

CHRIST'S ACTION IN THE MASS

Some Catholic liturgists write as if the Mass consisted in bringing Christ to be present on the altar so that the communicants may receive His true body and blood, and that for the rest Christ is to be thought of as quite passive in this transaction. An Episcopalian reviewer of Francis Clark's *Eucharistic Sacrifice and the Reformation*, can write: "If the essence of the Eucharistic sacrifice lies in the consecration, and if the Catholic doctrine of the Real Presence is officially taught by us, then the failure fully to understand the consecration in a sacrificial sense cannot possibly invalidate our intention."¹ From this to a request for the reconsidering of the papal decision on Anglican orders would be but a small step. On the other hand, Pope Pius XII, in his pronouncement which decided against (in fact, if not by name) the theories of Karl Rahner about the many Masses and the one sacrifice, laid it down that in each Mass there is a true act of Christ.² Now the coming-to-be-present is in no sense an act at all.

Part of the confusion in thought of the liturgists is due to an overemphasis of the character of the Eucharist as a sacrificial meal. An instance of this may be found in a German theologian who writes that the Eucharist "has ever been celebrated under the sign of bread and wine in the form of a meal. In the external rite of the Eucharistic sacrament nothing is so plain as its character as a meal."³ One is bound to wonder, if that is the case, why Luke 22:20 bothered to mention that it was *after* the meal that Christ took the chalice into His hands, and why the liturgy has preserved this Lukan phrase ever since, or why the early Christian (whether Hippolytus or another) who was responsible for the *Traditio apostolica* saw the likeness of the Last Supper in the agape and not in the Eucharist.⁴ *Mahlopfer* and *Opfermahl* may be handy German compounds, but in the English language "sacrificial meal" puts the accent on the accessory and away from the principal, because the Mass is, after all and before all things, a sacrifice. One can hardly say "convivial sacrifice," as that would strike a false note, while "meal sacrifice"

¹ C. C. Richardson, in *Anglican Theological Review* 47 (1965) 235.

² *Acta apostolicae sedis* 46 (1954) 669, in an Allocution where the key sentence runs: "Tot sunt actiones Christi summi Sacerdotis quot sunt sacerdotes celebrantes." The matter was again dealt with in the address to the Assisi Liturgical Congress (*ibid.* 48 [1956] 716).

³ O. Müller, "Die Eucharistie als Mahlopfer und Opfermahl," in *Gott in Welt: Festgabe für Karl Rahner* 2 (Freiburg, 1964) 121-34.

⁴ It is in the rules for the agape (p. 113 in Hauler's Latin version, p. 158 in Horner's edition of the Ethiopic) that the sentence occurs, "Catecuminus in cena dominica non concumbat." Horner renders this from the Ethiopic as "Concerning the impropriety of the catechumens sitting down with the believers at the Table of the Lord."

is quite impossible. If the Germans had a separate word for sacrifice, as distinct from offering, they might be in as difficult a linguistic situation as ourselves.

It was an insistence on the character of the Eucharist as a meal which led the Reformers to demand that there should always be communicants, in addition to the priest who was celebrant of the rite. This demand was rejected at Trent, and the sequel in the Anglican Church is a curious one. Cranmer thought at the time of the First Prayer Book that there would be communicants on Sundays and the major feast days.⁵ When he came to the drawing-up of the Second Prayer Book, he had given up his expectation of communicants on holydays, and when the Prayer Book of 1662 was issued, even Sundays were not expected to be days for Communion; the rubric then read: "Upon the Sundays and other Holydays (if there be no Communion) shall be said all that is appointed at the Communion-service, until the end of the general Prayer. . . ." In 1552, Sundays had not been mentioned in this rubric, and in 1549 it did not occur at all.

Trent had condemned under anathema (*DB* 955) the idea that every Mass should of necessity have other communicants besides the priest. This anathema stands in the way of those who would make the meal aspect of the Mass paramount. It is curious that in the early names for the Mass in the Latin language there is none that indicates the meal aspect of the rite. *Dominicum* was the earliest,⁶ and means simply "the Lord's thing or affair," while *missa* (or more probably the plural *missae*, in the formula *missarum sollemnia*) settles on an accidental feature, the dismissals (of which there were at least three in those early times: for catechumens, for penitents, and the final *exeunt omnes*), as signifying the whole rite. *Prex* or *preces* pointed to the fact that the Mass was the prayer par excellence of Christian worship. It was used in recusant days as a convenient ambiguity, when Catholics could speak of "going to Prayers" without exciting the suspicion of their hostile neighbours.

If one now looks for a sign of activity on the part of Christ in each Mass, it will have to be found in some statement or implication of the prayers of the Canon which have remained invariable for so many centuries as to establish a theological tradition. It is to one of these prayers that this article intends to point, though the earliest form of this prayer (as found in the Stowe Missal) has one very important divergence from the Canon as now

⁵ The several editions of the Book of Common Prayer are conveniently printed together in parallel columns in W. Keeling, *Liturgiae Britannicae* (London, 1842).

