

The Texts of the Convivium

THE IDEA OF SACRIFICE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND NEW TESTAMENT

The death of Jesus Christ on the cross is defined as a sacrifice offered to redeem all men from sin and to sanctify them leading them to all perfection (Heb 10, 14). It is a bloody sacrifice offered by Jesus, devotee and at the same time a victim, to his divine Father.

It is necessary to study the terms of this sacrifice thoroughly, since certain expressions, that the New Testament itself contains, could baffle and lead to thinking that, by speaking about the sacrifice of Christ, one dwells upon the idea of a religion that is far too archaic, truculent and unacceptable.

The sacrifices in the Old Testament

It would be a good idea here to first of all focus our attention on how sacrifice in the most ancient biblical tradition was considered and put into action. In the Old Testament, the book which deals with it par excellence is the Book of Leviticus. It distinguishes the holocaust from oblation, from the pacific sacrifice, from the expiatory sacrifice.

The holocaust, “an oblation of most sweet savor to the Yahweh” (Lev 1, 17), consists in entirely burning the flesh of slain animals, which could be a bull, a sheep, a goat, a turtledove or a dove, before the Lord.

Oblation is the inferior’s gift to the superior and it is an offering of agricultural produce: fine unleavened flour anointed with oil, sprinkled with salt and a little frankincense, burned on the altar and sent up in smoke (ch. 2).

In the pacific sacrifice a lamb is sacrificed, or a goat, or a larger animal, male or female, either one of the two, as long as it without blemishes. It is killed in the entrance of the Tabernacle of the Testimony, and the priests pour its blood round about upon the altar. The kidneys and other organs with the fat wherewith the flanks are covered and burned going up in smoke producing a most sweet savor which is particularly pleasing to the Divinity. The rest is food to be consumed together in a sacred banquet (ch. 3).

The expiatory sacrifice is carried out following a “sin”, which could have been committed intentionally, with malice or also only as an “oversight”. The person considered in a condition of sin is not only he who wrongfully oppresses his neighbour or commits fraud or theft or murder, but also, for a number of days that vary from case to case, the woman who has given birth, the man who has had sexual intercourse with his wife or who has touched a corpse, the man who suffers from blennorrhoea, or a tumour or leprosy, even the house declared “infected by a leprous disease” for having “greenish or reddish spots formed in its walls” (14, 33-53).

We are still very far from the idea, clearly expressed by Jesus, that the morality of our actions should be judged in their intention.

Sin produces the effect of making he who commits it fall into a condition of impurity. Impurity is not tolerated by that God who gives the order to the men of his chosen people: “You shall be holy; for I Yahweh your God am holy” (19, 2).

The impure man is as if he has been abandoned by God, left without help, no longer protected from evil. A condition of impurity is a condition of imminence of misfortune. It is clear how the subject who has fallen into impurity yearns to redeem himself.

And so we have the need of an atonement, which is satisfied by expiatory sacrifice. This obtains that “forgiveness” that will allow he who makes the sacrifice to reintegrate himself in the divine grace, once again obtaining his desired protection and, hopefully, all favours and fortune.

The Leviticus specifies the nature and modality of the expiatory sacrifice, also known as atonement, for the different cases that the sin has been committed either by a supreme priest, or by a chief, by a man of the people, by the whole community. When the purification cannot be obtained by a simple cleansing with water it is always a poor animal who has to pay for it: which, according to the case, could be a bull, an ox, a ram, a goat, a lamb, a turtledove or a dove.

Once a year, on the tenth day of the seventh month, after other preliminary sacrifices, lots are cast upon some goats and the goat on whom the lot fell shall be taken by the supreme priest who “shall lay both his hands upon the head of the goat, and send him away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities upon him in a solitary land; and he shall let the goat go into the wilderness” (16, 21-22). It will be killed in the wilderness and entirely burned, skin, flesh and excrement. In this way, says the Lord to His people, “on this day shall atonement be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins you shall be clean before Yahweh” (16, 30).

