

Active Participation in the Eucharist

Some time ago our Holy Father issued an Apostolic Exhortation on the Eucharist, called *Sacramentum Caritatis*, (The Sacrament of Charity). It was his hope that this document would help the Church more firmly believe, devoutly celebrate and intensely live the mystery of the Eucharist. One of the topics that he addresses in the Exhortation is that of the active participation of the faithful in the celebration of the Eucharist and so in this newsletter I would like to offer a reflection on the nature of what we do every time we participate at Mass with the hope that this will help us to participate more consciously and fully in the Eucharist.

To participate more fully in the Eucharist, in the sacrifice of the Mass, means above all to participate with our minds and our hearts. And the Mass is above all a sacrifice, the making present once more, in a mysterious, sacramental fashion, the one great sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. And so I think that one way in which we can come to a deeper understanding of what we are doing at Mass every Sunday, is to stop and reflect a bit more generally on the nature of sacrifice. What is worshipping God by sacrifice all about? What's going on?

So before considering the Mass in particular I'd like to consider the nature of sacrifice in general. One way to approach this is by taking a quick look at the religious history of mankind. If we take a long view of human history, we see that almost all men who have ever lived have believed in the existence of some sort of Supreme Being or supreme beings; the belief in the existence of God or gods of some sort or other is almost universal (modern atheism is definitely not normal, it is an exception to the rule of almost univer-

sal belief in God). And what is also interesting to note is that when it comes to worshipping the God or the gods they believed in, almost all peoples and cultures paid homage to their gods by means of sacrifice. The Greeks and the Romans, the Assyrians and the Babylonians, the Egyptians and the Carthaginians, the Aztecs and the Incas, almost any culture you



look at, you find that God (or the gods) are worshipped by means of sacrifice. And of course the Jews themselves worshipped God by means of sacrifice. Even Our Blessed Mother and St. Joseph, and Our Lord Himself, worshipped God by means of animal sacrifice. At the Presentation of our Lord in the Temple, Joseph and Mary offered two turtle doves to the priest in the Temple to sacrifice, and every year at Passover, the Holy Family would go up to Jerusalem in order to take part in the sacrifice of the Passover lamb.

Now if you compare all the various ways that these people sacrificed to their gods, you will find many differences, but you will also find certain elements that are common to all. What you will find common in all these various cultures and religions is that when they sacrifice, they always offer up one of two things to God: they either offer the life of an animal (or in the case of human sacrifice the life of a man or woman) or some sort of food and drink. Among these various cultures all different kinds of animals were sacrificed and many different varieties of food or drink were offered up, but in all cases either an animal was killed or food and drink offered: in other words, it was always either some form of life or that which sustains life. In the case of animal sacrifice the animal was killed in some ritual way, in order to show that it no longer belonged to the people and

that it was being given to God; in the case of food or drink, at least some of it was either burned or poured out as an indication that it was being offered to God.

Now the very fact that all peoples throughout history have worshipped God by means of sacrifice shows that it is something natural to man; that as we stand before the divinity we naturally want to worship Him by means of sacrifice. And so an obvious question arises: what's going on here? What is sacrifice? And why do men naturally want to do it?

In order to answer the question we could start with what is most obvious about sacrifice: namely, that it is a kind of gift-giving. We want to offer God a gift and, of course, we will only want to offer Him the very best of gifts, and the best thing we can possibly offer to God is the gift of life – life is the most precious thing there is. And so that's why all men throughout history who have offered sacrifice either offered a form of life (whether animal or human) or that which sustains life (food and drink).

