

Devotion to the Precious Blood and Heavenly Sacrifice of Christ – Part II

John Salza, J.D.

As we saw in our last installment, the Catholic Church offers special devotions to the Precious Blood of Our Lord during the month of July. In these devotions, Catholics call to mind that Jesus, as the Mediator of the New Covenant, continually offers His blood sacrifice to the Father in heaven as a propitiation for our sins, and which He makes present through His priests in the sacrifice of the Mass. Let us look at some additional passages in Scripture which reveal this profound truth. These passages also prove false Protestant theology which limits Christ's propitiatory sacrifice to the historical event of Calvary.

The Lamb slain before the throne in heaven

In the Apocalypse, St. John emphasizes that Jesus is presenting His sacrifice to the Father by referring to Jesus as the "Lamb." St. John repeatedly calls Jesus the Lamb throughout this letter and it is always in the context of Jesus' sacerdotal functions in heaven.¹ As Scripture teaches, Jesus' description as a Lamb emphasizes His propitiatory sacrifice which takes away our sins. St. John the Baptist said of Jesus, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"² St. Peter says that we were ransomed "with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot" (1 Pet 1:19). Isaiah prophesied that Jesus would be led to the slaughter "like a lamb before its shearer."³ Now, in the Apocalypse, St. John uses the same terminology to describe what he actually sees in eternity: *Jesus appears in heaven as a sacrificed Lamb.*

We see St. John's first use of this description in the Apocalypse in 5:6: "And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, I saw a *Lamb standing, as though it had been slain*" (Apoc 5:6). The Greek is translated as "having been standing" (*histemi*) and "having been slain" (*sphazo*). St. John's use of perfect participles to describe both Christ's standing and slain conditions indicate that Christ began to exhibit these conditions at a specific moment in the past, and that both conditions *are ongoing*. This underscores that Jesus is actively presenting His slain condition in the heaven sanctuary.

We also note that Jesus stands as a slain Lamb in heaven *before the throne of God*. This is similar to St. Paul's descriptions of Jesus in the heavenly sanctuary in the book of Hebrews. In fact, both St. Paul and St. John depict the throne as the place where God the Father is seated.⁴ St. John elsewhere distinguishes between the Lamb and the throne to emphasize what Jesus is doing in heaven: He appears *before* the throne of God *to present His slain condition to the Father*.⁵

¹ Apoc 5:6, 8, 12-13; 6:1, 16; 7:9-10, 14, 17; 8:1; 12:11; 13:8, 11; 14:1, 4, 10; 15:3; 17:14; 19:7, 9; 21:9, 14, 22-23, 27; 22:1, 3.

² John 1:29; see also John 1:36.

³ Isa 53:7; see also Acts 8:32.

⁴ Heb 1:8; 4:16; 8:1; 12:2; Apoc 1:4; 3:21; 4:2-6, 9-10; 5:1, 6-7, 11, 13; 6:16; 7:9-11, 15, 17; 8:3; 12:5; 14:3; 16:17; 19:4-5; 20:11-12; 21:3, 5; 22:1-3.

⁵ See, for example, Apoc 3:21; 5:13; 6:16; 7:10; 22:1, 3 where John distinguishes between the position of the Lamb and the throne before which the Lamb appears.

In the context of Jesus' appearance as a slain Lamb, St. John also refers to the altar in heaven.⁶ This alludes to St. Paul's use of "altar" in the book of Hebrews to describe the heavenly liturgy and also puts Jesus' appearance before the Father in the context of sacrifice (Heb 13:10). There would be no altar in heaven unless a sacrifice was being offered. St. John also sees the prayers of the saints rising to the Father as incense before the heavenly altar, and the souls of the martyrs underneath the altar.⁷ These prayers are united to the sacrifice of Christ, and both are presented to the Father.

St. John also sees Jesus clothed with a long robe and golden girdle (Apoc 1:13). These vestments are similar to those worn by the Levitical priests who offered animal sacrifices (see Ex 28:4). St. John further describes Jesus as "clad in a robe dipped in blood" (Apoc 19:13). This is another striking description of Jesus' slain condition, and underscores the presence of Jesus' blood sacrifice in heaven. St. John also connects Jesus' slain condition to its propitiatory effects on the Father as he then says, "he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty" (Apoc 19:15).

St. John also writes about those who "have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Apoc 7:14). These are the ones who are "before the throne of God, and serve him day and night within his temple" (Apoc 7:15). Again, St. John connects Christ's shed blood with the "throne of God" and the "Temple," terminology that St. Paul uses in the book of Hebrews as he describes Jesus' heavenly priesthood. In this vision, Jesus is including these saints in the presentation of His blood sacrifice "before the throne" and in the heavenly "Temple." Through Christ's ongoing offering, these people were able to defeat the devil "by the blood of the Lamb."⁸ These graphic descriptions underscore the ongoing presence and effects of Christ's shed blood in heaven.

