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Clifford Howell

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The Blessed Virgin in the Liturgy

REV. CLIFFORD HOWELL, S.J.

A MARIAN REPRINT

The Marian Library
University of Dayton
Dayton, Ohio

Number 17
ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . .

The varied career of Father Clifford W. Howell, S.J., has included work as a parish priest, army chaplain, teacher, missionary, and writer, but he is best known in the United States as preacher of a new type parish-mission, which he calls "Layfolks' Week."

After teaching at the foremost Jesuit school in England, Stonyhurst, Father Howell volunteered as an army chaplain at the beginning of World War II. In 1946 he began his "Layfolks' Weeks" in England. Designed to impart the teachings of the encyclicals on the Mystical Body (Mystici Corporis) and the liturgy (Mediator Dei), the "Week" consists of eight evening services (from Sunday to Sunday) in which, says Fr. Howell, there is so much variety and active participation, that no one has a chance to get bored. Several years ago he introduced "Layfolks' Weeks" to the United States, and he has had the same outstanding success with his program in this country.

A frequent contributor to Worship, Father Howell has also published a book on the liturgy, Of Sacraments and Sacrifice (1953). The present reprint was given as an address in the College Church at St. Louis University and appeared in the December 1949 issue of Orate Fratres.

(published with ecclesiastical approval)
First printing, September, 1953
Reprinted, July, 1956
THE BLESSED VIRGIN IN THE LITURGY

REV. CLIFFORD HOWELL, S.J.

MARIOLOGY — that department of theology which is concerned with our Blessed Lady — normally regards Mary from the point of view of her relationship with God. "He that is mighty has done great things to me" is its central theme. And so there are passed in review, and established with exactitude, all her wonderful privileges — her Immaculate Conception, her perpetual virginity, her divine Motherhood, her sinlessness, and so on: all the gifts and graces which Almighty God heaped upon her.

But as my subject is our Blessed Mother in the liturgy, I am proposing to treat of her from a somewhat different angle. . . . For which reason I shall begin by reminding you that we have two current meanings for the word "liturgy."

The primary meaning is that work of redemption which Christ our Lord first carried out by the sacrifice of the Cross, and which He now continues and applies through holy Mass, the sacraments and the office.

The secondary and derived meaning is that official collection of prayers, readings and hymns by means of which Christ's liturgy is continued: in fact, the text of Mass, sacraments and office.

In treating of the subject, "The Blessed Virgin in the Liturgy," I might therefore search the texts of the Mass and the office for mention of her, and from them compile a sort of litany in her praise: I could put together and classify all the wonderful things which are there said about her — her dignity, her holiness, her purity, her majesty, her humility, and so forth. This would be a perfectly legitimate interpretation of the title. But, you will notice, it is taking the word "liturgy" only in its secondary and derived sense.

Has our Blessed Mother no place in "liturgy" in its primary sense? — in the sense of that work of redemption which our Lord, her Son, carried out during His human life? Indeed she has! And a very wonderful part
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it is . . . She collaborated, for our sakes in that supreme liturgy which her divine Son carried out and still carries out for us.

Let it be clear once and for all that Christ’s liturgy is pre-eminent. Only by His liturgy were we redeemed (not by hers); He is the ONE Mediator between God and man. Without His liturgy, hers could never have been; or if, by some strange supposition, it could have been, it would have been ineffectual. All of us were redeemed by Christ and by Him only, and that is true of Mary herself. Nevertheless she is rightly termed “Co-redemptrix”; for, though her liturgy was entirely subservient to His, she did in fact have a liturgy to perform, and it was a part of God’s plan for our redemption.

We were redeemed by Christ’s sacrifice. To understand this fully, it is necessary to understand the nature of sacrifice, which, accordingly, has been the subject of much discussion among theologians. And it happens that almost all theologians have been priests; so when considering the subject of sacrifice they have rather tended to concentrate or place emphasis on those elements of sacrifice which essentially concern the exercise of priesthood. The material elements of sacrifice normally considered are three in number: there is a gift to be handed over to God’s sole dominion; there is an appointed person (the priest) whose function it is to do this; and there is a ritual act whereby it is carried out.

