

PAIX LITURGIQUE

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THE MASS OF PAUL VI : A MUTED SACRIFICE

After having first devoted our Letter to analyzing the new Missal from the point of view of ceremony, we then devoted one letter—#620, titled “A Hemorrhage of the Sacred”—to the content of the Missal as promulgated on April 3, 1969. We are now completing the series with a reflection the most serious of its deficiencies from a doctrinal and spiritual point of view : the feeble expression of the Mass as a propitiatory sacrifice.

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The context in which the sacrifice of the Mass was “reevaluated”

The council of Trent, in answer to Protestant errors, had affirmed the perfection of the one sacrifice of the Cross from which alone all redemption flows. It had also affirmed that Christ, during the Last Supper, had left His Church a visible sacrifice, “a true and authentic sacrifice” (DS 1751) accomplished by priests, who participate in His priesthood. In it, the sacrifice on Golgotha is re-presented in an unbloody manner in such a way that the salvific force of the original sacrifice operates the redemption of sins until the end of time (DS 1740).

For four centuries Post-Tridentine theology was at pains to define the essence of the Sacrifice of the Mass. On this point Pius XII, relying on Saint Thomas’s teaching, specified (*Mediator Dei*, November 20, 1947): “The august sacrifice of the altar, then, is no mere empty commemoration of the passion and death of Jesus Christ, but a true and proper act of sacrifice, whereby the High Priest by an unbloody immolation offers Himself as a most acceptable victim to the Eternal Father, as He did upon the cross. . . . [T]he sacrifice of our Redeemer is shown forth in an admirable manner by external signs which are the symbols of His death. For by the “transubstantiation” of bread into the body of Christ and of wine into His blood, His body and blood are both really present: now the eucharistic species under which He is present symbolize the actual separation of His body and blood.”

In the late 1960s the notion of “Sacrifice for sin” and of “vicarious satisfaction” (Christ taking upon Himself the sins of mankind to atone for them) was under direct attack. Such accusations as that by Hans Küng, who did not pass for a

radical at the time, were common: “In its teaching on the Eucharist, Counter-Reformation theology was hobbled by all manner of partial understandings that are worth pondering: the abandonment of the memorial aspect, which was still emphasized in the Middle Ages; likewise the aspect of communion; on the other hand an increased emphasis on the sacrificial aspect. But it is precisely the notion of sacrifice and of its actualization that raises all manner of unresolved issues” (*Kirche im Konzil*, Herder, 1963).

More broadly, there emerged a certain embarrassment at affirming the character of the Mass as a properly sacrificial act. The Mass, for some theologians, instead of a true and sacramental Sacrifice, rather constituted the Church’s sacrifice of oblation capturing the oblation-immolation sacrifice of Christ on Calvary that is ever present to the sight of God in heaven, without any properly sacrificial repetition in a sacramental mode. So in *Das Mysteriengedächtnis der Meßliturgie im Lichte der Tradition* (1926), Dom Casel (died 1948) judged that the unique act of the sacrifice on Calvary becomes “mysterically” present in the Mass, while the sacrifice of the Mass is not properly a sacrificial act. The very diverse proponents of this new theological approach often summarized it by saying: “The Mass is not a sacrifice, it is THE sacrifice.” Jacques Maritain’s thought, as elaborated in dialog with Charles Journet, was rather characteristic in this regard; he held that transubstantiation was doubled with a sort of “true presence” of the sacrifice of the cross (2).

The *Novus*

***Ordo Missae* was put together in an ecumenical context in which, while the sacrificial reference of the Mass was not denied, there was an embarrassment at affirming that the Mass is a sacrifice.** This theological option, now common in the teaching of theology, will be found in the doctrinal explanations accompanying the liturgical reform since Paul VI. Such explanations are not false; they are *feeble*: “When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, she commemorates Christ’s Passover, and it is made present: the sacrifice Christ offered once and for all on the cross remains ever present” (CCC 1364, see also 1362 and 1366); “the Eucharist is thus in the Church the ‘sacramental institution’ which, at every step, serves as a ‘relay’ to the sacrifice of the Cross, offering it both a real and an operative presence” (John Paul II, *Message to Participants in the Lourdes Eucharistic Congress*, July 21, 1981).

The weakening of the sacrifice in the New Ordo.

For instance, at the most solemn moment the new Missal has displaced focus from the sacrifice of Good Friday (the blood being shed for us), on which the Mass had until then concentrated, to the paschal mystery as whole, now understood as a sort of death and resurrection (3). The *Mysterium*

fidei, which had been nestled within the consecration of the Precious Blood as an explanation of the consecration of the chalice capping the eucharistic sacrifice—the mystery of faith celebrated in the here and now is the Blood shed unto the remission of sins (4)—is now postponed until after the consecration, as an introduction to the acclamations. This makes it take on a far broader signification: it is not only the mystery of the Eucharist as sacrifice and sacrament, it now designates the mystery of the death, resurrection, and parousia: “We proclaim your Death, O Lord, and profess your Resurrection until you come again.”

