

SACRIFICE AND SACRAMENT

By CLIFFORD HOWELL

THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL tells us that 'in the liturgy the sanctification of man is signified by signs perceptible to the senses, and is effected in a way which corresponds with each of these signs'.¹ The entire liturgy is just full of signs; some are words, some are actions, some are things – but all are *in genere signi*. And so, before discussing 'sacrifice and sacraments, around which the entire liturgical life revolves'² it will be useful to devote some attention to the subject of 'signs perceptible to the senses'.

A sign is some reality perceptible to the senses which draws attention to, symbolizes, or in some way makes known another reality which is not perceptible to the senses. Human joy and sorrow are realities; yet we can see neither of them. They are known to us only by their signs, by the external behaviour or facial expression of those who experience them. It is the smiles of happy people or the tears of sorrowful people which tell us of their joy or their sorrow.

These examples are of 'natural signs', intelligible to anyone because the intrinsic connection between them and what they signify is based upon nature. But there also exist 'free signs' in which the connection between the sign and the thing signified is based, not upon nature, but on the free choice of those who use them. Thus the crown on the shoulder of a British army officer indicates that he holds the rank of major only because this symbol has been freely chosen. It would have been possible to select some other symbol – as, in fact, is done in the armies of other nations. The connection between the sign (a crown) and the thing signified (the rank) has been put there by those who freely chose the symbol.

Now all the signs used in the liturgy signify some supernatural reality. Of themselves they could signify only something in the order of nature. Hence all of them are now 'free signs' because the connec-

¹ *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 7.

² *Ibid.*, 6.

tion they have with that which they signify has been given to them by free choice. 'The visible signs used by the liturgy to signify invisible divine things have been chosen by Christ or his Church'.¹ Eating together is a natural sign of union among men; but only the free choice of Christ could make it a sign of the supernatural union of men with himself and with each other (as it is in holy communion). And only Christ could cause this sign not only to signify what it now means, but also to effect what it signifies. Where he has so chosen to elevate some natural sign to supernatural significance and effectiveness, we call it a sacrament.

A sign makes known what it signifies only in proportion as the one perceiving it knows what it means. For natural signs there is no difficulty whatever; anyone who sees a human footprint in the sand knows that a man has passed that way. But for free signs some knowledge is a prerequisite; otherwise the sign, instead of being a bridge, is only a barrier. The mind cannot get beyond the sign itself as perceived. To a christian the movement of a priest's hand up and down, left and right, means a blessing. To a pagan it is but a gesture prompting (perhaps) his curiosity. Hence it is most important that we should know the meaning attached by Christ, or by the Church, to the signs used in the liturgy.

God uses 'signs perceptible to the senses' to sanctify us. But why? There can be no doubt that, if he had wished to do so, he could sanctify us without making use of anything whatever perceptible to our senses. He could bestow grace upon us and enable us to worship him in spirit and in truth independently of all material things. If he had willed this, religion would be a purely interior, individual, exclusively spiritual affair, without the mediation of any things or persons between us and God.

But facts show that this is not what God willed. To save us he deliberately chose another way – that of the incarnation. He sent us his only-begotten Son who became man in order that he might achieve, in his visible and tangible human nature, the passover of his passion, death, resurrection and ascension. It is God's will that we should go to him through this same incarnate Son. 'No man comes to the Father except by me', said Christ our Lord. And he continues his redemptive work among succeeding generations through his Church, which is something visible and organized, making use of persons and things. It is he who chose certain 'signs perceptible to

¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

the senses' to be vehicles of his salvation; in these he makes available to us the power of his paschal mystery.

So here is the way which God has, in fact, chosen to deal with us — by the incarnation and all that follows from it. It is for us to accept this gratefully and to make use intelligently of the mediation of Christ and of those subsidiary persons and things which go to make up the liturgy of the Church, consisting, as it does, predominantly of signs.

And we can reflect that in choosing thus, God has wonderfully suited his ways to the nature which he gave us. For we are partly spiritual, yet partly material. There is such a close union between our bodies and souls that both act together. We acquire knowledge by means of our bodily senses, and we express our thoughts and emotions by bodily actions. Hence a means of worship which involves both body and soul is particularly well suited to us. Moreover we are social beings as well as individuals; hence, in addition to private worship, we need social worship if we are to express ourselves fully. But this implies taking notice of each other as collaborators in worship: that is, communicating with each other in the course of our worship and by means of it. Words, actions and postures are all essential to this; and all of them are signs and find their due place in the liturgy.

And now let us see what we mean by sacrifice and sacrament. At one time or another there have been innumerable attempts by theologians to produce exact definitions of each, but we can neglect all their differences as having no bearing on our present subject. All that matters is the point on which they agree, namely, that both sacrifice and sacrament are *in genere signi*. Both are 'signs perceptible to the senses' and both signify 'divine realities'. And, though many qualifications would be needed to attain absolute precision, it is sufficient for our purposes to say that in a sacrifice something (a victim) is given by man to God, while in a sacrament something (a grace) is given by God to man. And we are concerned with the eucharist, which is both sacrifice and sacrament. What is the relationship between the two aspects?

