priest is that of the priesthood of Christ, which reached its ultimate perfection upon the Cross. Upon the Cross, Christ was, in a manner beyond our intellectual grasp, the perfect victim and the perfect priest. From this dual perfection of Christ the entire rite of the Christian religion was born and vivified. ". . . by His passion He inaugurated the rite of the Christian religion by offering Himself, an 'oblation and a sacrifice to God' (Eph. 5, 2)." (*Summa Theologica*, III, 62, 5). This rite is the sacramental life of the Church ordained to the worship of God and the sanctification of souls. The living image of Christ in the priest, then, is the instrumental power perpetuating and vivifying this Cross-born system of life and dispensing its benefits. Herein lies the sacramental victimhood of the priest: that co-joined with Christ Crucified he becomes a holocaust for love in all its amplitude. "The priest should, therefore, study to reproduce in his own soul the things that are effected upon the altar."²

THE FOUNDATION

Man, of himself, by his own native powers, can by no means attain the realm of supernatural action. Similarly, he finds it morally impossible to dispose himself properly for its attainment. A man is greatly hampered by the defective natural powers he possesses and there is no power within himself capable of raising him one step toward the world of God. Yet, there is in man a certain receptability for such divine action as would elevate him into the world of grace and life. It is upon this passive inclination of the soul, this capacity to be raised by God to the supernatural plane, that grace descends and lifts man up into the realm of divine things—into the sacramental order and mystical life of the Church.

This sacramental life is nothing less than an active and effective participation in the intimate life of God. Grace is a direct communication of divine life from God to the individual soul. The normal channels by which such grace enters into the soul's stream of life are the sacraments of the Church.

¹ *Popes and the Priesthood*, Grail Publ., St. Meinrad, Ind., 1953. pp. 94-95.

² *Ibid.*, p. 87.

These sacraments instituted by Christ encompass the span of man's existence, anticipating his every spiritual need. "The Christian, at almost every important stage of his mortal career finds at his side the priest, with power received from God, in the act of communicating or increasing that grace which is the supernatural life of his soul."³

In the sacramental structure of the Christian religion there is a definite order and purpose. All the sacraments are, in their own way, ordered to the Holy Eucharist as to the more perfect sacrament. This ordination effects a unity between man and God that is unrivalled in simplicity and beauty. All the members of the Body of the Church are drawn and joined together in the bond of the sacraments, especially in the Eucharist, and with Christ all are united in God. "That they all may be one as thou, Father, in Me and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us" (Jn. 17, 21). As we shall show, this ineffable union is achieved in part even here upon earth through the instrumentality of the sacred priesthood and the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

WORSHIP AND PERFECTION

The Divine purpose underlying the sacramental system is the rendering of due worship to God and the perfecting of man's spiritual welfare. God as Creator of all things has the right to determine and to fix the manner in which He desires His creatures to pay homage to His majesty. At the same time, this manner of worship is man's divinely-lighted path to personal sanctity and eternal beatitude. The sole adequate worship due to God is found in the Mass, the Sacrifice of the priestly victimhood of His Son. Here the divine majesty is glorified and honored in a godly fashion. The Father is always pleased with His only-begotten Son. In His Son, all of us through the priest are lifted up to the throne of the Trinity. We are found also to be pleasing to the Father because of our oneness with His Son.

All the sacraments have in common the work of perfecting this oneness with the life of God. Each sacrament bestows uniting grace channeled from the Crucified Christ, the Divine Unifier. But in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist there is an aspect not found in the others. This sacrament of love is a *sacrifice*. "The representation of the passion of the Lord," writes St. Thomas, "is enacted in the very consecration of this sacrament" (III, 80, 7).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

St. Thomas wrote elsewhere, "The Eucharist, by reason of its dignity is the greatest among the sacraments, as all the sacraments are consummated in the Eucharist." (III, 65, 3) It follows then that the oneness with God is chiefly effected for Christians in this sacrament—the focal-point of divine predilection.

ROLE OF THE PRIEST

By reason of the lofty pre-eminence of the sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood, and Its Divine task of unifying all Christian society in God, the position and vocation of the priesthood is unique in a very sacred way. It requires a special sacrament to elevate and to strengthen man in order to perform properly the priestly mission. This is necessitated because the mission of the priest is the same as was the mission of Christ. The monumental work of preserving and perpetuating the oneness spoken of above can in no other way be accomplished except by the priest's sacrifice of self, in his becoming the image of Christ.