But I want now to draw your attention to another element in sacrifice, one which until recently received but little attention. Thanks to the liturgical movement, however, its importance is becoming increasingly clearer. I refer to that element in sacrifice which is really presupposed by the other three, and precedes them both in the order of time and of intention. It is that for each specific act of sacrifice, someone must provide the material gift which the priest offers; and that “someone” can make the sacrifice his own (though not exclusively his own) by desiring that the priest offer it.

We read in the book of Deuteronomy, Chapter 26:

When thou are come into the land which the Lord thy God will give thee . . . thou shalt take the first of all thy fruits, and put them in a basket . . . and thou shalt go to the priest . . . and the priest, taking the basket from thy hand, shall set it before the altar of the Lord thy God, adoring the Lord thy God.
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In the Old Testament, then, the priest was to offer the sacrifice at the behest of one who brought him the gift and asked him to perform his function — his liturgy. If nobody brought him a gift for God, if nobody asked him to sacrifice, then he performed no liturgy. For him to sacrifice, there must first be someone — not a priest — who brought him the gift and asked him to sacrifice it. Really this “someone” was the originator of the sacrifice. The gift belonged to the “someone,” although the formal act whereby it was handed over to God was done by the priest, since a formality such as the priest’s liturgy was required by the majesty and holiness of God, with whom only an authorized person could have direct dealings. Moreover, God Himself was invisible to the worshipper, and was represented by the altar. Transference of the gift to the altar was then done by a person authorized by his position to have such direct dealings with God, namely, the priest. And, at this altar, the priest represented the worshipper by handing over, for him and in his name, the gift which he desired should be offered to God. But before any of this happened, there had to be a worshipper who provided the gift and desired the priest to perform his liturgy.

Another example is from the New Testament. We read in St. Luke’s Gospel of a certain sacrifice which took place in the temple. A priest offered to God in sacrifice a pair of turtle-doves. But he only did this because the turtle-doves were brought to him by Our Lady and St. Joseph, who desired him to sacrifice them in fulfilment of the law about the first-born belonging to God.

Mary and Joseph were the lay offerers in this sacrifice. It was truly their sacrifice, although it was the priest who did the ritual act. But he did this with a victim which they had provided, and he did it in their name. Certainly it was his sacrifice, because he did it. But equally certainly it was their sacrifice, for they provided the victim and commissioned him to offer it. The priest indeed performed a liturgy; but they also had a liturgy to perform, although it was different from the priest’s liturgy.

In the New Dispensation such action by a lay offerer is not a necessary prerequisite to the Sacrifice of the New Law. The priest of the New Law needs no commission from any member of the laity, for, as Pope Pius XII reminds us in Mediator Dei, “the minister of the altar acts in the person
of Christ considered as Head and as offering in the name of all the members." When the priest does so offer Mass in virtue of this "general commission," any particular lay person shares in that Mass only by the general title of his membership of the Mystical Body. It is "his sacrifice" no more — and no less — than it is the sacrifice of any other member of the Mystical Body.

But it is possible for him to enter into it much more closely — to make it much more specifically "his sacrifice." He can assist at the Mass and join his intention with that of the priest. Then it is much more "his sacrifice" than that of those who are not present. And he can go yet further — he can ask the priest to offer sacrifice for him. Yet more — he can provide the actual bread and wine — the material gifts offered. If he does all this, then the Mass is "his sacrifice" in the fullest possible sense in which those words may be predicated of any lay person.

Now Christ our Lord, the great High-priest, offered sacrifice on Calvary. Calvary was His Sacrifice because He did it. But He was not the only liturgist there. There was a lay offerer too — one who provided the victim and willed that the High-priest should perform His liturgy. That lay offerer was our Blessed Lady. She was not a priest, but she offered that Sacrifice — just as the faithful present at Mass are not priests as is the one who stands at the altar, yet they truly offer sacrifice. The Mass is the priest's sacrifice and theirs. Calvary was His Sacrifice and hers. As we read in Mystici Corporis, "she it was who . . . ever most closely united with her Son, offered Him on Golgotha to the eternal Father." Our Lady, then, was the prototype of the laity at Mass!

