

THE SACRAMENT OF PRAYER

BY

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ATHOLIC teaching on prayer and methods of prayer seems sometimes to neglect the sacramental system of the Church. Great emphasis is necessarily laid on the personal activities of the Catholic who sets out to lead a life based on communion with God; still greater emphasis is rightly laid on the part played by God directly on the soul in this communion, as the soul grows passive under the divine influence; but little is said of the divine activity through the sacraments in relation to this life of prayer, which after all is the final purpose of every influx of grace. These divinely given means of receiving grace work *ex opere operato* and do not depend merely on the subjective use made of them by the recipient. Therefore as means of prayer they should contribute to a new power, independent in some manner of the personal spiritual exercises of the individual. If a man desires to pray he adopts a method in addition to the ordinary daily exercises of morning and night prayers. That is his personal and subjective approach to converse with God; but he should not neglect the divine method which has the guarantee that if used in the right way it will necessarily bring about its effects: there are here two distinct approaches to the life of prayer.

A treatise should be written on the whole subject, reviewing not only the sacramental system as a whole but also each individual sacrament with its special contribution to prayer. Penance attacks distractions and quietens the will; confirmation brings an influx of the gifts which illumine a Christian's converse with God; marriage brings the power to the family to pray in unison. . . . Here however we must restrict ourselves to the consideration of the principal and unique sacrament, the Holy Eucharist, as a sacrament of prayer. For as the Eucharist is the Queen served by the other six sacraments, so should it be the centre of everyone's spiritual life and the principal means of progress from the purgative to the unitive forms of prayer.

The very term most commonly used to denote the use of the Eucharist, holy Communion, brings to mind the idea of an outward sign of union with God, of a mutual share and interchange with him brought about by receiving the consecrated bread. Our Lord himself began to indicate this outward sign in the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand which marks the opening of the great Eucharistic

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chapter of St John (c. 6). The whole crowd is brought suddenly into close familiarity with Christ himself by being invited to his own table at the feast, asked to share the few loaves of bread broken by his own hand. The relation of friendship established by this sign becomes increasingly clear after the resurrection when our Lord frequently invites his chosen disciples and apostles to share a meal with him. These meals are not necessarily the Eucharist but they are signs of an intimacy which does not depend on the nature of the food eaten, whether it be broiled fish or bread and fish or bread and wine. If we take prayer to be sufficiently described by 'the raising of the mind and heart to God', then we can recognise the elements of prayer shown in this act of our Lord's in raising the soul to fellowship with himself in a common meal. And in the sixth chapter of St John our Lord goes on to suggest that he is going to institute a sacrament which will cause this fellowship and in fact be of obligation for those who wish to gain such a priceless gift. 'If any man eat of this bread he shall live for ever; and this bread which I will give is my flesh for the life of the world. . . . Except you eat the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood you shall not have life in you.'

This feeding in the company of Christ is therefore to be something more than a meal, even more than a miraculous meal, when the guest can be placed on friendly terms with his host. The meal is itself to bring about what it expresses outwardly; the bread eaten is to be the very body of Christ himself; and all must eat of this bread made body. The seal is set to the doctrine when our Lord gives his body as food at the Last Supper and gives his apostles the power to give it to all who wish to be drawn into fellowship with him. It is clear that with such a gift placed in his hands the Christian could not help praying; it could not be a communion without encouraging converse with Christ. But it is not simply an encouragement, not simply an incitement to pray because the real Presence is the presence of the friend with whom we long to talk. Many hundreds of years after the institution of the Eucharist, when men first denied the reality of that Presence, Christians began to appreciate this aspect of the gift. By insisting that Christ, God incarnate, really existed, body, blood, soul and divinity under the form of bread, men became more aware of the great reverence and awe due to him. In this form he soon began to take the central place in the Church, enthroned in the hanging pyx and finally in the solid tabernacle on the altar. The consecrated bread was raised for the congregation to adore; and still later when another wave of enmity burst against the Eucharist, the host was placed in a monstrance and used for blessing Catholic assemblies. It was inevitable that the Eucharist should become a means to this type of reverential prayer when the Christian

