

THE MEANING OF THE ALTAR

FROM ANCIENT SOURCES

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INTRODUCTION

The theme of this dissertation is the significance of the altar as it is discoverable from the sacred scriptures and from early Christian writers up to the time of Origen.

Others have written at some length on the meaning of the altar. For example M. de la Taille in his *Mysterium Fidei*, written in 1921, writes at length on the Christological interpretation of the altar. In Elucidation XIII he asks three questions: Is Christ the altar of his own sacrifice? Is he the altar of his sacrifice after the resurrection? What is his relation as altar to other objects bearing the same title? (1) If Christ is an eternal altar he will also be the eternal victim of that altar, and in this sense there will be an eternal, heavenly sacrifice.

Patristic witnesses are summoned up in large numbers, and the conclusion is that Christ is the altar of his own sacrifice, that other things are called altars because of their closeness to him in his sacrifice, that in a special way the Church can also be called the altar of her own self-sacrifice. (2) In Elucidation XVII Christ is considered as the altar for the Church's offering of the passion. (3) In proof of the Church's early conviction of offering the body and blood of Christ in sacrifice some early texts relating to the altar are examined. (4) In Elucidation XXI

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- 1) TAILLE M. de la, S.J., *Mysterium Fidei*, Paris^s 1931, Elucidation XIII, p. 153-165.
 - 2) TAILLE M. de la, S.J. *Mysterium Fidei*, Paris^s 1931, Elucidation XIII, p. 163-4; 161-2.
 - 3) *ibid.* 197-200.
 - 4) *ibid.* 215-217.

the Fathers and Doctors are examined for the doctrine that the Church offers the heavenly sacrifice, that is, the heavenly victim: passive sacrifice as distinct from active sacrifice, which involves actual offering of the victim. Here the prayer *Supplices te rogamus* receives extensive treatment, the conclusion being that it is a prayer for the consecration, considered as the divine acceptance, and that the altar mentioned in the prayer is Christ himself. (5) Finally, in Elucidation XXIV the angel of this prayer is also considered to be Christ. (6) De la Taille's is easily the most extensive theological treatment of the whole question: it is an organic part of the larger questions dealt with in the work, but, even so, is gone into with much detail and refinement of thought.

J. Braun, S.J., writing in 1924, has a chapter on the symbolism of the altar in his massive two volume work. After glancing at some remarks of Augustine, Ambrose and Eusebius, who call Christ the altar, he considers mediaeval writings concerned with the consecration of the altar. He says that all the

5) *ibid.* 271-283.

6) *ibid.* 444-453. BOTTE B., O.S.B., *L'ange du sacrifice: Cours et Conférences*, VII (1929) 209-221, and *L'Ange du sacrifice et l'épîclèse; RechTheol.AncMed.* (1929) 285-308, disagrees. He says there is no strictly traditional teaching reaching back to the origins of the prayer to say that it is concerned with the consecration, or that the altar and the angel are Christ. In a Letter to a Theologian on the Angel of Sacrifice in *The Mystery of Faith and Human Opinion Contrasted and Defined*, London 1931, 59-79, de la Taille upholds his teaching in the face of some queries, but in quoting the opinion of Le Brun that the matter (that is, of the angel's being Christ) is beyond a doubt, he adds, «This is perhaps exaggerated; for in questions of this kind, the moment we try to determine the thought of those who drew up our ancient formulas, we cannot pretend to reach mathematical certitude. Probabilities suffice, based on the spirit of the epoch, on the interpretation of the age following, and on intrinsic reasons. We are here confronted by a text which under cover of an image expresses a reality, a change presented as a displacement. The figure is calculated to give prominence to the ministry of the angels. But the inner element of the sacred action prompts the eye of faith to see the part played by the Minister... the Angel beloved of God (Justin, Dial., 93), whose deacons are the angels...» (67-68).

Many readers might feel sceptical of de la Taille's conclusions, especially on reading Jungmann's treatment of the matter in *The Mass of the Roman Rite* Vol 2, 231-7 esp. footnote 40. But let them read the article of de la Taille's referred to (and the allied matter in M.F. Eluc. XXI) and they might feel that the German Homer has perhaps nodded. On the purely practical and pastoral level let anyone try to explain the *Supplices* prayer in a way different from de la Taille's, and its profundity and solemnity seem to vanish. In fact it has rather to be explained away than explained!

interpretations of the altar are either typological, tropological or anagogical, and gives instances. (7)

These are the main modern writers on the meaning of the altar. What then is the usefulness of this dissertation, which, to a certain extent, covers much of the same ground as de la Taille? The answer is that this enquiry seeks to provide a scriptural body of doctrine from the Old Testament, asks whether this body of doctrine can be found with a new significance behind the few references in the New Testament, and finally examines what early writers think about the altar under the new dispensation. Admittedly, rather a limited usefulness, the compass of the research not going beyond Origen. However, it enables a continuous and growing view of the significance of the altar to be obtained from the successive pertinent texts of the Old Testament. This means that a context is provided for the examination both of the sacrifice of Christ and of the few explicit texts in the New Testament. It also means that a strongly probable idea can be given of the altar references in the early Christian writings: the main interpretation can be distinguished from subordinate ones, which are generally of an ascetical nature.

The altar theme is found today in ascetical and mystical literature. This dissertation should help towards appreciating the antiquity and usefulness of picturing the activity of the soul as if the latter were an altar (7a). Such an application is suggested to us by Pope Pius XII in his encyclical letter on the Sacred Liturgy, when he speaks of participation in the liturgical celebration of the mysteries of Christ:

«Let the minds of Christians be like altars, on which the various phases of the Sacrifice which the High Priest offers may in some fashion be re-enacted: the sorrows and tears, which remit and expiate sin; prayer...; the dedication and so to speak immolation of

7) BRAUN J., S.J., *Der christliche Altar* I, München 1924, Ch.IV.

7a) The correspondence that must exist, for sincerity, between the external gift and the gift of self is one thing; but we must conclude that every element in the external process necessarily has its inner counterpart. For example, we need not feel obliged even to raise, let alone settle, the question as to what corresponds inwardly to the external altar, if anything does. But provided we act with a certain tact and do not press the application woodenly, it is clear we can profit from considering the soul under the metaphor of an altar: for we are then reminded that our offering of self in sacrifice is made to a God whose «altar» is at the centre of our being.

oneself.; and finally the most intimate union, whereby we commit ourselves and what is ours to God, and find our rest in him...» (8).