For she fulfilled, in the liturgy of Calvary, the most intimate of the functions which it is open to the laity to fulfill at Mass. The closest way in which a lay offerer can enter into the Mass and make it most fully his own sacrifice is to assist at it, to provide the gift, and to desire the priest to sacrifice. And our Blessed Mother assisted at Calvary, provided the sacrificial gift, and desired the High-priest to sacrifice.

She assisted at the Sacrifice. "There stood beneath the Cross of Jesus, Mary, His Mother." That needs no amplification!
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She provided the gift. That which was to be offered to God the Father in worship was the body and blood of Christ. But that flesh and blood came wholly from her. "Felix es sacra Virgo Maria," cries the Church in her office, "thou are worthy of all praise, because there arose from thee the Sun of Justice, Christ our Lord." "Blessed art thou, O Virgin Mary," sings the church in another office, "for thou didst fashion in thy womb Him who made thee!" Indeed the gift for the great Sacrifice came from her!

Moreover, He was hers not only by generation, but by law. According to the levitical law every first-born son had to be bought back from Temple-service in order to become fully the property of the parents. But this is precisely what Our Lady had done in respect of her Son — she had bought Him back, forty days after He was born, by the sacrifice of the pair of turtle-doves, as the law prescribed. Wherefore now, because He was legally as well as naturally hers, she was in full possession. The Victim, therefore, which the High-priest offered on Calvary was provided and given by her.

The next point to establish is that she did this in the name of the whole human race. She, as it were, commissioned the High-priest to perform His liturgy. Now what right or competence had she to do this? Was she in any position to do it? Yes, most certainly! For she was in the position of "Second Eve."

Let us see precisely what that means. The purpose of the redemption was to undo the fall. As St. Paul put it to the Corinthians (1, 15:21): "A man had brought us death, and a man should bring us resurrection from the dead; just as all have died in Adam, so in Christ all will be brought to life."

But remember how that man, Adam, brought us death. His death-bringing act was done at the desire of a woman — the first Eve. It all started with her. Now think how the God-man, Christ, the second Adam, brought us life. His life-bringing act all started with a woman too — with her who was the second Eve. This parallel is indicated in the very account of the fall given in the Book of Genesis. There a woman and her seed were enslaved by Satan through the act of a man. But God promised
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that through another woman and her seed, mankind should be liberated. Just as there would be a man to undo what Adam did, so there would be a woman to undo what Eve did. Not only would there be a second Adam, but also a second Eve. The friendship between the first Eve and the serpent led to the ruin of the human race. The enmity between the second Eve and the serpent would lead to the salvation of the human race. And, just as Christ is the second Adam, so also is Mary the second Eve.

This function of our Blessed Lady is only implicit in St. Paul's doctrine of Christ as the second Adam. But it was understood from the very beginning by the Church, and is explicitly set forth by such early writers as St. Irenaeus, St. Justin, and Tertullian.

St. Irenaeus, for instance, in his book *Adversus Haereses* (written about the year 170 A.D.), says:

Eve was disobedient; for though still she was a virgin, she disobeyed ... and thus made herself the cause of death both to herself and to the entire human race. Parallel-wise Mary, a virgin too, obeyed; and thus she made herself the cause of salvation, both for herself and for the entire human race. ... For what was knotted could not be disentangled, had not the intertwine-ments of the knot been undone backwards ... and so the knot tied by the disobedience of Eve received its untying by the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve tied up by her disbelief, that did the Virgin Mary untie by her faith.

The African writer Tertullian (about the year 200 A.D.) put the matter very well and succinctly:

Into Eve, as yet a virgin, crept the word which was the framer of death. Equally into Mary, ever a virgin, was introduced the Word which was the builder-up of life. So that what by that sex had gone into perdition, by that same sex might be brought back unto salvation.

