

## *The Holy Sacrifice of the New Covenant*

One of the teachings maintained by most Protestants is the denial of the sacrificial character of the Divine Liturgy, Eucharist, or Holy Mass -the basic form of Christian worship which has been offered from the time it was inaugurated by our Lord Himself on Holy Thursday during the Passover meal. For example a Protestant friend of mine repeated their common objection that to acknowledge any sacrifice after that of Christ on the Cross is in some way to imply that His work was not complete or effective for the eternal salvation of the world. Therefore, I would like to submit some thoughts on this matter.

First, Catholic and Orthodox Christians do not consider the Divine Liturgy (or Mass) as “another” sacrifice after that of the Cross. Instead, we believe that we participate in the once-for-all Sacrifice of Jesus Christ which was accomplished on Great Friday (Jn 19:30). One example I have heard to explain this is the practice of watching a movie which was recorded on a video. Each time we play a video tape of a movie, those actors do not have to re-enact all of those parts again. This they did “*once for all.*” But each time we play it, my family and I participate in the fruits of their work. In fact we derive benefits and are enriched by what they have done, in what they have accomplished. Through the use of video their once-for-all performance, is in fact *made present* to us again and again. “*Doing this*” in no way implies that their original effort was ineffective or incomplete. In fact, “*It is finished.*” And because it is finished, we can now *re-present it* over and over again for the benefit of others. In fact, I can offer their work for all my friends and thousands of others so that they can also participate in it and receive the fruits thereof. If we can do this with what humans have accomplished on our behalf, how much more with what God has accomplished for us! Since the beginning of the Church, since the evening that our Lord said, “Do this in remembrance of me” Christians have partook of what Christ accomplished for us, through His once for all Sacrifice on the Cross.

Of course this analogy is not perfect but it might help to communicate some important truths about the Divine Liturgy. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it this way:

"The Eucharist is the memorial of Christ's Passover, the making present and the sacramental offering of his unique sacrifice, in the liturgy of the Church which is his Body" (CCC 1362).

"The Eucharist is thus a sacrifice because it re-presents (makes present) the sacrifice of the Cross, because it is its memorial and because it applies its fruit" (CCC 1366).

All ancient Churches believe this. This is the faith of the one, holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. Thus the definition of “sacrifice” in *The Orthodox Study Bible* states:

"In the Eucharist, the faithful participate in the all-embracing, final and total sacrifice of Christ."

...and the the *O.S.B.* states about word Remembrance (Greek = *anamnesis*):

"Making present by means of recollection. The Eucharist is not merely a calling to mind but a remembrance of and mystical participation in the very sacrifice of Christ..."

Now, it is clear that this is the faith of the original Church. There is evidence of this belief in every century. So the burden of proof is on the shoulders of the Protestant who objects to show that the ancient Churches have deviated from the original interpretation of Scripture. Thus for a Protestant to prove that the Church is in error, he must be able to show that the early Church contradicts what we teach today. If they can not do this, they really have no argument, save their own personal interpretation which does not stand in comparison to two thousand years of consistent Christian teaching. So, as I attempt to present the original explanation from the Scriptures, as they relate to the issue of New Testament Sacrifice, it will be for those who object to show that I am misrepresenting the ancient Church founded by the Apostles. The only they could do this is by quoting someone from the early centuries of Christianity who supports their views. No such testimony exists. Yet there is plenty of proof for the belief of the ancient Church.

Lets start with the scriptural proofs that show sacrifice to be part of the original Christian understanding of the Eucharist. In the Apocalypse, St. John is mystically taken up to behold the heavenly Divine Liturgy. There are hymns, antiphonal responses, musical instruments, candles upon candle sticks, censers with burning incense, worshippers making prostrations, an altar with martyrs underneath it, all centered around Christ who is seen in priestly vestments (cf. Apoc. 1:13, Ex. 28:4 & 29:5). This is the heavenly Divine Liturgy which our earthly Divine Liturgy corresponds to and makes present to us each Lord's Day. In the midst of this heavenly liturgy, which is profoundly reminiscent of the Divine Liturgy, St. John sees our Lord Jesus Christ and describes Him as "a Lamb standing as it were slain... (Apoc. 5:6)." We have to ask the question, "Why does St. John see the Lamb standing as it were slain?" It is because the once for all Sacrifice of Jesus Christ is *eternally* present before the Father in heaven. Therefore, its eternal presence is there for us to partake of and benefit from for all time. As St. Paul said, "For also Christ, our Passover [referring to the passover lamb], was sacrificed for us; therefore let us feast, not with the old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." (1 Cor. 5:7-8). St. Paul also compares the sacrifice of pagans to the true New Covenant Sacrifice of the Divine Liturgy, when he writes,

"Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to wise men; judge for yourselves what I say:. The cup of blessing, which we bless, is it not communion of the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of the one bread. Observe Israel after the flesh: Are not those who eat the sacrifices, partakers of the altar? What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything? Rather, that the things which the nations sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not want you to have communion with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons." (1 Cor. 10:14-21).

Here St. Paul compares the sacrifice of pagans to the New Covenant Sacrifice offered by Christians. Both of these forms of worship, Pagan and Christian, as St. Paul describes them, involved a sacrifice, a cup and an altar. The Christian altar he calls the "table of the Lord." To this day Eastern Christians refer to the Altar as the "Holy Table." Implicit in St. Paul's words is the belief that this New Covenant Liturgy of Christians is indeed a "sacrifice" and a participation in the Body and Blood of Christ. The Orthodox Study Bible has this to say on the 1 Corinthian passage:

"All worship is sacramental, even false worship. To genuinely offer a sacrifice is to unite spiritually with the object of that offering. An idol by itself is nothing, but behind them lurk demons waiting for someone to partake of them. The Christian offering is the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We are not to engage in any worship contrary to, or in competition with, the Eucharist of Christ" (*O.S.B.* note: 1 Cor. 10:19-22).

As St. Paul adds in Hebrews, as Christians we "have an altar from which those who serve the tent [Jews] have no right to eat" (Heb. 13:10). This is another reference to the Holy Sacrifice of the Divine Liturgy which the ancient Churches have continued to offer since the Apostolic era.

So far what I have given is a few Scripture texts supporting the claim of the ancient Churches. If I stop there, I have given you little more reason to believe in the Orthodox Faith of the Catholic Church than any Protestant gives for his faith (or a Jehovah Witness or Mormon for that matter). There is more evidence than simply Bible verses to demonstrate the Orthodox interpretation. There are also numerous documents which witness to the faith and practice of the early Church. Lets look at these next.

Writing around AD 96 we have the witness of St. Clement of Rome who is called a "co-worker" by St. Paul in his *Epistle to the Philippians* (4:3). St. Clement was the third Bishop of Rome in succession to St. Peter. He writes to the Corinthian Church admonishing them to restore the clergy whom they had ousted in a rebellion (he wrote this as a result of being appealed to for help by the ousted Corinthian clergy). In this document, after exhorting the faithful of Corinth to re-install the legitimate hierarchy, St. Clement alluded to the sacrificial nature of the priesthood when he writes, "Our sin will not be small if we eject from the episcopate those who blamelessly and holily have offered its sacrifices" (44:1). Such a statement would make little sense if the Church did not already recognize in its Eucharistic worship the concept of it being a sacrifice. Thus St. Clement witnessed to the fact that, from the earliest times of the Church, Christian ministers like bishops (Gk. *episcopos*) and priests (Gk. *presbuteros*) have offered Sacrifice to God.

Next we have the witness of St. Justin the Philosopher and Martyr who gained the martyr's crown in AD 165. In his *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, around AD 155 (about 50 years after the death of the last Apostle) he had this to say regarding the Holy Sacrifice of the Divine Liturgy:

"Also, sirs, I said, the offering of fine wheat flour which was prescribed to be offered on behalf of those cleansed from leprosy was a type of the Bread of the Eucharist, the celebration of which our Lord Jesus Christ prescribed in memory of the passion He suffered on behalf of those men who are cleansed in their souls of every evil. Moreover, as I said before, concerning the sacrifices which you at that time offered, God speaks

through Malachias, one of the twelve, as follows: 'I have no pleasure in you, says the Lord; and I will not accept your sacrifices from your hands; for from the rising of the sun until its setting, my name has been glorified among the gentiles; and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a clean offering: for great is my name among the gentiles, says the Lord; but you profane it.' It is of the sacrifices offered to Him in every place by us, the gentiles, that is, of the Bread of the Eucharist and likewise of the cup of the Eucharist, that He speaks at that time; and He says that we glorify His name, while you profane it" (41).

