

THE PRIEST WHO OFFERS THE EUCCHARISTIC SACRIFICE*

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- *For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified (Heb 10:14).*
- *For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1Tim 2:5).*
- *The inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 6:19, 20).*
- *Melchizedek offered bread and wine, the consecrated food, as a type of the Eucharist (St. Clement of Alexandria, Stromata 4:25).*

If the Eucharist and the Sacrifice of the Cross are one and the same sacrifice, then the priest has to be the same. No human priest can offer the Lord's Body as a Sacrifice; "I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (Jn 10:17, 18). The sole Priest who has the authority to do that is our Lord Jesus Christ, the heavenly High Priest. None of the Fathers in the early Church taught otherwise. After reading all the available teachings of the Fathers before the Council of Nicaea (AD 325), with the exception of a few sermons by Origen, Gregory Dix wrote: There is no pre-Nicene author Eastern or Western whose Eucharistic doctrine is at all fully stated, who does not regard the offering and consecration of the Eucharist as the present action of our Lord himself, the Second Person of the Trinity. And in the overwhelming majority of writers it is made clear that their whole conception revolves around the figure of the High priest in the altar in heaven.¹

**This article is taken from a chapter from a book on the Eucharist, that is under print by the same author.*

1 Dix G: Shape of the Liturgy, Op Cit, 252.253

As a witness to this doctrine, Dix gave many examples from patristic writings² and the earliest liturgies including the Egyptian liturgy of St. Serapion. St. Clement of Rome in the first century describes Christ as “the High Priest of our offering.”³

But the Church, the Body of Christ, is not separate from him when He offers the Eucharist, as Dix explains further, “The “action” of the earthly Church in the Eucharist only manifests within time the eternal act of Christ as the heavenly High priest at the altar before the throne of God, perpetually pleading his accomplished and perpetual sacrifice.”⁴

The same teaching prevails in the Golden Age of the Fathers in the fourth and fifth centuries. In the Homilies on Hebrews, St. John Chrysostom asserts, “We have our Victim in heaven, our Priest in heaven, and our Sacrifice in heaven.”⁵ Also, in his Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew, he insists that the Lord Jesus is the Maker of every Eucharist: “This table is the same as that, and has nothing less. For it is not so that Christ wrought that, and man this, but He does this too. This is that upper chamber, where they were then; and hence they went forth unto the Mount of Olives.”⁶

Again in his homilies on the First Epistle to the Corinthians, Chrysostom asks, “But how says [the apostle], that “he received it from the Lord” since certainly he was not present then but was one of the persecutors? That you may know that the first table had no advantage above that which cometh after it. For even to-day also it is He who does all, and delivers it even as then.”⁷ He also says in his Homilies on Hebrews:

“By so much was Jesus made a surety of a better covenant.” He lays down two points of difference, that it has no end as the [covenant] of the Law had and this he proves from [its being] Christ who exercises [the priesthood]; for he says “according to the power of an endless life.” And he proves it also from the oath, because “He swore,” and from the fact; for if the other was cast out, because it was weak, this stands firm, because it is powerful. He proves it also from the priest. How? Because He is One [only]; and there would not have been One [only], unless He had been immortal. For as there were many priests, because they were mortal, so [here is] The One, because He is immortal. “By so much was Jesus made a surety of a better covenant,” inasmuch as He swore to Him that He should always be [Priest]; which He would not have done, if He were not living.”⁸

2 From the West, Letter of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians (36, 61), Justin (Dialogue with Trypho 117,118), Irenaeus (Against Heresies 4:18) Tertullian (Against Marcion 4:9). And from the Eastern Fathers he mentioned Clement of Alexandria (Stromata 4: 25), Polycarp (Letter to the Philippians: 12).

