

The Moment of Eucharistic Sacrifice

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Dr. Charley (Paper 5) insists that 'it is in the act of communicating (that) the Church, reintegrated and reappropriated by the one means of grace, is made a living sacrifice to God. Bishop Butler (Paper 3b) states the Roman Catholic view that 'the Mass-sacrifice is actuated precisely IN the consecration', adding however that this is not defined doctrine. Roman Catholic opinion on this point has undergone many changes; it seems therefore useful to give a brief outline of some of the variations.

Trent rejects the view that the sacrifice is totally identical with communion. Although the faithful are urged to communicate at every Mass, if only the priest communicates the Mass is not 'private and illicit'. (DS 1747). The Council anathematizes the opinion that 'the offering (of the sacrifice) means only that Christ is given to be eaten' (DS 1751). Trent was drawing upon a long line of Catholic teaching. St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, had argued that 'reception belongs to the sacrament, offering belongs to sacrifice' (Summa, 3.79. 7 ad 3).

Nevertheless theologians did not necessarily conclude that the consecration is the moment of sacrifice. In the Reformation controversies of the 16th century some Roman Catholic theologians, who believed the essence of sacrifice was oblation, held that the sacrifice was not complete until a prayer of offering was said after the consecration (Eck, de Castro, Tapper, etc.)

Others in the same century and later held that an essential part of sacrifice was the destruction of a victim, and consequently sought to show that some element of the Mass involved this immolation. Some were content that the immolation should be symbolic, and sought the symbol in the fraction (Cano), communion (Soto) or the separate consecration of the bread and the wine (Salmeron, Billot). Others insisted on a real immolation in the Mass: Suarez explained that the bread and wine are destroyed by transubstantiation, though it is Christ who is offered; Bellarmine held that the consecration needs to be completed by communion before the victim is destroyed; de Lugo saw an immolation in Christ's acceptance of a 'humbler state' by confining himself to the limitations of bread and wine.

In the 20th century it became the general view that the consecration by itself constitutes the sacrifice; through the consecration there becomes present to the congregation 'the Lamb once slain of old, now living, and meanwhile persisting as a Theophyte' (de la Taille, The Mystery of Faith, E.T. ii. 222). The separate consecrations are necessary, not for the sacrifice but for its symbolism; 'thereby Christ appears as given over to God, in so far as he appears clothed with a sacramental separation of the Body and Blood' (ibid). This opinion received the support of the encyclical Mediator Dei (1947): "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 representations Christ Jesus is signified and shown forth in the state of victim." (n.74).

On this view the essence of the sacrifice lies in the Real Presence; communion is not essential but necessary for completeness (MD n. 122). Some modern theologians, however, have returned to Bellarmine's conclusion (though not his reasoning) that the communion at least of the priest (the representative of the Church) is an essential element in the sacrifice. 'The visibility of the union with God in communion corresponds to the essential function of the Mass to make visible and actual the pro nobis of the sacrifice of the Cross. Communion makes the Church definitively one with her sacrificial gift.' (J. Betz, LKTh, 7.350).