

Pastor's Notes: How Do You Approach the Holy Sacrifice? - Part 1 of 2

June 14, 2020

This week, we celebrate Corpus Christi, the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of our dearly beloved Lord Jesus Christ. In this Mass, we hear texts composed by St. Thomas Aquinas to highlight the great mystery of Eucharist. One famous antiphon that he wrote that is now used for Holy Communion outside of Mass is the *O Sacrum Convivium*: "O holy banquet in which Christ is received, the memory of his passion is renewed, the soul is filled with grace, and there is given to us a pledge of future glory." It's a great source of meditation for us on this feast of Corpus Christi. Besides the primary mode of understanding the Mass as the Holy Sacrifice of the New Covenant, we have this complementary understanding that it takes place within the context of a sacred meal.

The Mass is a sacrifice. But it takes place within the context of a Sacred Banquet, *Sacrum Convivium*. And this is what St. Thomas Aquinas is getting at. This is not simply an ordinary meal. Nor was the Last Supper. The Last Supper was a formal, ritual, sacrificial meal that had very particular rules and expectations. This was the first Mass, and it forms the basis of the ritual tradition of the Christian faith that comes to us by way of the Latin Church, preserved through Apostolic Tradition. It behooves us to be attentive to what we have received in Sacred Tradition in order to faithfully move into the future in perfect fidelity with Christ and His Church.

Our recent change in Mass schedule and format has given the parish a chance to revisit our understanding of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. In this pastor's notes and the next, I would like to explore with you the way we approach the *Sacrum Convivium* (Sacred Banquet). This is coming to light for us at the Basilica especially as we offer more frequently the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite alongside the Ordinary Form. These two forms approach the Sacred Banquet in different ways.

I have an analogy that I think sums up these different approaches. If we take as our paradigm for Mass that the Holy Eucharist is food and the Mass is an experience of sitting at table, it begs the question: "What kind of meal will this be?" The Ordinary Form is often seen as a little less formal. In many places, the Ordinary Form could be likened to a backyard barbecue, or a very informal meal— a potluck, if you will; whereas the Extraordinary Form is very analogous to fine dining in a formal environment. The reality is that the Ordinary Form can be anything from the backyard barbecue to a more formal experience, but the Extraordinary Form is almost exclusively formal, even in the "Low Mass" format. Imagine you are going to a state dinner at the White House or at Buckingham Palace. If it helps, think of the recent TV series "Downton Abbey" or "The Crown", and imagine how they sat down to table. The waiters wear white gloves and have towels draped over their arms. There are more forks than you know what to do with. And how many stemmed glasses do you need? You can imagine the music in the background would be chamber music, not pop music from the radio. When the wine comes around, they ask if you would like a *Bordeaux* or a *Châteauneuf-du-Pape*? They ask you this in a foreign language, assuming that you know the difference. People are going to be served in a hierarchical order, and one does not begin eating until the host has begun. People sit when the host has sat and stand when the host stands. The whole experience oozes with culture and civilization. People are wearing tuxedos and fancy dresses. There is a sure and predictable order to it.

These are the things that we find also in the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite. The vestments include the priest's maniple, draped over his arm, as if he were a waiter at the Sacred Banquet. The movements are choreographed and precise, as if at the table of a king. The menu is read in a foreign language, Latin, as if this were a fancy restaurant. There is a sure and predictable order to it. On the other hand, the Ordinary Form can run the gambit from formal dining to a backyard barbecue. Oftentimes, one finds a more casual expression of the Sacred Banquet, where flip flops and shorts might not seem out of place. There are many options, and it is a little bit more of a fluid environment, in which creativity, novelty, and self-expression are often found. What you find sometimes is that the music is not the parlor music of Renaissance or Baroque, but rather the popular music of the latest billboard charts on the radio. Perhaps this is what is referred to when people say that they don't find as much "reverence" at the Ordinary Form. And it's a good question for us to ask. How *should* we approach the *Sacrum Convivium*, the Sacred Banquet?

To be continued next week...