⁶ I have discussed the word *dominicum* in *Vigiliae christianae* 12 (1958) 45-48.

printed in our missals.⁷ In the *Supplices te rogamus*, the Stowe Missal reads *iube perferri*, with the omission of the word *haec*, and in this reading Stowe is supported by the *Missale Francorum*. With this change goes also the use of the ablative *in sublimi altari tuo* in the next line of the same prayer. This ablative is found in the Bobbio Missal and the Sacramentary of Angoulême also, and has some support in the Sacramentary of Gellone. Thus the textual phenomena suggest that the oldest form of the Canon (which is that found in the Stowe Missal) had a sentence which asked of God to bid it be enacted on the heavenly altar that those who partook of the sacrifice should be replenished with grace. The impersonal use of *perferri* (carried over from the common idiom⁸ of *perlatum est* in the sense of "it is enacted that . . .") when no longer understood would call for some helping word to be added, and the word *haec* (added already in Vat. Reg. 316, the so-called Gelasianum) entirely changed the sense, making the prayer now ask God to take the sacrifice (designated by *haec*) to His altar above (which altar had therefore to be in the accusative case). Where sixth-century Irish influence lasted, as in the Bobbio Missal, the change had not been made quite effective throughout the sentence, as it has been in the Gelasianum.⁹ As the medieval theologians long ago remarked: If the words are taken literally, the prayer is asking that the newly-consecrated body of Christ be removed from the earthly altar to its heavenly counterpart, which is the last thing that the faithful on earth really desire.

Innocent III has not been the only theologian to find the *Supplices* baffling; the words are so profound, he writes, that the human intellect can scarce encompass them.¹⁰ It is opportune that the magnificent modern edi-

⁷ Edmund Bishop, in *Liturgica historica* (Oxford, 1918) p. 94, came to the conclusion that Stowe, Bobbio, and the *Missale Francorum* had the earliest form of the Roman Canon but he did not notice the variant in question (the omission of *haec*) as significant

⁸ The evidence is in Lewis & Short, under *perfero* and *fero*, the simple verb being for the introduction of a law and the compound for its successful enactment (where it is important to distinguish the two stages), though often the simple verb means "to enact." *Legem* was often omitted, especially when the verb was turned round into the passive, as in the phrase from Livy: "lato ut solet ad populum, ut equum escendere liceret." There is further evidence in the *Thesaurus linguae latinae* (s.v. *fero*, col. 547), but it is less clearly put.

⁹ The Liturgy of St. Peter (a Greek and Slavonic version of the Roman Canon) has an interesting echo of the Stowe reading. The Slavonic is rendered (in H. W. Codrington's edition [1936] p. 151): "Command that these divine ministrations be made by the hand . . ." while the Georgian version apparently followed a text where *haec* or its equivalent was omitted (*ibid.*, p. 160). Practically all the versions of this Liturgy support Stowe in reading *ex hoc altari* for the later *ex hac altaris* . . .

¹⁰ Innocent III, *De officio missae* 5 (PL 217, 891).

tion of Gabriel Biel's commentary on the Mass (1484) has now made available more widely the collective sense of the medieval theologians on this passage.¹¹ Hitherto it was so difficult of access for most students of theology that one could not cite it without printing long extracts from the text. Biel (*Lectio* 55: Q and R) gives a sentence from Alcuin (*PL* 101, 1263) under the impression that he is citing Gregory the Great: "At one and the same time it [the consecrated host] is carried to heaven by ministering angels to be united with the body of Christ, and it is visible on the altar to the eyes of the priest." Biel then gives the three meanings of *haec* which Innocent had accepted: either the intentions of the faithful, or the sacramental body of Christ, or whatever was signified mystically by that body. *Perferri*, he decides, means *representari*. He finds several passages (Tob 12:12 and Ap 8:4 in particular) which justify the first meaning. The second he treats very briefly: there cannot be a local transference of the body of Christ which is already in heaven, and so the motion must be understood in the sense of a gracious acceptance by God of the body offered here. For the third sense, he takes the "angel" to be Christ Himself, and the body to be the Church militant, which is to be translated to the Church triumphant. He tries to show (from Lv 6:12) that the altar in heaven stands for the triumphant Church.