Divine strength is conferred upon the priest in the sacrament of Orders enabling him to carry the burden of the Lord. This sacrament sets a man apart, empowering him to act as Christ's coadjutor in dispensing the sacraments and directing public worship to God. This strength which is not of the world, is indicated by the spiritual character imprinted upon the soul of the ordained.

THE MEANS

A sacramental character is a spiritual power ordained to the things which pertain to divine worship. This spiritual power of the sacraments may be of two kinds: either a passive power to receive divine gifts, as in baptism; or an active power to bestow divine gifts on others. This character, as an active power, resides in the cognitive or intellectual faculties of man. And as the intellect by nature is immortal, so also is the character impressed upon it. Yet the "character exists in the soul indelibly, not from any inherent perfection of [the soul], but solely from the perfection of Christ's priesthood, from which it flows as an instrumental power" (III, 63, 5, ad 1). By virtue of the character, the priest operates conjoined and connaturally with the person of Christ in the maintenance of the vitality of the whole organism of the Church. It is that power which enables the mind of the priest to expand to the whole work of salvation with the perspective of the mind of Christ. This perspective of Christ's priest-

ly mind was directed from the height of the Cross. The means to embrace this same Cross and to see with the same perspective of Christ is given to the priest by the sacrament of Orders and its spiritual character.

All the sacraments produce the effects they signify. In baptism, the cleansing by water effects the cleansing of the soul by the grace proper to the sacrament. Likewise in Orders, the imposition of the hands by the bishop signifies the bestowal of priestly power. It is actually accomplished by the grace of the sacrament. It is this sacramental grace operating in the cognitive powers of the priest's soul, through the impressed character, that assists and sustains the priest in his work.

One of the effects of sacramental grace in general is to perfect the soul in all things that pertain to divine worship. In Orders the soul is perfected as the living image of Christ. Such an objective is the terminal-point for all Christians. To conform to Christliness is a common command given to all. Yet by reason of the priestly designation, its distinctive and specific function in Christian living, an urgency is placed upon the priest to enter more deeply and fully into the "mystery of Godliness" (I Tim., 3, 16). The priest, by divine election and by personal determination has chosen as his own, in a public manner, the perfection of Christ, the priest and the victim. The sacramental grace of Orders is necessary for this emulation of Christ, Who was, St. Thomas wrote, "not only priest but also the perfect victim, being at the same time victim for sin, victim for a peace offering, and victim for a holocaust" (III, 22, 2).

Sacramental grace, however, does not work in a void or exclusively by itself. It is a special grace given by God for a definite purpose, and amplifies in a unique manner the state of grace in a soul. The soul becomes capable of additional supernatural acts which formerly it was unable to perform. Even though a soul is baptized, it cannot perform the priestly duty of absolving sins. Baptism constitutes the soul in charity, giving it the entire array of Christian virtues but nothing more; the sacramental grace of Orders adds a capacity to the soul for a new mode of work, the work of Christ, the priest. As in baptism the supernatural virtue of charity is infused to make the soul acceptable to God, so also in the soul of the priest the grace of Orders elevates charity to be acceptable to God in a more definite Christ-likeness.

The charity which the sacramental grace of Orders strengthens must be capable of sustaining the priestly ministry, the con-

tinuation of the victimhood of Christ in time for the salvation of souls. It is by faith and by charity that the priest enters into the dispositions of the soul of Christ hanging upon the Cross. The coupling of the priest's charity, through his sacred character, to the love of Christ perfects the priest as an instrument. It is in such deep charity that he disposes himself to be a victim with Christ, particularly at the moment of consecration. And in this union of two loves, the vast oneness of the Catholic Church is concretized.

VICTIMHOOD

Victimhood, in the Christian sense, is found at the crest of Calvary. Its most perfect embodiment is found in the total destruction of the victim as enacted upon the altars in the Catholic Church. The sacrifice is total, demanding a correspondingly total holocaust.