Pope Pius XII casts light on this. 'It must be emphasized that the eucharistic sacrifice is essentially the unbloody immolation of the divine victim, an immolation mystically manifested in the separation of the sacred species and the offering made of them to the Eternal Father. The communion belongs to the integration of the sacrifice; it is a participation of the sacrifice by the reception of the Bles-

sed Sacrament'.¹

The essence of the sacrifice therefore consists in the double consecration whereby our Lord's command at the last supper is fulfilled. He said 'Do this in memory of me'. And he did two things. First, he took bread and said of it 'This is my body given for you'.² And later he took wine and said 'This is the chalice, the New Testament in my blood which is to be shed for you'.³

Now when he said those words over the bread, it ceased to be bread and became his body. He had changed its substance into his body as given for us. That is what his words signified; that – and only that – was their immediate effect. However, his blood, soul and divinity must have been there also because, as he was physically alive at the supper table with his apostles, the body which his words caused to exist under the appearance of bread must have been his living body. But his blood, soul and divinity were not there because he said so; in fact he did not say so. They were there 'by concomitance', as we say; not 'by force of the words'.

Hence, as far as the force of the words go – according to the significance of the words – his body was indicated as here, and his blood as there. He indicated them separately; he indicated himself as being in the state of victim – as being sacrificed. This was true sacramentally – but not yet physically. Only next day did he immolate himself physically on the cross. Here, at the supper, he immolated himself sacramentally. He spoke a 'sign perceptible to the senses' namely, words which signified separation of his body and blood. And by his divine power he caused them to produce an effect not perceptible to the senses – the immolation of himself in that sacramental order of existence which he, as God, was able to bring about. His sacrifice was thus sacramental, not physical.

For all this we can again quote Pope Pius XII: 'The divine wisdom had devised a way in which our Redeemer's sacrifice is marvelously shown forth by external signs symbolic of death. By the transubstantiation of bread into the body of Christ and of wine into his blood, both his body and blood are rendered really present; but the eucharistic species under which he is present symbolize the violent separation of his body and blood, and so a commemorative showing forth of the death which took place in reality on Calvary is repeated in each Mass, because by distinct representation Christ Jesus is signified and shown forth in the state of victim'.⁴

¹ *Mediator Dei*, 122.

² Lk 22, 9.

³ Lk 22, 20.

⁴ *Mediator Dei*, 74.

Precisely how this happens is a mystery which we can leave to the theologians to probe. What matters to us is solely the fact which results from it, and which was described by the Council of Trent: 'Our Lord Jesus Christ, at the last supper, on the night in which he was betrayed, willed to leave to his beloved bride, the Church, a visible sacrifice such as the nature of man required; one by which the bloody sacrifice that was to be enacted once upon the cross would be represented, and its memory remain until the end of time, and its salutary power applied for the remission of sins which we daily commit'.¹

Here, then, we have Calvary put into sacramental form and entrusted to the Church. The mass, we may say, is the sacrament of Christ's sacrifice, in that it signifies that sacrifice and makes it present. But why did Christ entrust it to his Church? Merely that it might be made present in many different places? More than that: he did so that it might become the sacrifice of the Church. For multi-location is not an end in itself. It is but a necessary condition for the offering by Christians, who live in different places at different times, of the sacrifice which Christ himself offered alone on Calvary. On the altar Christ is not alone; he offers, indeed; but his Church offers with him and through him.

The liturgy constantly speaks of the mass as the sacrifice of the Church – indeed that aspect of it is even more clear and explicit than the fact that it is Christ's sacrifice. Again and again there occur such phrases as 'accept this sacrificial offering', 'we offer thee, Lord, this chalice of salvation, 'accept the offering we make to thee', 'And now, Lord, we thy servants, and with us all thy holy people . . . offer to thy sovereign majesty . . . a sacrifice that is pure, holy and unblemished'. As Fr Jungmann puts it: 'The prayers and ceremonies serve to express the praying and sacrificing of the Church. They constitute an ascent of many steps which the Church mounts until the heights of the consecration are reached . . . Thus does the Church climb up towards her Lord, *in montem sanctum tuum et in tabernacula tua*. And here she meets her Lord who now offers his own sacrifice with her. For the priest who, at that moment, stands at the altar as the representative of Christ does not thereby cease to be also the representative of the Church . . . It is rather like what happens when a child puts his little hands in between the folded hands of his mother while both of them say a prayer together'.²

¹ Trent Sess XXII., c 2.

² Jungmann, J. A., S. J., *The Sacrifice of the Church* (London, 1957), p 9.

