

The Sacrifice of the Mass

(by the Revd. Fr. E. J. Yarnold, S.J.)

The most authoritative Roman Catholic statement is that of the 22nd Session of the Council of Trent:-

"He, therefore, our God and Lord, though he was by his death about to offer himself once for all upon the altar of the cross to God the Father that he might there accomplish an eternal redemption, nevertheless, so that this priesthood might not come to an end with his death (Heb. 7. 24,27), at the Last Supper, on the night he was betrayed, so that he might leave to his beloved spouse the Church a visible sacrifice, such as the nature of man requires, whereby that bloody sacrifice once to be accomplished on the cross might be represented (repraesentaretur), the memory thereof remain even to the end of the world, and its salutary power (virtus) be applied (applicaretur) to the remission of those sins which we daily commit, declaring himself constituted 'a priest forever according to the order of Melchisedech' (Ps.109.4), offered up to God the Father his own body and blood under the form of bread and wine, and under the forms of those same things gave them to the Apostles, whom he then made priests of the New Testament, that they might partake, commanding them and their successors in the priesthood by these words to do likewise: 'Do this in commemoration of me' (Luke 22.19. I Cor. 11.24f) as the Catholic Church has always understood and taught. For, having celebrated the ancient Passover which the multitude of the children of Israel sacrificed in memory of their departure from Egypt, he instituted a new Passover, namely himself, to be immolated (immolandum) under visible signs by the Church through the priests in memory of his own passage from this world to the Father, when by the shedding of his blood he redeemed and 'delivered us from the power of darkness and translated us into his Kingdom' (Col. 1.13). (D. 1739-41)

"And inasmuch as in this divine sacrifice which is celebrated in the Mass there is contained and immolated (immolatur) in an unbloody manner the same Christ who once for all offered himself in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross (Heb. 9.14, 27), the Holy Council teaches that this is truly propitiatory and has this effect that if, contrite and penitent, with sincere heart and upright faith, with fear and reverence, we draw nigh to God, 'we obtain mercy and find grace in seasonable aid' (Heb. 4.16). For, appeased by this offering, the Lord grants the grace and gift of penitence, and pardons even the gravest crimes and sins. For the victim is one and the

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same, the same one now offering by the ministry of priests who then offered himself on the cross, the manner of offering alone being different. The fruits of that bloody offering, it is well understood, are received most abundantly through this unbloody one, so far is the latter from derogating in any way from the former. Wherefore, according to the tradition of the Apostles, it is rightly offered not only for the sins, punishments, satisfactions and other necessities of the faithful who are living, but also for those departed in Christ but not yet fully purified." (D 1743).

It is clear from these quotations that the Council is far from teaching that the Mass adds anything to Calvary. The priest does not make a sacrifice of his own; he is simply the minister through whom Christ offers himself. This is not a new offering on Christ's part, for he offered himself 'once for all'.

What then does Trent teach that the Mass does, if it does not add to Christ's unique sacrifice on the cross? Two sets of terms seem to be used:

- a) The Mass 'applies' the power of the single sacrifice of Christ to our daily needs, especially our need of forgiveness. In this way the Mass is 'propitiatory'.
- b) The Mass is the 'commemoration' of Christ's sacrifice, is performed in its 'memory', is performed 'visibly', but in a 'different manner'.

The verb 'represent' (repraesentare) should perhaps be regarded simply as a synonym for 'symbolise'. This is clearly the meaning of the corresponding adjective repraesentativa in the Summa 3.83.1. Those commentators on the Tridentine decree who have tried to make it mean 'present again' or 'make present' are probably wrong, though the term clearly came to have that meaning in later writings.

The Council does not consider that Christ's sacrifice needs completion by the Mass. By its symbolism, which recalls Christ's sacrifice on the cross, the Mass applies the power of this sacrifice to our every day needs. The Council, however, is not content to stop here, but calls the Mass itself a sacrifice (D. 1743, 1751) in which the ordained priest offers Christ's body and blood (D. 1752). Christ is 'immolated in an unbloody manner' (D. 1743). Such terminology encouraged post-Tridentine theologians to look for ways in which they could explain how Christ was sacrificed in the Mass. Sacrifice, they thought, meant destruction of some kind. It was, for example, suggested that what was destroyed was the substance of the bread and wine; or that an immolation is implied by the separation of the body

and blood, or by the fact that Christ can be present only by adopting a state of humiliation in the eucharistic species. Such theories seek to show that the identity between the sacrifice of the Mass and the sacrifice of Calvary consists simply in the fact that the Priest and the Victim are the same in both. They assume that despite this identity, Christ is sacrificed afresh in some sense in each Mass.