Thus St. Justin witnessed to the fact that the early Christians offered to God the Eucharistic Bread and Cup which to them truly constituted a Sacrifice.

Twenty five years later (around AD180) we have the witness of St. Ireneaus, Bishop of Lyons. In the letter *Against Heresies* he writes,

“[Jesus] taught the new sacrifice of the new covenant, of which Malachias, one of the twelve prophets, had signified before hand: 'You do not My will, says the Lord Almighty, and I will not accept a sacrifice at your hands. For from the rising of the sun to its setting My name is glorified among the gentiles, and in every place incense is offered to My name, and a pure sacrifice; for great is My name among the gentiles, says the Lord Almighty' (Mal. 1:11). By these words He makes it plain that the former people will cease to make offerings to God; but that in every place sacrifice will be offered to Him, and indeed, a pure one; for His name is glorified among the gentiles” (4,17,5).

Here St. Ireneaus states that the people of God of the Old Covenant have ceased offering sacrifices. How could they? The temple was destroyed in AD 70. Now, says St. Ireneaus, sacrifice is offered by the gentiles and this is through Christ's Church which is in every place. He also goes on to state in the same letter:

“Sacrifice as such has not been reprobated. There were sacrifices then, sacrifices among the people; and there are sacrifices now, sacrifices in the Church. Only the kind has been changed; for now the sacrifice is offered not by slaves but by free men” (4,18,2).

All of these Church Fathers are from the first 100 years after the Apostles. These men are known as the “Apostolic Fathers” because they were either taught directly by the Apostles themselves or by the immediate disciples of the Apostles. It is important to remember, Jesus, during His life on earth, did not write books in order to pass on God's eternal truth. Instead, He established a Church to teach all nations the message of redemption (St. Mt. 28:19-20). Christ entrusted the entire Gospel to His chosen Apostles for the salvation of the world. They, then, handed on this message of salvation, the Word of God, to their chosen successors by word of mouth, and by their divinely inspired writings (see 2 Thes. 2:15). These chosen successors, bishops (1 Tim. 3:1), were ordained by the Apostles (cf. Acts 14:23) through the laying on of hands (cf. Acts 6:6, 1 Tim 4:14, 5:22, 2 Tim 1:6), and were entrusted with the entire “deposit of truth” (cf. 2 Tim. 1:13-14; 2:2, Titus 1:7-9).

From my perspective as an Armenian and Eastern Christian, this is even more apparent. Our very title in the for the Divine Liturgy in Armenian is *Soorp Badarak* (Sovrp Badarak)

(c) Copyright: 2001-2018, Lazarus Der-Ghazarian, looys.net, All Rights Reserved

which is translated literally, “Holy Sacrifice.” The sacrificial nature of the Eucharistic Liturgy is manifested throughout our ancient Divine Liturgy.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in one ancient Armenian hymn, *Blessed is God / Orhnyal eh Asdvadz* (Orhnyal e Asdova/) we sing:

“Blessed is God. Christ is sacrificed and distributed among us. Alleluia.  
His Body he gives us for food and his holy Blood he bedews for us. Alleluia.  
Draw near to the Lord and take the light. Alleluia.  
Taste and see that the Lord is sweet. Alleluia...”

To conclude I will reference another beautiful quote from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

“When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, she commemorates Christ's Passover, and it is made present: The sacrifice Christ offered once for all on the cross remains ever present. As often as the sacrifice of the Cross by which ‘Christ our Pasch has been sacrificed’ is celebrated on the altar, the work of our redemption is carried out. Because it is the memorial of Christ's Passover, the Eucharist is also a sacrifice. The sacrificial character of the Eucharist is manifested in the very words of institution: ‘This is my body which is given for you’ and ‘This cup which is poured out for you is the New Covenant in my blood.’ In the Eucharist Christ gives us the very body which he gave up for us on the cross, the very blood which he ‘poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’” (St. Lk. 22:19-20; CCC 1364-1365).

In Christ's Light,  
Wm. Der-Ghazarian  
2/14/03

Revised in 2008 by  
Sub-Deacon Lazarus W. Der-Ghazarian

---

<sup>1</sup> For many examples of this, see my essay “Kreesdos ee mech: Christ's Real Presence in the Holy Sacrifice” available on-line on my “Essays” page.