

THE SACRAMENT OF SACRAMENTS

By JOHN F. CLARKSON

IN the early days of August, 1960, hundreds of thousands of the faithful converged upon Bavaria's capital city of Munich for the thirty-seventh Eucharistic World Congress. The Church at Munich became the *Statio Orbis*, that is, the scene of a stational celebration of the whole Catholic world. At the stational celebrations of the ancient Roman churches, some of the faithful from each of the city's churches would come together to celebrate the Eucharist, with the bishop of Rome presiding over the assembly in order to give visible expression to the unity of all the faithful in the one eucharistic bread. In the same way the Congress at Munich, and especially its closing pontifical Mass, was conceived as the stational celebration not just of the city but of the whole Catholic world. A million representatives of the faithful of every land and continent and tongue, bishops, priests, and laity, the whole Church in miniature as it were, gathered around its Head to offer with him the same sacrifice that he offered when, in his own flesh, he reconciled man to God on the cross. The sublime lesson of the centrality of the holy Eucharist in christian life and worship could hardly have been more effectively expressed than it was on that summer morning at Munich.

Let us consider more closely how the holy Eucharist, the sacrament of sacraments, is not only the centre of the sacramental system, but also that of all the Church's activity and of all the lives of each of the faithful.

Christ: Sacrament of God

God's whole way of dealing with men in the working out of his economy of salvation has been characterised by the appearance of God's saving reality presenting itself to us men in the course of history through concrete, tangible events and things. This divine way of acting reached its climax in the incarnation of the Son. Here God had found the means of accomplishing the salvation of men by uniting divinity and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ in such a way that divine Life itself, that eternal Life which ever abode with

the Father¹ appeared before our eyes in human flesh, to introduce us thereby into the knowledge of the Father² and to offer the same flesh in sacrifice for the life of the world.³ Not only could we see and hear our salvation; we could even touch it with our hands and would be able to partake of it by eating and drinking.⁴

Surely we may call this divine way of dealing with men 'sacramental'. We give the name of sacrament to that which is the symbol of a sacred reality and the visible form of invisible grace.⁵ Many indeed, are the symbol-ways in which God has clothed his saving grace and presented it to men in sensible forms. Not all of these ways, to be sure, are characterised by the peculiar grace-causing efficacy that distinguishes the seven sacraments. Nevertheless, these seven do not stand in sheer isolation. They form part of a great pattern, a sacramental pattern of God's dealings with men. The cloud and pillar of fire that accompanied the Israelites in the desert were symbols of Yahweh himself and the visible form of his invisible gracious favour; the rites of the mosaic law were symbols of the redemption that would be realised in Christ, and the tangible forms through which pious Jews could direct their faith and hope towards the grace of the Saviour; and we ourselves speak of certain rites and things as 'sacramentals' because they represent the graces we hope to receive through their use and through the Church's prayer in our behalf.

If we look for the apex of this 'sacramentality', we find it in the person of Jesus Christ. In him the personal meeting of man with God, in which salvation consists, takes place in the most perfect way. In him alone did the likeness of sinful flesh,⁶ the human nature which we share in common with him, respond with perfect fidelity to the loving invitation of God to men. Here was the perfect communion of man with God, the salvation towards which all authentic religious striving aspires. Since this union took place uniquely in Christ, other men cannot hope to achieve it except by their personal relationship with the man Jesus Christ, who is the head of all humanity.

Christ our Lord, then, is himself the first of the sacraments. He is the visible, human embodiment of God's love for men, the sign and cause of man's redemption. He is the Way, the one Mediator. After

¹ 1 Jn 1, 2.

² Cf. Jn 14, 8ff.

³ Cf. Jn 6, 52.

⁴ Cf. 1 Jn, 1, 1; Jn 6, 52, 55.

⁵ Cf. Council of Trent, Denzinger 876.

⁶ Rom 8, 3; cf. 6, 6.

his death and resurrection, he remains forever the meeting-place of God with men, the sacrament of God.

The Church: Sacrament of Christ

The disappearance of Christ, by his resurrection and ascension, from our visible world and daily experience did not mean the termination of our need for him as the sacrament of our encounter with God. The glorified Christ remains the unique Way of our going to the Father. But we encounter him now in the Church, which he has instituted as the continuation or prolongation of his own person: the Church which Holy Scripture calls the body of Christ.¹ A traditional view of the symbolism of the piercing of our Lord's side on the cross sees the Church as being born there from that sacred side to be the custodian and dispenser of the precious, redeeming blood through the sacraments. Her function is to apply to men the same redemptive work that Christ initiated with the Incarnation and crowned with the paschal mysteries. If Christ is the sacrament of God, the Church is the sacrament of Christ. Yet these two are really one, because the Church on earth is the sacramental Christ, is Christ sacramentally. As the body of which he is the head, the Church constitutes the historical presence among men of the glorified Lord who lives and acts through her, above all through her liturgy of sacrifice and sacrament.