Mystical life is also seen under the symbol of the soul's being an altar. St. John of the Cross, for example, speaks of the significance of Jacob's preparations for climbing the mountain of Bethel to build an altar and offer sacrifice to God. The people had to throw away the idols of strange gods, cleanse themselves and change their clothes, (actions symbolic of the soul's being «vacated, stripped and purified clean of every long-ing»):

«These three things make us understand that every soul that wants to climb this mountain, to make of itself an altar on which it can offer a sacrifice of pure love, of praise and of pure reverence, before reaching the top must have fulfilled the three above mentioned conditions...» (there will be a new way of knowing and loving) «which follows from the state of union, in which the soul is destined to serve as nothing else except as an altar, in which God is adored in love and praise and in which he is the only one present.»

God commanded that the altar of old be hollow,

«so that the soul might understand how much God wants it to be empty of everything, that it might be a worthy altar, where the Divine Majesty might reside.»

Finally God wanted only his fire to burn, and that continually, on the altar,

«This makes us understand that the soul has never to lack love of God if it wants to be a worthy altar, and furthermore no strange love has to be mixed with it.» (9).

With regard to the altar in the sacred liturgy, there is a strange state of affairs, which possibly this dissertation may help to resolve. On two occasions the Church tells us that her true altar is Christ.

First in the ordination of subdeacons. The bishop describes the visible duties of the subdeacon, one of which is to see that

8) PIUS XII, *Mediator Dei*: AAS 39 (1947) 577: DPL p. 148, al. 150.

9) SAN JUAN DE LA CRUZ, *Subida del Monte Carmelo*, 1.1, c.V, 7: *Obras*, Burgos 1931, 54-55.

only that amount of the bread oblations of the people is placed on the altar which will be necessary for the communicants. The subdeacon must realize the significance of his visible ministrations. He must perform them exactly and with the greatest care, because he has to see in them symbols of the invisible ministrations he is to carry out with regard to the members of Christ's mystical body. The reason for the symbolic nature of the visible ministrations lies in the symbolic nature of the visible altar, at which the subdeacon serves:

«Indeed the altar of holy Church is Christ himself, (on the witness of John, who relates in his Apocalypse that he saw a golden altar standing before the throne), in whom and through whom the oblations of the faithful are consecrated to God the Father.» (10)

Examining this more carefully we can say that the people's oblations seem to be an earthly sacrifice of bread: in reality they have become the heavenly sacrifice, the victim eternally glorious. This heavenly victim must lie on an equally heavenly altar, for victim and altar are inseparably related. God accepts victims at the altar as at the symbol of his presence. So just as Christ is the heavenly victim, he is the heavenly altar for this victim. Hence at Mass the material altar will only be a reminder of the heavenly altar sustaining the heavenly victim. The latter, though present on the visible altar, is not however in real contact with it: it is in real contact with the heavenly altar — by the supreme contact of identity.

Secondly, on the feast of the dedication of the basilica of St. John Lateran, the Church tells us that, although from the time of the apostles there were places of worship, there was not yet solemnly erected in them an altar, which, «anointed with chrism, should be a symbol of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is our altar, victim and priest.» (11).

The strange state of affairs mentioned above results from there being a complete absence of such an identification of the altar with Christ in the very place we should expect to find it,

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- 10) Pontificale Romanum, Mechliniæ 1895, 39: «Altare quidem sanctæ Ecclesiæ ipse est Christus, teste Joanne, qui in Apocalypsi sua altare aureum se vidisse perhibet, stans ante thronum, in quo, et per quem, oblationes fidelium Deo Patri consecrantur.»
- 11) Breviarum Romanum, Pars Autumnalis, ad diem nonan novembris, in Dedicacione Basicæ SS. Salvatoris, lectio 4a: «... altare, quod, chrismate delibutum, Domini nostri Jesu Christi, qui altare, hostia et sacerdos noster est, figuram exprimeret.»

that is, in the ceremony of the consecration of an altar. Instead, the material altar is spoken of as that whereon the oblations of the people are consecrated and accepted by God. (12) The only other altar mentioned is the cross, with which the material altar being consecrated seems to be compared. (13) Perhaps the whole ceremony is meant to be understood in the light of what the Church says on the other two occasions. This dissertation may help towards such an interpretation's being made with confidence.

Some points are more or less taken for granted in the course of the enquiry: the general nature of sacrifice and the nature of Christ's sacrifice. Sacrifice is seen as essentially the external offering of a gift to God in recognition of fundamental relationships between man and God, an offering made to be accepted and in some cases partaken of in a sacred feast. Christ's sacrifice is taken. It seemed beyond the scope of the thesis to discuss the various theological opinions concerning the relationship between Christ's sacrificial action at the supper and on the cross.

The plan of the enquiry is too simple to need much explanation. The altar texts of the Old Testament are taken in the order in which they appear and only those are used which throw light on the importance and meaning of the altar. Hence various historical points — they are mentioned at the beginning of chapter one — are not examined. The treatment is designed not only to bring out the functions of the altar more clearly but to show how eventually the life of the nation in its relations with God was rooted in the worship offered him at one altar.

The second chapter is different in manner. There is not much more in the New Testament than allusions to the altar. On the other hand the whole new order of things, as well as the sacred writings belonging to it, is dominated by the reality of the perfect sacrifice of Christ. Both this sacrifice and the few

12) Pontificale Romanum, Mechliniae 1895, 106: «... ut quicumque tibi in hoc altari sacrandae libamina devotus obtulerit vel sacrata susceperit...» 114: «... ut huic altari imposita munera semper accepta fieri digneris...» «...that whoever devotedly offers the gifts to be made sacred on this altar or receives them when they have been made sacred...» «... that you would deign to cause the gifts placed on this altar always to be accepted...»

13) *ibid.* 64: «Singulari illud propitiatorium in altari crucis pro nobis redimendis oblatum, in cuius praefiguratione Patriarcha Jacob lapidem erexit in titulum, quo fieret sacrificium... preces fundimus ut lapidis huius expositam materiam, supernis sacrificiis imbuendam, ipse tuae sanctificationis ubertate praecipias...»

textual references to the altar have been dealt with in the light of the importance attributed to the altar of old. This has meant a certain *a priori* interpretation of the altar, an attempt to see if behind the allusions to it there is not a massive reality taken for granted. The altar visions of the Apocalypse do not interpret themselves either. They are symbols drawn from the old worship. The question is, symbols of what?

The examination of the early Christian writers finishes with Origen, the last and main source in the Alexandrian school for matter on the altar. The purpose here has been to see what sort of consciousness there is concerning the meaning of the altar. The reason for stopping at this point is that seeds of all future interpretations have been sown, with the exception of that relating the Christian material altar to Christ. Something is said of this in the conclusion.

