The Theology of the Liturgy

Paper by His Eminence, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger
Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

THE Second Vatican Council defined the Liturgy as "the work of Christ the Priest and of His Body which is the Church."[1] The work of Jesus Christ is referred to in the same text as the work of the redemption which Christ accomplished especially by the Paschal Mystery of His Passion, of His Resurrection from the dead and His glorious Ascension.

"By this Mystery, in dying He has destroyed our death, and in rising He has restored life." At first sight, in these two sentences, the phrase "the work of Christ" seems to have been used in two different senses. "The work of Christ" refers first of all to the historical, redemptive actions of Jesus, His Death and His Resurrection; on the other hand, the celebration of the Liturgy is called "the work of Christ."

In reality, the two meanings are inseparably linked: the Death and Resurrection of Christ, the Paschal Mystery, are not just exterior, historic events. In the case of the Resurrection this is very clear. It is joined to and penetrates history, but transcends it in two ways: it is not the action of a man, but an action of God, and in that way carries the risen Jesus beyond history, to that place where He sits at the right hand of the Father. But the Cross is not a merely human action either. The purely human aspect is present in the people who led Jesus to the Cross. For Jesus Himself, the Cross is not primarily an action, but a passion, and a passion which signifies that He is but one with the Divine Will—a union, the dramatic character of which is shown to us in the Garden of Gethsemane. Thus the passive dimension of being put to death is transformed into the active dimension of love: death becomes the abandonment of Himself to the Father for men. In this way, the horizon extends, as it does in the Resurrection, well beyond the purely human aspect and well beyond the fact of having been nailed to a cross and having died. This element additional to the mere historical event is what the language of faith calls a "mystery" and it has condensed into the term "Paschal Mystery" the most innermost core of the redemptive event. If we can say from this that the "Paschal Mystery" constitutes the core of "the work of Jesus," then the connection with the Liturgy is immediately clear: it is precisely this "work of

[1] *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 7.

Jesus" which is the real content of the Liturgy. In it, through the faith and the prayer of the Church, the "work of Jesus" is continually brought into contact with history in order to penetrate it. Thus, in the Liturgy, the merely human historical event is transcended over and over again and is part of the divine and human action which is the Redemption. In it, Christ is the true subject/bearer: it is the work of Christ; but in it He draws history to Himself, precisely in this permanent action in which our salvation takes place.

1. Sacrifice Called into Question

If we go back to Vatican II, we find the following description of this relationship: "In the Liturgy, through which, especially in the divine Sacrifice of the Eucharist, 'the work of our Redemption is carried on,' the faithful are most fully led to express and show to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church."[2]

All that has become foreign to modern thinking and, only thirty years after the Council, has been brought into question even among Catholic liturgists. Who still talks today about "the divine Sacrifice of the Eucharist"? Discussions about the idea of sacrifice have again become astonishingly lively, as much on the Catholic side as on the Protestant. People realise that an idea which has always preoccupied, under various forms, not only the history of the Church, but the entire history of humanity, must be the expression of something basic which concerns us as well. But, at the same time, the old Enlightenment positions still live on everywhere: accusations of magic and paganism, contrasts drawn between worship and the service of the Word, between rite and ethos, the idea of a Christianity which disengages itself from worship and enters into the profane world, Catholic theologians who have no desire to see themselves accused of anti-modernity. Even if people want, in one way or another, to rediscover the concept of sacrifice, embarrassment and criticism are the end result. Thus, Stefan Orth, in the vast panorama of a bibliography of recent works devoted to the theme of sacrifice, believed he could make the following statement as a summary of his research: "In fact, many Catholics themselves today ratify the verdict and the conclusions of Martin Luther, who says that to speak of sacrifice is "the greatest and most appalling horror" and a "damnable impiety:" this is why we want to refrain from all that smacks of sacrifice, including the whole Canon, and retain only that which is pure and holy." Then Orth adds: "This maxim was also followed in the Catholic Church after Vatican II, or at least tended to be, and led people to think of divine worship chiefly in terms of the feast of the Passover related in the accounts of the Last Supper." Appealing to a work on sacrifice, edited by two modern Catholic liturgists, he then said, in slightly more moderate terms, that it clearly seemed that the notion of the sacrifice of the Mass—even

[2] Ibid., no. 2.

more than that of the sacrifice of the Cross—was at best an idea very open to misunderstanding.