could come and speak to his Lord and Master hidden under the form of bread and locked in the tabernacle against the risk of desecrating hands. All the wealth of Eucharistic devotion which has grown up since the tenth century, which found at once its poet and its preacher in St Thomas, and which has now made Benediction, the Holy Hour and visits to the Blessed Sacrament universal features of Catholic prayer, would be recognised as a desirable and inevitable consequence of the Real Presence even had it not been blessed over and over again by the Church and finally established by the Council of Trent. No Catholic who sets himself to pray methodically will neglect the presence of Christ in the local church, and he will find himself frequently drawn to pray there rather than in the privacy of his own room precisely because of that Presence.

But it should be noticed that this is not the principal effect of the Eucharist, that this approach is not so much the approach to a sacrament as to a sacramental. The blessing of Benediction seems to have grown up with similar blessings imparted by other less sacred but still holy objects such as statues and relics which are themselves only sacramentals. We should also notice that the greater the reverential awe for the Presence of Christ under the species, the less frequent became the actual reception of the sacrament. Thus the *effectiveness* of the sign came to be neglected in consequence of an increased insistence on the permanent *reality* hidden beneath the sign.

The balanced attitude to this truth is to be found in the explanation of the actual presence of Christ's body, the reality contained beneath the appearance of bread, as the *res et sacramentum* of the Eucharist. The reality is an effect of the external sign of Christ's words pronounced over the bread, but it is not the ultimate effect, nor the final reality. Christ did not give us his body that it should remain a permanent holy Thing on the Christian altar, as an object of devotion and adoration. As we have suggested, that development in Eucharistic devotion must have been included in his design in setting so great a treasure in his Church, but it was not his primary purpose nor was it the reality of the sacrament itself. For the real presence is in itself a sacrament, the *res et SACRAMENTUM*, the sign of something within the hearts of Christians themselves, in the deepest core of the Church. It is an outward sign of inward grace. He established it as a sacramental *meal* and also as a sacrifice.

In other words this prayerful aspect of the blessed sacrament, although of tremendous importance and of great spiritual depth and beauty, is still only secondary. Our Lord did not say, 'Take ye and adore me' but 'Take ye and EAT, this is my body which is GIVEN for you'. In those two words, 'EAT' and 'GIVEN' we find the

central elements of the Eucharist as a sacrament of prayer.

The sacrament and the sacrifice both act in their respective spheres as efficient causes which produce their effect by the simple performance of the act; they both work *ex opere operato*, and the 'opus' in both cases is an '*opus Dei*' closely connected with prayer.

Firstly, the body of Christ is given as the sacrifice. In this connection one should bear in mind that the 'real presence', taken precisely, is the presence of the victim of Calvary. Our Lord has many prerogatives, many positions, so to speak, in the kingdom of heaven; and in approaching the Blessed Sacrament we may visualize him in any one of them. We can pray to him under the form of bread, as Head of the Church, as Shepherd of our souls, as Friend and Lover, as King and Lawgiver; all these are real aspects of Christ and therefore really present in the Eucharist. But they are all concomitantly present rather than sacramentally so. The outward sign which effects what it signifies is the sign of a body drained of its blood, the blood poured out for the life of the world. The double consecration is the sacramental sign. 'This is my body, this is the chalice of my blood' spoken over two distinct elements—that is the sign and that sign brings about its effect precisely in that form. Our Lord is present sacramentally, therefore, as the victim of Calvary; St Thomas says that this sacrament '*continet ipsum Christum passum*'. The principal bond which unites the Eucharistic sacrifice with that of Calvary is the real presence of the victim; the one single victim, formally speaking, is not made a victim again. His blood is not poured out in reality a second time; but the pouring out is sacramentally re-enacted so that he is in fact given for us by the same act as he was on Calvary.