The Revised Standard Version of the sacred scriptures has been used for citations. This has been done on competent advice concerning the reliability of the translation. Furthermore, the Westminster Version being done by Catholics is not yet complete. For citations from the early writings, not the whole of the original, but the significant words only have been given: if few, in the text; if more numerous, in the foot-notes.

Finally I should like to express my gratitude to my director, the Reverend H. Schmidt, S.J. Professor of Liturgy at the Gregorian University, for his initial help, his encouragement en route, and his advice concerning the final shape of this dissertation. Its modest bounds do not do justice to his assistance and direction. I also thank the Reverend J.M. Hanssens, S.J. for his help on early documents; the Reverend M. Ledrus, S.J. for assistance with the meaning of some passages from St John of the Cross, as well as for other kindnesses; the Reverend E. Coffey S.J. for bibliographical help; and many others for discussions on one part or other of the matter of the thesis or of the doctrine of sacrifice that has been used.

THE MEANING OF THE ALTAR IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

In this chapter I intend to examine one element of the worship of the Old Testament, the altar, and to examine it under one aspect, its significance. Thus I shall not treat the many historical questions related to the altar unless they throw some light on its significance. Such questions are, for example, the state of religious worship in Palestine before the true worship began; the set-up of a pagan shrine with its altar, stone pillars, wooden posts and idols; the destruction of all these places and instruments of false worship; the story of the use in the true worship of God of the stone pillars; the infiltration of pagan rites into the true worship; the exact connection between the two Laws concerning the altar, the first allowing altars at every place indicated by God, the second only in one place, chosen also by God, in other words the story of the gradual adoption of only one altar for the whole nation. Rather, following the historical order, I shall try to determine what is revealed about the meaning of the altar, what man does there and what God.

The word «altar» is a translation of the Hebrew word *mizbeah*, meaning a place for the slaughter of animals for sacrifice. The same word is translated in the LXX version by *θυσιαστήριον*, which means a place for the burning of a meat offering in sacrifice (1). *Bâmâh* means a high place, a hill or a mountain on which there is a shrine for worship and hence an altar. It is normally used for describing idolatrous worship but sometimes describes the shrines erected in honour of God

1) *Mizbéah* from the verb *zâbah*, to sacrifice, immolate. In the LXX version *mizbéah* is translated 23 times by *βωμός* which, however, is rather the translation of *bâmâk*. (ADDIS W., art. Altar: EB 1, 123).

apart from the official shrine of the tabernacle or temple. (2) In his vision of the New Temple Ezechiel describes the massive altar, nearly 26 feet square at the base, and built of threere blocks of stone of decreasing dimensions, one on top of the other. Speaking of the topmost block, the altar proper, he says:

«and the altar hearth shall be four cubits; and from the altar hearth projecting upward, four horns, one cubit high. The altar hearth shall be square...» (3)

In the Hebrew, «altar hearth» (often translated as Ariel) is written in the above verses in two different ways: traslating the names literally we have: «And the *mountain of God* shall be four cubits; and from the *hearth of God* projecting upward, four horns, one cubit high. The hearth of God shall be square...»

(4) The altar is massive and majestic like a mountain; no doubt, like the latter, reminding the onlooker of the majesty of God. The altar is God's and so is the fire burning on it. So we have a general idea of the altar as a revered place, where man slaughters and offers his animals in sacrifice and where God receives them, with his fire to consume them.

The altar is first mentioned explicitly in the sacrifice offered by Noah on leaving the ark:

«Then Noah built an altar to the Lord... and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odour, the Lord said in his heart, 'I will never again curse the ground because of man... neither will I ever destroy every living creature as I have done». (5).

The Hebrew speaks of the «pacifying fragrance» of the smoke rising from the altar. The smoke conveys to God the smell of the meat on the fire, and God is spoken of as pleased,

2) For idolatrous cult: Lev 26,30; 3 K, 11,7; 4 K, 23, 8.9.15.23. For extra-egal: 1 K 9,12; 8 K 3,2,4.; 2 Par 15,17 βωμός and θυσιαστήριον used together: 1 Mach 1,59, the former for the pagan altar atop the altar of God.

3) Ez 43,15-16.

4) Es 43,15a: *har el* = mountain of God; 15b.16: *arf el* = hearth of God, from root 'arāh = to burn. (RENARD P., art. Autel, Dict. Bibl. 12, 1266.)

5) Gen 8,20. Holocausts: *ólāth* from *alah* = to go up, either in the sense of the victim's rising completely to heaven in smoke, or, according to the more common interpretation, in the sense that the victim is raised on to the altar, as in Lev 14,20; Jud. 6,26. What distinguishes a holocaust then from other sacrifices, is that it is placed completely on the altar, whereas the others are placed there in their innermost, choicest parts, representative of the whole. (CLAMER A. (LSB-PC,11) on Lev 1,3, p.30).

after the manner of a man's being pleased by a similar perception. But not only pleased: the smell pacifies God, removing from his nostrile the fetid adour of the sinfulness which has caused him to send the great flood. (6) God reveals to Noah that his offering is pleasing, by promising never again to destroy the world by water. The question arises could Noah have known of the acceptance of his offerings without God's making it known through his favorable resolution. For it is clear that God could not be expected to reveal his acceptance to the offerer every time by some special sign. There must be some more normal fashion for indicating God's acceptance of an offering, especially if offerings were made regularly. Nothing is revealed here on this point: but we may perhaps make preliminary remarks on the matter, that will become clearer later on. Since sacrifice is the offering of gifts to God for an acknowledgement of the relations existing between man and God, man will clearly try to have a sign of God's acceptance of his gifts. Not being able to see God he will naturally want to see the acceptance in sign language. If God does not give a special sign man will seek to have it all the same. (7) Otherwise the whole sacrificial process will lack just the completion that man wants. If possible, man will want to see some action on God's part corresponding to his own action of giving. Or he himself will cause such an action and regard it as the sign of God's acceptance. So, for instance, in the independent, consuming action of fire man could easily enough see a symbol of the action of God upon the offerings. Fire acts in a naturally mysterious fashion, lending itself readily to symbolic interpretation when used in a religious rite. But fire destroys! Is God then to be thought of as destroying the offerings? That would be a poor sort of a symbol of what we consider man is seeking, namely the divine acceptance. Whether this analysis of fire corresponds with the facts we shall be able to see later, but it certainly suggests itself once the nature of offering is considered — namely as demanding a sign of acceptance. What more spiritual sign could there be than fire? So I would say that in the sacrifice of Noah, God's revelation that the sacrifice is pleasing to him does not constitute the sign of acceptance but means that the sign (the fire and sweet smelling smoke) is true. For it is quite clear that the sign could be false.

6) A LAPIDE (ComSS,1) ad loc., p.128.