I certainly don't need to say that I am not one of the "numerous Catholics" who consider it the most appalling horror and a damnable impiety to speak of the sacrifice of the Mass. It goes without saying that the writer did not mention my book on the spirit of the Liturgy, which analyses the idea of sacrifice in detail. His diagnosis remains dismaying. Is it true? I do not know these numerous Catholics who consider it a damnable impiety to understand the Eucharist as a sacrifice. The second, more circumspect, diagnosis according to which the sacrifice of the Mass is open to misunderstandings is, on the other hand, easily shown to be correct. Even if one leaves to one side the first affirmation of the writer as a rhetorical exaggeration, there remains a troubling problem, to which we should face up. A sizeable party of Catholic liturgists seems to have practically arrived at the conclusion that Luther, rather than Trent, was substantially right in the sixteenth century debate; one can detect much the same position in the post-conciliar discussions on the Priesthood. The great historian of the Council of Trent, Hubert Jedin, pointed this out in 1975, in the preface to the last volume of his history of the Council of Trent: "The attentive reader...in reading this will not be less dismayed than the author, when he realises that many of the things—in fact almost everything—that disturbed the men of the past is being put forward anew today."[3] It is only against this background of the effective denial of the authority of Trent, that the bitterness of the struggle against allowing the celebration of Mass according to the 1962 Missal, after the liturgical reform, can be understood. The possibility of so celebrating constitutes the strongest, and thus (for them) the most intolerable contradiction of the opinion of those who believe that the faith in the Eucharist formulated by Trent has lost its value.

It would be easy to gather proofs to support this statement of the position. I leave aside the extreme liturgical theology of Harald Schützeichel, who departs completely from Catholic dogma and expounds, for example, the bold assertion that it was only in the Middle Ages that the idea of the Real Presence was invented. A modern liturgist such as David N. Power tells us that through the course of history, not only the manner in which a truth is expressed, but also the content of what is expressed, can lose its meaning. He links his theory in concrete terms with the statements of Trent. Theodore Schnitker tells us that an up-to-date liturgy includes both a different expression of the faith and theological changes. Moreover, according to him, there are theologians, at least in the circles of the Roman Church and of her Liturgy, who have not yet grasped the full import of the transformations put forward by the liturgical reform in the area of the doctrine of the faith. R. Meßner's certainly respectable work on the reform of the Mass carried out by

[3] Cf. *Geschichte des Konzils von Trient*, vol. 4, Herder, Freiburg 1975.

Martin Luther, and on the Eucharist in the early Church, which contains many interesting ideas, arrives nonetheless at the conclusion that the early Church was better understood by Luther than by the Council of Trent.

The serious nature of these theories comes from the fact that frequently they pass immediately into practice. The thesis according to which it is the community itself which is the subject of the Liturgy, serves as an authorisation to manipulate the Liturgy according to each individual's understanding of it. So-called new discoveries and the forms which follow from them, are diffused with an astonishing rapidity and with a degree of conformity which has long ceased to exist where the norms of ecclesiastical authority are concerned. Theories, in the area of the Liturgy, are transformed very rapidly today into practice, and practice, in turn, creates or destroys ways of behaving and thinking.

