

August 5, 2012

Sunday Before Transfiguration

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Several potential problems attend the ascription of the term "sacrifice" to the Passion and death of Jesus. I do not mean, of course, that the ascription is wrong; in the Christian mind---and certainly the mind of Jesus---there is no doubt that what happened on the Cross was a true sacrifice.

This very term, "true sacrifice," however, may serve to introduce what I mean by speaking of "potential problems." The expression, "true sacrifice," can easily mean---and to many Christians, I think, does mean---that we start with a definition of sacrifice and then go on to show how Jesus' death "truly" fits within that definition. That is to say, following this method we don't begin with the death of Jesus; we begin with a general definition of sacrifice and then use this definition to reflect on what happened on the Cross.

This methodology is very common among Christian apologists. It runs this way: First, the study of "religion" informs us that men offer sacrifices in order to improve their status with God. The purpose of sacrifice may be to satisfy the requirements of justice----to "set things right" with God. Or sacrifice may be offered in order to placate the divine wrath. Or to gain a favorable outcome to man's petitions. Or---following the argument of St. Anselm---to satisfy the divine honor offended by man's sin. The study of religious history indicates a variety of purposes for which men, at all times, have offered sacrifice.

Second, the argument goes on to show how the deed, the *opus*, of Jesus on the Cross accomplishes some (or all) of the purposes sought by these sacrifices. Thus, Jesus on Calvary satisfied the offended divine honor, placated God's wrath, and/or met the existential demands of justice. In short, this method begins with the general consideration of "sacrifice" and then applies this consideration to what took place on the Cross.

There is at least one thing wrong with this procedure as a theological method---namely, it is not theological. Theology, for the Christian Church, always begins with Divine Revelation; what God does and says. The method I just outlined, however, does not start with Divine Revelation; it commences, rather, with what we may call "religious theory." The History of Religions is permitted to define the term "sacrifice" before theological reflection even begins. This method is, in short, completely backwards.

Faith does not climb Calvary with presuppositions furnished by the History of Religions. Sound theology does not contemplate the crucified Savior through the eyes of religious theory. The sacrifice on the Cross is not simply a specified item within a larger genus. It is not just an instance among those actions, those *opera*, defined as "sacrifice."

The death of Jesus is, rather, the exemplar and primal type of what is contained in the word "sacrifice." The Cross-event properly defines itself; it is *sui generis*. We don't begin with a general theory of sacrifice in order to figure out what Jesus did; we begin by kneeling in repentance at the foot of the Cross. There we beat our breasts in order to break our hearts. Indeed, in order to grasp the sacrifice of Christ, we begin---as the Church---with that breaking of the bread and sharing of the cup through which chiefly we proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes. We do not start by studying religious theory; we begin by participation in the Holy Eucharist.

We call the death of Jesus a "unique" sacrifice, not only in the sense that it happened but once (*eph' hapaxs*), but in the formal sense that it is the one sacrifice that truly accomplishes what it sets out to accomplish; namely, the "holy society" by which human beings are joined to God. A deed (*opus*) is a "true sacrifice" in the measure that it copies, reflects, is analogous to, or partakes of, the sacrifice on Calvary. Calvary defines sacrifice.

Probably no theologian has expressed this teaching better or more eloquently than St. Augustine of Hippo: *Proinde verum sacrificium est omne opus quo agitur ut sancta societate inhaereamus Deo*---"Thus, the true sacrifice is every act done in order that we may cling to God in a holy society."

This *sancta societas* is the Body of which Christ is the Head. It is the corporate, covenant union of men with God and with one another in the singular redemption purchased at so great a price.

The Holy Eucharist is the sacrifice offered by the *sancta societas*, the place where we make an oblation of our very lives: "Therefore, man himself (*ipse homo*), who is consecrated by the name of God and devoted to God, inasmuch as he dies to the world in order to live for God, is a sacrifice. . . . We also make our body a sacrifice when we discipline it---as we should---for the sake of God and do not yield our members to sin as instruments of evil but to God as instruments of righteousness" (*The City of God* 10.6; cf. Romans 12:1).

All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America

4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641

Church Office: (773) 777-0749

<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor

phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:

www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

Pastoral Ponderings:

http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php