The sacramental nature of the Church is the reason therefore, why the life of a christian on this earth is necessarily a sacramental life. Our destiny is to be and to become sons of God, 'moulded into the image of his Son'² by a progressive identification with Christ. And the sacraments are the chief means which God has given to the Church to bring about this moulding. They are, in fact, the seven-fold activity of the sacrament of Christ; in each of them the Church brings to realisation in the individual recipient the general union of men with God in Christ.

With these perspectives of the Church as sacrament of Christ, and of the person of our glorified Saviour as the sacrament of our communion with God, we are in a better position to appreciate the centrality of the holy Eucharist; first of all in the sacramental system of the Church, then in all the Church's activity, and finally in the lives of the faithful.

¹ Col 1, 24.

² Rom 8, 29.

The centrality of the Eucharist in the sacramental system

When we read the promise of our Lord to be with his Church all days even to the consummation of the world, we spontaneously think of the fulfillment of it by his abiding presence in the blessed Sacrament under the appearances of bread and wine. In a veritable miracle of sacramentality we find that Love has here stretched the principle of self-emptying beyond all imaginable possibilities in order to enable men to make contact with God in an intelligible human way. Still, it is not so much the hiddenness and self-abasement of the Son of God under the eucharistic veils that commands our attention here. It is more the fact of the real, substantial presence itself of the glorified Lord in the midst of the temporal reality of the Church's day to day history. The first sacrament is no farther from any one of us than the nearest tabernacle. If we regard all the sacraments as ways in which we efficaciously meet and come under the saving influence of the first sacrament, Christ himself, it is evident that the blessed Sacrament, as it is so appropriately termed, in which the first sacrament himself permanently abides, is the greatest of all the sacraments.

It would not be enough, however, to rest content with this somewhat static view which would see the centrality of the Eucharist only in the fact that the very Author of that sanctity which the other sacraments are ordained to impart is himself contained in it. In addition to this, there is an organic, dynamic connection between the Eucharist and the other sacraments. The sanctifying function that each one performs ultimately looks to the Eucharist and especially to the sacrifice of the Mass in which, as St. Thomas says, 'divine worship principally consists'. In this sense, he interprets the dictum that the Eucharist is the 'end and consummation of all the sacraments.'¹

A few examples will make this clear. The sacrament of Holy Orders is ordained to the holy Eucharist. For the *raison d'être* of the christian priesthood is to assure the continuation in the Church, today and in every age, of that sanctifying and vivifying presence of Christ which the apostolic Church has possessed from the beginning. The other two character-conferring sacraments, baptism and confirmation, have always been closely associated with the Eucharist. Together with it they formed one, triple rite of initiation in the primitive Church. Baptism introduces the neophyte into the body

¹ Cf. *Summa Theologica*, III, 63, 6.

of Christ, makes him one of the people of God, whose function is to worship God in spirit and in truth. Thus, baptism is directed towards the Eucharist as the principal act of worship of the christian religion, and it qualifies the baptized person not only to receive the bread of life but to take an active part in the offering of the Eucharist as well. Since confirmation is, in general, a sacrament of the plenitude of grace, it perfects the new christian as a member of 'the royal priesthood, the holy people,'¹ so that he may by every right share in the act *par excellence* of the general priesthood of the faithful, which is the celebration of the Eucharist. Somewhat less direct, though no less real, is the Eucharistic reference of penance and of Extreme Unction which prepare the recipient for receiving the Eucharist worthily; while matrimony is the sacred symbol of the union of the Church with Christ in perfective charity, which is the proper effect of the Eucharist. Every one of the sacramental rites of Christ's body which is the Church is like a gesture by which he reaches out to us to draw us to himself, the centre, and to sanctify us by joining us to himself in his perfect worship of the Father.

