

January 12, 2014  
Sunday After Theophany

### Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings Sacrificial Blood

Throughout the New Testament the apostolic witness gives a central place to the theme of Christ's redeeming blood, which was poured out in his sacrificial death on the Cross. For the whole human race this blood procures deliverance from sin and death. Thus, Paul writes that in Christ "we have redemption through his blood" (Eph 1:7). John proclaims, "the blood of Jesus Christ, [God's] Son, cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). The author of Hebrews asserts of Jesus, "with his own blood, entered once for all into the Holy Place, obtaining eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:12).

There is no proper understanding of this theme without some appreciation of its Old Testament background, particularly the significance of the sacrificial blood. There are three points to be made here:

First, we should speak of the blood and the soul: When the Emperor Nero ordered the philosopher Seneca to take his own life, the philosopher decided to do it in the easiest way possible. A gentle person, he hated violence. Seneca simply had a vein opened in his arm, so that he could die as peacefully as possible. Without a lot of undo trouble and stress, it was just a matter of getting his flesh and his blood separated from one another. The separation of the blood from the body was the equivalent of the sundering of the soul from the body.

It is not as though Seneca actually identified the soul with the blood. Indeed, he wrote a treatise *On the Tranquility of the Soul*, where nothing is said about blood. Yet, he knew that an infallible way of separating the soul from the body was to sunder the blood from the body. No theory; it was just an application of basic hemadrometry. Holy Scripture, however, takes an even more explicit view of the matter: "the soul of the flesh is in the blood"—*nephesh habbasar baddam*—(Leviticus 17:11). In the Bible, the blood is not just one of the "bodily fluids." It is the medium of life.

As the medium of life, the blood contained the inner being of the living animal, including man. This is why the Old Testament prohibits the consumption of blood.

Second, we should speak of sin and sacrifice: Because the blood represented life at its deepest contact with God, *all* of the Old Testament sacrifices prescribed for sin were blood sacrifices. Various bloodless sacrifices were offered, but the sin offering required the shedding of blood.

The shedding of the blood of the sacrificial victim was the symbolic gift of self to God on the part of the sinner. He was reconciled to God—was found *at-one* with God—through the symbolic shedding of the animal's blood in place of his own. When the relationship between God and man was disrupted by sin, it was required that that disruption be mended by man's total gift of self, an inner personal surrender symbolized in the sacrificial mactation of the animal.

Third, we should speak of the blood of Christ: Because the sacrifices of the Old Testament were only symbolic, it was "not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4). It is in this sense that the blood of Christ is the price of our redemption: Jesus poured out his inner being in loving adoration of his Father on our behalf. The image of Christ's blood in the New Testament always implies the understanding of the blood in the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, in which the shedding of the blood means the restoration of the sinner to friendship with God: Atonement.

The Christian appeal to the imagery of the blood began with Jesus himself, who told his disciples, on the night before his death, "This is my covenant blood, which is shed for the many for the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:28). Because Jesus used this language within the liturgical ceremony at the center of the Christian religion, it is not surprising that we find it everywhere in the New Testament. Thus, St. Peter wrote, "You were not redeemed with corruptible things, . . . but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:18-19). The Christian Church chants to Jesus our Lord: "To him who loved us and freed us from our sins in his own blood, and has made us a kingdom and priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen" (Rev 1:5).

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