

The Voice that Delights the Bridegroom

By Dom Columba Marmion



The Holy Sacrifice in which the soul participates by sacramental communion constitutes, as we have seen, the center of our religion; it includes in one and the same act the commemoration, renewal and application of the immolation of Calvary.

But the Mass in itself alone does not supply the places of all the religious actions we ought to accomplish; although it is the most perfect homage we can render to God and contains the substance and virtue of all homage, it is, however, not the only homage. What do we yet owe to God? The homage of prayer, at one time public, at another individual... Let us now see in what the homage of public prayer consists.

If you read the letters of St. Paul, you will see he exhorts us to it more than once. He writes to the Colossians telling them to teach and admonish one another “in psalms, hymns,

and spiritual canticles, singing in grace in your hearts to God.” And again: “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual canticles, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; giving thanks always for all things, in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, to God and the Father.”

This Divine praise is closely linked with the Holy Sacrifice and we see that Our Lord wished to show us this by His example. The Evangelists, in fact, tell us that Christ did not leave the Cenacle, after the institution of the Eucharist, until He had said a hymn of praise. Public prayer gravitates towards the Sacrifice of the altar; there it finds its best support, thence it draws its greatest value in the sight of God. This is because it is presented to Him by the Church, in the name of the Bridegroom, the Eternal High Priest, Who, by His Sacrifice unceasingly renewed, has merited that all glory and honor should be rendered to the Father in the unity of the Holy Ghost.

Let us see in what this homage of the official prayer of the Church consists, and how, whilst constituting a work most acceptable to God, it becomes for us a pure and abundant source of union with Christ and of eternal life.

Before ascending into Heaven, Christ Jesus bequeathed to His Church its greatest treasure – the mission of continuing His work here below. This work, as you know, is two-fold: it is a work of praise in regard to the Eternal Father, a work of salvation in regard to men. The Word was made flesh for us... That is true; but this work of our redemption has for its cause the love of Christ for His Father.

The Church receives her mission from Christ: she receives the sacraments and the privilege of infallibility in order to sanctify men; but she has a part too in the religion of Christ towards His Father in order to continue upon earth the homage of praise that Christ in His Sacred Humanity offered to His Father.

Christ Jesus, in this as in all things, is our Model. Let us for an instant contemplate the Incarnate Word. Christ is the only Son of the Father; He is the Eternal Word. In the adorable Trinity, He is the Word by which the Father eternally says to Himself all that He is; He is the living expression of all the perfections of the Father the “figure of His substance,” says St. Paul, and the “brightness of His glory.” The Father contemplates His Word, His Son; He sees in Him the perfect, substantial, living image of Himself; such is the essential glory that the Father receives. If God had created nothing, had left all things in the state of possibility, He would, however, have had His essential and infinite glory. By the very fact of being what He is, the Eternal Word is like a Divine canticle, a living canticle, singing the praise of the Father, expressing the plenitude of His perfections. It is the infinite hymn which resounds unceasingly *in sinu Patris*.

In taking a human nature, the Son remains what He was... He does not cease to be the only Son, the perfect image of the perfections of the Father; He does not cease to be of Himself the living glorification of His Father. The infinite canticle, sung from all eternity, began to be sung upon earth when the Word became incarnate. By the Incarnation, humanity is, as it were drawn by the Word into this work of glorification; the canticle sung in the sanctuary of the Divinity is prolonged by the Incarnate Word in His humanity.

Upon the lips of Christ Jesus, true Man as well as true God, this canticle takes a human expression and human accents, and likewise a character of adoration that the Word, equal to the Father, could not offer Him as such. However, if the expression of this canticle is human, its perfection is all-holy; it is of Divine price and infinite value. Who amongst us could measure the greatness of the worship Christ rendered to His Father? Who could recount something of the song of praise Christ sang in His thrice blessed soul to the glory of His Father? The soul of Christ contemplated, in a continual vision, the Divine perfections, and from this contemplation sprang forth the fullness of religion, perfect adoration and sublime praise. At the end of His earthly life, Christ Jesus declares to His Father that He has always glorified Him. This was the chief work of His life and He has perfectly fulfilled it: *“I have glorified Thee on the earth; I have finished the work which Thou gavest Me to do.”*

But it is note-worthy that in personally uniting our nature to Himself, the Word incorporated, so to speak, all humanity with Himself. He associated, by right and in principle, all humanity in the perfect praise He gives to His Father. Here again we have received of the fullness of Christ, so that, in Christ and by Christ, every Christian soul, united to Him by grace, should sing Divine praises. Christ is our Head, all the baptized are the members of His Mystical Body; in Him and through Him, we should give all glory and honor to God.

