

## THE MASS: THEORY AND PRACTICE

WHEN St. Thomas wrote his *Summa* to embrace the whole of theology, he did not think it necessary to divide his treatise in two independent parts, Dogma and Morals. The division, adopted many years later for pedagogical reasons, was not an improvement on St. Thomas's method. To treat the truths of faith separately from the virtues and vices was an easier method of teaching the queen of the sciences, yet results have shown that the easy division has been allowed to develop into a fatal dichotomy. It is now generally considered, implicitly at least, that dogmas have little effect on everyday life and that for practical purposes the all-important subject is "Morals." The sermon in nine cases out of ten is a moral exhortation, while the discussions of the "schoolmen" are considered as far removed from the realities of life.

Unfortunately the latter allegation cannot be wholly disproved. Whether we hold that the beginning of the world can be shown only by faith, or maintain its proof by natural reason to be possible, our lives remain unaffected by the discussion. On the other hand, the great dogmas contained in divine revelation concerning God, the Holy Trinity, Grace or the Incarnation should have an infinitely greater effect upon our behaviour than the clearest notions about contraception or the evils of capitalism. There are, moreover, many discussions in theology which possess the power of altering very profoundly one's relations with God and one's personal life in grace.

A very actual and important example, to which the above remarks are intended as a preface, is that of the nature of the Mass. Recent history shows an intense interest in the theology of the Holy Sacrifice, and many are the theories thereon evolved and defended. The discussion bulks nearly as large as that which raged round Grace and Free-will in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Like that discussion it whirls and eddies within the banks of faith. All Catholics hold the Mass to be a true sacrifice, substantially the same as that of the Cross, according to the teaching of Trent: *Una*

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*enim eademque est hostia idem nunc offerens sacerdotum ministerio, qui seipsum tunc in cruce obtulit, sola offerendi ratione diversa.* The question which the Church has as yet no occasion to define, and which is consequently left to the discussion of theologians, is the precise aspect under which the consecration of the bread and wine in the Mass constitute the Eucharistic sacrifice.

However many theories are evolved, they will never change the objective fact of the real sacrifice of Christ and our real share in that sacrifice. Christ has ordained it so, and so it will remain until the end of time. The object stands untouched by our speculations, and for this we must be deeply grateful. On the other hand it is impossible to regard the discussion as mere theory unconnected with the reality of the personal, subjective approach. It does make a considerable difference to the priest or layman at Mass whether he is an "immolationist" or a "sacramentalist" or an "oblationist"—if we may invent generic names for the defenders of different theories. His personal devotion and his private acts of mind or of heart will be influenced by his conception of the precise nature of this sacrifice. To change from one opinion to another sometimes necessitates a certain re-orientation of his piety which is here concerned with the central act of his religion. Let us see how this subjective attitude differs in some of the more prominent theories of the day.

One opinion, the popularity of which is on the wane, considers that the fundamental act of the Holy Sacrifice consists in an immolation, that Christ is in some way made a victim anew by the action of the priest at the Consecration. The priest is regarded as wielding a mystical sword whereby Christ, if the properties of His glorified body permitted it, would be slain once more as a holocaust for our sins. Sacramentally the Precious Blood is separated from the Body, poured out again as it were for our sins, leaving Christ in the aspect of a death which would be real but for the fact that His heavenly condition necessitates His existing wholly under either species.

If we adopt this theory what will be our attitude and our

feeling during the Sacrifice? The priest as he pronounces the two sacred sentences is conscious of a mysterious power over our Lord's sacramental body. In memory of the Passion he is once more putting our Lord in the state of a victim who is slain in order that the priest and his people should be given over wholly to God. The personal act of the priest then will be one of sympathy and of union with the Victim by bringing forward his own pains and sufferings that he also may be a victim. The layman too, though he is not conscious of that power of victimizing our Lord, will naturally gaze steadfastly on the Victim, made thus at the hands of the priest. He too will concentrate on his state as fellow-victim with our Lord, since from this point of view sacrifice consists essentially in the making of a victim. Calvary is indeed also before his eyes, but it is precisely as an image of Calvary that he regards the Consecration. The Victim of Calvary is once again made a victim in order that the faithful of to-day may share in that universal sacrifice completed many hundred years ago.

Such an attitude towards the Holy Sacrifice obviously deserves much praise, and it should always play some part in personal assistance at Mass. But supposing we persuade that priest or layman to alter his conception of the sacrifice and to adopt the theory, the popularity of which is on the increase in the Church to-day, the theory based on the idea of sacrament. When next he goes to Mass he will have to re-adjust his devotional approach and remodel his personal acts. He is brought suddenly face to face, not with a re-enactment of Calvary, but with Calvary itself. No longer does he assist at a memory of Calvary by a renewal in an unbloody manner of that victimization, for this is the sacrament of Calvary. It is Calvary in another mode of being, just as it is the Body and the Blood of Christ in another mode of being. In addition it is necessary now to realize that the essential part of this sacrifice is not so much the death itself as the way in which Christ accepted that death, willingly undergoing it as an offering of Himself.

