

Maundy Thursday

THE SACRAMENT OF THE ALTAR

Just as we have heard about Holy Baptism, so we must also speak about the other Sacrament, in these same three points: What is it? What are its benefits? and Who is to receive it? And all these points are established through the words by which Christ has instituted this Sacrament. Everyone who desires to be a Christian and go to this Sacrament should know them. For it is not our intention to let people come to the Sacrament and administer it to them if they do not know what they seek or why they come. The words, however, are these:

Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night He was betrayed, took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to the disciples and said, “Take, eat; this is My body, which is given for you. This do in remembrance of me.”

In the same way also, He took the cup after supper, and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them, saying: “Drink of it, all of you; this is My blood of the new testament, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.”

Here also we do not wish to enter into controversy and fight with the defamers and blasphemers of this Sacrament, but to learn first (as we did with Baptism) what is of the greatest importance. The chief point is God’s Word and ordinance or command. For the Sacrament has not been invented nor introduced by any man. Without anyone’s counsel and deliberation it has been instituted by Christ. The Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Creed keep their nature and worth, even if you never keep, pray, or believe them. So also this honorable Sacrament remains undisturbed. Nothing is withdrawn or taken from it, even though we use and administer it unworthily. Do you think God cares about what we do or believe, as though on that account He should allow His ordinance to be changed? Why, in all worldly matters everything stays the way God has created and ordered it, no matter how we employ or use it. This point must always be

taught, for by it the chatter of nearly all the fanatical spirits can be repelled. For they regard the Sacraments, unlike God's Word, as something that we do.

“Now, what is the Sacrament of the Altar?”

Answer, “It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, in and under the bread and wine, which we Christians are commanded by Christ's Word to eat and to drink.” Just as we have said that Baptism is not simple water, so here also we say that though the Sacrament is bread and wine, it is not mere bread and wine, such as are ordinarily served at the table [1 Corinthians 10:16–17]. But this is bread and wine included in, and connected with, God's Word.

It is the Word, I say, that makes and sets this Sacrament apart. So it is not mere bread and wine, but is, and is called, Christ's body and blood [1 Corinthians 11:23–27]. For it is said, “When the Word is joined to the element or natural substance, it becomes a Sacrament.” This saying of St. Augustine is so properly and so well put that he has scarcely said anything better. The Word must make a Sacrament out of the element, or else it remains a mere element. Now, it is not the word or ordinance of a prince or emperor. But it is the Word of the grand Majesty, at whose feet all creatures should fall and affirm it is as He says, and accept it with all reverence, fear, and humility.

With this Word you can strengthen your conscience and say, “If a hundred thousand devils, together with all fanatics, should rush forward, crying, ‘How can bread and wine be Christ's body and blood?’ and such, I know that all spirits and scholars together are not as wise as is the Divine Majesty in His little finger.” Now here stands Christ's Word, “Take, eat; this is My body. . . . Drink of it, all of you; this is My blood of the new testament,” and so on. Here we stop to watch those who will call themselves His masters and make the matter different from what He has spoken. It is true, indeed, that if you take away the Word or regard the Sacrament without the words, you have nothing but mere bread and wine. But if the words remain with them, as they shall and must, then, by virtue of the words, it is truly

Christ's body and blood. What Christ's lips say and speak, so it is. He can never lie or deceive [Titus 1:2]. . . .

We have, in the first place, the clear text in Christ's very words, “Do this in remembrance of Me” [Luke 22:19]. These are inviting and commanding words by which all who would be Christians are told to partake of this Sacrament. Therefore, whoever wants to be Christ's disciple, with whom He here speaks, must also consider and keep this Sacrament. They should not act from compulsion, being forced by others, but in obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ, to please Him. However, you may say, “But the words are added, ‘As often as you drink it’; there He compels no one, but leaves it to our free choice.” I answer, “That is true, yet it is not written so that we should never do so. Yes, since He speaks the words ‘As often as you drink it,’ it is still implied that we should do it often. This is added because He wants to have the Sacrament free. He does not limit it to special times, like the Jewish Passover, which they were obliged to eat only once a year. They could only have it on the fourteenth day of the first full moon in the evening [Exodus 12:6, 18]. They still must not change a day.” It is as if He would say by these words, “I institute a Passover or Supper for you. You shall enjoy it not only once a year, just upon this evening, but often, when and where you will, according to everyone's opportunity and necessity, bound to no place or appointed time.” But the pope later perverted this and again made the Sacrament into a Jewish feast. . . .

We always have this obstacle and hindrance to encounter: we look more upon ourselves than upon Christ's Word and lips. For human nature desires to act in such a way that it can stand and rest firmly on itself. Otherwise, it refuses to approach. Let this be enough about the first point. In the second place, there is besides this command also a promise, as we heard above. This ought most strongly to stir us up and encourage us. For here stand the kind and precious words, “This is My body, which is given for you. . . . This is My blood . . . shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.”