7) TAILLE Mauritius de la, *Mysterium Fidei*, Paris 1931,13.

where, for instance, the sentiments of the offerer are not right. Moreover, considering the fire as God's fire acting on the altar, gives deep meaning to the fact that Noah builds the altar to God». The altar is seen not just as a convenient place for making an offering but as a place belonging to God, where man offers and God accepts, and both by appropriate actions. It might be objected that in this sacrifice of Noah God is said to be pleased with the smell of the offering, without there being any mention of a divine consumption of the offerings by fire. But it seems to me the two go together. Burning by fire and the rising of smoke are inseparable realities: so the consumption of the offering and perception of its fragrance are united symbolic activities of God, with the latter expressing better perhaps the spiritual reality behind the human language.

From Noah we pass to Abraham. In the account of the covenant made with him by God concerning his posterity's possession of the Holy Land (8) we see God acting under the form of fire. An ordinary manner of making a covenant was for the parties to pass through lines of cut-up flesh, the idea being that they called down on themselves a similar fate if they violated the agreement. (9) In this case it is a unilateral agreement. God commands Abraham to cut up several animals and lay their flesh on this side and that.

«When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.» (10)

It was a symbol of God's pledging himself to keep a promise.

«On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, «To your descendents I give this land...!» (11)

The object that passed thorough the lines of flesh was an oven, from which issued flame and smoke:

«The ancients, and the Arabs today, prepare the portable oven for baking by first lighting a fire in it... the fire and smoke symbolized God, the flame as bright and almost immaterial and the smoke as impenetrable

8) Gen 15, 7-21.

9) VAUX R.de, O.P. (LSB-J) on Gen 15,17, p.83.

10) Gen 15,17.

11) *ibid.* 18.

to the eye, representing God's invisibility». (12)

Nothing is said however about this fire's consuming the flesh in sacrifice: nor is there any mention of an altar: we simply see that God acts under the form of fire. (13).

But he can not be expected to do so miraculously even when he specifically asks for a sacrifice. In the sacrifice offered by Abraham when commanded to offer his son Isaac, we have the first mention of fire's being brought to the altar.

«Here is the fire and the wood, asks Isaac, but where is the lamb for the holocaust?» (14)

In his flight from his brother Esau, Jacob reaches a place called Luz, where during the night he has a vision of a great stair-case reaching from earth to heaven, and of the Lord himself promising that his posterity shall possess the land whereon he lies sleeping. Waking from sleep Jacob is filled with awe:

«...; Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it!»! And he was afraid and said, ;How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven! So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone which he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called the name of that place Bethel...» (15)

Jacob then makes a promise to worship God at this place if God brings back safe and sound from his journey:

«... and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that thou givest me I will give the tenth to thee.» (16)

The first thing to notice is the setting up of a single upright stone as a monument recording the vision of God. Stones of various shapes were used in Canaan and for many purposes, mostly however religious. Their religious significance is difficult to make out, but in a general way they were monuments in honour of a divinity. There seems to have been something of

12) SUTCLIFFE E.P., S.J. (CC) ad loc., 151e.

13) *ibid.* 151d: «The birds were possibly for a sacrifice.» à Lapidé takes a sacrifice for granted (*op.cit.*172). Who knows? It would make the fire symbolism more interesting if it were a question of a sacrifice, but in any case there are not wanting sacrifices consumed by fire from heaven, as we shall see.

14) Gen 22,7.

15) Gen 28,16-18.

16) *ibid.*22.

the idea that the divinity dwelt in the upright stone set up for him and anointed. Again, the connection between these upright stones, sacred stones and the altar is often discussed. In ancient ruins such as those at Gazer in Palestine a pagan shrine shows, an altar and eight of these upright stones, one of which, smaller than the rest, has been worn smooth by repeated anointings. The smaller stone seems to have been the strictly sacred stone, symbolizing in some way the divinity, with the other stones there to add dignity to the scene, while at the altar the offerings are made to the divinity. (17) The worshippers of God, saw nothing wrong in the use of these monumental stones, so that they appeared in his shrines too. Later the people of God had to destroy all pagan stone monuments and eventually remove them from their own worship. (18) It is clear that Jacob gives the stone a

17) VINCENT Hugues, O.P., *Canaan*, Paris 1907, 90-151 for the Canaan places of cult and their religious apparatus. Figs. 75-80 give interesting shots of the shrine at Gazer.

18) The stones are called *massébôth* (from *nasab* = to set up.) They are mentioned as heathen things in Ex 23, 24; Deut 7,5; 12,13; 2 K 3,2 etc. As legitimate objects in Ex 24,4; Os 3,4; 10,1; Is 19,19. In the sanctuary of Javé at Sichem in Jos 24,26. As forbidden to the people of God in Lev 26,1; Deut 16,22.

LAGRANGE M. J., O.P., *Études sur les Religions Sémitiques* Paris 2, 1905, 1901-214, has a most useful study of the relations between sacred stones and the *massébâh* giving an account too of their meaning. These are some of his conclusions: the Sacred stone is not the same as the *massébâh*. The latter was always commemorative, perhaps consecrated to a divinity but not his sensible form (200). The upright stone, seemingly, can be closely related to the tower, itself representing the earth's great mountain (the earth itself!), which was the support of the heavens and the container somehow of the divinity. So the tower was called *E-KUR* = temple-mountain. The tower was represented then by a conical stone, and as the tower came gradually to be regarded as the dwellings, even the incorporation of the divinity, so as to be confounded with him and eventually called *EKURM* (= god), so too the upright stone shared in this process. The stone, however, was not called *betyle* (= Bethel), although that was a natural conclusion. It was certainly no the *βαυτολος* of the Greeks, which was a magic self-moving stone from the heavenly, and represented the final outcome of this long evolution. Phallic stones were also a later degradation. (190-4)

Now a sacred stone was often engraved on a *massébâh* or monumental stone, and was a sort of incorporation of the divinity. The engraving underwent a certain evolution. First the stone was engraved, then a symbolic figure of the divinity, next a divine effigy with human features and finally representations of the worshippers! Obviously the *massébâh* with the stone engraved on it easily developed into an object of cult itself. (200) Hence can be understood the hardening of Jewish legislation with regard to the *massébâh*: it easily turned from commemorative stone to image, and finally led to idolatry. (203)

Jacob's anointing is connected with the foundation of a sanctuary probably of a sanctuary that had already existed. The a

religious meaning, by it recalling the vision and marking the place as the dwelling of God. He says that the stone itself will be called the House of God: he means that he will make the place a shrine and offer worship there. (19) In the meantime he anoints the stone pillar, thus consecrating it to God. Among the ancients oil was related closely to vital strength, and the practice of anointing or of infusing oil into a king meant «a bestowing of new life, of divine life» (20) upon him, giving him divine authority making his person inviolable. (21) So the anointing of the stone will indicate that it is sacred to God, that to approach it is to approach him, source of strength and life.

