

SHARING THE SACRIFICE

BY

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THE central act of the liturgy is the mass. It is an act in two senses, that of something done, and that of drama in the highest order. But despite the amount written round it in recent years, the idea of being a spectator only still infects many, perhaps the majority, of lay men and women. The mass remains a service which we attend, not a sacrifice which we offer. Some of this vagueness is due to the care necessary in separating the priest from the people, in that we say the priest alone has a priestly function, by ordination, while the people are in no way priests, even though they too share in the offering. This is inclined to cloud the part of the people, to obscure the public nature of the mass. For the mass is by nature public and social, whether it is said in the solitude of the Sahara by Charles de Foucauld or in the Piccadilly-Circus crowd of a London Midnight Mass. The priest offers sacrifice for the whole Church, for the living, for the dead. This note is the most resounding of any in the liturgy, because the echo of each mass has its effect upon each living person, more especially on each member of the mystical body. You do not feel any better for the mass being offered now in the Philippines? Well, you are better, anyhow! What a joy it is, or should be, to belong to that body which, 'from the rising of the sun to the going down thereof', is making God's name great among the gentiles. Greater joy still to realise that we can take on the role of sponsors and workers in the offering, 'doers of the word, not hearers only'.

But the question at issue is how we are to persuade our slow minds and hearts to take a more active part. Such phrases ring true and meaningless from school-desk to deathbed: 'We are redeemed by his Precious Blood', 'From the mass flows every grace', 'Christ our Pasch is sacrificed'; they roll off an idle tongue, learnt by rote, from a forgotten age of Catechism. Do they vitalise us, goad us to action? Do they draw us to mass? To be frank: they do not. From a prayer book, from a preacher's tongue, they yawn with our bored yawn, waiting like us to get-on-with-

the-job. A slow priest, we can get in ten minutes late; a quick priest, we can get out ten minutes early; meet me at the twelve-thirty mass; the last mass is at twelve, you say? Oh, but the sermon ends at half-past, that's when we always come along!

Sometimes we understand that to come to mass is the greatest thing we can do in our lives. We even grasp the power now and then: how it achieves more than endless organising, wins sinners back, converts pagans—yes, but now it is over, let's *do* something practical! Silly fools: that is all we are. Our only practical method should be to get up earlier, come to mass more frequently, attend with greater interest and awe. Such action changes our lives, fills us full of the Holy Ghost, makes us sources of God's power over men. The miracle of conversion begins in us from the miracle of Calvary renewed and blossoms in the 'daily miracle of a saintly life'.

In some way or other we must find the incentive to wake up at mass. It needs a bit to go out on a wet morning; it often needs more to change the breakfast routine, cutting out the relax-with-cigarette-and-paper period. Most people find it necessary to have a greater understanding in order to have greater appreciation. Some gain the required deepening through prayer alone, but being made with a mind, generally it needs food for thought before the heart is moved at all. Without hesitation, then, I would say that everyone should read a book about the mass. If the Catechism is the end of our development, we all know the young mind scarcely grasps, let alone appreciates, spiritual values behind exam-worn definitions. Lack of knowledge breeds lack of interest, which mixes with stronger worldly attractions to create perfunctory attendance at the last mass, whittling down to complete collapse. But what to read? Try Mgr. Knox's *Mass in Slow Motion*. Why? Because he was talking to children, trying to liven their interest, which is just what we need. There are other innumerable books, of course; you must suit your taste. Some will like Frs Coventry and Gillick's *The Breaking of Bread*, an interesting explanation with beautiful illustrations; more spiritual is Zundel's lovely: *The Splendour of the Liturgy*, while the studious will gain a new angle of value in theological approaches from de la Taille, Masure and Billot. The only important thing is to probe into these books until you find a flash of understanding into the magnetism of the mass.

