

Sunday Afternoon Readings

(By RIGHT REV. MGR. POWER for the N.Z. Tablet.)

XVIII.—THE MASS PERPETUATES CALVARY.

The angels sang their song of praise near Bethlehem the night Our Lord was born, but their music died away into stillness as they gazed with the shepherds into the manger to see its lovely Tenant, and in that stillness they heard the breathing of the gentle peace that was falling like dew from Heaven upon the earth. The Host is raised above the altar at the moment of consecration, and once again the angels are awed into silence as Christ comes with His fragrant graces to purify the hearts that come to see the beloved sign which each new morning brings to pass. The same mystery surrounds the altar and the manger, it is the same Jesus that comes and dwells amongst us. St. Bonaventure writes:—

"Not less doth God seem to do, when He deigneth to descend daily from Heaven upon the altar, than He did when He assumed human nature and became incarnate."

"Who can doubt," St. Gregory says, "that at the moment of immolation, when the priest utters the word, the heavens open, and that the choirs of angels are present at that solemn act of Jesus Christ—that Heaven and earth intermingle and that the Highest is joined with the lowly?"

No wonder that the Mass occupies so large a place in the life of every good Catholic! No wonder that the enemies of God went by a certain diabolic instinct against the Mass when they wished to wreck the Church. It is the Mass that mattered to both, for the Mass is the test of Catholic brotherhood, binding priests and people into the one Mystic Body of Christ. It was to strangle the Mass that rack and rope were requisitioned by Elizabeth, and it was to cast it out as something vile that the mummies were sent through the country, in the hope that mockery might succeed where rack and rope had failed. But all these wicked agencies have failed, and the Mass abides to be the centre of Catholic life and the source of Catholic strength. Always threatened, always mocked, always attacked, it is fated not to die, for He whose word fails not has decreed that the Clean Oblation shall be offered to the Lord of Hosts from the rising to the setting sun.

Bethlehem, Calvary, and the Altar, beloved trinity of names, their music will never cease to beat upon our ears and thrill our inmost hearts. At Bethlehem the atoning Victim of our sins is born. The work of His priesthood began at Bethlehem, it is for this priesthood He was born. The sacrifices of the Old Law—of Aaron and Melchisadech—were only figures and symbols, "weak and needy elements," acceptable to God only because they represented that which was to come. It was the Divine decree that the God-Man should offer Himself in sacrifice. St. Paul in his Epistle to the Hebrews tells us that upon His entrance into the world Christ

accepted this decree of His Father and made the voluntary offering of His Body to be immolated on the Cross.

"For," he writes, "it is impossible that with the blood of oxen and goats sins should be taken away. Wherefore when (Christ) cometh into the world, He saith: Sacrifice and oblation Thou wouldst not; but a body Thou hast fitted to Me; Holocausts for sin did not please Thee. Then said I: Behold I come; in the head of the book it is written of Me, that I should do Thy will, O God. . . In the which will we are sanctified by the oblation of the body of Jesus Christ once. . . For by one oblation He hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified."

What He accepted in Bethlehem He fulfilled on Calvary. "Father, not as I will but as Thou wilt." Then the great High-Priest took up His Cross and on it took away the sins of the world in His own Blood, shedding the last drop of it as was the law for holocausts. "It is consummated," the One Oblation that would for evermore perfect those who would have a participation of it.

This participation we have through the Sacrifice of the Altar, which is a reproduction or perpetuation of the Sacrifice of Calvary. In the Holy Mass Christ still renews His Sacrifice through the ministry of men. He still shares with us through the Mass the inexhaustible fruits of the Cross, His "corn of the elect" and His "wine springing forth virgins." It is to perpetuate these gifts that He, Who has an Eternal Priesthood, gives His unction, His dedication, His consecration, a participation of His Priesthood to every priest.

But since the priest is ordained for men in the things that appertain to God, he must in his turn not only bring the people around the altar, but must also show them how they too may participate and are bound to participate in the offering, in the Sacrifice; how they too in their measure should voluntarily make themselves both priest and victim. It is true that priests alone have the right to consecrate and officially offer to the Father the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, but by a lesser title, but in a real manner, the people can offer the Host though they cannot consecrate it. Study the prayers with which the Church accompanies the Divine Sacrifice. And here it will not be out of place to urge upon my readers the beauty of the consecrated prayers of the Roman Missal; they are full of inspiration, and should be more desirable than the fifty, or one hundred and fifty methods of hearing Mass that are found in too many sentimental manuals.

When the priest is about to enter upon the most sacred part of the Mass he turns round to the people and says: "*Orate fratres*—Brethren, pray that my sacrifice AND

YOURS may be acceptable to God the Father Almighty." At the commemoration of the living he says: "Remember, O Lord, Thy servants of both sexes, and all here present for whom we offer or who themselves offer up to Thee this sacrifice of praise for themselves and those belonging to them." Again at the *Hanc igitur*, when just before the consecration he spreads his hands over the chalice, you will notice that he asks God to accept the oblation not only as his, but of the whole parish, that is of the spiritual family assembled around the altar. The priest then consecrates and offers Christ to the Father, but the people make the offering with him. So that in a certain real sense the people do participate and were meant to participate in the priesthood of Jesus Christ. If we only remembered this, how we should love to gather around the altar.

But Christ is not the only High Priest in the Mass, He is Victim also, in which character we must also share, all of us, both priests and people. Thus, our union with Christ in the Mass becomes one of the closest possible nature. A little water is mingled with the wine at the Offertory, then both are offered unto God "as a sweet odor for our salvation." The wine represents Christ and the water the people, so that we unite ourselves with Christ in His offering, in His immolation, we become victims with Him, we offer ourselves with Him. In one of the Masses of Pentecost, in the secret prayer after the offering of the bread and wine, the Church puts these words on our lips: "Vouchsafe, O Lord, to sanctify these gifts, and receiving the oblation of this spiritual victim, make US an eternal sacrifice to Thyself." It follows from all this that when we assist at Mass, we should, in imitation of Christ, give ourselves entirely up to God. The High Priest at the sacrifice has full power over the victim: we should place ourselves without any reserve in His hands that He may do His holy will in us. That holy will is our sanctification and strengthening in grace, our identification with Christ in His Mystic Body, our participation of His Priesthood, the bringing about of that great consummation expressed by St. Paul: "I live now, not any longer I, but Christ Jesus liveth in me." This is the real fruit of the Mass, so close an identification with Christ that the lowliest and the weakest among us may say with St. Peter that "we are partakers of the Divine nature."

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