Meanwhile the problem has been aggravated by the fact that the most recent movement of 'enlightened' thought goes much further than Luther: where Luther still took literally the accounts of the Institution and made them, as the *norma normans*, the basis of his efforts at reform, the hypotheses of historical criticism have, for a long time, been causing a broad erosion of the texts. The accounts of the Last Supper appear as the product of the liturgical construction of the community; an historical Jesus is sought behind the texts who could not have been thinking of the gift of His Body and Blood, nor understood His Cross as a sacrifice of expiation; we should, rather, imagine a farewell meal which included an eschatological perspective. Not only is the authority of the ecclesiastical Magisterium downgraded in the eyes of many, but Scripture also; in its place are put changing pseudo-historical hypotheses, which are immediately replaced by any arbitrary idea, and place the Liturgy at the mercy of fashion. Where, on the basis of such ideas, the Liturgy is manipulated ever more freely, the faithful feel that, in reality, nothing is celebrated, and it is understandable that they desert the Liturgy, and with it the Church.

2. *The Principles of Theological Research*

Let us return to the fundamental question: is it correct to describe the Liturgy as a divine sacrifice, or is it a damnable impiety? In this discussion, one must first of all establish the principle presuppositions which, in any event, determine the reading of Scripture, and thus the conclusions which one draws from it. For the Catholic Christian, two lines of essential hermeneutic orientation assert themselves here. The first: we trust Scripture and we base ourselves on Scripture, not on hypothetical reconstructions which go behind it and, according to their own taste, reconstruct a history in which the presumptuous idea of our knowing what can or can not be attributed to Jesus plays a key role; which, of course, means attributing to him only what a

modern scholar is happy to attribute to a man belonging to a time which the scholar himself has reconstructed.

The second is that we read Scripture in the living community of the Church, and therefore on the basis of the fundamental decisions thanks to which it has become historically efficacious, namely, those which laid the foundations of the Church. One must not separate the text from this living context. In this sense, Scripture and Tradition form an inseparable whole, and it is this that Luther, at the dawn of the awakening of historical awareness, could not see. He believed that a text could only have one meaning, but such univocity does not exist, and modern historiography has long since abandoned the idea. That in the nascent Church, the Eucharist was, from the beginning, understood as a sacrifice, even in a text such as the Didache, which is so difficult and marginal *vis-à-vis* the great Tradition, is an interpretative key of primary importance.

But there is another fundamental hermeneutical aspect in the reading and the interpretation of biblical testimony. The fact that I can, or can not, recognise a sacrifice in the Eucharist as our Lord instituted it, depends most essentially on the question of knowing what I understand by sacrifice, therefore on what is called pre-comprehension. The pre-comprehension of Luther, for example, in particular his conception of the relation between the Old and the New Testaments, his conception of the event and of the historic presence of the Church, was such that the category of sacrifice, as he saw it, could not appear other than as an impiety when applied to the Eucharist and the Church. The debates to which Stefan Orth refers show how confused and muddled is the idea of sacrifice among almost all authors, and clearly shows how much work must be done here. For the believing theologian, it is clear that it is Scripture itself which must teach him the essential definition of sacrifice, and that will come from a "canonical" reading of the Bible, in which the Scripture is read in its unity and its dynamic movement, the different stages of which receive their final meaning from Christ, to Whom this whole movement leads. By this same standard the hermeneutic here presupposed is a hermeneutic of faith, founded on faith's internal logic. Ought not the fact to be obvious? Without faith, Scripture itself is not Scripture, but rather an ill-assorted ensemble of bits of literature which can not claim any normative significance today.

3. *Sacrifice and Easter*

The task alluded to here far exceeds, obviously, the limits of one lecture; so allow me to refer you to my book *The Spirit of the Liturgy* in which I have sought to give the main outlines of this question. What emerges from it is that, in its course through the history of religions and biblical history, the idea of sacrifice has connotations which go well beyond the area of discussion which we habitually associate with the idea of sacrifice. In fact, it opens the doorway

to a global understanding of worship and of the Liturgy: these are the great perspectives which I would like to try to point out here. Also I necessarily have to omit here particular questions of exegesis, in particular the fundamental problem of the accounts of the Institution, on the subject of which, in addition to my book on the Liturgy, I have tried to provide some thoughts in my contribution on "The Eucharist and Mission."[4]

