

*'That they all may
be one'*



DIVINE GIFTS TO THE LORD - the bloodless sacrifice

Churches in the West are accustomed these days to talking about the shape of the liturgy ie the common form or arrangement of things discernible in the majority of the earliest Eucharistic rites that have come down to us. Current liturgical renewal across the denominations (exclusive of Orthodoxy which never departed from the tradition) adheres closely to the perceived pattern which is briefly expressed as the Liturgy of the Word, the Eucharistic Prayer and the Communion Rite. It could be claimed, however, that, in the interests of a supposed need for simplicity, and out of fear, resulting from inherited doctrinal prejudice, certain of the vital aspects of the pattern are being set to one side.

This is very clearly apparent in some cases at the pivotal transition-point between the liturgy of the word and the Eucharistic Prayer, ie the presentation of the gifts, or the Offertory (termed in the East the Great Entrance). If we are really seeking to be true to traditional forms, and indeed to Scripture itself, we cannot ignore or re-invent this key moment in the eucharistic action. Eucharist *is* sacrifice, the bread and wine are to be taken and *offered*, as at the Last Supper, so that they may be returned to us as the body and blood of Christ, and so that we in turn, as Christ's body, may be *offered* in Him to the Father. Anything that fails to include this aspect is inadequate. For such is the mystery revealed to us consistently in the early Eucharistic rites, forming the basis as they do of the liturgies still in use in the Eastern Churches today. The ancient Liturgy of St. James is a case in point and is well worth exploring with these things in mind.

One of the best-loved eucharistic hymns of the Western Church, *Let all mortal flesh keep silence*, is in fact taken from this liturgy, and actually occurs in the original at the very point in the

action that we are considering: the Offertory or Great Entrance. The bread and wine, which have already been prayed over in sacrificial terminology immediately before the Eucharist proper in the service of the Preparation of the Gifts, are now brought into the sanctuary with great solemnity. As this is happening the Cherubic Hymn is chanted by the choir:

Let us, who mystically represent the Cherubim, and sing the thrice-holy hymn to the life-giving Trinity, lay aside at this time all worldly cares, that we may receive the King of Glory, invisibly attended by the angelic orders...

Then immediately the priest intones the section 'Let all mortal flesh . . .'. Christ is coming to be sacrificed, accompanied by the angelic hosts. The worshippers bow low in adoration, for their Lord is already 'really present' though not yet offered up. The words of our Western version are very familiar:

Let all mortal flesh keep silence
And with fear and trembling stand;
Ponder nothing earthly-minded,
For with blessing in his hand
Christ our God to earth descendeth,
Our full homage to demand.

The original text is, however, more explicit:

Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and stand with fear and trembling, and ponder nothing earthly in itself; for the King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, Christ our God, cometh forward TO BE SACRIFICED and to be given for food to the faithful . . .

Evelyn Underhill, in her translation of the St. James text, follows the original wording literally:

Let all mortal flesh keep silence . . . for the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, Christ our God, comes TO BE SACRIFICED, to give himself as food to the faithful.

It is sad that our truncated Western liturgies lose the full drama and symbolism of this moment, out of fear that by talking of sacrifice here we might in some way be detracting from the one unique sacrifice of Calvary. It is surely not a detraction but an enhancement, a symbolic progression towards the climactic moment when the eternal offering of Christ is

meted again to us by the power of the Spirit? Never mind the exact how or when of it all. The mystery is traditionally expressed as a sacramental action, a **bloodless sacrifice**, and not surprisingly the Liturgy of St. James uses such expressions frequently at this point in the rite and later.

Immediately before the **Anaphora** (the Eucharistic Prayer, embodying our Lord's words of consecration at the Last Supper and the invocation of the Holy Spirit upon the gifts and the people) the veil covering the sacred elements is raised and the priest begins the prayer of the veil. As the time to offer the bloodless sacrifice approaches his sense of awe increases:

Master, have mercy upon us: since we are full of fear and dread, when about to stand before thy holy altar, and to offer this fearful and unbloody sacrifice for our sins and for the ignorances of the people. Send forth, O God, thy good grace . . . that in a pure conscience we may present to thee the mercy of peace, the sacrifice of praise.

Then he speaks of the peace-offering he is about to make and asks of the Lord that the mystery to be enacted might be made clear to all:

Do thou, uncovering the veils of enigmas which mystically surround this holy rite; make them gloriously manifest to us: and fill our intellectual eyes with incomprehensible light.

That prayer can surely still be our own.

Immediately after the words of consecration (as they are termed in the West) comes the **anamnesis**, the calling to mind by the priest on behalf of all, of the whole mystery of redemption, from the Cross through to the descent of the Spirit and the return of Christ in glory. Again the bloodless sacrifice is referred to, this time as an offering by all:

We therefore also, sinners, remembering his life-giving Passion his salutary cross . . . his glorious and terrible coming again . . . offer to thee, O Lord, this tremendous and unbloody sacrifice . . .

And repeatedly, following on the **Epiclesis** (the prayer for the descent of the Holy Spirit on the gifts and people) reference is made to offering and sacrifice. The emphasis is sometimes

different now however. The sacrifice is not only the holy and spotless one made by our Lord himself but also **our** sacrifice to him. The oblations, hallowed, precious and ineffable, have become OUR DIVINE GIFTS TO THE LORD. In the mystery of our participation in Christ the gifts are therefore interchangeable - mutually shared with a free trafficking - like the mutual indwelling (circumincession) of the persons and attributes of the blessed Trinity.

Let all mortal flesh indeed keep silence and ponder the awesome mystery, but not so silently that we allow it to slip out of our liturgical celebrations. That would be the subtlest of temptations by the evil one.

Rank on rank the host of heaven
Spreads its vanguard on the way,
As the Light of light descendeth
From the realms of endless day,
That the powers of hell may vanish
As the darkness clears away.