

Justification, Sanctification, and the Post-Modern Experience

Now comes my hour of heartbreak, and what can I say, "Father save me from this hour?" No, it was for this very purpose that I came to this hour. Father, honor your own name!

John 12

1 I want to examine the dynamics of justification and sanctification as processes in human life. To do this, I have chosen two of the sacraments of the historical Church, attempting to draw through them the relationships among justification, sanctification and the post-modern experience.

2 Running through all of the sacraments of the Church like the interwoven melodic lines of a renaissance motet, the dynamics of justification and sanctification are never wholly contained in one rite or another. But it seems to me that within the sacrament of Penance the emphasis falls upon the process of justification. Similarly, within the sacrament of the Eucharist I see an emphasis on the process of sanctification. Looking further into these sacraments and into the human experiences they reenact and intensify has led me on a journey through the past and into the future of man's self-consciousness.

3 The Church's understanding of the sacrament of Penance was drawn together in 1551 at the Council of Trent. Four components of the Sacrament were identified. In order of their enactment they are: contrition, confession, satisfaction (or penance), and absolution.

4 Contrition has to do with the dramatic re-creation of man's encounter with the Mystery. This is symbolically held in the Act of Contrition, which rehearses the anguish of standing before the utter ambiguity of free decision. The Church Fathers chose to re-enact that moment in which a human being realizes that all action is fraught with ambiguity, that the biblical commandments, the laws of the Church, and the laws of society stand not as absolute determiners of rectitude, but as occasions for the exercise of free will or free decision. The act of contrition raises to self-consciousness the occasions in which our whole life is brought into question. Martin Luther saw the meaning of contrition when he began to spend hours of every day in confession. Once you see through to the depths of man's separation from certitude, every decision comes as an immense burden.

5 The next act in the drama of Penance is confession, which re-creates the offense of being confronted with our own inescapable guilt. Here the Church holds you before both the universal fatedness of man's separation from the

ground of his being and the particular guilt of your individual participation in widening that gulf. Within the act of confession, our pain and guilt are universalized, becoming for us the pain of all creation. It is interesting that the ancient Church practiced the act of confession before the gaze of the community in a drama which held the entire body before its universalized brokenness. Coleridge dealt with the human experience of confession in the "Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner," the story of a man who wanders the world, compelled to confess his guilt repeatedly before all men. "With my crossbow I shot the Albatross." Thus each man the mariner encounters is held before his own compulsion to destroy that which robs him of illusions about his life.

6 Satisfaction, or penance as it was called in the ancient church, is perhaps the most difficult of these dynamics for people of the Twentieth century to re-appropriate. We have lived too long in the conviction that human actions can atone for human separation and lead toward progress in the future. It is just this view that is undercut in the act of penance. This act, which consists of ritual acts of charity or prayers following the confession of sins, dramatizes the absurd inadequacy of any human action to atone for man's separation. Penance has always involved a decision to abandon the hope of justification within human actions. Sackcloth and ashes are ancient symbols of the inadequacy of any human being to the task of justifying his own existence. Thomas Merton relates the story of a desert monk who "sold his book of the gospels and gave the money to those who were hungry, saying: I have sold the book which told me to sell all I have and give to the poor." It is that kind of absurd action that is highlighted in the act of penance.

7 Absolution is the dramatic re-enactment of the gift of life experienced in the midst of deep despair. It is here on the other side of the death of all my hopes for human justification that I can fully embrace the justification that is mine as an eternal gift from the Father. The only door to this state is through the death of my illusions. In the medieval and modern Catholic rite, this absolution comes as a gift from the unknown entity on the other side of a veil, which I, in my dramatic role as penitent, refer to as Father. Perhaps the best illustration of the dynamic of absolution is the story of Jesus and the man by the pool. Jesus says to the man, who has waited long years by a pool waiting for a chance to touch the water and be healed, "Do you want to be healed? Get up, pick up your bed and walk." Once the man gave up his hope that healing (or justification) would come from some act of his own, he was free to deal with his life just as it was, and be healed.

8 Post-Modern man has experienced the dynamics of Penance on a number of levels. In the arena of vocation, justification is experienced, first of all, as deep restlessness and guilt for having made the wrong choices in life. You have the feeling that living a significant life was once within your grasp, but now has slipped beyond your reach. You may even try changing jobs or going back to school. Recently two members of a professional baseball team exchanged wives and children in an effort to find new fulfillment in life. Sooner or later, however, the gnawing guilt and restlessness returns. Confession comes as something like, "All right, I'm me, not somebody else, now what do I do?" It is at this point that you experience, in Bultmann's phrase, "an end to all our knowing and doing." Nothing you can know and nothing you can do will ever assure you of fulfillment. At this point you have been brought to the threshold of penance, or the decision to act without hope of fulfillment.

9 A friend of mine was teaching junior high school in an inner-city area a couple of years ago. She finally came to the point of complete despair. Nothing, she thought, could force her to walk into the classroom again. Finally, a mutual friend drove her to school, opened the car door and said, "Now go in there and be the dead woman you are." It is that kind of decision that the Church has pointed to with the catagory of penance. And the final irony is that it is in that very moment of decision that you find your vocation. No great deeds, no new ideas, just final reconciliation to the demand of a particular situation and a particular life. To embrace the moment in all of its deadness and despair, and thereby to breathe life where there were only ashes, this, in the words of Paul Tillich, is to live in "the eternal now."

