

THE MYSTERY OF REDEMPTION

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The Sacrifice of the Cross¹

God as a real Father, embraces man as his lover. But we rejected His love, turning away by our disobedience. Thus there was the necessity to offer a bloody sacrifice, so as to redeem man, bear the result (death) of his sin against God, and intercede for him.

All the human race received this rule of the bloody sacrifice through Adam, and most religions practised it. But many abused its notion and rites; some sacrificed their children to appease the wrath of God.

For this reason, the written Law of Moses directed us to offer bloody sacrifices, describing their rites accurately and in detail. For “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.”²

These sacrifices were symbols of the unique sacrifice, i.e. that of the Cross. For the “Lamb of God” bears our sins and disobedience and pays the price. He is the only One who can pay, redeem, intercede and raise us up.

We can see this sacrifice of Christ hidden in all the history of God’s dealings with man. The Patriarchs saw it through the symbols and rejoiced.³ Moses saw it through the law and God’s actions with His people.⁴ The Prophets foresaw it in the prophecies.

The prophet Isaiah saw the Victim bowing his head, to bear our sins, redeeming us by the Cross. He said⁵,

“Who has believed what we have heard?

And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? . . .

He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;

and as one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken,

Smitten by God, and afflicted.

But he was wounded for our transgressions,

He was bruised for our iniquities; . . .

stricken for the transgressions of my people . . .
 although he had done no violence . . .

Yet it was the will of the Lord to bruise Him . . . when He makes Himself an offering for sin . . .

He poured out His soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors”.

The apostle Paul compares this sacrifice to the old sacrifices.⁶

“But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption . . .

For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.

Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the Holy Place yearly with blood not his own; for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, He has appeared once for all at the end of time to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself”.

In these magnificent phrases, we catch the depth of the theme of our redemption, Christ’s suffering; the shedding of His blood has a sacrificial quality.

This sacrifice is unique

—*First*: It is the unique sacrifice in which the “Victim” offers His will as a sacrifice to the Father. He expressed His absolute obedience and inward abandonment to the Father, and His fervent love. He chose death as the ultimate extreme of obedience and by this He gave the Father infinite honor, worship and glory. He offered that highest and most precious possession, His own will, which St. Paul calls “Self-emptying”⁷. This self-emptying could not be offered by the old victims, for these had no “will” to offer.⁸

Second: The High Priest here is not a man suffering from sin⁹ or offering the blood of animals for the purification of the flesh, but He is the heavenly One, who offers His own blood as a heavenly and mighty sacrifice, which does not need to be repeated . . . for it brings us to the heavenly place, i.e. “the good things that have come.”

Thus, the sacrifice of the Cross is unique for it is the sacrifice of “self-emptying” and a heavenly one, not subject to the laws of “time” and “place”.

There never was a moment when Christ did not wish to be sacrificed, and now He is still in heaven as the slain “Lamb”¹⁰ making intercession for His church through His blood.

To understand this notion, we say that the sacrifice of the Cross forms one redeeming action of God, although it was fulfilled in many stages. For our salvation, the Son was incarnated, baptized, tempted, suffered, was crucified, died, was buried, resurrected and ascended to heaven . . . These stages are one integral redeeming action, and cannot be isolated one from the other.

Examples: Through His incarnation the Son was united with us, and we abode mystically in Him. But we cannot enjoy this union with Him outside the Crucifixion, the Resurrection and the burial with him in the baptistry so that we may rise up with Him in the new life.

And through His baptism, the Church - His body - enters with Him to receive the Spirit of adoption from God, but she cannot enjoy this without the Cross, which reconciles her with God . . .

Likewise in the Last Supper, the Lord brought His Church into the mystery of the Cross, bestowing upon her His sacrificed Life, i.e. his sacrificed Body and Blood, as a true sacrifice, and the Church still enjoys sacramentally the one sacrifice of the Cross through the Eucharist.

Upon the Cross He fulfills the role of Victim which He accepted at the Last Supper. And His acceptance of the resurrection or the new life from His Father is a fulfillment of His self-oblation in the last Supper, this life-giving sacrifice.

In brief, the Lord offered one sacrifice which took many essential and integral stages, especially the Last Supper, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. It is one sacrificial, supernatural and divine action, always present in the Church to last for eternity.

A Real Sacrifice

The Church is Christ continuing to act and to operate in His body. He bestows this mystery upon her, so that she may offer His own sacrifice by His Holy Spirit.