There is, however, a remark which I can not refrain from making. In the bibliographic review mentioned, Stefan Orth says that the fact of having avoided after Vatican II, the idea of sacrifice, has "led people to think of divine worship in terms of the feast of the Passover related in the accounts of the Last Supper." At first sight this wording appears ambiguous: is one to think of divine worship in terms of the Last Supper narratives, or in terms of the Passover, to which those narratives refer in giving a chronological framework, but which they do not otherwise describe. It would be right to say that the Jewish Passover, the institution of which is related in Exodus 12, acquires a new meaning in the New Testament. It is there that is manifested a great historical movement which goes from the beginnings right up to the Last Supper, the Cross and the Resurrection of Jesus. But what is astonishing above all in Orth's presentation is the opposition posited between the idea of sacrifice and the Passover. The Jewish Old Testament deprives Orth's thesis of meaning, because from the law of Deuteronomy on, the slaughtering of lambs is linked to the Temple; and even in the earliest period, when the Passover was still a family feast, the slaughtering of lambs already had a sacrificial character. Thus, precisely through the tradition of the Passover, the idea of sacrifice is carried right up to the words and gestures of the Last Supper, where it is present also on the basis of a second Old Testament passage, Exodus 24, which relates the conclusion of the Covenant at Sinai. There, it is related that the people were sprinkled with the blood of the victims previously brought, and that Moses said on this occasion: "Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words" (Ex. 24:8). The new Christian Passover is thus expressly interpreted in the accounts of the Last Supper as a sacrificial event, and on the basis of the words of the Last Supper, the nascent Church knew that the Cross was a sacrifice, because the Last Supper would be an empty gesture without the reality of the Cross and of the Resurrection, which is anticipated in it and made accessible for all time in its interior content.

I mention this strange opposition between the Passover and sacrifice, because it represents the architectonic principle of a book recently published by the Society of St Pius X, claiming that a dogmatic rupture exists between

[4] Cf. "Communion, Community and Mission: On the Connection between the Eucharist, (Parish) Community and Mission in the Church" in Joseph Ratzinger, *Behold the Pierced One*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1986.

the new Liturgy of Paul VI and the preceding Catholic liturgical tradition.[5] This rupture is seen precisely in the fact that everything is interpreted henceforth on the basis of the "Paschal Mystery," instead of the redeeming sacrifice of expiation of Christ; the category of the Paschal Mystery is said to be the heart of the liturgical reform, and it is precisely that which appears to be the proof of the rupture with the classical doctrine of the Church. It is clear that there are authors who lay themselves open to such a misunderstanding; but that it is a misunderstanding is completely evident to those who look more closely. In reality, the term "Paschal Mystery" clearly refers to the realities which took place in the days following Holy Thursday up until the morning of Easter Sunday: the Last Supper as the anticipation of the Cross, the drama of Golgotha and the Lord's Resurrection. In the expression "Paschal Mystery" these happenings are seen synthetically as a single, united event, as "the work of Christ," as we heard the Council say at the beginning, which took place historically and at the same time transcends that precise point in time. As this event is, inwardly, an act of worship rendered to God, it could become divine worship, and in that way be present to all times. The paschal theology of the New Testament, upon which we have cast a quick glance, gives us to understand precisely this: the seemingly profane episode of the Crucifixion of Christ is a sacrifice of expiation, a saving act of the reconciling love of God made man. The theology of the Passover is a theology of the redemption, a Liturgy of expiatory sacrifice. The Shepherd has become a Lamb. The vision of the lamb, which appears in the story of Isaac, the lamb which gets entangled in the undergrowth and ransoms the son, has become a reality; the Lord became a Lamb; He allows Himself to be bound and sacrificed, to deliver us.