This aspect of the blessed Sacrament is important in the matter of prayer because the first prayer we must offer is the prayer of praise. The servant, the creature, must profess his dependence on the divine Creator. He must give back to God the good things bestowed on himself. He must restore the divine harmony where it has been broken, by satisfaction which is itself an aspect of prayer. All this has been done once and for all by the one single sacrifice of Calvary, which summed up the whole praise and satisfaction of the world from its first to its last moment. Christ offered himself *once* and then entered into his glory, and in that one offering he fulfilled all the praise and sacrifice of the Old Testament and forestalled all the subsequent sacrifice of Christendom by the institution of the Eucharist. '*Per ipsum, cum ipso et in ipso sit omnis honor et gloria*'. If the individual Christian is to offer praise and satisfaction he must offer it through the one victim, he must bring his own small offering

to the altar pouring his gift into the chalice that it may be turned into the blood of Christ and so become a Christian sacrifice.

It would be impossible for anyone to make amends for his sins and offer praise to the blessed Trinity away from the Cross. He cannot pray thus except in and through the Cross any more than he can reach to the intimate life of the Trinity except he become a member of Christ's mystical body. The Cross has summed up all these prayers of his already and to attempt, as it were, to by-pass the praise and satisfaction of Christ in order to make these offerings entirely on one's own would be to deny the truth of the Incarnation and redemption. Our voice of praise can be heard by the Father only if he can recognise in it the accents of his Son: our penitential offerings are accepted by him only if he can see in them a reflection of the wounds shining from the height of Calvary. And it is the consecration at Mass that brings Calvary to us, that makes it possible for those bright wounds to shine upon each one individually, because at that moment the victim who rose from the dead bearing the glorious marks of the nails and the lance is made present and given for us. When the priest in obedience repeats the words of the Last Supper, the Church continues to show forth the death of the Lord until he come and each member of the Church is given the opportunity to fill up what is wanting in the Passion of Christ, so that all the praise of the universe may ascend as an acceptable gift to the Father. The prayer of worship, then, is made possible by the Eucharist in a sacramental manner, so that it is not impeded by the sins of the minister and remains yet an objective and priceless offering even though the offerers themselves be half-hearted or full of selfishness. The Eucharist is thus the principal and necessary instrument of worship.

But the prayer of worship is incomplete in the Christian until it has moved on to its culmination in com-union, union with God. And it is inaccurate to speak of a sacrament as an instrument of *ours*; it is God's instrument for reaching the soul in a human way which will yet rise above the vagaries of human feelings and experience. Certainly man uses the sacraments, but God gives the grace through them. Each sacrament has been separately designed by our Lord to convey a special grace; and every sacramental grace although fundamentally the same life-giving share in the intimacy of the Trinity yet has a special conformity to the purpose for which it is given. Baptism brings the initial graces of spiritual birth, penance the graces of contrition and rehabilitation in this divine life, confirmation the strengthening and full power of this life. All the sacraments convey

their special graces but none of them convey so fundamental a grace as that of the Eucharist. It is worth while in this context to repeat a paragraph from a celebrated article of St Thomas's *Summa*:

Absolutely speaking the sacrament of the Eucharist is the greatest of all the sacraments. First of all because it contains Christ himself substantially. . . . Secondly this is made clear by considering the relation of the sacraments to one another. For all the other sacraments seem to be ordained to this one as to their end. For it is manifest that the sacrament of Order is ordained to the consecration of the Eucharist: and the sacrament of Baptism to the reception of the Eucharist: while a man is perfected by Confirmation, so as not to fear or abstain from this sacrament. By Penance and Extreme Unction man is prepared to receive the Body of Christ worthily. And Matrimony, at least in its signification, touches this sacrament in so far as it signifies the union of Christ with the Church, of which union the Eucharist is a figure: hence the Apostle says (Eph. v, 32): *This is a great sacrament: but I speak in Christ and in the Church.* (III, 64, 3.)