To a modern eye the first of these explanations seems hardly enough to justify the petition that follows, where grace is sought for those who communicate. The second explanation is really no explanation at all, for it can hardly be that *perferri* should mean "accept." The third, with its desire for the hastening of the consummation of the world, is not a prayer that tradition associates with the Sacrifice of the Mass. Modern commentators on the Mass generally follow Jungmann,¹² who appeals to the passage in Ambrose, *De sacramentis* 4, 27 (*CSEL* 73, 57), where the words used (*ut hanc oblationem suscipias*) are quite clear in the sense of asking for the sacrifice to be accepted. Jungmann moralizes on the laconic use of *haec* in the Canon, as if it were due to a feeling of awe and reverence on the part of the faithful; but if, as has been argued above, it is in fact an interpolation made by some *scholasticus* who did not understand the text, this fanciful idea falls to the ground. Ambrose may have been paraphrasing the text of the Canon when he wrote *suscipias*. He seems to telescope the *Supra quae* and the *Supplices* into one prayer, but he was at the moment of citation nearing the

¹¹ Two volumes of the reprint have appeared, edited by H. A. Oberman and W. J. Courtenay (Wiesbaden, 1965). The editors have supplied accurate references for all Biel's quotations.

¹² J. A. Jungmann, S.J., *Missarum sollemnia* 2 (3rd ed.; Vienna, 1952) 288.

end of his fourth catechesis and may not have aimed at the textual accuracy that would satisfy a modern German professor. Alternatively, one might suppose that he had a much simplified form of the Canon, which was afterwards expanded by Pope Gelasius into the form we now know. Gelasius would still be able to use *perferri* in the legal sense, whereas, after the decay of the study and use of Roman law in the Dark Ages, the sense of this phrase would be itself darkened for the commentators.

It is at this point that the idea of an action of Christ in each Mass becomes important. If one can say that the presenting of the earthly sacrifice (which priest and people in their several ways offer at a given moment of time) is what Christ in His glorified manhood *does*, then one has something to indicate as the action of Christ in the Mass. The Father is addressed in the *Supplices*, and He is asked to enact on the heavenly altar the successful outcome of the sacrifice, which is the giving of grace to those who partake. If it is Christ who presents each individual sacrifice for acceptance and for this enactment, one has a distinct action of Christ each time. The concept of the heavenly altar was vigorous in the early Church, but in later times it has been much neglected by theologians. Perhaps the disorientation that came about when the meaning and symbolism of the shape of a church was lost led to this neglect. The Syrian and Cappadocian Fathers were familiar with the idea that the floor of the nave symbolised the earth; the raised sanctuary at the East end was heaven; the steps approaching it were Paradise.¹³ The giving of Communion was the bringing of bread from heaven, and the altar was thought to be itself in heaven. The bema was in the center of the nave and was taken as a symbol of Jerusalem, from where the first preaching had gone forth.

The ratification of the sacrifice of Christ was shown to us by His resurrection, but, as we have been empowered by Him to continue His sacrifice in the mystery of the Mass, it is to be expected that some ratification of that continued sacrifice must be sought from the Father, and this is what the *Supplices* is about. There is no movement being prayed for, and Duchesne's fancy of an epiclesis in the Latin rite for the carrying off of the oblation to

¹³ The only modern liturgist to exploit the work of the archeologists on this matter is Louis Bouyer, in *Rite and Man* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1963) p. 169. The study of the ground plans of Syrian churches undertaken by Jean Lassus (*Cahiers archéologiques* 1 [1947]) showed that this was the arrangement of the churches. Lassus was then astonished to find that long ago Dom Hugh Connolly had drawn such a plan to help in the understanding of a commentary on the Syrian liturgy which he was editing (*Revue de l'histoire des religions* 137 [1950] 236-50). The two plans corresponded. It is also necessary to suppose that the Syrian church-plan was followed in Cappadocia, as St. Gregory of Nazianzus, when telling of Basil's rebuff to the Arian emperor Valens, makes plain (*Orat. in laudem Basilii* 52 [PG 36, 561-64]).

the heavenly altar by the hand of the angel must remain a fancy.¹⁴ The idea of M. de la Taille¹⁵ that the *Supplices* is asking for transubstantiation seems to depend mainly on Pseudo-Dionysius, for whom Christ is the heavenly altar and locus of the consecration. The idea was popular in the Middle Ages owing to the influence of the Areopagite, but even then it was not entirely accepted, as may be seen from one of the authors whom de la Taille quotes, Honorius of Autun (or possibly of Cashel¹⁶). This author says that Christ is the heavenly altar on which the Church immolates spiritual victims and on which God *accepts* the prayers of the faithful and the *sacrifice* of righteousness.

Prayers which ask that the Eucharist may be *legitima* are not uncommon in early liturgies. One may instance the prayer after the words of institution in two of the Mone Masses,¹⁷ where one may read: "We ask that thou mayst bless this sacrifice with thy blessing and shower upon it the dew of the Holy Spirit, that, to all who partake, it may be a pure, true, and lawful Eucharist through Jesus Christ thy Son." If the priest on earth prayed for ratification through Christ, he must have supposed that Christ was pleading for the same in heaven. The Burgundian priest for whom this *libellus* was copied out (*ca.* 630-40) may not have been aware of the Canon of Gelasius, but he shared with it at least the idea that after the words of institution it was proper to pray for the ratification of the sacrifice by God. If the sacrifice were not ratified, the Communion would be in vain.