All this has become very foreign to contemporary thought. Reparation ("expiation") can perhaps mean something within the limits of human conflicts and the settling of guilt which holds sway among human beings, but its transposition to the relationship between God and man can not work. This, surely, is largely the result of the fact that our image of God has grown dim, has come close to deism. One can no longer imagine that human offences can wound God, and even less that they could necessitate an expiation such as that which constitutes the Cross of Christ. The same applies to vicarious substitution: we can hardly still imagine anything in that category—our image of man has become too individualistic for that. Thus the crisis of the Liturgy has its basis in central ideas about man. In order to overcome it, it does not suffice to banalise the Liturgy and transform it into a simple gathering at a fraternal meal. But how can we escape from these disorientations? How can we recover the meaning of this immense thing which is at the heart of the message of the Cross and of the Resurrection? In the final analysis, not through theories and scholarly reflections, but only through conversion, by a radical change of life. It is, however, possible to single out some things which

[5] Cf. The Society of Saint Pius X, *The Problem of the Liturgical Reform*, Angelus Press, Kansas City 2001.

open the way to this change of heart, and I would like to put forward some suggestions in that direction, in three stages.

4. Love, the Heart of Sacrifice

The first stage should be a preliminary question on the essential meaning of the word "sacrifice." People commonly consider sacrifice as the destruction of something precious in the eyes of man; in destroying it, man wants to consecrate this reality to God, to recognise His sovereignty. In fact, however, a destruction does not honour God. The slaughtering of animals or whatever else, can not honour God. "If I am hungry, I will not tell you, because the world is mine and all it contains. Am I going to eat the flesh of bulls, shall I drink the blood of goats? Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, fulfil your vows to the Most High," says God to Israel in Psalm 50 (49):12-14. Of what then does sacrifice consist? Not in destruction, not in this or that thing, but in the transformation of man; in the fact that he becomes himself conformed to God. He becomes conformed to God when he becomes love. "That is why true sacrifice is every work which allows us to unite ourselves to God in a holy fellowship,"[6] as Augustine puts it.

With this key from the New Testament, Augustine interprets the Old Testament sacrifices as symbols pointing to this sacrifice properly so called, and that is why, he says, worship had to be transformed, the symbol had to disappear in favour of the reality. "All the divine prescriptions of Scripture which concern the sacrifices of the tabernacle or of the Temple, are figures which refer to the love of God and neighbour."[7] But Augustine also knows that love only becomes true when it leads a man to God, and thus directs him to his true end; it alone can likewise bring about unity of men among themselves. Therefore the concept of sacrifice refers to community, and the first definition which Augustine attempted, is broadened by the following statement: "The whole redeemed human community, that is to say the assembly and the community of the saints, is offered to God in sacrifice by the High Priest Who offered Himself."[8] And even more simply: "This sacrifice is ourselves," or again: "Such is the Christian sacrifice: the multitude—a single body in Christ."[9] Sacrifice consists then, we shall say it once more, in a process of transformation, in the conformity of man to God, in His theiosis, as the Fathers would say. It consists, to express it in modern phraseology, in the abolition of difference—in the union between God and man, between God and creation: "God all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28).

But how does this process which makes us become love and one single body with Christ, which makes us become one with God, take place; how does

[6] *City of God*, X, 6.
[7] Ibid., X, 5.
[8] Ibid., X, 6.
[9] Ibid.

this abolition of difference happen? There exists here first of all a clear boundary between the religions founded on the faith of Abraham on one hand, on the other hand the other forms of religion such as we find them particularly in Asia, and also those based, probably, on Asiatic traditions—in the plotinian style of neoplatonism. There, union signifies deliverance as far as finitude (self-awareness) is concerned, which in the final analysis is seen to be a façade, the abolition of myself in the ocean of the completely other which, as compared to our world of façades, is nothingness, which, nonetheless, is the only true being. In the Christian faith, which fulfils the faith of Abraham, union is seen in a completely different way: it is the union of love, in which differences are not destroyed, but are transformed in a higher union of those who love each other, just as it is found, as in an archetype, in the trinitarian union of God. Whereas, for example in Plotinus, finitude is a falling away from unity, and so to speak the kernel of sin and therefore at the same time the kernel of all evil, the Christian faith does not see finitude as a negation but as a creation, the fruit of a divine will which creates a free partner, a creature who does not have to be destroyed, but must be completed, must insert itself into the free act of love. Difference is not abolished, but becomes the means to a higher unity. This philosophy of liberty, which is at the basis of the Christian faith and differentiates it from the Asiatic religions, includes the possibility of the negative. Evil is not a mere falling away from being, but the consequence of a freedom used badly. The way of unity, the way of love, is then a way of conversion, a way of purification: it takes the shape of the Cross, it passes through the Paschal Mystery, through death and resurrection. It needs the Mediator, Who, in His Death and in His Resurrection becomes for us the way, draws us all to Himself and thus fulfils us (Jn. 12: 32).