The centrality of the Eucharist in the activity of the Church

The high point of Christ's life-work of sanctifying men, and of offering to the Father a perfect sacrifice of thanksgiving, was the paschal mystery of his death and resurrection. Now the whole purpose of the Church, which is the mystical prolongation of the Redeemer, is to continue and bring to completion in the lives of men of subsequent ages the work of sanctification and of worship which Christ then accomplished. But nowhere does the Church actually bring this about more directly and more perfectly than in the sacrifice of the Mass. 'The Eucharist is the perfect sacrament of the Lord's passion, in that it contains Christ himself who underwent the passion.'² The supreme event of Christ's life here becomes sacramentally actualized in and for the Church in such a way that one theologian has called the Mass 'the sacrifice of the Cross in the [sacramental] form of a sacrifice of the Church.'³ It is clear, then, that in this most perfect sacramental union with her Head, the Church exercises her very greatest activity. Here she herself is most perfectly sanctified; here she offers the most perfect worship with her spouse to the heavenly Father.

¹ 1 Pet 2, 9.

² Summa Theologica, III, 75, 2 ad 2.

³ G. Soehngen, *Das sakramentale Wesen des Messopfers* (Essen: Wubbelt, 1946), p. 24.

In a profound sense all the manifold activities of the Church are directed towards these fleeting, sacred eucharistic moments when, as the spouse of Christ and mother of the faithful, she gathers with her children around the glorified Lord, really present in their midst, offers with him the sacrifice of thanksgiving and partakes of the bread of life. All her apostolate of teaching looks to these eucharistic gatherings as to its goal. As Pius XII wrote in *Mediator Dei*, 'when the Church teaches us our Catholic faith and exhorts us to obey the commandments of Christ, she is preparing and paving the way for her priestly, sanctifying action in its highest sense . . .' When the Church sows the seed of faith through her missionaries and then nurtures it in her neophytes with the milk of sound doctrine, it is not merely in order that her children may believe the truth, but that believing they may not walk in darkness but possess the light that is life. For the Church's still-pilgrimaging children, it is the holy Eucharist that affords the highest possible realisation of union with eternal life, our goal and destiny: 'He who eats my flesh, and drinks my blood, lives continually in me and I in him'.¹ First catechism is traditionally preparation for first communion. Further doctrinal instruction, ordinary preaching, retreats and missions, all culminate in the more conscious and fervent participation of the faithful in the holy Eucharist. Even the teaching of sacred theology is orientated towards preparing priests to offer the holy Sacrifice and feed the flock by word and sacrament, above all by the sacrament of the Eucharist.

It is the same with the Church's activity of guiding and governing her children. Her laws are not an end in themselves. Their end is the common good of the Church, which is charity. This they foster by removing obstacles to the supernatural life and providing the necessary climate in which it can grow and flourish. Whatever the Church does for the purpose of sanctifying men, she does in order to draw men into the eucharistic sacrifice and make them partakers of God in Christ in holy communion. Whatever efficacy the efforts of the Church have in them, she draws from her union with her spouse in the eucharistic sacrifice.

As the Church looks to the Eucharist in all that she does, so does she find her perfect unity in the Eucharist, and particularly in the celebration of Mass. The eucharistic sacrifice constitutes the Church. For the nature of the Church is to be the assembly of those who

¹ Jn 6, 57.

have been called out from the world (*ekklesia*) to become the people of God, his worshippers in spirit and in truth.¹ When these holy ones gather to commemorate in a real-symbolic way the perfect sacrifice of redemption and praise offered on the cross, then they are truly and fully the worshipping community of God. Their unity is not the mere moral unity of an audience in a hall, nor even of sharers of the same table; it is the supernatural unity of those who are each identified mystically with the one body of Christ which they receive, each vivified by his Spirit. In the offering of the Mass the Church becomes a real image of Christ as he gave himself unto death out of love, and when the participation of the faithful in the Mass takes its most perfect form in the real reception of holy communion, the partakers are ever more perfectly brought into unity in Christ.

The centrality of the Eucharist in the lives of the faithful

Every christian is designated by his baptism for union with and in Christ: a unity that is to be realised in its perfect form here on earth in the reception of the Eucharist. By this essential designation of his baptismal character, the christian is wholly orientated towards the holy Eucharist. This orientation should give a eucharistic meaning and purpose to all of his actions, to his whole life. This does not mean that he is merely drawn passively, as though by the magnetic force of the Eucharist, there to be sanctified and perfected. It would be a great mistake to think of those called to be moulded into the image of Christ² merely as inert objects in which the action of the sacraments (even of the blessed Sacrament) will automatically produce Christ-likeness, if only the sacraments are validly received. The work of moulding must be a vital process in which the christian himself not only receives but lives the sacraments. When an adult christian encounters God in Christ in a sacramental experience, he cannot but assume in loving faith something of the same filial attitude that marked every one of the actions of our Saviour's life. Thus, even as he receives God's sanctifying action in the sacrament, he consciously and freely acknowledges the divine excellence and his own human submission to God. Here we have the very essence of divine worship. And we see that this worship, in the sacraments, is a certain imitation, sacramentally expressed, of our Saviour's own perfect worship on the cross. Hence every sacrament, besides being

¹ Jn 4, 23-4.