The great final purification according to the ancient prophets

The greatest purification is that which not only forgives sins by giving back the communion of grace with the Divinity to men, but it shelters them once and for all from any relapse.

It was the great aspiration of the people of Israel, who had to suffer far too many adversities on account of its betrayals and transgressions, as explained by the prophets, for having turned its back on God by practicing usages and rituals of idolatry peoples. This aspiration is expressed in great detail in Ezekiel, Zechariah and Malachi.

By referring to the Jews as “removed far off among the peoples” and “scattered through the countries” because of their idolatry, Ezekiel (VI century) communicated a more reassuring and happier prophesy to them: “Thus says Yahweh God: I will gather you from the peoples, and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel. And when they come there, they will remove from it all its detestable things and all its abominations. And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will take the stony heart out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God” (Ezek 11, 17-20).

Jeremiah (VII-VI centuries) had already communicated using similar words: “Behold, the days are coming, says Yahweh, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel... I

will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people... for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sins no more” (Jer 31, 31-34).

In his turn Zechariah (VI century) prophesized: “In the whole land, says Yahweh, two thirds shall be cut off and perish, and one third shall be left alive. And I will put this third into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say: ‘They are my people’; and they will say, ‘Yahweh is my God!’” (Zech 13, 8-9).

As far as he was concerned, Malachi (V century) had already entrusted the purification to the Messiah who was to come: “Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says Yahweh of hosts.

“But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

“For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; and he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to Yahweh.

“Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to Yahweh as in the days of old and as in former years” (Mal 3, 1-4).

The consequence of this definitive reconciliation of the Jews to Yahweh God, performed by the divine power itself, was the advent of what was by then unerring, stable, full and definitive peace, prosperity, happiness and perfection, which is characterized so eloquently in extremely famous passages of Micah (VIII century) of the First and Second Isaiah (respectively VIII and VI centuries), of Zechariah (cp. Mic 4, 1-3; Isa 11, 6-9; 65, 17-25; Zech 8, 20-23).

The sacrifice of Christ

The supreme request is that “those who are sanctified” are “perfected for all time”. It is the request expressed in a passage of the Letter to the Hebrews (10, 14), which, precisely, develops the Jewish ideology of sacrifice in the Christian sense.

The letter considers the ancient sacrifices in order to point out their ineffectiveness (9, 23 ff.; 10, 1). It sets the ephemeral sacrifices of the Old Testament against the truly perfect, universal, real, efficacious and definitive character of the sacrifice of Christ (10, 8-18).

The letter affirms the “weakness and uselessness” of the former commandment” (7, 18). The “law” of the Old Testament has “but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of those realities” and therefore “it can never, by the same sacrifices which are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered? If the worshippers had once been cleansed, they would no longer have any consciousness of sin. But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year. For it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins” (10, 1-4 and 11). On the contrary, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ really sanctified us making us perfect forever (10, 14).

The weakness of the ancient sacrifices is in the quality of those who sacrifice, of the high priests. These are “men of weakness”, who, in setting about sacrificing for the sins of the people, have to “first of all offer sacrifices for his own sins” (7, 27-28). On the contrary Jesus is a high priest who is “holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens”. He is, of God Himself, the “son who has been made perfect forever” (7, 26).

Christ becomes a priest “not according to a legal requirement concerning bodily descent”, which is the Law, “but by the power of an indestructible life”. In this way, for us “a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God” (15, 19).

Truly efficacious and resolute sacrifice is that where the figure of he who sacrifices is higher and more powerful. The most sublime is the one that starts from God Himself.

However, sacrifice is also the work of humans. Here cooperation between God and men appears necessary, which will be much closer the better it is based on the figure of a mediator, who represents the divinity and humanity together. This is precisely the figure of the priest, more or less in all religions.

The perfect priest is the Man-God. Jesus Christ is precisely the true God who really makes himself man. The Letter to the Hebrews develops such a concept in this way: “Since therefore the children [of God] share in flesh and blood, he himself [Jesus] likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage. For surely it is not with angels that he is concerned but with the descendants of Abraham. There he had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted” (2, 14-18).

