

Homily - The Eucharist as Sacrifice - August 1st 2021

If ever there has been a hot potato in the life of the Church in the west it is the subject of to-day's address in our series of sermons about the Eucharist.... that is.... 'The Eucharist as Sacrifice.' Type those 4 words into your search drive and you will soon be plunged back into the disputation of the Reformation in all its polarisation. For if there was one thing the reformers did not believe it was that the Eucharist is a Sacrifice.

To be fair to them, they had a certain amount of good reason for their rejection of the phrase because, in common parlance anyway, many people at the time of the Reformation crudely saw the action of the Mass as another Calvary, as though Jesus was slaughtered again every time the Mass was celebrated. To be fair to the Catholic faith as well, the notion that every Mass represents another slaughter of the innocent victim Jesus Christ, has never been a teaching of the Catholic faith.

Fortunately, we live in different times and I can't think of any reason why anyone would want to return to the tumultuous times of the Reformation in Europe with its horrific cruelty, bitter argumentation and its deliberate rupturing of church and society. Neither can I think of any reason why anyone would want to return to the bitter sectarianism of the days of our childhood (well, the childhood of those of us who are over 60 anyway) when, if you belonged to a Protestant church there was nothing good to be said about the Roman Catholic Church and if you belonged to the Roman Catholic Church there was, equally, nothing good to be said about the Protestant churches. Those attitudes, inculcated in us from a very early age, have their origin in the bitterness of the Reformation and they perpetuated that bitterness well onto the 20th century.

Today, there are, as Fr Rene said last week, broad areas of agreement between Catholics and Anglicans that are the result of scholarship and ecumenical conversations that have taken place over many years. One such document that states briefly and simply our common beliefs about the Eucharist is fifty years old this year, can you believe that? It is called 'An Agreed Statement of Eucharistic Doctrine 1971' and it was prepared by the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission. This short document commences its discussion of 'The Eucharist and the Sacrifice of Christ' as follows:

"Christ's redeeming Death and Resurrection took place once and for all in History. Christ's death on the cross, the culmination of his life of obedience, was the one, perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the world. There can be no repetition of, or addition to, what was then accomplished once for all by Christ."

The language of that paragraph can hardly be clearer...in no way is the Eucharistic Sacrifice (the Sacrifice of the Mass, as it is often called) another ritual

slaughter of the Lord Jesus Christ effected on our Altars. That being the case what, then, do we make of the use of the word 'altar' for the most sacred item of furniture in our churches? For an Altar is indeed a place of sacrifice.

For that matter, what do we make of the very word '*Sacrifice*' when used in our Eucharist at the Offertory, for example, when the Priest says.. "*Pray Brethren that this our Sacrifice may be acceptable to God the Almighty Father*"... and we reply... "*May the Lord Accept the sacrifice at thy hands for the praise and glory of His name, for our good and the good of all His Holy Church.*"

To explain clearly what is meant requires a brief examination of the word '*Sacrifice.*' We are, all of us, very far removed indeed from the notion of slaughtering an animal, pouring out its blood on an altar or a stone, or sprinkling the blood over the bystanders, then cooking the flesh and eating some of it to identify ourselves with such a ritual action. At the heart of these strange and incomprehensible rituals though there is something that we can identify with very powerfully. It is this: The ritual slaughter involves giving up a life in order to achieve a worthwhile purpose.. God's forgiveness or God's approval.

We can understand that because we understand the notion of what we call '*sacrificial love*' where a person puts their own well being aside in some way for the good of another. Sacrificial love lies at the heart of Christian morality and it is found at the heart of much human behaviour. A mother will sacrifice herself willingly for her children. A father for his family. A soldier will sacrifice his life for his country. Sacrificial love, the giving up of myself up even to giving up my life itself, is at the heart and centre of our faith because our Lord Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God, became incarnate specifically to do just that...give up himself to death, even death on the gibbet of the cross, to achieve the salvation of the world. His death on the cross is our life, our hope and our forgiveness.

As said already, Christ's sacrificially redemptive act happened once in time and it can never be repeated. That's plainly obvious. The key to understanding the meaning of the term 'Eucharist as Sacrifice' lies in what Christ said at the last Supper and, even more so, the key to understanding the Eucharist as Sacrifice is found in the Resurrection of the Lord on the third day.

Christians are people who believe that Christ is risen from the dead. Christ is not a long time dead hero who we remember only in the pages of a book. If Jesus Christ is not our living Lord of life then there is no point to the Eucharist whatsoever and for that matter there is no point to the entirety of the Christian faith. But Christ is risen from the dead and His Resurrection is the Father's seal of approval upon His sacrificial death upon the cross.

The Lord Jesus Christ is our living Lord and He lives an inextinguishable life..we call it eternal life. Think of St Paul's words... "*Christ being raised from the*

dead dieth no more, death hath no dominion over Him. For in that He died he died unto sin once, but in that He liveth, He liveth unto God.” It is solely because Christ is Risen that we sincerely believe He is present in the Eucharistic elements of Bread and Wine. Of an absolute certainty, the Apostles clearly understood that when Jesus said at the Last Supper.. *‘this is my body, this is my blood’* and *‘do this in remembrance of me’*, that he meant precisely what he said ... they knew this because He rose again from the dead.

St Paul makes this Apostolic faith crystal clear when he says to the church at Corinth (and to us!) ... *“the Cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the Blood of Christ? The Bread which we break, is it not a participation in the Body of Christ?”* (I Corinthians 10:16.)

Even more bluntly in the same Epistle Paul says to us... *“As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the Body and Blood of the Lord.”*

Here is the scriptural heart of the meaning of the term... The Eucharist as Sacrifice...or as I prefer... the Sacrifice of the Mass. The Risen Lord is truly present in the bread and wine that is consecrated by a member of the Apostolic priesthood at the altar. We call our Lord’s Eucharistic presence the “Real Presence” for it is a reality that surpasses the temporal order and it surpasses the order of matter. We faithfully do as Jesus commanded we should at the Last Supper and, as a result, we find ourselves to be, most truly, in the very presence of the Risen and Crucified Lord who offered himself on the Cross as the true and efficacious Sacrifice for human sinfulness.

To quote St Paul yet again... *“Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us..therefore let us keep the feast.”* (I Corinthians 5:7) The Feast is the Eucharist. The Passover is our redemption won by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus broken for us on the altar of the cross.. and by the shedding of His blood poured out for us.

All of this is made made present to us in the Eucharist. The Body of Christ that we consume in Holy Communion is the body that was bruised, humiliated, scorned and nailed to the cross for our redemption. The blood that we drink is the very blood that flowed down our Saviour’s face from the crown of thorns. It is the blood that poured from his hands and feet when they were pierced by the nails. It is the blood that gushed forth from the Saviour’s side when he was pierced by the soldier’s lance. The Sacrifice of Christ, made once for all in time, is made truly present to us at every single celebration of the Holy Mass, because His sacrifice is eternal.

There is a wonderful Anglican hymn written by William Bright, an Anglican Priest, who was Regius Professor of Church History at Oxford University from 1868 to 1901. It brilliantly sums up what is meant by the term...The Eucharist as Sacrifice.

Many of you will know it.

*And Now, O Father, mindful of the love that bought us, once for all, on
Calvary's tree,*

*And having with us Him that pleads above, we here present, we here spread
forth to thee*

That only Offering perfect in Thine eyes, the one, true, pure immortal Sacrifice.

Christ our Passover has indeed been sacrificed for us and we show forth that sacrifice and receive its benefits in the great foretaste of the heavenly banquet, that is, the Feast of the Eucharist.