Christ upon the Cross suffered a total destruction in death. By His express command, this identical total holocaust is repeated in the sacrifice of the Mass by the priest. In the Holy Mass, the self-same divine death on Calvary is re-enacted, though in an unbloody manner. As Christ said, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all things to myself" (Jn. 12, 32), so in the Mass He is again lifted up and, through the instrumentality of the priest, continues to draw all things to Himself. Consequently, the priest's life is specified or denominated by sacrifice and victimhood. "As the life of the Saviour was directed toward the sacrifice of Himself, so the life of a priest . . . ought also to be with Him, and through Him and in Him, a pleasing sacrifice."⁴

These words of Pope Pius XII keynote the two paramount features of the priesthood: its sacrificial nature and its complete subordination as a perfect instrument to the power of Christ. This is indeed the kernel of the priest's sacramental victimhood. The exquisite expression of both the sacrifice of Christ and that of the priest is achieved in the sacrament of sacrifice, the Holy Eucharist.

INSTRUMENT OF GOD

The sum total of a priest's life is his cooperation with Christ for the salvation of the world. But in order to set the victimhood of the priest properly in all its Christ-like splendor, a few basic notions of instrumentality ought to be explained, for instead of

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

diminishing in any way the glory of the priesthood, the doctrine on instrumental causality buttresses its dignity and grand nobility.

The function of an ambassador is to represent his government in a foreign country. There he embodies within his office the same intention and purpose of action as are present within his own home government. The ambassador must reflect the mind of his government. Yet, unless he is empowered by his government and possesses credentials, his presence in a foreign nation is useless. It takes the superior power and authority of his government to establish the ambassador in office. This same government can recall or dismiss him as it will. While he is actually representing his government, the ambassador works by virtue of his government's consent. These two different agents, the ambassador and the government he represents, work as one for a common objective. This is the distinctive feature of instrumental causality. The ambassador, moreover, does not lose his individual characteristics and talents in his work. They retain all their native force and vigor. They are, however, placed at the service of his country for her use.

Instrumental causality always involves the uniting of two distinct agents, one superior to the other, for the purpose of producing an effect, which effect exceeds the natural powers of the inferior agent. The inferior agent attains to the production of this effect by virtue of the power of the superior agent. This inflowing power elevates and ennobles the natural faculties of the instrument to the performance of acts of which it is not normally capable. Thus the priest, when moved and elevated by the power of Christ, effects the actual consecration of the Body and Blood of Christ. This act is wholly beyond the natural powers of man to accomplish. But by the supernatural power intrinsically entering the priest by reason of his sacred character, the priest is for that moment acting beyond his native ability. Yet the inferior agent retains all its proper faculties, even during the actual time when under the domination of the superior agent. The priest pronounces human words by the action of his human power of speech, under the direction of his own will and intellect. He retains all his human capacities while acting conjoined to the power of Christ.

During this period of combined action, the instrumental action of the inferior agent, and the action of the superior agent work as a single unit. Wherefore, the whole effect produced is

said to be equally the work of the principal agent and of the instrumental agent. In the consecration of the Mass, the action of Christ and of the priest are one. The effected mystery of the consecration is attributed equally to the priest and to Christ. From these few points on instrumental causality, the drama of the priesthood is strikingly manifest. The dominant act of the priest's day is the Mass wherein he daily revives the triumph of Christ's passion on Calvary.

The Mass is a memorial of the passion of Christ. It is the image of His immolation. The reality of the passion is made present upon the Altar through the commemorative act of the Mass. In the Mass the Body and Blood of Christ are sacramentally present by the words of consecration, as they were naturally upon the Cross after His death. Inasmuch as this sacrament is contained in the Mass under two separate species, it represents mystically Christ's Body as It was upon the Cross late in the afternoon of that first Good Friday—in a state of separation from His life-giving Blood. "Although the whole Christ is under each species, yet it [the fact of the two-fold species] is not without purpose. For this serves to represent Christ's passion, in which the blood was separated from the Body" (III, 76, a. 2, ad 1).

The action of the Mass re-dramatizes the sacrifice of Calvary, Christ again, in an unbloody manner, offers Himself to His Father as the perfect sacrifice. At the same time, the priest, standing at the Altar, enters into the offering of Christ as victim upon the Cross. That one perfect holocaust undergone by Christ in satisfaction and atonement for all sin is made alive again in the person of the priest.

St. Thomas draws this parallel in the responses to the second and third objections in question eighty-three of the *tertia pars*. "As the celebration of the sacrament is the representative image of the passion of Christ, so is the Altar representative of the Cross Itself on which Christ has been immolated in His own nature. In the same line of thought, the priest also is the image of Christ, in whose person and by whose power he pronounces the words which make the consecration . . . and so in a certain way the priest and victim are the same." Here the priest stands as the sacramental counterpart, the image of Christ on the Cross. This constitutes the sacrificial phase of the priest's configuration to Christ.