Thus what He entrusted to her on the night of His suffering was a true sacrifice, as we conclude from His words.¹¹

My Body given . . . broken for you,

My Blood poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins,

The new covenant in my Blood . . . shed for you.

For this reason, the early Church used these Greek words, "thusia = sacrifice and prosphora = oblation, for the "Eucharist".

St. Paul clearly implies that the Eucharist is a "sacrifice" when he contrasts "the table of the Lord" and "the table of demons" (1 Cor. 10:20, 21). Also the references in Hebrews, chapter 10 are to the sacrifices of the Old Testament to which Calvary and the Eucharist are compared as fulfillment and antitype to the prefigured type.

Thus the ecumenical councils and the early Fathers of the Church¹² taught us that the Eucharist is a real unbloody Sacrifice.

For, St. Ignatius, the eucharistic assembly of the Church is *thusiasterion* "the place of the sacrifice and he who is not within it is deprived of the bread."¹³

St. Clement of Rome¹⁴ says that the bishop's work is to offer "prospheretia" the oblation.

Eucharist and Calvary

On the Cross Christ physically shed His blood. And had this sacrifice ended by His death like the old ones, He would have been unable to bring us to heaven. But He rose again proclaiming the Father's acceptance of this sacrifice, proving that He is the Living Victim, always present in His church, offering the same sacrifice sacramentally without physical shedding of blood nor physical death, because He can die no more.

In other words,¹⁵ on the Cross, the Word of God spoke the practical, saving and loving speech, by shedding His blood. And in the Eucharist, the Holy Spirit awakens the hearts of men to hear the same Word of the Cross, by recalling its effect. By the power of the Holy Spirit we enjoy unity with the Crucified Christ as a response to love and to the effective hearing of the word of God. We hear the practical voice of Salvation, which is the death of Christ and His resurrection, not simply by partaking of Christ's Body and Blood, but the Body sacrificed for our salvation. This means that Christ is not present in the Eucharist "statically" but dynamically.

Thus we look upon the redemption not as something of the past, nor as something that was done, but as something that still goes on. It is operative in human history, liberating men of each succeeding generation from their particular enslavements . . .¹⁶ This mystery is the continuous sacrificial action of Christ. For He is present in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, and He still has His inner attitude, that is His obedience to the Father until death, accepting passage through death into risen life. It is this attitude that effects reconciliation of man with God. This attitude may flow effectively into our lives through our unity with the Only-Begotten Son, so we meet the Father as ours through His only Son, and the Father once more recognizes us as sons of obedience through His Son also.

Thus the Eucharist is the continuous redeeming action of the Cross. The history of salvation continues to embrace all generations. Men are slowly drawn more closely to Christ Who is patiently working by His love to shape us to greater maturity.

We mention here some phrases of the early Fathers and some texts of the prayers of the liturgies which reveal the effect of the Eucharist in our Salvation and our spiritual progress:

*For this table is the sinews of our soul, the bond of our mind, the foundation of our hope, our salvation, our light and our life,

*When you see it set before you, say to yourself:

Because of His body I am no longer earth and ashes, no longer prisoner but I am free.

Because of this I hope for heaven, and to receive the good things therein, immortal life, the portion of angels, converse with Christ.

This Body, nailed and scourged, was more than death could stand against . . .

This is even that Body, the blood-stained, the pierced, and that out of which gushed the saving fountains: the one of blood, the other of water, for the world.

*St. John Chrysostom*¹⁷

*By It the soul is cleansed, by It it is beautified and inflamed.

*St. John Chrysostom*¹⁸

*The Church grows from day to day in stature and in beauty by the cooperation and communion of the Logos, Who condescends to us until now and continues His going out of Himself in the anamnesis of His Passion.

*St. Methodius of Olympus*¹⁹

*To Thee We have offered this bread . . . we have offered also the cup . . . and make all who partake to receive a medicine of life, for healing of every sickness and for strengthening of all advancement and virtue, not for condemnation.

Euchologium of Serapion

*This oblation of thy servants . . . that it be to us for the pardon of offences and the remission of sins and for the great hope of resurrection from the dead and for new life in the kingdom of heaven.

Liturgy of S.S. Addai and Mari

A Living Anamnesis

The sacrifices of the Old Testament, which were symbols of Calvary and of the Eucharist consisted essentially of the destruction of the victims. The death of victims and the fire that destroys them are the signs of God's acceptance of the offering. Their work ends at this point, and it becomes necessary to offer another victim for another occasion.