As far as the nature of this Priest-Mediator is concerned that is at the same time both human and divine, that he joins one to the other in himself, the same letter repeats a little further on: “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we have not a high priest who is not able to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (4, 14-15).

In virtue of this Mediator, who is at the same time so highly divine and so totally human, we can “draw near to the throne of grace, that we receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (4, 16).

The evolution of the religious consciousness has by now far exceeded the idea that a valid sacrifice could consist in killing an animal. What is only valid is the sacrifice of oneself: or rather, the renunciation of all egoism in order to entirely subject one’s own will to the divine will. In this way an interiorized sacrifice coincides with that which one could call an initiation death. A worthy sacrifice is dying to oneself with the aim of living solely for the Lord God and of Him.

Jesus Christ was the first who, instead of immolating some external victim as was the case of the ancient priesthood, immolated himself: he “has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily... he did this once and for all when he offered up himself” (7, 27).

Those “gifts and sacrifice... cannot perfect the conscience of the worshipper” (9, 9). “But when Christ appeared... taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, he entered once and for all into the Holy Place, thus securing an eternal redemption” (9, 11-12).

Jesus Christ became perfect because of the sufferings he freely accepted and suffered: “For it was fitting that he [God], for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation [Jesus] perfect through suffering” (2, 10).

Jesus Christ, who in the dimension of the eternal is perfectly God, became perfect also as a man in the dimension of time, because of his perfect obedience, of his total devotion until the extreme sacrifice: “Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him” (5, 8-9).

The role of Christians and saintliness

The sacrifice of Christ is particularly significant, efficacious, powerful, but in order for it to be thoroughly as such for each one of us, so that each one of us can really obtain salvation and eternal life, each one of us has to make Christ's sacrifice his own.

We cannot maintain an entirely passive role. We have been called to play our part. All those baptized participate in the priesthood of Christ. As such they have been requested to offer a spiritual sacrifice in all their actions. In taking part in the holy mass, the laymen themselves add the offering of themselves to the offering of the divine Lamb, of their good deeds, of their suffering and mortifications, of their asceticism.

An excellent synthesis of these concepts is in the dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium* of the Vatican Council II (n. 34): "Jesus Christ supreme and eternal priest also intends to continue his testimony and his service through the laymen; therefore he gives life to them with his Spirit and pushes them incessantly to embarking on every good and perfect work".

Not only to priests in the strict sense of the word, but to laymen themselves, called to priesthood in a broader sense of the word, in other words, to all those "who he has joined together to his life and to his mission, Christ also grants them to participate in his priesthood role, so that they practice spiritual worship, glory to God and salvation of men.

"This is why the laymen, already consecrated by God and sanctified by the Spirit, are called and prepared so that the Spirit can produce increasingly abundant fruits in them. All of their works, prayers and apostolic initiatives, their married and family lives, their daily work, their spiritual and corporeal relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and also the sufferings themselves of life, if borne with patience, become spiritual sacrifices pleasing to God for Jesus Christ (cp. 1 Pet 2, 5).

"In the celebration of the Eucharist all of this is piously offered to the Father together with the oblation of the Lord's body. Therefore, also the laymen consecrate the world to God, as his worshippers who operate piously, devoutly everywhere".

However, the sacrament which comes before everything in the temporal order, the first initiation, the sacrament that makes one Christian, is baptism.

"Do you not know", Paul asks the Romans, "that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life".

"For if", continues Paul, "we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.

"For he who has died is free from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom 6, 3-11).

Baptism is the sign of our dying to sin, in other words, to all egoism and egocentrism, to live only in God. Here sin can no longer be a mere inadvertence, but it is intentional: it is in the negative, egoistic will; it is turning one's back on God in full consciousness.

Sin is not eating "impure" food, that one does intentionally or not. Impure food does not exist. "Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and so passes on? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness,

slander. These are what defile a man...” This is how Jesus answers Peter in the Gospel according to Matthew (15, 17-20). Mark (7, 18-23) adds “coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, pride and foolishness” to the afore-mentioned list.