The two central points of this theory are the nature of the sacrifice as a visible, willing acceptance of the Passion and

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the actual presence of the Passion in a different mode. Here we are thrust forcibly to the very foot of the Cross, brushing time and space aside by the simple words of the priest, and we needs must employ our minds and hearts as we should have done had we knelt actually with our Lady and St. John on Golgotha on the first Good Friday. With now a twofold object, our personal acts shift from sole concentration on the Victim to take into account Christ the Priest as well. Christ is offering on the Cross and we must offer ourselves as victims with Him. We are in some sense fellow-priests as well as fellow-victims, the emphasis being evenly distributed upon these two complementary ideas. And permeating every phase of this act is the sense of the overwhelming proximity of the Passion and the Cross.

Among the many varieties of opinion on the Mass there is one other which counts a large number of supporters and which serves, too, as a general heading under which to class all those who emphasize the idea of oblation in sacrifice. With this view the physical act of Calvary is allowed to sink back once more into its historical position of two thousand years ago. The connection with that unique sacrifice is now the Victim. The priest calls down upon the altar the same Victim, precisely in its aspect of victimhood, for our Lord by His Resurrection and Ascension has been received into heaven as an eternal and glorified victim of a unique sacrifice. It is our duty, in accordance with our Lord's injunction, "Do this in commemoration of Me," to offer this Victim of the Cross. The essential sacrificial act on Calvary was our Lord's visible offering, His act of oblation; but that was a completed, perfect act; the redemption was effected once for all time. In the Mass He offers as priest only virtually, that is, the sacrifice is offered through the power which Christ has conferred on the Church and on the Christian priesthood.

According to this view all the stress is laid upon the priestly act. This is the new element in the Mass and one that depends considerably on the priest and the Church. Consequently the focal centre for personal devotion becomes the act of offering. Sacrificial offering necessarily implies a victim, but this complementary aspect is only secondary. In this

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respect the mind is filled rather with admiration and gratitude at the presence of the eternal Victim of Calvary, the glorified Victim whose resplendent wounds signify triumph and victory as well as suffering and death. Thus in offering himself with Christ the participant is not so conscious of a union in suffering and a daily taking up of his cross. All such aspirations are included in a broader view embracing the whole glorious Christ, whom we offer as conveying "*omnis honor et gloria*" to God, and including also the whole being of the offerer himself, a creature acknowledging God's complete dominion over his body, his soul and his actions.

These three opinions cover in general terms all the varieties of opinion on this subject and show quite sufficiently the different orientation of the piety they inculcate. We must now meet the obvious objection that no serious criticism can be levelled at any of these attitudes towards the Holy Sacrifice. Each is a perfectly legitimate, and indeed very praiseworthy, manner of assisting at Mass and can have nothing but a beneficial influence upon the individual. So there seems no need to worry. Certainly, there is no need to worry from that point of view. None of the orthodox theories can have a harmful effect since it is based in each case on the truths of Faith. The precise point at issue is that they do have varying effects, and that a change in theory is not merely a change in theory but has a very definite effect upon the spiritual life. That should at least deter us from seeking too readily to win over supporters of other theories to our own.

Perhaps, approaching the question from another angle, we might be tempted to adopt the theory which has the most beneficial result. Among several conflicting yet tenable propositions better results might be taken as a sign of the truth, since it might be presumed that the Holy Spirit would indicate the truth thus. If such were the case we ought all to go over to the "sacramentalist" camp as a happy balance is struck there between the priest and the victim in the practical sphere. But, since each theory inculcates a true piety, we should, along these lines, argue rather to a synthesis of them

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all so as to preserve all the types of piety in a still more unified worship.

However, this is not the correct way of arguing. We should not judge truth on the principle that "it works." But on account of the intimate relation between the truths of faith and practical spirituality, the argument has some extrinsic value in a case like this where the theological truth is in process of development. For the present we must accept the apparently conflicting ideas as a necessary stage in the unfolding of this truth. In all evolution of dogma these birth-pangs are unavoidable. From unity in thought emerge several seemingly divergent opinions. In the friction that follows, the sparks burn away the dross of falsehood or inaccurate statement, leading to a final reunion where man has gone a step further in the knowledge of divine revelation. As to-day with the theorist on the Holy Sacrifice, so it must have been in the fourteenth century with the Dominicans and Franciscans as regards our Lady. The Dominican kneeling to "advocata nostra," whom he felt had been redeemed like himself; the Franciscan reciting his "Little Office" in honour of her whom he regarded as the purest lily, "sine labe concepta." There was conflict in idea and in piety, but from this rose a complete synthesis, which showed that our Lady was conceived without sin through the merits of her Son.

If now we have to bear with some variety of interpretation, we look forward with greater eagerness to the time when the Church shall have defined the full doctrine of the Sacrifice of the Mass, bringing unity and a deeper, more comprehensive, piety in the participation of these holy Mysteries.

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