The blessed Sacrament is therefore *the sacrament par excellence* because its grace is the culmination of all the others. And approaching the doctrine in the terms of prayer we can see that it is the culmination of all the other means of prayer which a Christian may adopt in order to facilitate his converse with God, for it seems that all the means of the spiritual life culminate in the blessed sacrament in virtue of its own special grace. St Thomas says, in the article preceding the one quoted above, that the Eucharist is ordained to final perfection. The Christian therefore who has set out to reach God by his prayer and has formulated some methods of prayer, beginning with the simple acts of morning and night prayer, and continuing by meditation and simple attention and so on, must be ready to abandon his methods when he approaches the meal of Christ's own body. The methods of prayer cannot well be applied to the sacrament of Communion itself, for they are in themselves another and more subjective form of communion, whereas this is an objective (*ex opere operato*) method of communion, a method in which God is active and the soul passive no matter at what stage in the spiritual life the soul may be. This is very important when the beginner is trying to learn by some special course of 'exercises'. It would be presumptuous to impose these exercises on one's mode of sacramental communion, because God's way cannot be restricted by our own peculiar fancies. This sacrament is itself the principal method of prayer and one that has the sanction of Christ's own institution. This will become clearer if we consider its special effect.

The effect of the Eucharist is expressed by St Thomas in two ways which at first sound somewhat diverse but which on analysis can be shown to be the same. In the first place the *Res* of this sacrament, the ultimate effect of which the Real Presence itself is a sign, is the union of the mystical body. All the faithful gather round the same table to partake of the same meal. Their presence at Mass itself is a sign of their desire to be gathered into one, to fulfil Christ's prayer that they all may be one. The faithful then come forward and press round the table while the priest, their host fulfilling the function and person of Christ, gives to each the bread made flesh. Each receives the same flesh to eat, the flesh of Christ himself. Each receives the whole Christ. He receives him, as we have already pointed out, not primarily to adore him, to stand in spirit at a distance in reverence and awe. He receives the body of Christ in order to become one thing with him, in order to be so intimately united with him as to be able to say with the Apostle, 'No longer I but Christ liveth in me'. As ordinary food is assimilated to become part of the life of the one who eats it, so this spiritual food assimilates the Christian who receives it into the very life of Christ. The intimacy of the union brought about by the sacrament is inexpressible, but the analogy most suited to overcome this defect of language is that of the mystical body. For the Christian is thus identified with Christ without losing his own identity. He becomes a living member of Christ who lives constantly in the world through these members. And each member lives by the life of the whole body.

All this is common doctrine, here summarised in the briefest fashion. But it is easy to see how the blessed Sacrament brings about by its divine activity what is signified outwardly by the common meal and the share of the common life of the body. The whole liturgy of the Church, the prayer of the mystical body, centres in the Mass. The divine Office and all the other rites of the Church lead up to the sacrifice and Communion. St Thomas says too that the other six sacraments are generally 'consummated' in the Eucharist in the sense that they are more properly conferred in or around the Eucharist, baptism before the Easter or Pentecostal Mass, Orders during Mass, matrimony before the Nuptial Mass. From the special point of view which we are here considering, therefore, the blessed Sacrament joins the individual's voice of praise and supplication with the prayer and supplication of Christ in his Church. It does this not simply because at the celebration of the Eucharist or in the Divine Office which precedes it, the priest says many prayers on behalf of the faithful who join in spirit with the sentiments expressed, but because at Holy Communion the Christian's own personal union with Christ is perfected so that his desires are transformed into the desires of

Christ, his sentiments into Christ's sentiments, and therefore his prayer into Christ's prayer. This, at least, is the effect to which the power of the Eucharist is ordained in each and all the communicants.