It goes without saying that reading alone would be lopsided and absurd. We can go so far as to say knowledge is of less need than practice; as is the case with all prayer, practice makes perfect. The accent, though, is not only on attendance bodily, but on dynamic spiritual co-operation. A wordy, meaningless sentence? No. We are not told to come to church to find a method of whiling away the time from the first dab of holy water to the Last Gospel. Pius XII states that the faithful may say the Rosary during the liturgy, as not all can cope with the missal, whereas the 'Hail Mary' and thoughts on the life of our Lord are in keeping with the spirit that liturgy is proclaiming. Nevertheless, such a practice is not a dope to fill up an idle half-hour: it is to be stimulant to our understanding of the sacrifice. By this or other means, we are to realise the full share in offering which we, as individual christians, make. Be quite clear; this is not the priestly power, which is given only in ordination; this is a real and effective participation in the offering belonging to each layman, a participation which varies with the earnestness of the person present. To sit and wonder why Mrs Upright uses the shade of lipstick which clashes with her Sunday hat is to miss our share in the offering; to become suddenly absorbed in the Table of Moveable Feasts (I wonder how many Sundays there are after Pentecost this year, anyhow?) may mean missing that bit when the priest says 'Pray, brethren, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God the Father Almighty'. . . . When he says what? Well, that is the English for *Orate Fratres*, you know. But what sacrifice of mine? That was the one you should have been offering when the priest offered the host and chalice; that was your chance to begin offering yourself, your life, your friends, your worries, your joys . . . well, but of course, you were looking for that sixpence for the plate; so annoying of it to get lost!

Much of the difficulty is that it is so easy to drift through mass. For that reason, it would be a good thing to fix a series of hooks to hang your attention on. Do you not think, as an example, that it is tremendously easy even to miss the Sign of the Cross at the beginning, especially when the priest mumbles it? Before you know where you are, he is up the altar steps and away, leaving you still trying to discover if it is the twelfth or thirteenth after Whitsun. It would be a good plan to decide at least to get the first sign in with the priest; it checks you on being late, too! Think

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if everyone in church did that together, a united, terrifying act of resolve to focus ourselves on this mass as a living sacrifice, not only God's drama, but our own.

After that, the intention must carry on. The first part, to the end of the Creed, is instructional; it is there that we can gain knowledge—*to be* to chew over during the day, if you will forgive the expression. I begin the day depressed, then the opening psalm asks: 'Why art thou cast down, O my soul? . . . Hope thou in God.' *Kyrie eleison*, Lord have mercy on me in temptation, Christ have mercy on me in my pride of success, my depression of failure. Because now at the *Gloria* I know why I am alive. . . 'We praise thee, we adore thee, we glorify thee', however odd the way may seem. What, the Epistle already? where is the lesson here? A 'Confessor not a Bishop' (how do you pronounce that word Confessor? I am always shifting the accent from first to second and back again); anyhow, it tells us to be fools for Christ's sake, fools in kneeling here, fools in wasting time which might be spent in bed, fools in not being out in the country relaxing; but no! the Gospel shouts, for where your treasure is, there is your heart also. That's what we came for, to put our hearts on the altar, by sacrificing our wills with Christ. But where is my heart . . . wandering home to breakfast? Steady now, we are not through yet.

With the Gospel over we really get down to the mass. No, I do not mean down on the bench to take it easy. I mean the sacrifice proper begins here, from the Offertory to the Communion. Just to emphasise that this is not the place to sit back and let the priest do the work alone, digest these words of Pope Pius XII on the people's part: 'It means they must assume to some extent the character of a victim, that they deny themselves as the Gospel commands, that freely and of their own accord they do penance, and that each detests and satisfies for his sins. It means, in a word, that we must all undergo with Christ a mystical death on the Cross, so that we can apply to ourselves the words of St Paul: "With Christ I am nailed to the Cross".'

That passage is strong! If we could let it penetrate our minds and hearts as we kneel at the bench in shifty dreariness we should have a greater share in 'filling up what is wanting in the sufferings of Christ'. After the Preface, except for bells ringing, we are left to drift or to follow silently. Silence most deeply expresses love;

silence is most profound prayer; silence unites us closely to the intentions of the Church, to the prayer of Christ, to the sacrifice of the priest. The silent hymn of the liturgy throbs between High priest, priest and people, as the priest says: *Memento Domine . . .* 'Be mindful, Lord, of thy servants and handmaids . . . for whom we offer, or who offer up to thee this sacrifice of praise for themselves and theirs, for the redemption of their souls. . . .'