DISPOSITIONS OF THE PRIEST

We touch now upon that area not directly pertaining to the

sacrifice itself, but to the dispositions of the will on the part of the celebrant. It is here that the perfection of the victimhood of the priest is attained. St. Thomas, in his tract on the priesthood of Christ, asks whether the effects of Christ's priesthood pertain to Himself or to others only. In response to an objection that Christ not only merited for Himself but also for others, and therefore the effects of His priesthood pertain to Him as to others, St. Thomas wrote: "In the offering of a sacrifice by every other priest, we may consider two things, namely, the sacrifice itself which is offered, and the zeal of the one who offers. Now the real effect of the priesthood is the one that comes from the sacrifice itself. But Christ obtained a result from His passion, not by virtue of the sacrifice which is offered by way of satisfaction, but by the very devotion with which, out of charity, He humbly endured the passion" (III, 22, a. 4, ad 2). Therefore Christ's priesthood did not effect anything in Himself, since He is the "fons totius sacerdotii," the eternal High priest incomparably perfect before His Father.

This zenith of perfection is the measure for the zeal of priests. The perfect charity and devotion of Christ should be realized in the priesthood established by Christ, for the priest sacramentally represents Christ during the Mass. His union with Christ would be incomplete and deficient if his own interior dispositions failed to correspond with those of Christ. It is in this area that the priest, as an instrument cooperating with the power of Christ, can directly contribute to the glory of Christ, through the use of his own volitional powers in effecting a more perfect sacrifice. In this area, the priestly soul can in charity and zeal become more like to Christ, the perfect priest. The words of St. Paul to the Colossians have a particular vigor here as applied to the priesthood, "For you are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col., 3, 2).

The death of Christ was not only a sacrifice for sin, but also the powerhouse of the entire supernatural unifying force within the Church. Pope Pius XII wrote in the *Mystici Corporis*, "It is He who through His heavenly grace is the principle of every supernatural act in all the parts of the Body."⁵ Christ is the principle as Head of the Body, diffusing into every member those graces which He merited as Priest-Victim on the Cross. St. Thomas in a parenthetical remark in a reply to an objection,

⁵ *Mystici Corporis*, Pius XII, American Press, New York. p. 29.

wrote, "The Church is said to be built up with the sacraments, 'which flowed from the side of Christ while hanging on the Cross'" (III, q. 64, a. 2, ad 3). The sacramental system is the normal divinely constituted means of the grace which emanates from Christ's pierced side and inundates every single member embraced by His Heart. This outpouring of grace is made a daily reality in the Church in the sacramental representation of the identical sacrifice as that on Calvary. Just as the priest sacramentally images Christ in His sacrificial death, so too for perfect configuration as a living image, the priest likewise perpetuates the sacramental system. Whence too, the sacraments should flow from the heart of the priest, pierced by charity and zeal. Consequently, his sacramental victimhood in charity is a centralizing and unifying force in the Church. Again quoting from Pope Pius XII's *Mystici Corporis*, "It is He who, while He is personally present and divinely active in all the members also acts in the inferior members through the ministry of the higher members."

CONCLUSION

Those sons of the Church who have reached the top of the Mount and have embraced the Cross, have grasped the Tree of Life. The priesthood is not a static state. It vibrates with the vitality that stems from the Cross. The arms of the Cross comprehend the span of the universe. In his ministry it is through his own charity and sacrifice that the priest extends these arms of the Cross over the world. Pope Pius XI said in his encyclical, *Ad Catholici Sacerdotii*, "He (Christ's minister) continues the work of the redemption in all its world-embracing universality, and divine efficacy, that work that wrought so marvelous a transformation in the world . . . he is himself a continuation of Christ."⁶ The divine efficacy and its universality finds expression in the sacramental system. This system, founded and instituted by Christ, vitalized by His passion, and dispensed by His ministers, diffuses its influence over every phase of human life, drawing all through the priest to a oneness with Christ in God. That love which sprang forth from the heights of the Cross, canvasses the many avenues of the ages, to return to the same Heart that sent it forth, with a multitude of souls.

⁶ *Popes and the Priesthood*, op. cit., p. 43.