Let us cast a glance back over what we have said. In his definition: sacrifice equals love, Augustine rightly stresses the saying, which is present in different variations in the Old and in the New Testament, which he sites from Hosea (6:6): "it is love that I want, not sacrifices." [10] But this saying does not merely place an opposition between ethos and worship—then Christianity would be reduced to a moralism. It refers to a process which is more than a moral philosophy—to a process in which God takes the initiative. He alone can arouse man to start out towards love. It is the love with which God loves, which alone makes our love towards Him increase. This fact of being loved is a process of purification and transformation, in which we are not only open to God, but united to each other. The initiative of God has a name: Jesus Christ, the God Who Himself became man and gives Himself to us. That is why Augustine could synthesise all that by saying: "Such is the sacrifice of Christians: the multitude is one single body in Christ. The Church celebrates this mystery by the sacrifice of the Altar, well known to believers, because in it, it is shown to her that in the things which she offers, it is she herself who is

[10] Cf. *City of God*, X, 5.

offered."[11] Anyone who has understood this, will no longer be of the opinion that to speak of the sacrifice of the Mass is at least highly ambiguous, and even an appalling horror. On the contrary: if we do not remember this, we lose sight of the grandeur of that which God gives us in the Eucharist.

5. The New Temple

I would now like to mention, again very briefly, two other approaches. An important indication is given, in my opinion, in the scene of the purification of the Temple, in particular in the form handed down by John. John, in fact, relates a phrase of Jesus which does not appear in the Synoptics except in the trial of Jesus, on the lips of false witnesses, and in a distorted way. The reaction of Jesus to the merchants and money changers in the Temple was practically an attack on the immolation of animals, which were offered there, hence an attack on the existing form of worship, and the existing form of sacrifice in general. That is why the competent Jewish authorities asked Him, with good reason, by what sign He justified an action which could only be taken as an attack against the law of Moses and the sacred prescriptions of the Covenant. Thereupon Jesus replies: "Destroy (dissolve) this sanctuary; in three days I will build it up again" (Jn. 2:19). This subtle formula evokes a vision which John himself says the disciples did not understand until after the Resurrection, in remembering what had happened, and which led them to "believe the Scripture and the word of Jesus" (Jn. 2:22). For they now understand that the Temple had been abolished at the moment of the Crucifixion of Jesus: Jesus, according to John, was crucified exactly at the moment when the paschal lambs were immolated in the sanctuary. At the moment when the Son makes Himself the lamb, that is, gives Himself freely to the Father and hence to us, an end is made of the old prescriptions of a worship that could only be a sign of the true realities. The Temple is "destroyed." From now on His resurrected body—He Himself—becomes the true Temple of humanity, in which adoration in spirit and in truth takes place (Jn. 4:23). But spirit and truth are not abstract philosophical concepts—He is Himself the truth, and the spirit is the Holy Spirit Who proceeds from Him. Here too, it thus clearly becomes apparent that worship is not replaced by a moral philosophy, but that the ancient worship comes to an end, with its substitutes and its often tragic misunderstandings, because the reality itself is manifested, the new Temple: the resurrected Christ who draws us, transforms us and unites us to Himself. Again it is clear that the Eucharist of the Church—to use Augustine's term—is the *sacramentum* of the true *sacrificium*—the sacred sign in which that which is signified is effected.

[11] Ibid., X, 6.