How many of us, in fact, make the offering with the priest? If we do make it verbally, is it true of us that 'out of the fullness of the heart, the mouth speaketh'? For the offering verbally with the priest is not enough. Somehow we must follow St Paul: 'I beseech you therefore . . . that you present your bodies, a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing unto God'. Because here we come upon an amazing paradox, most startling in the case of the priest, but nearly as amazing for those who share in the mass. It is this. The mass, infinite in value, perfect, complete and unchangeable in itself, nevertheless is made more perfect, is more complete, is of more value extrinsically, in so far as a holy priest is celebrating worthily, and in so far as those in the congregation are holy, are full of fervour, are uniting with high priest and priest to offer themselves as a spiritual sacrifice. Astounding? It is the paradox of God's bounty to man, that God allows man to co-operate in or to limit his work. God's greatest gift to man, freedom, thus becomes the binding or loosing force for the graces God plans to shower upon us. If we can feel this pulse of man's co-operation beating through God's plan, it will lead us to redouble our efforts, lest we frustrate his plan. Each time we doze or yawn through mass, that mass is so much the less effective; each time we take our part fully, those merits of the Precious Blood abound the more in this world which today so lacks grace. Here indeed is the centre of Catholic Action, Catholic and active to a greater extent than any other because of its universal application and infinite power. Moreover, we fulfil literally: 'if any man will come after me. . . .'

There is another doctrine which gives even more striking proof of our instrumentality in the mass. A horrid word that, but expressive of our sharing in the sacrifice by accepting all that is implied when Christ said: 'Abide in me, and I in you'. St Paul saw the point, cried out: 'I live, now not I, but Christ liveth in me'. We all know the awful consequences to a person 'possessed

by the Devil'; he is no longer master of his actions. Equally radical, though totally different, the possession by Christ, if we allow it. How shall we relate it to our action at mass? What effect will it have?

The answer is simple. Christ in us breaks down our personal, centralised approach; it is no bore, not something we watch, not something beyond our grasp. For self must be put aside, while Christ acts in us, prays in us, sacrifices in us. He is the driving force, we are humble co-operators. Christ directly in and through the priest at the altar is sacrificing again. We in the congregation, surrendered, drawing life as Members of the Body, can only co-operate in so far as Christ, living in us, has taken command. Always in accord with our willing surrender, he makes use of our willing lips to adore, praise, thank and beg his Father; loving Son giving supreme joy to his Father, he uses the Father's most perfect creatures as instruments of worship.

Unless an instrument does the work intended by the workman, it fails in its purpose. As channels of Christ's prayer we must, then, take on his attitude to the Cross. What would this be? The dreamy unawareness which clouds the eyes and mind at mass? Weariness perhaps, for surely he was weary on Calvary, but a weariness livened by wholehearted giving. Just at such a time of inability are we most empty, most ready 'to become as like as possible to Christ in his most grievous sufferings' by which 'he emptied himself, becoming obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross'. We do not lack emptiness, we lack emptying. All our personal feelings crowd into our empty heads . . . how stuffy it is; the priest dawdles; that airman is chewing gum again; why do Italians eat garlic? Why all this discomfort?—at least pad the kneelers! Why the mass? Because of the suffering of the Cross? Well, why the Cross then . . .? It was just for this that he emptied himself. Only the hardest death, most cruel suffering could be an example to us; only by hanging three hours on the tree could he persuade us to kneel for thirty minutes. Do we recognise the lead, as the Body of Christ is raised again above the altar? 'My Lord and my God' . . . an answer to his appeal from our hearts, or just 'Hullo, do get on with it; we are missing the bus'? What a lot besides buses we miss, our minds chasing shadows, conscious or unconscious. To God or Mammon for one half-hour. . . . To let, one semi-detached mind and heart!

