

THE EUCHARIST AND THE SPIRIT OF THE LITURGY

BY

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THE christian liturgy is first and foremost an *opus operatum*. It is something much bigger than the deed of any one of us and than our own personal devotion. It is something that is first of all done apart from us, that has its own worth and power independently of our effort. We enter into its mighty current and allow ourselves to be borne along by it; our part, the *opus operantis*, is to allow ourselves to be subject to its power, to be covered over with its glory.

It should not surprise us that the christian liturgy is thus primarily an *opus operatum*. The christian liturgy stands at the heart of the christian religion; and the christian religion is first and foremost an *opus operatum*. It is not just a technique of spiritual culture; many pagan religions are that. Nor is it just a way of worship; that too can be found outside the Church. No, it is first and foremost the mighty act of God who in Christ is reconciling man to himself, and giving us in Christ a mediator and a great high-priest. The christian religion is more God's dealing with us than our dealing with him. All merely human religions, be they ever so satisfying or so lovely, lack this note of givenness, of divine achievement, of the *opus operatum*.

God reaches down to us before we lift up our hands to him. The lifted human hands that worship, the lifted human hands that plead, are raised up and held by more than human hands in a worship and a pleading that is God's gift to us. In christian liturgy the initiative is always divine. There is always something *given* to us from the divine side before we begin to approach. That something given is a Person and a Deed; a lover loving the Father, a satisfier with his pain endured in love, a priest with his act of worship. That more than human act of worship, that *given* act of worship, is the *opus operatum* which lies at the heart of the christian religion.

We are more God's than we are our own. To have realised that truth is to be wise. Of course, each one of us is the centre of his

own life, of his own world, with rights and duties, responsibilities and claims, merits and guilt of his own. But the deepest view of ourselves is when we see ourselves and any good that is in us as more his than it is ours. Our only unqualified proprietorship is a melancholy one—our sin is no one's but our own. Of ourselves we can sin; that is something that is simply and sheerly an *opus operantis*. Everything else we do, from the first faint stirrings of good in us up to the most unselfish and noble giving, is ours no doubt, but it is God's even more that it is ours.

If when we are being saved, it is more his doing than it is our own, it is more his *opus operatum* than it is our *opus operantis*. To stress one of these aspects at the expense of the other would be to lose the balance of orthodoxy, the delicate poise of the faith. The various forms of predestinationism which deny human liberty seem to exalt the omnipotence of God when they exclude the value of human effort and merit in the work of human salvation. Many of the reformers did this. For them God's *opus operatum* made the human *opus operantis* useless, if not blasphemous. On the other hand the Pelagian tendency is unduly to exalt the value of the human effort and to reduce the divine work to something which is at the most a co-operation.

In the christian liturgy this quality of givenness is paramount. In the christian liturgy as in the christian faith our whole interest, effort and attention is fixed on the one mediator given to us—the man Christ Jesus. In this mediator and his saving work we have found a copious, and the only, salvation. We should remember too that Jesus Christ may be envisaged in many ways, all of them true, but each approaching his mystery from a different vantage point. His work of reconciling man with God may be likewise variously considered. We may think of him as the God-man, who because of the infinite dignity of his divine person confers on all his human activities an infinite value. Or we may think of him just as man, not indeed excluding the infinite dignity of his divine personality, but leaving it in the background of our thought, and concentrating all the effort of our attention on his human nature and all its created holiness.

There are then these two ways of regarding Jesus Christ, each with its own attractiveness and grace. Christ's redeeming act may be regarded in one or other of these two ways as well. We may consider it as the work of the God-man, of infinite moral worth

and power because of the infinite dignity of the divine person who accomplished it in a human nature. *Christus Victor* in his triumph was God in human nature breaking the bonds of Satan. Some theologians when speaking of Christ as mediator are drawn to think of him as the God-man, with his divine dignity as well as his human lowliness both equally in the fore-front of their thought. They then proceed to consider his headship, his priesthood and his kingship as functions of his mediatorship thus envisaged.

But it seems closer to St Thomas's mind to look at Christ the mediator, leaving his dignity as a divine person in the background, and explicitly regarding him just as he is a true man, in all things like to us save sin, but filled with a plenitude of sanctifying grace which makes him in his human nature most pleasing to the Father, and able to draw down the forgiving love of God on all his sinful brethren. This is certainly a true way of looking on Christ our mediator. And because his headship of us and his priesthood for us are aspects of his office of mediator, we must regard Christ our head and our priest in all the created reality of his complete humanity, but as it is filled with sanctifying grace. In 'the man Christ Jesus' God has given us a priest who can plead and intercede for us.