6. *The Spiritual Sacrifice*

Finally I would like to point out very briefly a third way in which the passage from the worship of substitution, that of the immolation of animals, to the true sacrifice, the communion with the offering of Christ, progressively becomes clearer. Among the prophets before the exile, there was an extraordinarily harsh criticism of temple worship, which Stephen, to the horror of the doctors and priests of the Temple, resumes in his great discourse, with some citations, notably this verse of Amos: "Did you offer victims and sacrifices to Me, during forty years in the desert, house of Israel? But you have carried the tent of Moloch and the star of the god Rephan, the images which you had made to worship" (Amos 5:25, Acts 7:42). This critique that the Prophets had made, provided the spiritual foundation that enabled Israel to get through the difficult time following the destruction of the Temple, when there was no worship. Israel was obliged at that time to bring to light more deeply and in a new way what constitutes the essence of worship, expiation, sacrifice. In the time of the Hellenistic dictatorship, when Israel was again without temple and without sacrifice, the book of Daniel gives us this prayer: "Lord, see how we are the smallest of all the nations...There is no longer, at this time, leader nor prophet...nor holocaust, sacrifice, oblation, nor incense, no place to offer You the first fruits and find grace close to You. But may a broken soul and a humbled spirit be accepted by You, like holocausts of rams and bulls, like thousands of fattened lambs; thus may our sacrifice be before You today, and may it please You that we may follow You wholeheartedly, because there is no confounding for those who hope in You. And now we put our whole heart into following You, to fearing You and seeking Your Face" (Dan. 3:37-41).

Thus gradually there matured the realisation that prayer, the word, the man at prayer and becoming himself word, is the true sacrifice. The struggle of Israel could here enter into fruitful contact with the search of the Hellenistic world, which itself was looking for a way to leave behind the worship of substitution, of the immolation of animals, in order to arrive at worship properly so called, at true adoration, at true sacrifice. This path led to the idea of *logike thysia*—of the sacrifice [consisting] in the word—which we meet in the New Testament in Romans 12:1, where the Apostle exhorts the believers "to offer themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God:" it is what is described as *logike latreia*, as a divine service according to the word, engaging the reason. We find the same thing, in another form, in Hebrews 13:15: "Through Him—Christ—let us offer ceaselessly a sacrifice of praise, that is to say the fruit of the lips which confess His name." Numerous examples coming from the Fathers of the Church show how these ideas were extended and became the point of junction between Christology, Eucharistic faith and the putting into existential practice of the Paschal Mystery. I would like to cite, by way of example, just a few lines of Peter Chrysologus; really,

one should read the whole sermon in question in its entirety in order to be able to follow this synthesis from one end to the other:

> It is a strange sacrifice, where the body offers itself without the body, the blood without the blood! I beg you—says the Apostle—by the mercy of God, to offer yourselves as a living sacrifice.
>
> Brothers, this sacrifice is inspired by the example of Christ, who immolated His Body, so that men may live...Become, man, become the sacrifice of God and his priest...God seeks your faith, not your death. He thirsts for your self-surrender, not your blood. He is not appeased by slaughter, but by the offering of your free will.[12]

Here too, it is a question of something quite different from a mere moralism, because man is so caught up in it with the whole of his being: sacrifice [consisting] in words—this, the Greek thinkers had already put in relation to the logos, to the word itself, indicating that the sacrifice of prayer should not be mere speech, but the transmutation of our being into the logos, the union of ourselves with it. Divine worship implies that we ourselves become beings of the word, that we conform ourselves to the creative Intellect. But once more, it is clear that we can not do this of ourselves, and thus everything seems to end again in futility—until the day when the Word comes, the true, the Son, when He becomes flesh and draws us to Himself in the exodus of the Cross. This true sacrifice, which transforms us all into sacrifice, that is to say unites us to God, makes of us beings conformed to God, is indeed fixed and founded on an historical event, but is not situated as a thing in the past behind us; on the contrary, it becomes contemporary and accessible to us in the community of the believing and praying Church, in its sacrament: that is what is meant by the "sacrifice of the Mass."