If, in spite of this parallel to the *Supplices* from a Gallican liturgy, it may still be thought that the interpretation given of that prayer is alien to the movement of ideas in the fifth century, it should help to consider the evidence of the *tituli psalorum* which has recently become available.¹⁸

¹⁴ In the fifth edition of the English version of his *Christian Worship* (New York, 1919) the passage occurs p. 182: "This symbolical transference [in the *Supplices*] is in a contrary sense to that implied in the Greek formulary; it involves not the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the oblation but the elevation by God's angel of the oblation to heaven."

¹⁵ *Mysterium fidei* (Paris, 1921) *Elucidatio* 21, esp. p. 272.

¹⁶ There is a strong probability that Honorius was an Irishman, and his Augustodunum may have been Cashel, not Autun; see R. W. Southern, *St. Anselm and His Biographer* (Cambridge, Eng., 1963) pp. 215-216.

¹⁷ The Mone Masses are conveniently printed in Mohlberg's edition (Rome, 1958) of the *Missale Gallicanum Vetus*. The prayer in question is found in Masses 3 and 4, in the sections numbered 297 and 312.

¹⁸ P. Salmon, O.S.B., *Les tituli psalorum des manuscrits latins* (Paris, 1959). Salmon dates the first group in the third century; if this is correct, the titles antedate extant patristic commentaries on the Psalms, save for that of Origen, whose influence this group does not show. The titles are more susceptible of Christian interpretation for the Psalms than the Psalter collects (edited by L. Brou in the Henry Bradshaw Society volume for 1946), which are less often Christological.

In many Latin mss. of the Psalter Christian titles are added to give the message of each Psalm. These "titled" mss. form six groups, the first and earliest of which is found associated with St. Columba, other groups showing the influence of Jerome, Eusebius, Origen, and Cassiodorus. The first group is the oldest and its language echoes that of Tertullian, but how it was transmitted to Columba, whether through Spain or Gaul, is not clear. The titles generally give a spiritual interpretation of the Psalm: *vox ecclesiae ad Christum*, *vox apostolorum contra Iudaeos*, etc. One title keeps recurring, *vox Christi ad Patrem*, and this is sometimes amplified. Thus, for Psalm 100 it is *vox Christi ad Patrem de requie sanctorum*, and the sense given to verse 6 in that Psalm (*oculi mei ad fideles terrae ut sedeant mecum*) must be obvious. Psalm 137 has the title *vox Christi ad Patrem*, and the second verse must have made those who used it familiar with the idea of Christ adoring the Father in heaven. Psalm 101 is titled *vox Christi et ecclesiae cum ascendisset ad Patrem*, and here the opening words (*Domine exaudi orationem meam*) speak of Christ *interceding* in heaven. Sometimes the Psalm has been given a link with some Gospel lection, but these are not easy to grasp. Psalm 83 (*Quam dilecta*) has this long title: *Legendus ad evangelium Matthaei; ad eos qui fidem sunt consecuti. Vox Christi ad Patrem de ecclesia*. Here the force of verse 10, *Respice in faciem Christi tui* would impress on the minds of these fourth- and fifth-century readers the idea of the continuing intercession of Christ in heaven. In short, these tituli are a distillation of many commentaries on the Psalter and may be transmitting to us patristic work which is now lost in its original form. The literal-historical interpretation favored by the writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Diodore is not seen in this first group, though it may have touched some of the others. If the daily prayer of a great part of Western monasticism was influenced by these titles, it is hard to suppose that the liturgy would be untouched by their influence.

While the priest, then, speaks in the person of Christ at the consecration and effects the presence of Christ on the earthly altar, the action of Christ in the Mass is the pleading at the heavenly altar for the ratification of this and each further renewal of His sacrifice. The liturgical decree of the Council (2, 47) speaks of Christ "perpetuating His sacrifice through the ages till He come again"; the heavenly act of Christ in this sacrifice is to adore, to give thanks, and to plead, as the spiritual meaning of these Psalms has shown, and it is this action of Christ which the Church relies upon in the *Supplices* of the Mass. It was the habit of Coptic Christians in the sixth century¹⁹

¹⁹ H. G. Evelyn White, *New Coptic Texts from the Monastery of St. Macarius* (New York, 1926), gives many of these; an example can be found in text no. 326.

when writing to a priest to say: "I salute your holy hands." It is the hands of the great Angel that the Church salutes in her prayer. The final answer to the Episcopalian hypothesis is to say that the essence of the Mass is not merely the consecration but also the ratification of the sacrifice, asked for in the *Supplices* and won through the merits of Christ.

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