To St. Augustine, if I mistake not, goes the credit for the discovery of that pleasant little liturgy conceit which points out that the name of Eva, when reversed, becomes Ave significant of our Blessed Mother. Hence
the Mutans Evae nomen of the Vesper hymn. Another reference to Our Lady's position as second Eve occurs in the hymn for her Lauds: "Quod Eva tristis abstulit, Tu reddis almo germine. — What hapless Eve deprived us of, thou, by thy blessed offspring, didst restore." A search through the liturgy of her masses and offices would bring to light several other references to this same truth. But it will be sufficient to instance the prayer used on her birthday, and on other occasions, wherein she is described as salutis exordium, the "beginning of our salvation." For, just as Eve set in motion the train of events which led to the fall, so Mary set in motion those which led to our redemption.

Now Eve provided Adam with fruit, and, at her desire, he used it to be disobedient. Thus mankind was ruined. Mary provided for the second Adam the Fruit of her womb. He used it to be obedient (even unto the death of the Cross). Thus mankind was redeemed. In the part which Eve played were involved all the children of Eve. In the part which Mary played were involved all the children of Mary — which means all the redeemed; for, as Mother of Christ the Head, she is mother also of all His members.

Let us go back now to the idea of sacrifice. This includes not only the essential liturgy of the priest, but also the liturgy of the laity. A lay person may provide the gift for the sacrifice and desire the priest to perform his priestly liturgy; and when that is the case, the priest offers the sacrifice on behalf of and in the name of that lay person: the sacrifice is then truly attributable to the giver.

Now on Calvary Christ was the High-priest. It was required for the redemption that He offer sacrifice for and on behalf of mankind. But a lay person, who represented all who were to be redeemed, was actually there, did in fact provide the gift to be offered, and did desire that it be sacrificed. Mary did a lay-liturgy which went with His priestly liturgy; Mary, then, brought us all in the closest possible manner truly and rightly into the very redemptive Sacrifice itself.

Well does the Church exclaim in an antiphon at Matins on the feast of the Assumption: "Through thee were the gates of paradise opened to
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us.” Well does she apply to Mary in the epistle of another of her Masses those words from the Book of Judith: “The Lord in His power has blessed thee, because through thee He has annihilated our enemy!”

To sum up: Mary on Calvary performed a liturgy in the redemptive sacrifice of the great High-priest: she did all that the laity can do in the re-enactment of that same sacrifice in holy Mass. She provided for that sacrifice all that a lay-officer can provide for this sacrifice — namely, personal assistance, the gift to be offered, and the desire that it be offered. As His Mother she disposed of His flesh and blood which she had herself formed in her womb and which was legally hers. As the second Eve, standing beside the second Adam, she willed that He perform His task for all the children of Adam.

Mary on Calvary — the prototype of the laity at Mass!

One last thought — this time about her Immaculate Conception. Usually this privilege is connected with her divine motherhood — and so it is, of course. But it has another aspect too. Those who offer gifts for sacrifice should be spiritually fitted to do so. Our Lord said to those providing gifts for sacrifice: “If thou art bringing thy gift before the altar and rememberest there that thy brother has some ground of complaint against thee, leave thy gift lying there before the altar and go home; be reconciled with thy brother first, and then come back to offer thy gift” (Matt. 5:25). To offer a gift worthily one must be innocent — free from sin. How fitting it was, therefore, that she who provided the gift for the first Christian sacrifice was innocent, sinless, conceived without stain of sin. Of all the human race which was redeemed by that sacrifice, there was no one so worthy as herself to provide the gift for the sacrifice.

“Benedicta es tu, Virgo Maria: O Virgin Mary, thou has been blessed by the Lord our God above all the women upon the earth! Thou art the joy of Jerusalem, the joy of Israel, thou art the proud boast of our people! For thou art all beautiful, O Mary, and no stain of sin is in thee!” (Gradual, feast of the Immaculate Conception).
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