Christ has left us a share of praise to fulfill as He has given us a share of our suffering to bear. Does our adoration and praise add something to the merit or the perfection of those of Christ? Certainly not. But Christ has willed that, through the Incarnation, all humanity, of which He holds the place, should be by right indissolubly united to all His states and to all His mysteries. Let us never forget this. He makes only one with us. He rendered His adorations and praises to His Father not only in our favor but also in our name. And that is why the Church, His mystical Body, must be associated here below with this work of religion and praise which the humanity of Christ now renders to His Father in the splendor of holiness. The Church must offer, after this example of her Spouse, this “sacrifice of praise,” as St. Paul calls it, that is due to the infinite perfections of the Father.

Let us see how the Church, guided in this by the Holy Ghost, fulfills her mission. At the center of her worship she places the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the veritable sacrifice which renews the work of our redemption on Calvary and applies the fruits of it. She accompanies this oblation with sacred ceremonies which she carefully regulates and these are like the protocol of the court of the King of kings. She surrounds it with readings, canticles, hymns and psalms which serve as preparation or thanksgiving for the Eucharistic immolation.

This constitutes the “Divine Office”... as to the elements, the “formulas” of her praise, the Church composes some of them herself – as the hymns – by the pen of her doctors, who are also great saints, for example, St. Ambrose; but she principally borrows them from the books of the sacred Scriptures, the books inspired by God Himself. St. Paul tells us “we know not what we should pray for as we ought; but,” he adds, “the Spirit Himself asketh for us”. That is to say God alone knows the way in which we should call upon Him. This is true of the prayer of petition, but it is especially true of the prayer of praise and thanksgiving. God alone knows how He should be praised. The most magnificent conceptions of God formed by our intelligence are human. To praise God worthily, it is necessary that God Himself should compose the expression of these praises. And that is why the Church places the psalms upon our lips as the most perfect praise we can, after the Holy Sacrifice, offer to God.

Christ is the Bridegroom and the Church is the Bride, as St. Paul says. What is here the dowry of the Bride? It is her miseries, her weakness, but likewise her heart to love with and her lips with which to praise. And what does the Bridegroom bring? His satisfactions, His merits, His precious Blood, all His riches. Christ being united to the Church gives her His power of adoring and praising God. The Church is united to Jesus and leans upon Him. Seeing her, the Angels ask: “Who is this that cometh up from the desert, flowing with delights, leaning upon her Beloved?” It is the Church who, from the desert of her native poverty, mounts towards God, adorned like a virgin with the glorious treasures her Bridegroom gives her. And in the name of Christ, and with Him, she offers the adoration and praise of all her children to the Heavenly Father. This praise is the voice of the Bride: *Vox Sponsae*, the voice that delights the Bridegroom. It is the canticles sung by the Church in company with Christ, and that is why, when we join in it with faith and confidence, it is so pleasing to Christ Jesus: in God’s sight it surpasses in value all our private prayers. Behold this Bride, proud of her condition and state and assured of the eternal rights gloriously won by her Divine Bridegroom, penetrating boldly into the sanctuary of the Divinity where Christ, her Head and Bridegroom, ever lives and prays for us. Between the two there is all the distance from earth to heaven, but the Church bridges over this distance by faith and blends her voice with that of Christ *in sinu Patris*: it is one and the same prayer, the prayer of Jesus united to His Mystical Body with whom He offers one and the

same homage to the adorable Trinity. How should such a prayer fail to be acceptable to God since He receives it from Christ? What power will it not have over the Heart of God? How too could such praise fail to be a source of graces for the Church and for all her children? It is Christ who prays, and Christ has always the right to be heard.

Let us then be guided by the Church our Mother in this primordial devotion which is to make us share in the worship rendered by Christ to His Father. Christ has placed the celebration of these mysteries in the hands of His Bride. The prayer established by the Church is the true and authentic expression of the homage worthy of God. When the Church, knowing the secret of Jesus, prepares herself, and us with her, to celebrate Christ's mysteries it is as if we heard from heaven those words of the Canticle of Canticles: "Let thy voice sound in my ears, for thy voice is sweet and thy face comely." The Church is adorned with the riches of the Divine Bridegroom, she has the right to speak in His name; that is why the homage of adoration and praise she places on the lips of her children is extremely pleasing to Christ and to His Father.

This prayer is also a sure way for us. We could not take one that would lead us more directly to Christ, and make our life more one with His. The Church leads us by the hand straight to Him. To let oneself be guided by her is an act of humility and obedience, for she has received all from Christ. It is likewise for us an infallible means of coming to know Christ, of sounding the depths of His mysteries and remaining united to Him, so as to find in Him not only a model, but the source of eternal life which He has caused to spring forth from the abundance of His merits.

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