² Cf. Rom 8, 29.

a sanctification of men, is also at the same time an act by which man worships God in union with Christ's perfect worship.

Of their very nature, then, the sacraments do effect a configuration of man to Christ, an ontological configuration effected by Christ but not without man's own free aspiration towards it. In receiving his sanctifying Christ-conformity in the sacrament, a man simultaneously commits himself to the moral demands which his new being in Christ implies. To receive holiness from God means to pledge oneself in worship to his service. Here we see the working out of the conditions of the sacramental economy of our salvation: it would not have profited us anything if God had become man in Christ without carrying out his redemptive work in very reality in his passion and resurrection. Likewise, it is of no avail for us to express our devotion to God in Christ through the sacraments and the sacrifice of the Mass, unless we effectively conform our lives to Christ's in all our daily actions by doing the will of his Father. Only then will he call us his brothers. 'If anyone does the will of my Father who is in heaven, he is my brother, and sister, and mother.'¹

The consequences of this doctrine for the centrality of the Eucharist in the christian's life become evident. The Mass, among all the sacramental rites of the Church, is *par excellence* the act of worship; and in holy communion we meet the very author of our sanctification in a most personal encounter. But participation in the Mass implies offering ourselves there with Christ in a spiritual sacrifice: we must pledge ourselves to a faith that is operative in charity, to a zeal for the divine glory, and particularly to the due submission of ourselves to the divine will. And when we partake of the body of Christ that has been offered in sacrifice – his sacrifice that has sacramentally become ours – we receive it as a sacrificial banquet: that is, as the sign of the divine acceptance of the offering, a sign of our union with God. All this, however, is fully realised for the individual christian only to the extent that the self-oblation expressed in his participation in the Eucharist is genuine. St. Cyprian expressed this forcefully when he said: 'It is evident that the blood of Christ is not offered, if there should be no wine in the chalice; likewise the sacrifice of the Lord is not celebrated as the sanctifying rite that it should be according to his institution, if our own offering and sacrifice should fail to correspond to his passion'.² Every Mass and every holy communion thus become for the christian both a challenge

¹ Mt 12, 50.

² PL 4, 380.

to his loyalty to Christ in the future and the crowning expression in which past good actions are offered up in an odour of sweetness.

The holy Eucharist should stand at the centre of the everyday life of each of the faithful. Much more true is it of the fervent christian, for whom 'to live is Christ,'¹ that he spontaneously gravitates towards the ever-present Lord in the blessed Sacrament as to the true centre of his being. Faith will recognize Christ there in the sign and memorial of his greatest act of love for men. Hope will seek him out as the sure pledge here on earth of the glorious face-to-face union with God that the sacramental union with Christ prefigures. Love will unite itself to him in the holy banquet and prove itself true by faithful imitation of him in christian life. Here in the holy Eucharist no tension is possible between the spiritual life as liturgy and as personal prayer and mortification. Personal piety would indeed be sterile were it completely to neglect the altar and the communion table. But when the personal spiritual life is ordained to achieving an ever better disposition of mind and heart with which to offer oneself in sacrifice in the Mass, or when it proceeds in charity from the intensity of love realised in the personal eucharistic encounter with Christ, then these efforts are sanctified by the holy Eucharist and taken up into its liturgy.

With his genius for putting the most profound truths simply, St. Thomas says that 'in this sacrament the whole mystery of our salvation is contained'; and that 'this sacrament produces in the individual the effect that the passion of Christ produced in the world.'² At each Mass the christian enters into a holy precinct in which all of God's loving works for him throughout the course of sacred history are concentrated, and all his loving intentions of bestowing grace and glory in the future are prefigured in the rich, sacramental reality that is given to him in the Eucharist. He can do nothing else than take it, made his own in Christ, and offer this same Eucharist as the only adequate thanksgiving and perfect worship of the Father. From his full participation in the Eucharist, the christian will draw the streams of divine life which will then transform all of his life here below into a sacrifice of thanksgiving in the liturgy of christian living that overflows from the liturgy of worship and has its centre there. 'Whatever you are about, in word and action alike, invoke always the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, offering your thanks to God the Father through him.'³

¹ Phil 1, 21.

² *Summa Theologica*, III, 84, 4.

³ Col 3, 17.