On this return journey some fourteen years later Jacob is told by God to build an altar at the place where he set up the stone pillar. This he does, and calls the place *El Bethel*. (22) *El* being the name for God considered as the Strong One. There is question here of the name by which God should be invoked at this particular altar: (23) his protection of Jacob during the journey accounts for this name's being chosen. It is debated whether the stone pillar and the altar are distinct, but the text seems to me to imply clearly enough their distinction. «There he built an altar. . . » he does not treat the previous stone as an

nointing was the normal practice of Assyrian princes when they found the foundation steles *massêbôth* of their predecessors. (202).

The sacred stone was not an altar (against Wellhausen and Robertson Smith). True, the Arabs oversimplified things, identifying their altar with the divinity. Then again, altars have been found with *Zeus-autel*, Zeus-inscribed on them. But these altars were square. The sacred stones were conical. (191) So the shrine at Gezer, with its altar, sacred stone and *massêbôth* is an interesting reminder of the differences in meaning in ancient instruments of cult.

Lagrange finishes his remarks with a reflection that bears directly on the whole idea of the altar: «C'est un besoin si impérieux pour l'homme d'avoir tout près de soi la divinité pour lui rendre un culte qu'il la renferme dans un tas de pierres alignées, qui deviendra le temple, ou dans une seule pierre. . . la pierre sacrée est donc au plus une habitation du Dieu, l'ébauche du temple et de la statue, et si elle n'est à l'origine qu'un autel ou un trône, le monothéisme lui-même peut s'en accommoder.» (212)

- 19) A LAPIDE (ComSS 1) on Gen 28,22, p.242: «Locatum ponitur pro loco qd. Locus in quo est lapis hic, mea applicatione, destinatione, et quasi consecratione erit et vocabitur sanctus, ac domus sive habitaculum Dei. . . »
- 20) ONIANS R.B., *The Origins of European Thought*, Cambridge 1954, 189.
- 21) MEDEBIELLE A. (LSB-PC,111) on 1 K 10, 1, p.386)
- 22) Gen 35,7.
- 23) HUMMELAUER K. (CSS, 1) on Gen 35,7, p.513: «nunc autem locum altaris vocat *El Bethel*: altare aliquo nomine divino appellatur, quo scilicet nomine Deus ad illud altare esset invocandus».

altar. Moreover his manner of acting will not be out of harmony with existing practices in the country, and we have seen that at Gazer the altar and stone pillar are distinct. I think it is reasonable to say that while pillar and altar have the same basic significance of so to speak narrowing down the divine presence or rather localizing it, there is a stress on the place's being the dwelling of God by means of the pillar, while the altar receives the offerings made to God so dwelling in the place.

Leaving these rather fragmentary notices of the altar we come now to the making of the covenant between God and his people at Sinai. Through Moses God gives the people the ten commandments and the detailed code of the alliance, based on the commandments. The code begins and ends with references to the altar: at the beginning the law of the altar is promulgated, at the end an altar is built in conformity with this law, and the alliance is entered into by the offering of sacrifice and the sprinkling of blood.

The law of the altar states:

«An altar of earth you shall make for me... in every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you. And if you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones.»

(24)

Pagan altars made of costly materials and with carvings and inscriptions on them were treated in an idolatrous manner as if containing something of divinity. (25) The altar of God is to be simple and as it were untouched by man: «for if you wield your tool upon it you profane it.» (26) The sacredness of the altar is proclaimed: it can only be set up where God authorizes it, and then he will come there at the time of sacrifice and bless the worshippers.

When all is ready for the ratification of the alliance Moses builds an altar, placing near it twelve monumental stones, like the one erected by Jacob at Bethel, but with a different significance. There it was a sign of God's presence; here they are symbols of the tribes:

«And he rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, accor-

24) Ex 20, 24.

25) A LAPIDE (ComSS 1) ad loc., p.500.

26) Ex 20,25.

ding to the twelve tribes of Israel.» (27)

Then sacrifices are offered, holocausts and peace offerings. The blood of the animals is divided into two equal portions, and half is poured on the altar. Moses next reads the book of the alliance, and when the people promise their obedience he takes up the rest of the blood and sprinkles it over them saying:

«Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words».

(28)

Here we see another kind of ratification ceremony distinct from the one seen in vision by Abraham. This time the alliance is so to speak, bi-lateral, (28a) both parties pledging their respective fidelity, the people their obedience and loyalty, God his protection and favour. The symbol of agreement is clearly the blood of the sacrifices. Shared equally by God and the people, it acts as a sign of the newly cemented unity between them. It is clear too that the altar acts as the substitute for God: Moses pours, the altar accepts.

«Moses, intermediary between God and the people, unites them symbolically by pouring on the altar, which represents Javé, then on the people, the blood of one and the same victim. The pact is thus ratified.» (29)

The sequel is the feasting on the flesh of the peace offerings offered on this occasion along with the holocausts. Moses and the Elders are also able to take part in this communion feast, even though after the blood ratification they have climbed the mountain and contemplated a vision of God. (30) The altar acts as the table of God, whence he gives his guests to feast on

27) Ex 24,4.

28) *ibid.* 8.

28a) «The covenant is a human way of thinking of the relations of God with the people Israel; like all such human modes of thinking, it is an imperfect expression of the contact between the Divine and the human. The covenant cannot, of course, be a truly bilateral agreement; God cannot submit Himself to obligations after the manner of men. Nevertheless, the covenant permitted the Israelites to appeal to His fidelity and to the bond of covenant affection which arose as its consequences; by making Israel His own people, God had undertaken «to act as a kinsman» toward them, and this word also frequently used.» MACKENZIE, John L., S.J., *The Two-Edged Sword*, Milwaukee, 1955, 117.

29) COUROYER B., O.P. (LSB-J) on Ex 24,8. p.115.

30) Ex 24,11, «Comederunt et biberunt» does not mean that Moses and Aaron, after seeing God, nevertheless did not die as witness their eating and drinking! It refers to their being able to get back from the mountain in time to eat of the sacrificial feast following the

what is his: all the flesh has been made over to God in the parts burnt upon the altar. But even though the altar is seen here quite clearly as the «substitute» for God, so that blood poured on it is equivalent to blood made over to him; is seen too as the table of God, set for God by the people in the offerings, and then set by God for the people in the return of the offerings, nevertheless it is only an intermediary: God is *present* on the mountain and only *acts* at the altar. Through it he makes known his inner activity of promising protection, of being pleased with the offerings, and of wanting to share with the offerers his peace and friendship. Notice, too, that the blood has to be poured on the altar first, before becoming sacred and able to draw those sprinkled with it into the oneness of a sacred alliance.

