

Sacrifice and Blessing

One of the most basic truths of the Judaic-Christian Faith – one which is found throughout all of Sacred Scripture from Genesis to Revelation – is that of sacrifice.

The perennial problem with this core Biblical doctrine, of course, is that what our theology means by sacrifice and what the word means in current secular usage are entirely different. In secular usage sacrifice means losing something, often to kill something living as a bribe to a pagan god. In Judaic-Christian theology sacrifice means to give something to God – which is often given back to us transformed – not to destroy or in many cases even to lose it. Giving something to God is how things are made holy, whether it is an object or ourselves and our lives. The word sacrifice itself comes from two Latin words meaning “to make” and “holy.”

The whole Christian Faith and life is about sacrifice:

– Jesus gave His life to the Father in His earthly ministry and ultimately on the Cross. The Father received this ultimate gift, transformed Jesus’ incarnate life and gave it back to Him (that is what the Resurrection was).

– In the Sacrifice of the Mass Our Lord’s sacrifice (His life, His suffering, and His death and resurrection) is made actually present again (*anamnesis*).

We give God bread and wine. He receives them, makes them holy, transforming them into the actual, true body and blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ and gives them back to us.

With the bread and wine we also present to God “ourselves, our souls and bodies,” incorporated into the Resurrection by Baptism, to be made holy as part of the Body of Christ (the Church) by the Body of Christ (the Eucharist). This process of “being made holy” is the life-long journey of *Theosis*, growing into the life and community of the Triune God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

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Persons and material objects are made holy by being given to God. The gift which God receives always becomes holy; it effects “a sharing in God’s life and power.” The blessing of a person or an object is (1) its being set aside for God’s use and (2) its being accepted by God and thus “sharing in God’s life and power,” authoritatively declared as part of the power conferred by Jesus Christ on His Apostles and their validly consecrated successors to “bind and loose.” When we ask for a blessing, we must be prepared to use the object or our lives as God’s own and in accordance with His will.

Theologians have written that all blessings are “intercessory prayers of the Church” that the person or object may be a “sign [something which actually conveys that which it signifies] that provides the occasion for a personal and ‘gracing encounter’ with Christ.... It is clear that, while the seven Sacraments are richly symbolic, they cannot carry explicitly every nuance of Christian life and experience – a cogent reason, then, for using various sacramentals [blessed objects] to assist in expressing particular dimensions of that life....

“The Church has relied very heavily in recent years on the [seven] Sacraments and liturgical rites to carry by themselves the full meaning of encounter with Christ; this has often been at the expense of the warmth and richness of Christian daily life; a more general care for and use of sacramentals would go a long way toward integrating the [seven] Sacraments with our overall growth in Christianity. Sacramentals, based on and relating to the Church’s [seven] Sacraments, both prepare for and flow from the celebration of those Sacraments. They are mutually enriching.

“Underlying this understanding of sacramental is the notion that Christ, the primary sacrament of encounter with God, renders the whole of creation new and redeemed. In this sense while the Church has nominated only [seven] certain actions as Sacraments, there is ‘hardly any proper use of material things which cannot be ... directed toward the sanctification of men and the praise of God.’” (Vatican II: *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*)