The cross no longer has to stand at the center of the altar so as to dominate the celebration of the sacrifice; it may be placed “close to it” (GIRM 117). A single sign of the cross on the non-consecrated offerings remains in place of the twenty-eight signs of the cross of blessing or designation the priest used to make over the offerings before and after the consecration, or with the Host or chalice (*Per Ipsum*, commixture, Communion) in the former Ordo.

The short *Prex Eucharistica II*, an abridged version of Hippolytus’s *Apostolic Tradition* according to Gregory Dix’s and Dom Botte’s now disputed reconstruction, reflects an archaeologizing theological expression. It only very implicitly expresses the sacrifice of the consecrated bread and wine (“that, partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, we may be gathered into one by the Holy Spirit”).

A number of prayers invoking forgiveness for sins have been cut out: those said while walking up to altar, mentioned above; the Offertory prayers, to which we shall return; the two prayers asking for purification of the soul and expressing fear of judgment before Communion, which have been reduced to a choice of one.

The last prayer the priest said before giving his blessing was the *Placeat tibi sancta Trinitas*, a deeply meaningful expression of the sacrifice that has just been accomplished; it is now suppressed. It read: “May the performance of my homage be pleasing to Thee, O holy Trinity: and grant that the Sacrifice which I, though unworthy, have offered up in the sight of Thy Majesty, may be acceptable to Thee, and through Thy mercy, be a propitiation for me and for all those for whom I have offered it.”

The Roman Canon, which is particularly explicit in expressing the sacrifice as it repeats the terms “sacrifice” (in the plural or the singular), “offerings,” “we offer,” “oblation,” is only one of the available eucharistic prayers, and is infrequently used by celebrants who fear being branded as “fundamentalists.” Furthermore, the words *sanctum sacrificium, immaculatam hostiam*, “a holy sacrifice, a spotless victim,” which Saint Leo the Great added to the prayer *Supra quae propitio* of the old Roman Canon, have been translated in the French version: “as a sign of the perfect sacrifice.”

But the principal weakening of the notion of sacrifice comes from suppressing the traditional Offertory, which has been replaced by a “preparation of the gifts.” But the word *offertory* has always been understood in the full meaning of *sacrifice*. In fact the Canon presents itself as an “offertory,” i.e. a sacrificial oblation to the Father by the Son. Throughout the entirety of the eucharistic action, both Latin and Oriental liturgies—the latter place much insistence on this—have always hailed the offerings brought into the sanctuary and placed, uncovered, on the altar as things consecrated and sacrificially offered in anticipation.

These prayers, which make a sacrificial offering of the gifts about to be consecrated, developed quite organically in the Roman liturgy from the seventh to the ninth century—just as they did in the other Latin and Oriental liturgies: “Accept, o holy Father, almighty and eternal God, this unspotted host, which I, Thine unworthy servant, offer to Thee . . . for mine innumerable sins, offences, and negligences”; “we offer to Thee, o Lord, the chalice of salvation”; “receive, O holy Trinity, this oblation which we make to Thee, in memory of the Passion, Resurrection and Ascension”; “accept us, O Lord, in the spirit of humility and contrition of heart, and grant that the sacrifice which we offer this day in Thy sight may be pleasing to Thee”; “Brethren, pray that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God the Father almighty.”

A desire to return to some ancient ritual as was imagined—a simple gift-bearing procession—was married to a creative quest for processions bringing “the fruits of the earth and of human work” and led to the suppression of the so-called “doubling” represented by the Roman offertory.

Yet credit is due to Paul VI for reintroducing the word *offerimus* in the presentation of the bread and wine, as also for the prayer *Orate fratres* and the response *Suscipiat*, of which he was very fond. The translators, however, weakened it, as we shall see.

Experts created eucharological prayers modelled on the Jewish Berakha for the blessings of the first cup and of the breaking of the bread during ceremonial meals (so, “*Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have received the wine we offer you: fruit of the vine . . .*”). Nowadays this inspiration is source of some embarrassment since the theses that naively supposed an unchanged Jewish prayer for eight or nine centuries have been seriously shaken. It is actually quite possible that certain prayers in the traditional offertory are at least as ancient as the Jewish blessings.

In any event the fact is that the *Consilium*’s learned experts eliminated the Roman offertory, and with it a whole part of the explanation of the sacrifice as taught by the liturgical tradition it belonged

to. At the end of the day, the “preparation of the gifts” that replaced the offertory comes out as follows:

- When the priest elevates the paten: “Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made. It will become for us the bread of life” (as opposed to the Tridentine Missal’s “Receive, O holy Father, almighty and eternal God, this unspotted host, which I, Thine unworthy servant, offer to Thee, my living and true God, for mine innumerable sins, offences, and negligences, and for all here present: as also for all faithful Christians, both living and dead; that it may be of avail for salvation both to me and to them unto life everlasting”).