But the sacrifice of Christ is unique, for His resurrection is the sign of the Father's acceptance of His sacrifice, and the sign of its power to be present in the Church, continuing His redeeming and sacrificial act. For this reason the heavenly High Priest bestowed upon us His mystery, i.e. His Sacrifice. He gave us His sacrificed Body and Blood, that is the mystery of His death; His resurrection and His ascension as a living commemoration (*anamnesis*), acting in our lives.

Thus we understand the Lord's commandment, "Do this in my *Anamnesis*".

For the Greek word "*anamnesis*" does not mean merely a remembrance or a memorial of a thing regarded as being absent, but it means a recalling or representing the thing in an active sense²⁰. It does not mean a remembrance of the sacrifice of Christ as something purely of the past, something that was done, but as a real and present sacrifice which has its effect on us. It is an "efficacious commemoration"²¹

The early Fathers of the Church explain this meaning:

*But do we not daily offer the sacrifice? We offer it, but in making the anamnesis of His death. And this is unique, not multiple. It was offered once as He entered into the Holy of Holies. The anamnesis is the figure of His death. It is the same sacrifice that we offer, not one today and another tomorrow. Christ is One only everywhere, entire everywhere, one only Body. As everywhere there is one Body, everywhere there is one sacrifice. This is the sacrifice that we now still offer. This is the meaning of the anamnesis: we carry out the anamnesis of the sacrifice.

*St. John Chrysostom*²²

*(on the Lord's words)

I have called It and It really is "My Body". The smallest part of this particle can sanctify thousands of souls and is sufficient to give life to those who receive It.

*St. Ephraem Syrus*²³

*The Eucharist is the Flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ, Who suffered for our sins, and which God the Father raised up.

*St. Ignatius*²⁴

*The Food which has been "eucharistized" is the Flesh and Blood of that Jesus Who was made flesh.

*St. Justin Martyr*²⁵

*The mingled cup and the prepared bread receive the Word of God and become the Eucharist, the Body and the Blood of Christ.

*St. Irenaeus*²⁶

*The bread which He took and gave to His disciples He made his own very Body by saying, "This is my Body".

*Tertullian*²⁷

*What can be sacrificed so full of love, and accepted so gratefully, as the flesh of our sacrifice, which became the Body of our priest?!

*St. Augustine*²⁸

Thus in the Eucharist the Church is presented to the Golgotha, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to enjoy the sacrificial Holy Body and the precious Blood of her Saviour, practising the saving deeds of her heavenly Father. In other words the Eucharist is an anamnesis of the redeeming action of Christ in the mysterious sense that it is still active and continuous.²⁹

References

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Nicola Lask: *His Presence in the world.*
Lavosik: *Eucharist in the Catholic Church.*
Cooke: *Christian Sacraments*
2. Heb. 9:22

3. John 8:56.
4. John 5:46.
5. Is. 53.
6. Heb. 9:11-12 & 24-26.
7. Image book D 38: *A Handbook of the Catholic Faith*, p. 306.
8. See Heb 10:7.
9. Heb. 9:7.
10. Rev. 6:5.
11. See Lk. 22:19, 20; Mark 14:24; Mt. 26:28; I Cor. 11:24, 25.
12. See
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 Cyprian: Ep 62:2, 14; Cyril of Jer.: Myst 5:8.
 Augustine: Ep. 68:9.
13. Ignatius: Ep. to Eph. 5:2, Dix p. 113.
14. 1 Clem 44.
15. Lask, p. 113.
16. Image Book D 246: *Christian Sacraments*, p. 242.
17. NPNF, Ser 1, Vol 12. Hom 24 on 1 Cor.
18. Hom. 46 on John 6.
19. *Banquet* 3:8.
20. Fr. Dix gives many examples from the O.T. & N.T.
 (Dix p 161).
21. Jean Danielou: *The Bible and The Liturgy* p. 136/7.
22. *ibid* p. 137 (See also Hom. on Heb. 17:3).
23. Mimre 4 on the Passion.
24. Ep. on Sym 6:2.
25. Apology 1:66.
26. Adv. Haer 5:2:3.
27. against Marcion 4:10.
28. *On the Holy Trinity*, book 4.
29. Image Book D 246, p. 209.