No wonder the Church prays at the beginning of the Canon of the Mass that she, the one Church, should be united (*adunare*). In the Eucharist God works to draw all the members into closer conformity with Christ, so that they may pray *uno ore*, with one mouth which is indeed the mouth of Christ. The whole outward form of the Eucharist shows this same interior effect; and the effect is indeed interior. We are not here pitting the liturgy against private devotion or methods of private prayer. The glory of this universal eucharistic prayer is that the individual's expression of devotion to God in and through his Son becomes in this way the whole Church's expression of devotion; the whole Church shares in the individual Christian's private eucharistic devotion. And also, contrariwise, the prayer of the mystical body brought about by the Eucharist is at the same time the individual's most intense and most personal approach to God—'No longer I but Christ liveth—prayeth—in me'. This will become clearer if we consider the second way in which St Thomas expresses the *Res* or ultimate effect of the Eucharist.

The *Res* of this sacrament, says St Thomas in the question which treats *ex professo* of its effects, is Charity not only habitually but also in the act which is stirred up by the sacrament (III, 79, 4). To understand this most important statement we must remember that all the sacraments give charity at least in habit because they all give grace and grace must first among all the virtues give charity. All the other supernatural virtues are built up on the divine love of God in the will. But the other six sacraments bring an increase in charity which is inevitable rather than intentional, because in giving their own special effects they are bound to be giving charity. But the increase of charity thus given may be only habitual.

Now the blessed Sacrament can be regarded as *the* sacrament because it is designed of itself to bring an increase of *the* virtue, the principal theological virtue of love. It is the sacrament of love, and that is why it is the sacrament of unity, of the union of the mystical body. And since it is specifically intended to give this divine love it should increase this virtue not simply habitually in the will, as happens for example if a man become more humble or more contrite—conformed to the will of God, more united to him. But this sacrament is designed to bring the will to the state of actively loving God—*quantum ad actum qui excitatur in hoc sacramento*. The actual love of God is the sacramental effect of eating the body of Christ; it is, as St Thomas says elsewhere, the *fervor Caritatis*, the fire of love. The union which it effects is the union of actual love. As a result of

a fitting reception of the blessed Sacrament the soul is set on fire with the love of God, the will is actively engaged in loving him and the mind itself must in consequence also be concerned with him.

The application of this doctrine to prayer need hardly be made. The virtue of charity is the essentially contemplative virtue, the theological virtue which principally characterises the contemplative life. So that we could say that the effect of the sacrament is to make the soul more contemplative. But more precisely, the mind and will cannot be thus actively engaged in loving God without praying. Indeed that expression is practically tautological. The aim of the ascent of Mount Carmel, of the climbing of the Scale of Perfection, is precisely to reach this union, the transforming union of love. Charity is perfection, and prayer is the attaining of perfection, the growth in love, the raising of the mind and heart. Again we must repeat that the Eucharist is a sacrament, an efficient sign which brings about this very effect of actual love of God, actual prayerful union by its own divine activity. It is designed to bring the soul to the very heights of the life of prayer. So St Thomas, the great doctor of the Eucharist, says almost in passing, as though it was a thing all would take for granted, *Eucharistia est quasi consummatio spiritualis vitae*—the blessed Sacrament is as the consummation and fulfilment of the whole spiritual life.

To those unfamiliar with the Catholic doctrine of the sacraments all this might seem to lead to a mechanical attitude to the Eucharist in which the Christian approached the sacrament expecting to be caught up into high states of prayer without more ado. But of course the teaching about the objective nature of sacramental activity must always be balanced by the subjective preparation of the recipient. And this is of the greatest importance here, for if the activity of mind and heart in loving God is impeded then the sacrament cannot have its full effect in the soul. Evidently the *full* effect would be the highest of contemplative states, that of transforming union, so that at every Communion the normal Christian must be putting obstacles, grave or slight, to the sacramental activity. These impediments will be precisely those that prevent the actual as distinct from the habitual charity, that quench the flame of love without necessarily extinguishing the fire of grace completely. Where the mind is occupied by thoughts which are not directly concerned with God it is impossible to be in the act of loving him. And similarly when the will is occupied with other loves than the love of God, the grace of this sacrament will be prevented. In other words distractions—even those distractions which cannot be avoided—and venial sins not fully repented and cast aside, these imperfections silt up the channel of

Eucharistic grace so that when the morsel of consecrated bread is eaten Christ cannot pour the fullness of his love into the soul. We are here of course talking about the impediments which are not complete hindrances, which are not therefore mortal sin, and which are sometimes quite guiltless such as involuntary distractions which do in fact prevent the perfect fulfilment of the outward sign and are merely a general result of original sin.