Jesus connects His heavenly priesthood to the Eucharist in the Apocalypse when He says, "To him who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna" (Apoc 2:17). The manna of the Old Covenant was the bread from heaven with which God fed Israel during its journey to the Promised Land. It foreshadowed the true bread from heaven which God gives to His Church during its journey to the Promised Land of heaven. The manna is "hidden" by our senses but revealed by faith which God desires from His New Covenant people.

Thus, as our eternal High Priest, Jesus invites us through the Eucharist into covenant communion with God. He says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me" (Apoc 3:20). Because those in heaven are already in eternal communion with God, Jesus is talking about giving His heavenly manna to those *on earth*. This happens during the celebration of the Eucharist in the Holy Mass: "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Apoc 19:9).

⁶ Apoc 6:9; 8:3, 5; 9:13; 11:1; 14:18; 16:7.

⁷ See Apoc 5:8; 6:9; 8:3-5. See also Apoc 9:13; 11:1; 14:18; 16:7.

⁸ Apoc 12:11; see also Apoc 1:5; 5:9.

Jesus is the ongoing propitiation for our sins

There are additional passages in Scripture which describe the reality and effects of Jesus' ongoing propitiation. For example, in the book of Hebrews, St. Paul says:

Wherefore it behoved him in all things to be made like unto his brethren, that he might become a merciful and faithful priest before God, that he might be a *propitiation for the sins of the people*. For in that, wherein he himself hath suffered and been tempted, he is able to succour them also that are tempted.⁹

As with his letter to the Romans, St. Paul connects Jesus' heavenly priesthood with His being a propitiation for sin. St. Paul says that Jesus appears in heaven as a "priest before God" to be a "propitiation for the sins of the people" (v.17). St. Paul does not limit Jesus' propitiatory sacrifice to the hill on Calvary, but sees it extending into heaven through His perpetual priesthood. This passage also reminds us of both St. Paul and St. John's imagery of Jesus appearing "before" the throne of God as a slain Lamb. Jesus is both priest and victim in the heavenly sanctuary – the one offering and being offered.

Because Jesus is an ongoing propitiation, St. Paul says that "he is able to help those who are tempted" (v.18). This is the purpose and effect of Jesus' propitiation. Because Jesus appeases the Father's wrath through His heavenly sacrifice, the Father responds by granting grace and mercy to those who are being tempted. This coincides with Hebrews 7:25 and Romans 8:34, where Jesus' intercession is currently taking place in heaven to save those who have fallen into sin. Jesus' propitiation is offered continually because we sin continually, and the Father wills to be appeased in order to forgive us our sins.

St. Paul further says to the Hebrews: "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb 4:16). The "throne of grace" refers to the place where Jesus appears before the Father as a slain Lamb. In our time of need (that is, when we sin), Jesus' perpetual appearance before the Father appeases His wrath against the sin, and we receive His grace and mercy.

John also describes Jesus as an ongoing propitiation in heaven. He says:

My little children, these things I write to you, that you may not sin. But if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the just: And he is the *propitiation for our sins*: and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.¹⁰

Like St. Paul in Hebrews 2:17, John connects Jesus' *advocacy* with *propitiation*. Because St. Paul describes our having an advocate in the present tense ("we have an advocate"), the advocacy and its effects ("he is the propitiation") is also occurring in the present. Jesus' ongoing advocacy (or "intercession" as used in Hebrews 7:25 and Romans 8:34) brings about the

⁹ Heb 2:17-18 (DR).

¹⁰ 1 Jn 2:1-2 (DR). Notice that Jesus' propitiation is described in the present tense: "He is the propitiation" (*autos hilasmos eimi*).

forgiveness of sin by appeasing the Father's anger against that sin. Like St. Paul, St. John underscores the temporal relationship between us committing sin (on earth) and Jesus propitiating the Father to forgive our sin (in heaven).

What is the purpose of Jesus' ongoing propitiation in heaven? *To save us from sin and eternal damnation.* Because we constantly struggle with sin, we need Christ's constant, propitiatory mediation. In response, the Father forgives our sins and grants us the graces we need to persevere in faith and works to the end of our lives. St. Paul says, "Consequently he is able for all time *to save those* who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make *intercession* for them" (Heb 7:25). The phrase "to make intercession" is from the Greek *entugchano* which is a present tense verb that literally means "to be pleading."

Unlike Protestant theology which views the work of the cross as "finished," St. Paul reveals that our salvation depends upon Christ's *ongoing* pleading before the Father in heaven. Because "God is love,"¹¹ and the essence of love is sacrifice, Christ's sacrifice is an eternal action. This action is not limited to Calvary but is made present by Christ in heaven and through His priests in the Holy Mass. We might even say that "God is sacrifice," because He loves us from eternity to eternity. May we continue to meditate upon these great mysteries of our Faith and grow in a deeper love with Jesus Christ, our paschal sacrifice (cf. 1Cor 5:7).

¹¹ See 1 John 4:8, 16.