By dying, in baptism and to sin, in union with Christ, we establish with the Son of God, with the Man-God that vital relationship which allows us to grow in him until the fullness of the divinity. Baptism is the efficacious sign, it is the concrete beginning of all of this. However, it concerns a process, which, precisely speaking, has to proceed: it has to go on until it reaches its ultimate completion.

Baptism is continued in the Christian ascesis, which – as St. John of the Cross would say – passes through the “dark nights” of the senses and the spirit to go on in the end to lead into the “spiritual matrimony” with the Divinity: to go to end up in that which western Christianity calls the “sanctification” and which the eastern one calls “deification” (*théosis*).

The sanctification of the members of the Church starts with baptism and continues with the other sacraments. In confirmation a particular effusion of the Holy Spirit unites the faithful more closely to Christ and the Church. In penance or reconciliation, the relationship with God is re-established along with the re-establishment of the state of grace compromised by the serious sins committed after baptism, and therefore the baptismal condition is re-established. Other sacraments (unction of the sick, orders, marriage) are of use for particular situations.

The eucharist is of very particular importance out of all the sacraments. This has something very essential in common with baptism: in both of these sacraments man repeats and renews the total and supreme sacrifice of Christ in himself in extremely close union with him.

With baptism man dies to sin with Christ who died on the Cross. In the same way, in the eucharist the baptized man offers himself, together with Christ, who, by accepting to die on the Cross, carries out the supreme sacrifice of himself.

Both in baptism as well as the eucharist man participates in the sacrifice of Christ, as we have already said. Furthermore, it certainly concerns a very real participation also in the sole sacrament considered in itself. This participation therefore becomes full and perfect in a Christian life that is entirely aimed at saintliness.

In the encyclical *Dives in misericordia* (1980) John Paul II confirms that baptism is “necessary to salvation” and defines it as “the sign and instrument of God’s forestalling love which frees from sin and communicates the participation to the divine life”. However, he points out the requirement that “this kind of gift could develop through a true education in faith and Christian life, so that the sacrament can fully reach its ‘truth’ (*ut sacramentum totam suam ‘veritatem’ attingat*)”.

And so we have: baptism as a seed, which inserted into a new individual has to germinate there, has to grow and bear fruit. Full maturation of this seed is Christian saintliness: it is here that baptism “fully reaches its truth”. Otherwise it is a seeding of mediocre results, if not one that has proved unsuccessful. The parable of the sower speaks clearly (Mt 13, 3-23; Mk 4, 1-20; Lk 8, 4-15).

Christian saintliness is testimony. The Christian is called to be a witness. The God who incarnates himself in the world, the Christ, is the light; and therefore every one of his disciples, in likeness of John the Baptist, is called to live “for testimony, to bear witness to the light”. It is in virtue of his testimony that the others, “through him”, can be persuaded to “believe” (Jn 1, 7).

In the Greek text, “testimony” reads *marturía*. In that language *marturéo* is “make testimony”, whereas *mártus*, genitive *márturos*, is witness”. The Greek etymology of “martyr” clearly indicates that the Christian martyr is the witness of Jesus Christ, the Lord, the Messiah, God who incarnates himself amongst us to open up to road to eternal life for us.

The Christian is called to total testimony, to martyrdom. The Christian is like a soldier waiting for his orders: according to his personal vocation, he could be employed behind the lines, in an office, in a study, in a research, in a situation of at least temporary tranquility, or in the front lines where one fights and dies.

He could be called to shed his own blood in the heroic act of one day, or to wear himself out in a long patience of decades without any results, without any satisfactions, in a daily sowing without any apparent harvest. In any case the Christian is a man who, in Jesus' footsteps and in union with him, has crucified his own ego and by now lives only of God and for God.

Here not only the baptism obtains all his "truth", but any idea of sacrifice, also the most traditional one, despite the inadequacy of its concept and its own more archaic applications. Here, beyond any contingency, the idea of sacrifice is confirmed in its most essential, purest and highest content.