But the next question is: why do men want to give gifts to God? Doesn't God already have everything He needs? I think we can answer this question of why men want to give gifts to God by taking a moment to consider why we give gifts to each other. Suppose a man gets angry with his wife; they get in a heated argument and he says things he shouldn't have said. Later on he's feeling sorry and so on his way home from work he picks up a dozen roses and a box of chocolates. He comes in the house and presents his wife with his gifts. Obviously, the man doesn't even need to say anything. Given the circumstances, it's very clear what those gifts mean; they mean: I'm sorry for what I said and I still love you and I want to make up for what I did. Now, if the wife accepts the presents then he knows that his apology has been accepted and there is reconciliation. But if the wife takes the flowers and the chocolates and throws them in the corner, well, then he knows he's still in the dog house. So you can see with just this simple example how we use gifts. Gifts are like material messages. And they are much more powerful messages than messages spoken with mere words. We can see in this example of the husband and wife of how the gift in a way stands for the husband himself — it is as if he is in the gift. If the wife accepts the gift, it means that

she accepts him; and if she rejects the gift she in a way rejects him and his offer of reconciliation.

But there are many other reasons why we give gifts to each other. We give gifts to show our gratitude, or we give gifts in order to ask for a favor, or sometimes we give gifts simply to let a person know that we appreciate them for who they are. In all these cases, when we give a gift to someone, we want to win his favor or more generally, we want to be united to the person. Gifts all seek to establish a union between the giver and the person to whom the gift is given. There is something deeply human about giving gifts to each other; and they are powerful means of creating strong bonds between people. And I think that explains fairly well why men are naturally inclined to want to offer gifts to God: they want to be in His good favor, they want to be united to Him.

We know from the revelation that God made to the Jews that God does in fact want to be worshipped by means of sacrifice. But even though the Jews knew the true God and offered Him the sacrifices that He prescribed, still those sacrifices were not able to win God's favor in such a way that the Jews could restore the union with God that was lost by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. There are two reasons why the sacrifices of the Old Testament were not able to expiate mankind's sin and earn him the grace and friendship of God which were lost by our first parents: first, the sacrifices were so imperfect, it was only animals or food and drink that was offered. The life of an animal is not a perfect enough gift to restore a man to the intimate union with God that our first parents had before they sinned. And the second reason why the sacrifices of the Old Testament were not efficacious was because the ones making the offering were sinful men. What was needed to reconcile God with man was a perfect victim, a perfect offering and a perfect High Priest. And, of course, this is precisely what we have in Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Christ, who is both God and Man, offers Himself in sacrifice to the Father for the forgiveness of sins of all mankind.

And the night before He died Our Lord instituted the priesthood of the New Testament and the sacrament of the Eucharist so that His Church could continue to make present and offer to God this one great

sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. The Mass is a true sacrifice. As we saw, man's desire to worship God by means of sacrifice is something that belongs to his nature, and so God gave us the means to satisfy this innate desire of ours to offer to God a gift. Now He has made it possible for us to offer Him the perfect gift, the gift of His only begotten Son. In all those ancient cultures that offered sacrifice, the people could never be certain whether or not God had accepted their sacrifice, whether it was pleasing to Him. We need have no such doubts about whether or not He is pleased with our sacrifice.

And now, finally, I come to the main point of our reflection. The Holy Father in his Exhortation, and the Church throughout the ages, has always encouraged the laity to actively participate in the Sacrifice of the Mass. It's important to understand more concretely what this means. When you, the laity, come to Mass on Sunday, do you come to watch the priest offer the sacrifice at the altar? Are you mere spectators of the sacrifice? Or do you come to offer the sacrifice yourselves? It would be a very serious

error to think that you are mere spectators of the sacrifice that the priest is offering. The Church has frequently and consistently taught that the laity only properly participate actively in the sacrifice if they themselves offer the sacrifice of Christ on the altar to God the Father with and through the hands of the priest. Only the ordained priest has the power to make the sacrifice present, only he has the power to transform the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, but once Christ is present on the altar it is the privilege and duty of the laity to offer Him together with themselves and all that they are and with all their concerns up to God. The document of Vatican II that treats of the liturgy encourages the faithful to take part in the Eucharistic liturgy not "as strangers or silent spectators, but as participants in the sacred action, conscious of what they are doing, actively and devoutly." There is more than this to our active participation in the Mass, but this is the most essential thing: that we offer up Christ's sacrifice made present on the altar, together with ourselves and all that we are. ✠