

The Sacrament of Holy Qurbana, or Holy Sacrifice

By Anand Peter

Today we meditate on the theme of the Sacrament of Holy Qurbana, or Holy Sacrifice. The Eucharist is counted as one of seven Sacraments in Catholic and Eastern Orthodox tradition, while the Protestant Church, by and large, recognises only two: Baptism, and the Eucharist, or Holy Communion, as it is generally known — the Lord's Supper. A Sacrament, at the very least, is an outward sign of an inward grace of Jesus Christ. God plainly bestowed His grace through various acts long before the Church came to define, or number, them precisely — though Baptism and the Eucharist were always counted among them. One could argue at great length, and never quite settle, whether there ought to be seven Sacraments, two, or only one. What remains beyond dispute is that the Eucharist appears to be the one Sacrament our Lord explicitly instituted Himself. Without entering into that wider debate, we shall keep our attention fixed on Holy Communion.

People often advise us not to look back — "what is past is past," they say. Yet there are moments when we must pause and remember. The Lord's Supper is just such a moment. We look back to "the same night in which he was betrayed" (1 Corinthians 11:23) — the night of the Passover, and the Passover itself looks back further still, to the Exodus of Israel from Egypt. What we must remember is that our reflection upon Holy Communion is no mere dead memory, but a living remembrance (1 Corinthians 11:24-25). Just as Israel remembers the angel of death passing over the houses marked with sacrificial blood upon the doorposts and lintels, so we commemorate the One slain for us, that we might be set free from the bondage of sin and of eternal death. We remember that death could not hold Him, and that on the third day He rose again. We call to mind His resurrection, His ascension into heaven, and His outpouring of grace upon His people. We enjoy, even now, the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, and look forward to the glorious return of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 11:26: "For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come."

The Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation teaches that when the priest pronounces the words "This is my body" and "This is my blood" over the bread and wine upon the altar, the bread and the wine become the actual body and blood of Christ. This doctrine rests, I would suggest, upon a mistaken reading of those very words of Christ. Set within their proper context at the Last Supper, it is difficult to see how they could bear such a meaning. Our Lord's habitual manner of teaching was through parable and figurative speech, and when, in the presence of His disciples, He broke the bread and said, "This is my body," it is hard to believe He meant that the bread had become His actual physical body. Later, at the Reformation, it was argued that transubstantiation "overthrows the nature of a sacrament," since a sacrament is, by definition, a sign of something — whereas transubstantiation turns the sign into the very thing it is meant to signify.

The most natural way to understand someone who holds up an object and says, "This is my body," is to take it as meaning that the object represents the body, not that it has been transformed into it. If we show someone a photograph of our family and say, "This is my family," no one imagines that the photograph has been mysteriously and physically turned into our family. This reading is strengthened further by

John 6:31-35: "Our fathers did eat manna in the desert; as it is written, He gave them bread from heaven to eat. Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Moses gave you not that bread from heaven; but my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world. Then said they unto him, Lord, evermore give us this bread. And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst." "This is my body," understood in that light, means that as we eat this bread and drink this cup, we come to Him and believe in Him — that we sit with Him at His table, and trust Him to be our life-sustaining food and drink, letting the proclamation of His death, and the remembrance of all that He is for us, awaken our faith and draw us into deeper communion with Him.

So while I judge it mistaken to say that the bread and the wine are turned into the physical, incarnate body of Jesus, I am not thereby suggesting that what takes place at the Lord's Supper is a mere intellectual recollection of facts. The Supper proclaims; and faith comes by hearing, and by seeing, and by tasting that proclamation. Faith is a spiritual feasting upon the risen and living Christ, in which He satisfies our soul, deepens our love for Him, and breaks the power of sin within us. This, to my mind, is the very essence of the Eucharist.

Paul writes the passage read to us today, 1 Corinthians 11:23-30, in response to a report he had received of trouble in the Corinthian church, offering his apostolic guidance for setting the matter right. The particular problem he addresses here is the improper observance of the Lord's Supper (11:17-22). The Corinthian believers had fallen into treating it as though it were no more than an ordinary meal: each person, or each family, brought their own food to the gathering and ate it without sharing — or, if they did share, after a fashion, those who arrived early had plenty, while those who came later, generally the poorer members with less leisure to spare, were left with little. The result was that some, the poor, went hungry, while others, the wealthy, had more than enough to eat and drink — Paul even mentions that some were becoming drunk (11:21). He writes, in verses 21 and 22: "For in eating every one taketh before other his own supper: and one is hungry, and another is drunken. What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in? or despise ye the church of God, and shame them that have not?"

What follows is Paul's counsel, given so that the Corinthian Christians might come to appreciate the true meaning of the Lord's Supper, and observe it in a manner more fitting. Paul wants two things of them: that they observe this Supper as a sacred rite, and that they show consideration for one another's needs.

The description Holy Sacrifice underlines the truth that in this Sacrament, the self-offering of Christ is made present to us. The language of sacrifice belongs properly to any full understanding of the Eucharist: Christ's sacrifice is made present in every celebration of Holy Communion, and ought to be reflected, too, in the hearts and lives of Christians as they go on to live out what they have enacted in worship.

Consider the Eucharist, too, from another angle. The breaking of the bread signifies that all who eat of the one loaf are made one in the body and blood of Christ. The bread of the Eucharist is made from many grains, and in the act of Holy Communion, all who partake are united with Christ in an extraordinary way. The expression "the Blessed Sacrament," or, more simply, the Communion Service,

is generally used of devotion to the Eucharist outside the service of Communion itself, since all such devotion and prayer flows from, and returns to, the celebration of the Sacrament proper.

We have heard the message within the meal; it remains for us now to heed it, and to respond. For the Lord's own people, it is time to examine our hearts, and to be sure we have dealt honestly with our sins and our failures. It is time to bow before the Lord in repentance and humility, and to ask Him to prepare us to meet Him at His table. And for anyone reading this who has not yet come to Him, now is the time to consider your own destiny: will you receive the salvation our Lord offers freely, by His grace, or will you choose an eternal death instead? If you have never yet been saved, you may receive forgiveness and salvation through the blood of Jesus today, if only you will come to Him in faith.

Most merciful and everlasting God, we offer our thanks and praise to You through Your Son, Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life, Who offered Himself as a sacrifice for the remission of the sins of the whole world. Even as we approach Your table, we remember with deep gratitude that offering of sacrificial death upon the Cross; we humbly beseech You to renew our commitment to You. Inspire us, we pray, that we may be a living sacrifice for You, in Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for evermore. Amen.