

**O COME, LET US WORSHIP XIII:  
“THIS IS MY BODY; THIS IS MY BLOOD”**

It happens at a play that the audience seated in the grand theater is treated when the curtain are raised to a marvelous world of make-believe and for a space of time that world that sprang from the playwright's imagination, be it nearby or far away, is viewed as reality, and the real world from which the audience stepped when it entered the theater is more or less forgotten for a while. Something similar, but quite different happens of a Sunday morning as we approach the very heart of the Mass. As the priest says, “Therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven,” we are invited to unite our voices with those above singing, “Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus,” and it is suddenly as if the curtains were drawn back and we beheld a different world, this one, however, not imagined but real, more real than the world we inhabit, the world of the spirit that lies behind the ephemeral world of daily life and human history. Here is where the things that are of ultimate significance take place, not those that will pass with time. Then rather than stepping from the real world into the imagined as in a theater, we step from that which passes for reality to reality itself.

“Holy, Holy, Holy,” proclaims the heavenly choir, “Heaven and earth are full of thy glory.” That is reality, that our thrice-holy God is working his sovereign will, is revealing his glory, on earth, in the midst of this passing world, where to our natural and unenlightened vision we see only appearances which we mistake for reality, like the shadows in Plato's cave. Not only heaven but “earth is full of his glory,” sing the angels. “Where?” we ask. To what place would they direct us above all to see this spectacular display? After the *Sanctus* and *Benedictus* the priest points to that place on earth where the glory of God is most fully revealed. The blazing forth of God's glory is seen—not in the great wonders of nature—in wind and storm and earthquake and fire—and not in a great exhibition of military might nor in the finest work of the great artists or architects, but in the cross of Jesus Christ. “All glory be to thee, Almighty God our heavenly Father, for that thou, of thy tender mercy, didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death

upon the cross for our redemption.” The highest is revealed in the lowest; God’s glory in the humiliation and death of his Son undergone in love to rescue those who because of sin lay under the judgment of death. God’s glory is revealed above all in the cross, for there, as nowhere else in all of human history, does his love, his “tender mercy,” so shine forth.

The Prayer of Consecration in drawing our focus to the cross seeks to make clear what there transpired: that Jesus Christ the Son of God made there upon the cross by his oblation, his giving of himself utterly and without reserve, that sacrifice that had been foreshadowed in the priestly offerings of Old Testament times. The liturgy says “by his *one* oblation of himself *once* offered” to insure that we understand the completeness and sufficiency of his sacrifice, and that we guard against the idea that Christ is sacrificed repeatedly upon the altar. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews in contrasting the work of our Lord with that of the High Priest under the Old Covenant who had to offer sacrifices continually year after year stresses that “Christ was *once* offered to bear the sin of many” (6:28). Any idea of incompleteness or insufficiency of Christ’s work upon the cross is carefully repudiated by the statement that he offered “a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world.” This wording is sometimes criticized as didactic, as it is, but it was a necessary guarding against any idea that the sacrifice of the mass was a repetition of Christ’s sacrifice upon the cross.

The Prayer of Consecration after ascribing all glory to God for sending his Son to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption, says that Christ did two things: (1) that he made there on the cross and perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, and (2) that he “did institute, and in his holy Gospel command us to continue, a Perpetual Memory of that his precious death and sacrifice until his coming again.” Between Christ’s first coming two thousand years ago and his second coming at the end of time we have this holy ordinance, this blessed sacrament. Between his physical presence in the incarnation and his physical presence when he shall come again in like manner as the apostles saw him go at the ascension, we have his physical presence under the signs of bread and wine in institution of the Lord’s Supper. “A Perpetual Memory of his precious death and sacrifice, until his coming again,” it says. In this Holy Sacrament

we look backward to Christ in memory and forward to Christ in anticipation, even as he gives us the signs and means of his presence with us now.

When the priest says, “Until his coming again,” the sanctus bell is rung. In the old Roman Mass the words of the Eucharistic canon were whispered quietly by the priest, as though he were enveloped by a cloud of silence like Moses on Mount Sinai, while the people waited outside the cloud in prayer. The sanctus bell was then rung at this point to alert the congregation that the consecration was about to take place. The priest at our mass speaks the words aloud so we don’t need to be awakened, but the bell should call us to special devotion as the priest in Christ’s stead speaks the words of institution.

And so we are ushered into that holy moment. The words in which St. Paul describes the tradition he received are read: “For in the night in which he was betrayed.” Even at the very moment in which we focus most fully on Christ’s giving up of himself are we reminded that he was *betrayed*—not by Judas alone, but by all who would not hear or heed his words, who hid from his love, who fled when the crisis came, as did they all, even boastful Peter. At the very moment our attention is drawn to his sacrifice for our redemption we are reminded of the sin from which we needed to be redeemed, and continue to need to be redeemed, for we betray him still—by deeds done and deeds not done, by words spoken and words not spoken.

“For in the night in which he was betrayed, he took bread,” as his priest/representative does now, “and when he had given thanks,” and at these words the priest makes the sign of the cross over the host, as though to underscore the connection between the rite and the thing signified, “He broke it,” for his body was truly broken, and unless the bread is broken it cannot be shared. “And gave it to his disciples, saying, Take, eat, THIS IS MY BODY, WHICH IS GIVEN FOR YOU. Do this in remembrance of me.” And he continues, “Likewise after supper, he took the cup; and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE NEW TESTAMENT, WHICH IS SHED FOR YOU AND FOR MANY, FOR THE REMISSION OF SINS. Do this in remembrance of me.”

We need not touch now upon the endless and often loveless controversies that have been fought over the manner of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist. The Romans call it ‘Transubstantiation’ (or some “Transignification,”) the Orthodox call it

‘Transmutation,’ the Lutherans, ‘Consubstantiation,’ and so on. Martin Luther in controversy at the Marburg Colloquy with those who thought the Supper a mere memorial simply wrote on the table with a great piece of chalk, “*Hoc est corpus meum*” (“This is my body”) and everytime anyone tried to deny the real presence he would simply point to the words. The words of our Lord are the clearest indication that we have of the meaning. Theologians may dicker over whether the process involved is best explained through Aristotelian categories or the philosophy of Bernard Lonergan, or like the Orthodox eschew Western thought categories altogether. That is their business; it is faith seeking understanding.

But the person in the pew ought simply to listen carefully to what the Lord says, “This is my body. This is my blood.” Jesus told his dull hearers in John chapter six, “Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me and I in him” (Jn. 6:53-56). The bread and the wine consecrated by him who is the Lord of all things, who could turn water into wine, make the leper clean and still the raging sea, can perform the wonder of making present to us his true body and blood. We may not, we cannot, understand fully for the ways of God are beyond our kin; so we come humbly before him and receive at his hands, who is both the priest and the sacrifice, this pledge of his love. The true miracle of the Holy Eucharist is not that the bread and wine mysteriously become the body and blood of Christ, but that he loves us so and gives himself to us in this way, so that if we receive his gift of himself in deepest humility and faith and with due thankfulness, we ourselves will be transformed from the sinners that we are more and more into his glorious likeness and made fit for his kingdom forever. Rightly, therefore, do we kneel in his presence, behold him reverently and bless ourselves at the elevation of his body and blood, and then meekly receive this heavenly food. By this remembrance do we make him present and take him with us, within us, as we go forth to serve him and all the world he so loves.