3 1 Clement 36:1

4 Dix C, Op Cit, 251

5 Heb. Homilies 17:3 (quoted from Dix, op. cit., 252).

6 NPNF, Series I, vol. 10, Hom. 82: 5.

7 Ibid., vol. 12, Hom. 27:5

8 Chrysostom: Hebrew Homilies: 13: 5). NPNF, second series, vol 14: 429.

St. Augustine says in his exposition of Psalm 133:2:

Like ointment on the head, which ran down upon the beard of that Aaron' By the Priest Aaron, that Priest is indicated who alone fulfils the Sacrament of the true High Priest, not with a victim of another kind, but in the oblation of his own body and blood: same Priest, same Victim, Propitiator and Propitiation . . . Who died, was buried, and rose again. He ascended into heaven, exalting human nature above every other name; and sending the Holy Spirit, whose unction would penetrate every Church.⁹

In its introduction to the “Prayer of the Fraction,” the Coptic Liturgy of St. Gregory the Theologian speaks within the same ancient tradition when it addresses Christ as the sole Priest in the whole Eucharistic Action:

Thou who didst then bless, bless also now.

Thou who didst then sanctify, sanctify also now.

Thou who didst then break, break also now.

Thou who didst then give to thy holy disciples and pure Apostles,

Give now, O our Lord, the Almighty Lord our God, to us also, and to all thy people.

Role of the Clergy in the Mystery

If Christ our Lord is the Priest who offers the Eucharist, then what is the role of the earthly priest, the bishop or the presbyter, who leads the Liturgy?

From the *Didache* (The Teachings of the Twelve Apostles) and the Letter of St. Clement of Rome in the first century and the writings of St. Justin Martyr in the second century, we know that there is a “president” or “presider” who leads the prayers of the Eucharist. Early in the second century, St. Ignatius of Antioch insists that no Eucharist can be done without the presence of the bishop. The consecration of bishops and presbyters is an apostolic tradition that comes in several places of the New Testament, and their presiding over the Eucharistic Prayer is evident in the ancient liturgies.

⁹ Translated in Jurgrns WA: *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, vol. 3: 194. The Liturgical Press.

The earthly priest is the visible icon of Christ who leads the Church in the liturgy, and whom we know no more in the flesh (2 Cor 5:16). While on the one hand the priest says the words of consecration that the Lord said in the Last Supper, on the other hand he leads the Church in her prayers before God. In the Orthodox Church, the priest cannot serve the Liturgy or offer the Eucharist alone, without a congregation. His words in the liturgy are always in the plural.¹⁰ The Orthodox theologian Father Nicholai Athnasiouf clarifies this, and affirms that the earthly priest does not replace Christ:

Eucharist is the Lord's Banquet. Thus, beside the president, there must be those over whom he presides. While the president, i. e. bishop or presbyter, takes the place of Christ at the Last Supper, yet he does not replace Christ for no one can really take the place of Christ. No man is able to fill the place or the service of the Son of God. He is always present "at his table with his friends."¹¹

Yet some later Fathers and theologians, especially in the Roman Catholic Church during the Middle Ages, have gradually used statements that are not theologically accurate to reflect that the human priest consecrates or offers the Eucharist by himself. Such teachings have not been restricted to theological works, but were common even in spiritual books.¹² Even some have infiltrated into works by authors in Orthodox churches.

Liturgical scholars in most churches now acknowledge the teaching that our Lord is the true Priest in the Eucharist as it had been evident to the Church Fathers in the early centuries. Even the Roman Catholic Church herself has returned to the ancient tradition that says, "The Eucharistic sacrifice is the same as the unique sacrifice of Jesus. In both Jesus, and Jesus alone, is the true priest and the victim The ordained priest is only a sacrament of the one, true priest."¹³

10 When the singular is used at times in the Liturgy of St. Gregory, it does not refer to the person of the priest but to all humankind

11 Nicholai Athnasiouf: *The Table of the Lord*, p. 75-76 of the Arabic Translation (Lebanon).

12 An example is *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, one of the best and very useful classics of Western spirituality. Book 4 deals only with the Eucharist and contains inspiring meditations and prayers that are of great benefit. The reader can benefit much from such books if he is alert and careful to avoid unorthodox doctrines in them.

13 Kenan Osborne, O.F.M.: *Sacramental Guidelines*, Paulist Press, 1995, p. 85.