Moses now receives directions for the permanent worship to be made by the people as a result of their new alliance with God. There is to be a tabernacle or tent for God pitched within a rectangular court. The tabernacle is to be divided into two parts. One is to be an inner shrine, the holy of holies, where God will dwell. He will be enthroned over a golden mercy seat, which is to cover the ark of the alliance, so called because of its containing the stone tablets of the law. (31) A veil will separate this shrine from the holy place, in which will be found a great lamp-stand, a table for bread offerings and directly in front of the ark an altar of incense. From this altar morning and evening there will rise clouds of incense, passing over the veil into the presence of God. (32) Outside in the court there will be the altar for making sacrifices. (33) Such is the general picture. We can now see the altars more in detail.

The altar of holocausts is to be a square, box-like structure with sides of about 7½ feet and a height of 4½ feet. It is to be made of acacia wood covered with bronze: being hollow, it will be easily carried. It seems clear that when set down it is to be filled with earth or stones: thus conforming with the legislation about the altar given earlier. (34) There is also to

ratification of the alliance. Ex 22,18 ordered that the consumption of the sacrifice be completed on the same day. Later legislation allowing two days, concerned private sacrifices: cf. Lev 7,16. So HUMMELAUER (CSS, 11) ad loc., p.255.

31) Ex 25,10-22.

32) Ibid, 23-40.

33) Ex 27,1-8.

34) A LAPIDE (ComSS, 1) on Ex 27,1, p.550: «Quarto, altare hoc intus vacuum erat sed terrae vel lapidi impositum; quia crux Christi defixa est et imposita monti Calvariae.»

be a bronze net work and another item of uncertain meaning. For a long time it was thought that a bronze grating covered the top of the altar, to receive the flesh of the victims to be burnt, and that from it hung a hearth for the fire. (35) Now it seems clear that the bronze net work rose from the ground half way up the sides of the altar, most probably for supporting a platform for the priests occupied in the sacrifices. (36) The fire and the victims would then rest on the top of the earthen or stone altar inserted within the bronze framework. From the corners of the altar are to rise the most important part of the structure, the bronze covered horns. (37) Then too the altar is to be provided with all the instruments needed for the fire, the victims and the ashes left over. The divine care in legislating for this altar (as for the whole tabernacle) is seen in God's telling Moses to make it «according to the plan... which has been shown you on the mountain.» (38) Later commentators on the altar will not let one of these details escape their attention as they derive some spiritual meaning from them.

The altar of incense is also to be made of acacia wood and, like the ark and the table for the bread, covered with gold. It will have a golden crown round the top and be provided with golden horns. Its dimensions will be roughly 3 feet in height and 1 1/2 feet square. By its position and function it will be thought of as belonging to the holy of holies: its incense will please the Lord there by passing across the separating veil. (39)

The altar of holocausts is also closely connected with the divine presence in the holy of holies. Speaking of the daily ho-

35) A LAPIDE loc.cit., following an old standing interpretation going back to Josephus.

36) POWER E., S.J. (CC) on Ex 27,4, 178d. The disputed word is *carcôb*: COUROYER (LSB-J) ad loc., p.126 leaves the meaning vague, plumping for «cornices».

37) Without the horns the altar lost its sacredness; Am 3,14. The horns of the altar are smared to make expiation: Lev 4,7. Adonias, fearing Solomon rises early and goes to the temple, grasping the horns of the altar for asylum. The horns shared in the propitiatory power of the victims and rendered the guilty inviolable. In a general way horns represented the power of God: at the altar they stood for the benevolent character of this power. So CLAMER (LSB-PC, 11) on Lev 4,7. The horns were also symbols of the divine fecundity: CAZELLES H., P.S.S. (LSB-J) ad loc., p.29.

38) Ex 25, 9,40; 26,30; 27,8.

39) Ex 30, 1-10. We are not concerned with the exact relation of this altar to the Sinai instructions.

holocaust of a lamb to be offered morning and evening God says:
 «It shall be a continual burnt offering throughout your generations at the door of the tent of meeting before the Lord, where I will meet with you, to speak there to you... I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar.» (40)

The divine presence is symbolically concentrated in the holy of holies, for over this will the cloud and the pillar of fire, signs of this perpetual presence, remain: (41) but it is a presence which extends to the altars, or rather the altars are in the divine presence, only the limitations of material symbolism necessitating a spatial separation.

There remains to be seen the connection between the two altars themselves. I have not seen the question discussed, but it seems to me that the physical relationship between them sufficiently indicates the relationship in meaning. The coals for the burning of the incense come from the altar of holocausts, (42) and the two offerings of incense are made in connection with the public sacrifices. Morning and evening a lamb is offered in holocaust, and morning and evening incense is burnt in the holy place (43) Both are public acts of worship, and it seems to me that one is the interpretation of the other. The incense rising up and passing into the divine presence will be a symbol of the holocaust offered outside. The latter is to be «for a pleasing odour, an offering by fire to the Lord.» (44) In appearance a food offering, the holocaust tends to be considered as a perfume offering, avoiding thereby the crude, unsymbolic notion that could be given to food offerings made to God. (45) The fire consumes the offering, turning it into a sweet fragrance, and under this spiritualized form does the food offering reach and please God. The incense burning simply stresses this aspect of the holocaust. Support is given this idea by the fact

40) Ex 29, 42-44.

41) Ex 40, 36-40.

42) Lev 16,12: the high priest takes fire from the altar of holocausts to burn the incense; very probably the death of Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10,1-2) was due to their not using this fire.

43) Ex 29,40 for the double daily lamb holocaust; Ex 30,7-8 for the corresponding incense offerings. The order, at least in Herod's temple, was such that in the morning the sacrifices were prepared, but before they were offered, the incense was burnt. Ditto in the evening. (MOORE G.P., art. Sacrifice: EB IV, col.4210).

44) Ex 29,41. COUROYER (LSB-J) ad loc., «C'est un parfum d'apaisement, un mets consommé en l'honneur de Jahvé.»

45) To be considered later: note 58.

that in private bloodless sacrifices, a handful of incense has to be thrown on the offerings, because of course there will be no incense burning going on at the same time inside. (46)

Again, the smoke of the holocausts naturally rises up into the heavens and leads the mind to think of God's presence there. Yet God wants the people to consider his constant dwelling with them in the tabernacle. So the incense smoke going into the holy of holies will be a constant reminder that the sacrifices on the outside altar are really being offered to the God who is dwelling within the tabernacle.