10 Just as the sacrament of Penance is the reenactment of the human process of justification, so the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist is the dramatization of the human process of sanctification. In the sacrament of Penance you are ritually cleansed of the death-ridden search for some human justification, and in the Holy Eucharist you embrace the free deed of sacrifice on behalf of all men. The Eucharist represents the reduplication of the deed of Christ and the advent of the Holy Spirit.

11 The Holy Eucharist can be seen to encompass four acts or dynamics. These are: the revelation, the mortification, the immolation, and the embodiment. (These last two dynamics were set forth by Pius XII in his encyclical Mediator Dei, November 20, 1947.)

12 The revelation points to the bursting forth of possibility in everyday events. Within the drama of the Eucharist, this is the discovery of the supramundane

within the common realities of bread and wine. In the context of revelation, every event that happens becomes a transparent relationship to being itself.

Gerard Manley Hopkins captured the human event that takes place in revelation:

Brute beauty and valor and act, oh air, pride, plume, here
 Buckle! and the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
 Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!
 No wonder of it: sheer plod makes plow down sillion
 Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah, my dear,
 Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermillion.

13 Within that revelation, however, also comes the mortification, the realization of one's total inadequacy in the face of the required task. As the full impact of the possibility within every moment becomes clear to us, we draw back in terror at the terrible burden of giving ourselves totally to anything. On the other side of this terror is the calm assurance of the Roman centurian: "Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof, speak but the word and my son will be healed." To stand, knowing only that your death will be required, knowing only that to die is finally to live, that is the human activity rehearsed in the act of mortification (Domine, non sum dignus . . .)

14 The immolation is the final embracing of death as a sacrifice on behalf of all men. There is nothing unusual or out of the ordinary about immolation -- it is that expenditure out of which human civilization has always been built. To be the sacrificial victim is not only to give your life but to give your death in every moment. For the man who embraces his death, every moment holds the possibility of new creation. This is symbolized in the drama of the Eucharist by the offering up of the bread and the wine. T.S. Eliot writes of this human dynamic in his poem "Ash Wednesday:" And I who am here dissembled/ Proffer my deeds to oblivion, and my love/ To the posterity of the desert and the fruit of the gourd."

15 Then comes the act of embodiment. This is the human dynamic of seeing that your journey is one with that of all men. Your every action is now on behalf of all. You are not only on the journey of man, you are that journey, and it requires everything of you. The Church has talked about this experience as the Mystical Body of Christ, or oneness with the Lamb. The Lamb is the sacrificial victim, born and bred for slaughter, to take upon itself the burden of sin. Embodiment of the victim is symbolized by taking within ourselves the body and blood of Christ. This is the experience of showing up with the burden of total obedience to the innocent suffering of all creation.

16 Contemporary man has experienced an intensification of the human process

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INTRO.		THE DYNAMICS OF JUSTIFICATION & SANCTIFICATION										A TIME OF SANCTIFICATION					
		JUSTIFICATION & PENANCE										SANCTIFICATION & THE EUCHARIST					
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
			CON-TRITION	CON-FESS-ION	CON-FESS-ION	ABSOL-UTION	EXPERIENCE				REVE- LATION	MORTIFI- CATION	IMMO- LATION	EMBO- DIMENT	EMBO- DIMENT		

The Dynamics of Justification and Sanctification

Justification			Sanctification		
Liturgical	Dynamic	Experience	Liturgical	Dynamic	Experience
Contrition	Seizure	Guilt & Restlessness	Revelation	Discovery (?)	New Possibility
Confession	Offense	Painful Acknowledgment	Mortification	Crushing (?)	Crushing weight
Penance	Decision	Abandonment of hope	Immolation	Embracement	Final commitment
Absolution	Death	Embracing Gift of life	Embodiment	Embodiment	Fulfillment

of sanctification. In every field of endeavor exciting and terror-filled possibilities loom just over the horizon. In economics, for instance, the possibility of a new humanized economic system which would provide the necessities of life for every man is now within sight. But those who see this possibility also see that its creation demands the expenditure of their lives. Structures that permit economic stability without economic tyranny are now demanded at the local as well as the global levels. Those structures can only be built through the sacrifice of human life on behalf of the future. Those who create that future will be those who embrace the immolation and become the embodiment of the new society.

17 The resurgence of all of the structures of humanness, not only in the economic arena, means that every man has the burden of creating the new forms of human civilization. Now, as seldom before in history, men are experiencing the unconditional demand upon their lives. Nikos Kazantzakis wrote, "You are a throw of the dice on which, for a moment, the entire fate of your race is gambled. Everything you do reverberates throughout a thousand destinies. As you walk, you cut open and create that riverbed into which the stream of your descendants shall enter and flow."

18 We have, indeed, entered upon an age of sanctification.

. . . Some reflections on this paper:

It seems clear to me that the struggle of Symbolic Centrum in the past quarter has been in the arena of mortification. This has come in two ways: 1) a realization of the demonic possibilities within the new forms that are coming into being (probably centers around our work with parish tactics) and 2) a realization of the huge gap between our capacities and what the mission demands. We may be ready now to deal with the area of immolation, with all of its dangers. This might mean intensification of a)discipline, and b)religious exercises.

In the light of our work with sanctification, it may be necessary to take a new look at the Common Meal.

D.W.