But not only does the Church offer Christ in sacrifice; she offers – must offer – herself also, through him and with him and in him. For sacrifice is sacramental in the sense that it is a visible sign of something invisible; it is an external manifestation of total self-giving to God. Christ our Lord gave himself totally to his Father; and the Church, who offers with him, must do the same. Otherwise her sacrificing is not sincere; to the external sign there corresponds no internal reality. And the word Church in this connection does not mean solely the universal Church which deposes the priest to represent her: it means primarily and immediately that assembly of the faithful gathered about the altar to offer the mass here and now. That, too, is clearly expressed by the liturgy in all sorts of ways. It is to these particular people that the priest turns again and again with his greeting and his invitation *Oremus*, ‘Let us pray’; it is these people whom he means when he says ‘we offer’; to these he says ‘Let us give thanks to the Lord our God’; it is from these people that he receives, in kind or through their collections, the material elements for the sacrifice, the bread and wine which he consecrates into the victim of Calvary. These are the ones who, in the first instance, are co-offerers with him, who must offer themselves through and with and in Christ as members of the mystical body joined to their head. The very liturgy of the mass ‘requires them so far as human power allows, to reproduce in themselves the sentiments that Christ had when he was offering himself in sacrifice: sentiments of humility, of adoration, praise and thanksgiving to the Divine Majesty. It requires them also to become victims, as it were; cultivating a spirit of self-denial according to the precepts of the gospel . . . It requires us all, in a word, to die mystically with Christ on the cross, so that we may say with the apostle: With Christ I hang upon the cross’.¹

The mass, then, calls for the closest possible union with the divine victim; and, moreover, it provides within itself the means for effecting that union in a superlative manner. For it is not only a sacrifice – it is as well a sacramental meal. Besides saying ‘Do this in memory of me’, our Lord also said ‘Take ye all of this and eat’. It is by the eucharist as a sacramental sharing in the mass that the most perfect union with the divine victim can be attained. By the very act of offering, the assembly which offers the sacrifice is invited also to partake of the sacrament. As we have seen, communion does not belong to the essence of the sacrifice itself; but it certainly does

¹ *Mediator Dei*, 55.

pertain to the integrity of the mass. Fénelon once remarked that a kind of violence is done to the sacrifice if we unite ourselves only psychologically with the priest, yet do not also unite ourselves sacramentally with Christ the High Priest, the principal offerer of the Mass. Even canon law does not fail to point out the closeness of the connection between sacrifice and sacrament: 'The faithful should be admonished according to the decrees of the Holy See to receive the eucharistic bread frequently, even daily; and those who assist at mass should not only communicate spiritually, but be prepared to receive in reality our Lord in the holy eucharist.'¹

Again we see how the liturgy itself indicates communion of the faithful as the self-evident consequence of their offering. Very soon after the consecration the priest, as spokesman of all present, asks that 'as many of us as have received the body and blood of thy Son by partaking from this altar may be filled with every heavenly blessing and grace'. The postcommunions, again and again, take it for granted that those who have offered will also have received, 'May thy heavenly banquet, Lord, of which we have partaken, sanctify us . . .' (Wednesday of Third Week in Lent). 'May the sacrament we have received fill us, Lord, with spiritual nourishment . . .' (Third Sunday after Easter). 'Let the sacrament of which we have partaken, cleanse us, Lord . . .' (Fourth Sunday after Pentecost). 'We who have partaken of the food of immortality pray, Lord, that we may . . .' (Twenty first Sunday after Pentecost) 'Grant, Lord, that we who have feasted on the sacrament of thy body and blood . . .' (Feast of St John Bosco, 31 January). These are a few samples picked at random. Indeed it takes quite a lot of searching in the missal to find postcommunion prayers which make no mention of 'being refreshed with heavenly food' or 'filled by thy holy gifts' or 'being renewed by this holy sacrament' and the like. How can those who have not 'feasted on this sacrament' sincerely reply Amen to such prayers?

The eucharist, considered as a sacrament, can never be divorced from the sacrifice; it is the greatest of all the sacraments because it is intrinsically sacrificial. It is a sharing in the sacrifice precisely because it is a sharing in the victim. While it is correct to think of Christ in communion as 'the guest of our souls', such an idea falls lamentably short of the whole truth. Not merely do we receive Christ, but we receive him *ex hac altaris participatione*, from this altar,

¹ Canon 863.

as victim of the sacrifice. He is the glorified Saviour over whom death has no more dominion; but the Lamb who took away the sins of the world is 'the Lamb standing upright, yet slain in sacrifice'.¹ He is a 'priest for ever according to the order of Melchisedech', but also the victim for ever.

And with this victim we are united; to him we are assimilated. For this heavenly food differs in one remarkable respect from ordinary food. When we eat ordinary food, it is the food which is changed and becomes incorporated into our physical bodies. But when we eat the bread of life, it is we who become changed and incorporated into Christ's mystical body. Our first incorporation was, of course, at baptism; but baptism looks towards the eucharist of which the effect is continually to strengthen our union with Christ and with each other in him. It is a recalling and renewal of the union of all in the one mystical body. 'We are Christ's body, members of it, depending on one another'.² Or, as Christ himself said, 'He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives continually in me, and I in him'.³

The eucharist, then, is both sacrifice and sacrament; it is both supper and cross. The one sacrifice has two aspects – the cross looks towards God and the supper looks towards man. And man, when he partakes of the supper is joining himself to the cross that he may look towards God, for he is sharing in the sacrifice. 'It is the Lord's death that you are heralding, whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, until he comes'.⁴

¹ Apoc 5, 6.

² I Cor 12, 27.

³ Jn 6, 57.

⁴ I Cor 11, 26.