Finally, as a natural symbol of prayer and joyful adoration (47) the incense either on the inner altar or at the private sacrifices outside will, so to speak, «inform» the material offerings with the devotion of the offerers.

The sacredness of the altar is emphasized by the consecration ceremonies, which consist of washing, anointing and sacrificing. (48) Moses sprinkles the altar seven times with water and then anoints it with the perfumed oil, the composition of which, having been dictated by God, is declared by him to be sacrosanct. That is, it will make sacred whatever it touches, putting it into God's special possession:

«and you shall make of these a sacred anointing oil... you shall consecrate them (tabernacle, altars, etc.), that they may be most holy; whatever touches them will become holy... it is holy, and it shall be holy to you». (49)

But this anointing is not enough to make the altar completely ready for its august function of making man's offerings sacred to God. It has been set up by man and still bears man's contaminating sinfulness: (50) so it must be purified by blood. A special bullock is sacrificed for this purpose, Moses taking its blood, smearing the horns of the altar and pouring the rest at

46) Lev 2,2.14.16; 6,14.

47) Ps 140,2: «Let my prayer be counted as incense before thee.» CAZELLES on Lev (LSB-J), p.13. «L'offrande d'encens conserve le sens d'adoration joyeuse qu'elle avait à l'origine.»

48) The consecration is commanded in Ex 29,36-7, although the chapter deals rather with the consecration of persons than things. Lev 8,11.15 describes the ceremony, making no mention of its lasting seven days. However, Ez 43, 18-27 describes the vision of a new consecration lasting that time.

49) Ex 30,25.29.32.

50) COUROYER (LSB-J) on Ex 29,36, p.139.

the base. (50a)

In passing to the functions of the altar, I intend only to point out the common features of the sacrifices, namely the blood pouring, the meal aspect, the consumption by fire, without treating of the great variety of sacrifices. Whether they are public or private, whether for adoration and thanksgiving or for atonement, all animal offerings have common features, that stress the function of the altar in the sacrifice.

Taking sacrifice in the general sense of the making over of a precious gift to God as token of acknowledgement of his being Lord of all, the application to the altar of the blood of the animal chosen for this purpose is the first way in which the gift passes from human to divine ownership. (51) Even if there were no atonement for sin to be made, the giving of the blood to God via the altar would be a powerful symbol of the recognition man wants to make of God's dominion. For the blood is universally regarded as containing the life of the animal, and thereby belonging in a special way to God, the author of life. In the Old Testament, however, the stress is always laid on the atoning value of making such a gift of the blood. Giving instructions to Moses, God says:

«For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for

50a) A strange idea, this blood cleansing, if we consider that the sacred oil has already made the altar sacro-sanct, able to sanctify. I suggest either that the three material processes of water cleansing oil anointing, blood cleansing are simply to be considered as one formal cleansing, or that there is gradual passing from the profane to the sacred condition of the altar — the first ceremonies being sufficient to consecrate the blood offered and enable it to complete the process of purification.

51) So God commands the application of the blood to the altar in Lev 1-7, pass.

«On porte le sang sur la pierre sacrée, pour que la divinité le reçoive et qu'il y ait ainsi un même sang entre elle et l'homme. Ce sera de toute évidence «un sang d'alliance», si Dieu, l'ayant accepté, en fait asperger les offrants, un sang apporté par l'homme et apporté par la divinité, dans lequel les deux contractants communient et fraternisent. (cf. Ex.24,6.8.). Outre qu'il crée un lien de parenté, il est instrument par excellence de toute purification et consécration; car ayant passé en la possession divine, ce sang du sacrifice lave toute souillure dans la sainteté de Dieu et étend sur l'homme ou l'objet qui en est aspergé, sa propre consécration (Lev 4,6). DURRWELL, F.X., *La Résurrection de Jésus Mystère du Salut*, Paris³, 1954, 93 footnote 75. In Lev 16,16 sacrificial blood cleanses the sanctuary of the faults the sons of Israel have committed. The image is almost of sins' being like mud flung at the Lord God of the sanctuary and removable only by the power of sacred blood.

your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement by reason of the life.» (52)

After the flood God already forbade the use of blood:

«Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you... only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.» (53)

Abstention from blood was already an acknowledgement of its relation to life and to God the author of life. Now God reveals the meaning of the blood's being made over to him in a ritual manner: applied to the altar it will make atonement. This pouring of blood on the altar will be a pouring in the presence of God; it will not be the same kind of offering as the flesh offerings to follow, a food offering, but a strong symbolic acknowledgement, it seems to me, under the very eyes of God, that the offerers have deserved death themselves. The acceptance by God of this life blood will mean that he accepts the acknowledgment, is placated by it, and so remits the sins of the offerers. (54) But where is the divine acceptance of the offering manifested?

The application of the blood to the altar is already a sign, contrivable by human industry, of the divine acceptance, even though it is at the same time the rite of offering the blood. The mind can see two aspects in the blood poured out: first it can see man giving to God via the altar, secondly it can see God receiving from man via the altar. What is given to the altar, the altar receives: passively, no doubt, without any distinct action; but in such a case no action is possible. (55) What then man could look on as a sign of God's acceptance, God not only reveals

52) Lev 17,11. The LXX version mistranslates «by means of the life» (according to the Hebrew) and gives us «instead of life», i. e., «for your lives.» SAYDON P.P. (CC) ad loc., 192e. Hence theories of penal substitution, whereby God accepts the animal's blood instead of guilty man's. See text for another explanation.

53) Gen 9,4. The prohibition is renewed seven times: Lev 3,17; 7,26; 17,10-14; 19,26; Deut 12,16.23-4; 15,23.

54) MF 9-10: where the author explains the infliction of death on the animal as the most appropriate expression of man's recognition of his own sinfulness.

55) MF 13. The doubt has been expressed as to how the blood-pouring can be considered a sign of divine acceptance. It's not that the actual pouring by the priest from the chalice is the sign but the pouring on to the altar: the putting of the offering, as it were, into the hands of God. If the blood is offered for acceptance at the altar, sacred to God, then it seems only logical that man should have the satisfaction of seeing God's acceptance of his offering at the altar too. Remember also that the sign of acceptance discernible in the blood's actually being received by God's vice-gent altar is

as such, but also explains its meaning. By offering and acceptance, atonement is accomplished.

Stress is laid on the expiating power of the blood according to the part of the altar to which it is applied. In holocausts and peace offerings, where the idea of expiation is not paramount, the blood is poured or sprinkled on the altar, whereas for sin offerings it is generally smeared on the horns of the altar. (56) The horns are considered the most important part of the altar, and so to smear them implies a very deliberate attention given to the expiating power of the blood.