This kind of thought has been generally abandoned by Roman Catholic theologians. The use of the word 'immolate' by the Council of Trent does not imply that Christ is sacrificed afresh in each Mass. Thus in the passage from the Summa quoted above St. Thomas says that Christ is immolated in the Mass in two ways:

- (a) Because the Mass is a symbol of Christ's passion;
- (b) Because through the Mass we share in the fruits of his passion.

Neither (a) nor (b) implies a fresh sacrifice. Modern theologians maintain that in the Mass there is not a new offering of the same Christ, but the unique offering is made present each time. For de La Taille, the Mass is the oblatio hostiae immolatae. Casel believes that it is not only the person of the sacrificed Christ but his sacrificial activity which is present in the Mass. Others see the sacrificial property of the Mass in the presence of the glorified Christ, who exercises his perpetual sacrificial intercession. In such explanations the thought is sacramental: the sign makes present the reality of Christ's sacrifice.

Recent pronouncements of Popes and Vatican II have followed this line of thought. The clearest example is in Paul VI's Credo of the People of God: "We believe that the Mass.... is truly the sacrifice of Calvary, which is made sacramentally present on our altars." Pius XII's thought in Mediator Dei was similar, though he did not explicitly refer to sacramental presence, and complicated the issue by taking the eucharistic species to be a symbol of "the violent separation of his body and blood". Vatican II also adopts the sacramental terminology. "Through the hands of priests and in the name of the whole Church, the Lord's sacrifice is offered in the Eucharist in an unbloody and sacramental manner until he himself returns" (Decree on the Ministry and the Life of Priests, No. 2). Christ instituted the eucharistic sacrifice "in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the cross throughout the centuries until he should come again" (Decree on the Liturgy, No. 47).

Recently in authoritative documents there has been an attempt to make less use of the word 'sacrifice' in explanation of the Mass. (Of course the word 'sacrifice' has been retained in the Liturgical texts themselves.)

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Emphasis has been placed instead on the memorial aspect of the Mass. This theological language has its roots in the passage from the Summa quoted above, as well as in recent biblical research into the meaning of 'memorial' (anamnesis, zikkaron). The people's 'remembering' of Calvary at the Mass makes the effects of Christ's unique sacrifice present in their lives, and associates them with Christ's self-offering to his Father.

Pursuing this line of thought the 1969 Ordo Missae defined the Mass in these terms: 'The Lord's Supper or the Mass is the sacred synaxis or assembly of the People of God presided over by the priest for the celebration of the Lord's memorial.' This new theological language disturbed certain sections in the Church which were suspicious that a change of doctrine underlay this new terminology. Accordingly the 1970 edition of the Missale Romanum changed the sentence quoted above so that it read: "In the Mass or the Lord's Supper the people of God assemble to celebrate the memorial of the Lord or the eucharistic sacrifice; the priest presides over it and represents Christ." An added sentence speaks of "the celebration of the Mass in which the sacrifice of the cross is perpetuated." It was even thought necessary in this edition to add an eight-page Preface to show that the tradition of the Church in this respect had not been changed. In other words, the use of the term sacrifice is retained, though it is defined in terms of 'memorial'.

This day-by-day application of the unique sacrifice of Christ to the present needs of the Church is expressed in other ways. Pius XII in Mediator Dei (1947) speaks of the repetition in each Mass not of Christ's sacrifice but of "a commemorative showing forth of the death which took place in reality on Calvary" (No. 74). Vatican II, following another idea of this encyclical, speaks of the members of the Church who "offer the divine victim to God, and offer themselves along with it" (Decree on the Church, No.11); it is in this way especially that the people exercise the priesthood of the baptised (confer No. 10). The Church is thus associated with the fourfold purpose of Christ's sacrifice on the cross: praise, thanksgiving, propitiation, impetration (Med. Dei, 75-79).

One last point needs to be made: It is the risen body of Christ that is present in the Mass. Mediator Dei had spoken of Christ's presence on the altar "in the state of victim" (No. 96). But it is the victim glorified, 'The word of God who is the Son of the Virgin Mary and suffered on the Cross, He who is present in the Eucharist, and He who reigns in heaven, are one and the same' (Mediator Dei, No. 142). The Mass is 'a memorial of his death and resurrection' (Vatican II, Priests, No. 47). 'The one, individual existence of the glorified Lord Christ in heaven is not multiplied, but made present (praesens officitur) by the sacrament throughout the world" (Paul VI, Credo, n.26).

The belief of the ordinary Catholic is summed up clearly in the Dutch Catechism: "We are enabled to partake in mankind's definitive sacrifice.... The sacrifice has already been offered. Strictly speaking, we offer no other sacrifice than the sacrifice of Christ. No other offering is demanded of us. We join in with the one sacrifice" (pp. 340-1).