If we apply this to the question of prayer we shall see that the one who receives holy Communion must lay very great emphasis on his preparation. In order to rid the mind of distractions and the will of attachment to venial sin he must exercise and purify these two faculties with care before he dare approach the altar. His personal, subjective prayers must in particular be contrition for his remembered sins and attachments, and acts of faith and praise which direct his mind towards God. It is thus in the preparation that his own activity must be concentrated if the Eucharist is to have any of the *ex opere operato* effect on his prayer already mentioned. Many people seem to think that they need not trouble much about preparation, and that they must reserve their spiritual energies for the moments when our Lord is sacramentally present within them and they are engaged in thanksgiving. By such topsy-turvy behaviour they implicitly flout the wisdom of the Church in designing the rites of the Eucharistic sacrifice. The Mass has been developed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit so that it provides a complete preparation of mind and will, beginning with the Act of Contrition and including prayers and instructions from the Scriptures in order to train the mind on God. It progresses slowly from the collects and lessons to the Creed and thence to the offertory and so on to the Consecration. In all this those who assist are given the opportunity to focus all their powers on the one point—Christ's body, the body of the victim. They are given many opportunities to overcome distractions and to repent their sins. And then only at the very end do they dare to approach the sacrament of love and union.

The Eucharist has its sacramental effect of actual love, but then the activity should be primarily under God's immediate direction. It would be a mistake to make the time of thanksgiving a time of planned activity and spiritual exercises. This period is the most important of all but its importance is greatly diminished if the soul is struggling to overcome the distractions and other disturbances by its own personal activities. All this should have preceded holy Communion, and at the time of thanksgiving the soul should be far more passive. We have tried to show in what way the Lord teaches the soul how to pray in this sacrament by setting it on fire with love of himself and by bringing its offering and gifts into the orbit

of the one Gift of the Victim. If this is true, then once the bread of life has been eaten the soul should remain peacefully open to these influences coming directly from him and not fuss with its own preconceived methods of prayer and converse with him. To light a fire a man prepares dry sticks, lays them carefully and then finally applies the match. A flame applied to a disorderly heap of damp wood will have little effect. At Communion the flame of love is applied by God's hand through the greatest of his sacraments; he leaves us to prepare the wood of the soul for kindling.

The Eucharistic devotion surrounding the presence of Christ on the altar will serve after this to keep the fire of love alight, to prolong the thanksgiving and so continue the sacramentally formed prayer. And the whole movement of the spiritual life, the outward prayer of the liturgy and the inner contemplation of the individual soul alike, is in this way inspired, directed and controlled sacramentally by the Eucharist which leads to the perfection for which every Christian prays. And because it works sacramentally it is not left to subjective activities of the soul *using* the presence of Christ's body as it might use holy water and a striking picture of Gethsemane; it works in such a way as to impel the soul to prayer—Christ takes possession of the soul and its activities through this sacrament. And so St Thomas says that it is the consummation of the spiritual life; for indeed the Eucharist is the sacrament of prayer because it is the sacrament of love and the sacrament of the body of Christ.

THE BREAD OF LIFE

BY

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NE evening in summer on the rocky slopes overlooking the Sea of Galilee from the north, Jesus had fed five thousand people with a few pieces of bread. Next day these same people and Jesus were crowded into the synagogue in Capharnaum. Our Lord was speaking to them: 'I am the bread of life. Your fathers did eat manna in the desert and are dead. This is the bread that comes down from heaven that if any man eat of it, he may not die. . . . I am the living bread which came down from heaven. . . . If any man eat of this bread he shall live for ever. And the bread that I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world' (John 6, 48-52).

Unlike all other great spiritual teachers Christ claimed not only to lead and point to a better life, he made the astonishing claim that