The error of Luther lay, I am convinced, in a false idea of historicity, in a poor understanding of unicity. The sacrifice of Christ is not situated behind us as something past. It touches all times and is present to us. The Eucharist is not merely the distribution of what comes from the past, but rather the presence of the Paschal Mystery of Christ, Who transcends and unites all times. If the Roman Canon cites Abel, Abraham and Melchisedech, including them among those who celebrate the Eucharist, it is in the conviction that in them also, the great offerers, Christ was passing through time, or perhaps better, that in their search they were advancing toward a meeting with Christ. The theology of the Fathers such as we find it in the Canon, did not deny the futility and insufficiency of the pre-christian sacrifices; the Canon includes, however, with the figures of Abel and Melchisedech, the "holy pagans" themselves in the mystery of Christ. What is happening is that everything that went before is seen in its insufficiency as a shadow, but also that Christ is

[12] Sermon 108; PL 52, 499-500.

drawing all things to Himself, that there is, even in the pagan world, a preparation for the Gospel, that even imperfect elements can lead to Christ, however much they may stand in need of purification.

7. Christ, the Subject of the Liturgy

Which brings me to the conclusion. Theology of the Liturgy means that God acts through Christ in the Liturgy and that we can not act but through Him and with Him. Of ourselves, we can not construct the way to God. This way does not open up unless God Himself becomes the way. And again, the ways of man which do not lead to God are non-ways. Theology of the Liturgy means furthermore that in the Liturgy, the Logos Himself speaks to us; and not only does He speak, He comes with His Body, and His Soul, His Flesh and His Blood, His Divinity and His Humanity, in order to unite us to Himself, to make of us one single "body." In the Christian Liturgy, the whole history of salvation, even more, the whole history of human searching for God is present, assumed and brought to its goal. The Christian Liturgy is a cosmic Liturgy—it embraces the whole of creation which "awaits with impatience the revelation of the sons of God" (Rom. 8:9).

Trent did not make a mistake, it leant for support on the solid foundation of the Tradition of the Church. It remains a trustworthy standard. But we can and should understand it in a more profound way in drawing from the riches of biblical witness and from the faith of the Church of all the ages. There are true signs of hope that this renewed and deepened understanding of Trent can, in particular through the intermediary of the Eastern Churches, be made accessible to Protestant Christians.

One thing should be clear: the Liturgy must not be a terrain for experimenting with theological hypotheses. Too rapidly, in these last decades, the ideas of experts have entered into liturgical practice, often also by-passing ecclesiastical authority, through the channel of commissions which have been able to diffuse at an international level their "consensus of the moment," and practically turn it into laws for liturgical activity. The Liturgy derives its greatness from what it is, not from what we make of it. Our participation is, of course, necessary, but as a means of inserting ourselves humbly into the spirit of the Liturgy, and of serving Him Who is the true subject of the Liturgy: Jesus Christ. The Liturgy is not an expression of the consciousness of a community which, in any case, is diffuse and changing. It is revelation received in faith and prayer, and its measure is consequently the faith of the Church, in which revelation is received. The forms which are given to the Liturgy can vary according to place and time, just as the rites are diverse. What is essential is the link to the Church which for her part, is united by faith in the Lord. The obedience of faith guarantees the unity of the Liturgy, beyond the frontiers of place and time, and so lets us experience the unity of the Church, the Church as the homeland of the heart.

The essence of the Liturgy is, finally, summarised in the prayer which St Paul (1 Cor. 16:22) and the Didache (10:6) have handed down to us: "Maran atha—our Lord is there—Lord, come!" From now on, the Parousia is accomplished in the Liturgy, but that is so precisely because it teaches us to cry: "Come, Lord Jesus," while reaching out towards the Lord who is coming. It always brings us to hear His reply yet again and to experience its truth: "Yes, I am coming soon" (Apoc. 22:17,20).

Translated by Margaret McHugh and Fr John Parsons