- When pouring a little water into the chalice: “By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity” (as opposed to the prayer of the Leonine Sacramentary found at this place in the Tridentine Missal: “O God, who, in creating human nature, didst wonderfully dignify it, and hast still more wonderfully restored it, grant that, by the Mystery of this water and wine, we may become partakers of His divine nature, who deigned to become partaker of our human nature, even Jesus Christ our Lord, Thy Son . . .”).

- When he elevates the chalice: “Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this wine to offer, fruit of the vine and work of human hands. It will become our spiritual drink” (instead of: “We offer to Thee, O Lord, the chalice of salvation, beseeching Thy clemency, that it may ascend before Thy divine Majesty as a sweet savour, for our salvation and for that of the whole world”).

- Then, bowing: “Lord God, we ask you to receive us and be pleased with the sacrifice we offer you with humble and contrite hearts” (instead of the former prayer, which however is still to be found in the new Latin Missal: “Accept us, O Lord, in the spirit of humility and contrition of heart, and grant that the sacrifice which we offer this day in Thy sight may be pleasing to Thee, O Lord God”).

- “If appropriate, he also incenses the offerings, the cross, and the altar. A Deacon or other minister then incenses the Priest and the people.”

- Washing his hands: “Wash me, O Lord, from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.”

- And in conclusion: “Pray, brethren, that our sacrifice may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father” with the people’s response: “May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands for the praise and glory of his name, for our good, and the good of all his Church” (now, however, restored to the form as found in both Latin Missals: “Pray, brethren (brothers and sisters), that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father”; “May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands for the praise and glory of his name, for our good and the good of all his holy Church”).

Clearly the expressions of sacrificial offering (of the “spotless host,” for the sins of the priest and for the salvation of “all faithful Christians, both living and dead,” of the “chalice of salvation” as a pleasing savour before the divine majesty, for the salvation of the whole world) have been seriously trimmed down.

Gliding towards “simply calling to mind”

Each of the elements analyzed in this letter and in the last two may, by themselves, seem relatively unimportant. But in aggregate they are momentous: the jettisoning of a constraining ritual, the multiplication **of options, celebration facing the people, the generalized use of the vernacular, the great freedom in the admonitions and commentaries, the increase in speaking (nearly always out loud) to the detriment of ritual and sacred *secret silence*, the weakened reverence for the Eucharist, the weaker expression of hierarchical priesthood and especially of the reality of the sacramental sacrifice, not to mention adopting a certain number of gestures and uses from everyday life—all of this contributes to gliding from *commemoration* to a *simple calling to mind*. For all that, we are not questioning the validity of this new Mass; yet, considering the far looser structure of the rites and prayers in comparison with the older Ordo, the issue of validity can legitimately be raised in the case of fanciful or even blasphemous celebrations that certain priests feel authorized to perform on the basis of such an unconstraining norm.**

It is not just the “progressive” priests who tinker with the NOM’s soft ritual, however. “Conservative” priests do it too, though in the opposite direction (constant genuflections, insistent commentaries: “And now the priest is going to consecrate the bread, which is really going to become the Body of the Lord,” etc.). One may even say that this pushing forward of the celebrant’s “presence,” a characteristic of the new Mass, is a kind of compensatory obligation to make up for this Mass’s intrinsic shortcomings. In order to keep the celebration from tilting towards a simple commemoration, the pious celebrants of the new Ordo have to make manifest their own faith and personal piety to remedy its defects. The less the rite speaks of the Real Presence and Sacrifice, the more the priest must show that he does believe in them to boost the faith of those in attendance. This overturns the basic principle of sacramental objectivity according to which the sacraments produce grace in what is done publicly in the Church’s name, not by reason of the celebrant’s personal belief.

(1) During the sacrifice of the Mass, the saving death of Christ is sacramentally reproduced under the sign of the separation of the species into Body and Blood, which symbolize the violent separation of the Cross (*Summa Theologica* q. 77 a. 7; *Summa contra Gentiles* 4.61.

(2) See Philippe-Marie Margelidon, OP, “La théologie du sacrifice eucharistique chez Jacques Maritain,” *Revue Thomiste* 115 (January-March 2015), 101-147.

(3) Understood as death and resurrection. Note that the expression can also mean the death of the Lord. For example in the Prayer for Good Friday: “. . . Christ Thy Son established through His Blood this mystery of the Pasch,” *per suum cruorem, instituit paschale mysterium*.

(4) “For this is the Chalice of My Blood of the new and eternal Testament, the Mystery of Faith; which shall be shed for you and for many.”