There is only one head of humanity on its path towards the goal of eternal life; there is only one leader to an unqualified happiness; there is only one priest of a fallen humanity who can reconcile his fallen brethren to the Father. All other valid priesthood is either the figure or the sacrament of Christ's. The priesthood and the worship of the old law prefigured Christ the priest and his worship on the cross. The christian priest and the christian sacrifice are the sacrament of Christ the priest and of his sacrifice on the cross. The old testament priesthood and sacrifice was a natural but figurative priesthood and sacrifice. Our new testament priesthood and sacrifice is a true and proper priesthood and sacrifice, but not a natural one; it is a sacramental one.

The heart then of the christian liturgy is Christ the priest and his worshipping action of the cross. Every one of our seven sacraments, and especially the greatest of them, the eucharist (both as mass and communion) looks back to Christ the mediator and to his adoring, satisfying, propitiating action on the cross.

Baptism looks back to that mediating action primarily as it is a

satisfying action, righting the balance of justice by love and by pain. The eucharist looks back to that mediating action primarily as it is a worshipping, propitiating action of Christ the priest giving his broken body and poured-out blood to the Father.

Christ the mediator is present in his power in all the christian sacraments, i.e. in the christian liturgy. He is present to us in three ways. He is present to our faith, and that is the first and most necessary presence. Without the contact of faith (at least of habitual faith) the other closenesses to Christ are impossible or of no avail. Then there is a moral presence by which we morally appropriate the moral value of various aspects of his mediating work. In baptism we appropriate completely and unrestrictedly all the satisfactory value of his passion. This is a moral laying hold of Christ the mediator in his saving work. And finally in the christian liturgy there is a physical contact with Christ the priest and with his priestly act of oblation of his body and his blood. This priestly act of giving in the mind of Christ made what happened on the cross to be a sacrifice, and not merely an act of loving satisfaction and obedience. This priestly act continues in his mind now uninterruptedly in heaven. It has never been withdrawn. It is the physical heart now of the christian liturgy.

In the mass, as in all the sacraments, this priestly action of Christ becomes physically present to us men here on earth in time. It is the physical reality which lies at the heart of our worship. The moral reality which lies at the heart of our worship is the moral value of Calvary, all its love, merit and satisfaction. Thus our worship looks back to Calvary for all its moral worth, but here and now it pierces the highest heaven to make Christ the priest and his act of priestly giving really present in every christian sacrament.

Thus our liturgical worship is in every way first and foremost an *opus operatum*. It is Christ's *opus operantis*, all the riches of his merit and satisfaction and propitiation put at our disposal to use to our heart's content. It is also the very physical act of his priestly giving put at our disposal to clothe ourselves physically with it. In every way then, morally and physically, we can put on Christ.

In the eucharist, at the consecration, the physical act of Christ's priestly giving is made physically present to the mind of the consecrating priest. At that moment he is the living image of Christ the priest. At that moment there is a real presence of Christ

the priest and his act of priestly giving. We look at Father X standing at the altar. But Christ is really there, sacramentally present in Father X, actually giving his body and blood to the Father with that self-same act of giving with which he gave them on the cross.

This is, I think, the best way for us to offer mass. Let us look at the priest as he performs the consecration. Let us realise that Christ is really present in that priest; that his act of priestly oblation of his body and blood is really present to the mind of that priest. We are familiar with the thought of the real presence of Christ the victim under the appearances of the consecrated bread and wine. We shall become genuinely liturgically-minded when the thought of the *Real Presence of Christ the Priest* under the appearances of the human priest, in all the sacraments but especially in the eucharist, has become just as familiar. We shall daily enter into the real, though sacramental, presence of Jesus our high-priest as he continues to offer in an unbloody manner the victim which he once offered in a bloody manner for our salvation in the natural sacrifice of the cross. Let us in spirit raise our hands also with those of the human priest, knowing that both his and ours are sustained by the pierced and worshipping hands of the praying and worshipping Christ. They are sustained, too, by the love and devotion of the whole Church—that love which can never fail its lord. Thus our own poor faith and charity have, because of our baptismal character, our membership of Christ and of his Church, led us into the vast worship of Christ and of his Church, the ceaseless song of glory and the ceaseless giving of the body and the blood. We are carried on the movement of love that goes from Christ and his Church to the Father. More than ever is this true when in the eucharist we are even physically lifted up into union with Christ our priest.