

October 21, 2007

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Medieval and Renaissance theories about the Atonement appear to suffer from a common and easily identified misunderstanding, and I take it to be this: They all assume that there is some need *in God* that must be met and satisfied by Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. Something *in God* is the beneficiary of the Cross, whether His honor, or His justice, or His wrath, or whatever. These theories postulate *in God* some requisite that could only be addressed by the suffering and death of Christ. God—or some aspect of God—is the beneficiary of sacrifice.

I submit that an idea of this sort is very difficult to sustain from biblical teaching about sacrifice. There are simply too many scriptural texts insisting that God does not need it. Introducing a brief survey of such texts, St. Augustine comments, "And who is so foolish as to suppose that the things offered to God are needed by Him for some uses of His own? Divine Scripture in many places destroys such an idea" (*The City of God* 10.5). Augustine then goes on to cite several texts from the Psalter to this effect, limiting the number "so as not to be tedious."

If God does not need sacrifice, however, *man certainly does*, because "whatever correct worship is paid to God profits not Him, but man." Man, then, not God, is the beneficiary of a sacrifice offered to God. God does not need sacrifice, but man needs to offer it.

A sacrifice, after all, is a symbolic act, signifying, embodying, and giving outward expression to an inner gift, the gift of self. It is "the visible sacrament or sacred sign of an invisible sacrifice," wrote Augustine, "for that which in common speech is called a sacrifice is only the symbol of the true sacrifice."

And this is why the Lord does prescribe man's offering of sacrifice. According to Psalm 51, "For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart — These, O God, You will not despise." Augustine comments on the irony of this double assertion: "Observe how, in the very words whereby he expresses God's refusal of sacrifice, he shows that God *does* require sacrifice. He does not desire the sacrifice of a slaughtered animal, but the sacrifice of a contrite heart."

Finding yet more evidence of this double thesis in the prophetic books, Augustine concludes that "these two things are distinguished and set forth with ample clarity—that God does not require these sacrifices for their own sake, and that He requires the sacrifices which they symbolize."

And this is the meaning of the Cross. It was the outward embodiment and expression of Christ's internal gift of self. Elsewhere, with an engaging play on words, Augustine asks, "Who is that priest except He that was both victim and priest, the One who, finding nothing clean in the world (*in mundo non inveniret mundum*) that He could offer, offered Himself? (*Enarrationes in Psalmos* 132.7) God's Son, that is to say, became man in order to do what unaided man was unable to do—to give himself completely to God in pure, perfect, and consummate love, thereby restoring the human race to divine communion. This is what is

meant by the expiation for sins, which was accomplished by Christ's perfectly blameless life, ending in His utterly sacrificial death.

Christ's Passion, then, satisfied no need in God. Nothing in God was altered by that offering. The Bible does not speak of God's offended honor in respect to the Cross, nor the demands of His justice, and most emphatically not the appeasement of His anger.

It was for man's sake alone that the perfect sacrifice was offered. In His self-oblation the Lamb of God took away the sins of the world. "It came to pass," wrote Augustine, "that the bonds of many sins, in many dead people, should be dissolved through one Man's death which no sin had preceded" (*De Trinitate* 4.13.17).

This was the reason, moreover, that the death of Christ was victorious. Because sin had no hold on Christ, death had no hold on Him. His perfect gift of self in sacrifice overcame, once and forever, man's subjection to sin and death. He was "both victor and victim," said Augustine, "priest and sacrifice" (*Confessions* 10.43.69).

The purity of Christ's sacrifice was the reason that God raised Him up. "Therefore," says St. Paul, "God also has highly exalted Him" (Philippians 2:9). Perhaps we may say that the Cross was the sacrifice as offered, the Resurrection was the sacrifice as received. Both events pertain to a single and singular act of worship. This why Paul could write that Christ was "delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification" (Romans 4:25). The sacrifice was rendered perfect when "with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:12).

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