

April 27, 2008
Pascha

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Too often---if my impressions are correct---the Resurrection and Ascension of our Savior are treated simply as the aftermath of the sacrifice of the Cross, the first effects of Redemption, so to speak. A Christian theology informed by Holy Scripture, however, will insist that the Lord's Resurrection and the Ascension were also integral components of that sacrifice. His glorification on high accomplished that laudable perfection which was but faintly symbolized in the Old Testament sacrifices that prefigured it.

The victims of those sacrifices, after all, were not only immolated, expressing the self-gift of those who offered them; they were also transformed by sacred fire and thereby ascended to God as the expression of Israel's worship. God received them in the fire.

In the case of our High Priest and Victim, the Holy Spirit was the true fire that transformed His immolated Body and raised it up to the Father as the perfect oblation, the supreme act of worship. The Father received that sacrifice in the fire of the Holy Spirit. This, I take it, is what St. Paul had in mind when He wrote that Christ "gave Himself for us, an offering and sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma" (Ephesians 5:2). On the cross Christ "through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God" (Hebrews 9:14).

This truth respecting the sacrificial quality of the Lord's glorification is perhaps best expressed in the Epistle to the Hebrews, which portrays Jesus' entry into the true and heavenly sanctuary as the final act---the liturgical act!---by which He was perfected in His priesthood. Indeed, if Jesus "were on earth, He would not be a priest" (8:4).

That entrance into the Holy Place not made with hands was also the perfection of Christ as our Victim, because in it was achieved the goal of all sacrifice---the Victim became completely the possession of God, transformed by the divine acceptance of the gift. It was the fire of the Holy Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead and handed Him to the Father as the perfect sacrifice, through and in which the human race has access to the Throne. This is why the Church calls the event of the Cross the "Paschal Sacrifice."

According to St. Augustine, "this sacrifice was offered by the one true Priest, the Mediator of God and man; and it was proper that this sacrifice should be pre-figured by animal sacrifices, . . . for a natural body is endowed with heavenly attributes, as

the fire in the sacrifice typified the swallowing up of death in victory" (*Against Faustus* 22.17).

The immolated flesh of Christ, because of the perfect love that He offered to the Father in the self-gift of the Cross, received the Holy Spirit as the iron receives the fire and is thereby transformed. It was the energy of the Holy Spirit in the flesh of Christ (for His soul had departed) that preserved Him from decay and raised Him from the dead.

The glorious Christ abides, therefore, in the divinized state of sacrifice. He is the Lamb who forever stands "as though immolated"---*hos esphagmenon* (Revelation 5:6)---our Spirit-bearing Mediator with the Father. In this state of glory, ascended on high, He is the channel of the Spirit's sundry gifts (Ephesians 4:4-13).

The Holy Spirit Himself was the first gift of the risen Christ to the Church: "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.' And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (John 20:21-22). It is a principle of the New Dispensation that this Holy Spirit comes to the Church through Christ's transformed, divinized flesh.

The Eucharistic Mysteries are especially pertinent to this principle. How do bread and wine become the very Body and Blood of Christ? Because, says St. John of Damascus, "The Holy Spirit is present and does these things." He goes on, "The bread and wine are not mere representations of the Body and Blood of Christ---God forbid!---but the same deified Body of the Lord." We partake of these Mysteries, Damascene insists, "that we may be inflamed and deified by participation in the divine fire." This is how the Christian is transformed: "Being purified thereby, we are united to the Body of Christ and to His Spirit" (*On the Orthodox Faith* 4.13).

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