Here, as elsewhere, Christ our model leads us to Calvary, living now again upon every altar in the Church. To come at all is something, but only part. The soldiers came on that first Good Friday . . . to crucify. Shall we, like them, sit scoffing, gossiping, passing the time, waiting to breathe a sigh of relief at the end, when we can get on with living? If we do this, we are failing him indeed. He alone on the Cross, we with the choice of being the 'beloved disciple' or the unmoved soldiery. Pope Pius XII continually urges the better part upon us: 'Now the exhortation of the Apostle: "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus", requires that all Christians should possess, as far as is humanly possible, the same dispositions as those which the divine Redeemer had when he offered himself in sacrifice: that is to say they should in a humble attitude of mind pay adoration, honour, praise and thanksgiving to the supreme Majesty of God.' Quite a big task, as we sit there dumbly. Yet the *Pater Noster*, coming in the centre of the most solemn part, should rouse us outwardly and inwardly. I always like the idea they have abroad of ringing the bell just before the *Pater Noster*. We have reached such an important point. The priest with all the people is talking to God the Father in the words Christ taught his Apostles. Even supposing we could say we were lost in the rest of the mass, we cannot say so here. 'Our Father.' How many say it with the priest? If we do, we 'pay adoration, honour, praise and thanksgiving to the supreme Majesty of God'. Christ speaks through the priest to his Father in the acts of faith, hope and charity which make up the first section of the prayer. He speaks through each member of the congregation, in so far as 'this mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus. . . .' Oh dear, I wish I wasn't always so dozy; he's slipped on to the *Agnus Dei*, and I didn't even make the sign of the Cross at the 'fractio', when the body of our Lord is symbolically reunited in a new Resurrection. Strange, really, how that custom is dying; it seems to belong to the era of Bishop Challoner. Who made the first sign of the Cross, anyhow? That may have been the way our Lord blessed his Apostles before he ascended into Heaven. Which reminds me again that it is the Mass, and time to go up to Communion, the consummation of the sacrifice just as the Ascension was: God the Father receiving the Son in glory, we receiving the Son, our 'pledge of future glory'.

We may be inclined to forget too easily the importance of our

Communion. For the priest, it is an essential part of the mass, which may not be omitted, because without it the sacrifice is incomplete. Though not essential to the people attending mass, it is clear that the union in offering will be much greater if we receive the body of our Lord. The hard years of Jansenism must be cut out from our spirituality. How they cling! It is the God of love who urges us to partake. From a personal point of view, this act is also one of the best hooks upon which to hang the wandering strands of our attention. And even supposing that for some good reason sacramental Communion is impossible all the same, a spiritual Communion is always possible.

Yet here again, just because of the tremendous thing which is happening to us and in us, we find the greatest difficulty in even keeping awake. Innumerable very holy people, saints too, have exclaimed how hard it is to concentrate at this moment. Everything is distractingly dry, lonely, dark, blank, muddled; the only clear thought runs down alley ways, plays games, is tempted. Our desires for God, love, thanks, delight—poor smothered things—get no chance. It may be battle royal to believe. Then we can help ourselves only by letting God help us. Eating the body of Christ, we should force to our lips, if force is necessary, an act of love at that very moment. Afterwards, we must lean gently on love, making the love of God one with our love, that we may take into ourselves not the body only, but also the Spirit of Christ. It is within us that Christ wills to continue his life; Christ lives in us for this short time, not only Spirit, but body also. Oh, there we go—another yawn, a pity Father is so slow, we'll never get breakfast and catch the ten o'clock; what, another collection?—what for this time? Lord, do you believe in all these collections? Is paying the best form of praying for me? I can't seem to do both at once, but anyhow that is all I've got—threepence—it won't redecorate the Sanctuary, but it may help to keep the lamp alight in my heart.

Ite Missa est—that *Deo gratias* comes out a bit too slickly. Thank God it is over! Perhaps one day, Lord, you will manage to change our tune, if we keep coming to let out our hearts to you. Then, too, we may understand more that a perfunctory bob in the Last Gospel isn't good enough, because, believing, we are made the sons of God, and so we know that the word made flesh dwelt, and literally dwells, among and in us.