After the blood offering comes the offering to God of the flesh of the animal, either of the complete flesh, as in the holocaust, or of the rich, inward fat-covered parts, as in the communion sacrifice and in the sacrifice for sin. Then there are the many bloodless oblations of flour and oil, sprinkled with salt and incense. A bloodless oblation accompanies the daily lamb holocausts. There is no need for details: Leviticus abounds in minute legislation concerning the cleaning, cutting and preparation of the flesh offerings as well as of the bloodless ones. (57) In a general way it is clear we are dealing with food offerings: what matters is their symbolic import. It is a question of acknowledgement on man's part that God is the giver of all things: through these very things then is gratitude best shown. The point of importance here, however, is not to indicate the complex of subjective attitudes that dictates this or that kind of sacrifice but to show that man prepares his offer-

not an isolated sign. It is linked with the acceptance of the flesh offerings. In this acceptance more sign language is possible: God, symbolized by altar fire, can be shown as taking the gifts more dramatically. Such fire-acceptance of the flesh naturally extends to the blood. If the question is raised as to the accuracy of considering the fire in this way, note 61 might help.

- 56) Holocausts, Lev 1,5; peace offerings, Lev 3,2. According to the importance of the person for whom the sin offering is made, the blood is either taken into the holy place, sprinkled towards the veil and smeared on the horns of the altar of incense (Lev 4,5), or on the horns of the altar of holocausts (ibid.25). When a dove is offered for sin, its blood is not smeared on the horns, but sprinkled on one side of the altar (Lev.5,7.)
- 57) *Examples*: the daily holocausts of lambs are offered with flour kneaded in oil and with libations of wine (Ex 29,40). Aaron's consecration sacrifice consists of the rich, inner parts, with bread, pastry and cake (ibid.25). The holocaust rite is described in Lev 1; the communion sacrifice in Lev 2. Bloodless food offerings: Lev 3. Sin offerings: Lev 4. Many details of the rites in Lev 5-7. A summary of them is given by CLAMER (LSB-PC, 11) on Lev 1,3, p.31.

rings in a human manner. He prepares as he does for his fellow human beings, but, naturally, gives the external preparation a unique significance. He makes over the whole of the flesh of an animal as a food offering or, where he is to communicate himself in the offering, makes over the best parts to God. God is not thought of as needing the nourishment! His consumption of what is offered will not be a literal eating, but such as to serve for a sign of his being pleased with the offering. Man wants to see God take to himself what has been offered. Hence what is a sufficient sign of God's acceptance of the blood will not serve here. The blood once offered can run off the altar into the ground and be effectively removed from all profane use by man: it can without more ado be considered as having passed over into God's possession. But flesh offerings cannot, to put it crudely, continue to be heaped up on God's table or taken off and put away in some place away from man's use and still be considered as belonging to God. Otherwise, even here, the very acceptance on the altar would be some sort of sign of divine acceptance. We saw earlier that fire can be considered a more complete sign of divine acceptance, and now we see that the natural symbolism of fire is ratified by God. The sacrifice is considered as food to be consumed by fire for God: at the same time as being changed by the fire a pacifying fragrance.

«And the priest shall offer it on the altar as food offered by fire to the Lord.» (58)

In another passage the idea of a sweet fragrance is joined to the idea of consumption:

58) Lev 3,11. «Burn»: Hebrew, *hiqtir* = make to burn like a perfume, the smoke of which rises to God as an agreeable fragrance. CLAMMER (LSB-PC, 11) p. 43 translates this passage: «le prêtre fera monter la fumée de l'autel.» «Nourishment offered by the fire» from Hebrew *léhém isséh* = nourishment, food communicated to God by fire. *Isséh* meant at first only the nourishment offered to God, including the parts ceded to the priests. But by attaching the word to the root *es* (fire), the Israelites put the accent on the part actually burnt for God on the altar. Thus, according to CAZELLES (LSB-J) on Lev, p.13, the idea of nourishment was played down, and the holocaust made like an incense offering. But the words *léhém* remains, and means «nourishment» straight out. The two words are combined in the translation «nourishment offered by fire.» The Vulgate has «in pagulum ignis» here and «in alimoniam ignis» in v. 16, whereas the LXX version emits «*léhém*» in both cases, fearing to compromise the spirituality of the Godhead. The gross understanding of God's consumption of the offerings is ridiculed in several places (so Ps 49,13: Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?). The idea was held by a number of Semites and probably badly instructed Israelites. However, one has to be careful

«And the priest shall burn them on the altar as food offered by fire for a pleasing odor.» (59)

In other passages no mention is made of nourishment:

«And the priest shall burn the whole on the altar, as a burnt offering, an offering by fire, a pleasing odor to the Lord.» (60)

It seems to me that there are two ideas being expressed: the first, that the fire consumes the offerings in the name of God: God comes down upon them and partakes of them in a divine manner, symbolized by the fire. The second, that in order to overcome the tendency to materialize this action of God's, the fire is considered as changing the offering into a fragrant smoke, with which God is delighted. In this sense the offering rises up to him from the altar, and is assimilated to the offering of incense. But it is the sweet savour of a food offering. The two ideas seem to me somewhat awkwardly joined, but it is clear there is the underlying notion of fire's consuming at the altar the offering being made. In this way the offerers have set the table of God, and as of old God is present in fire. (61)

of giving such an interpretation to rites that look like unsymbolic feeding of the gods. LAGRANGE, *Etudes sur les Religions Semitiques*, 2 1905, 267 says, «Si le sacrifice n'avait été qu'un procédé culinaire pour nourrir les dieux, il n'aurait jamais eu de place dans la religion.»

59) Lev. 3, 16.

60) Lev 1,9,17.

61) The only other interpretation would be to say that fire enters into the process of offering as such, and is simply the means for causing the offering to be presented in the heavens as a sweet fragrance. So LEPIN M., *L'Idée du Sacrifice de la Messe*, Paris 1926, 687-8. 704-5, de la Taille (MF 691-3) argues against the idea, admitting of course that the fire does enter into the offering of incense for an incense offering is precisely an offering of incense burning and pouring out its perfume. Now it is, true that the flesh offerings are in a sense equated with incense offerings by the constant use of the «sweet fragrance» theme. To that degree then, there would be point to Lepin's view. But there is a big difference, The sacrifices are made *humano modo* —under the appearances of food: together with the flesh there are the bread offerings, the libations, salt. They are offered to God when man places them on the altar as on God's table through the hands of the priest. God by fire as it were consumes the meal. If fire were part of the *human* process where could we find the sign of *divine* acceptance, necessary if the symbolism of food offering is to be carried through to the end? Prior to *man's* participation in the sacred meal of communion with God, God himself must be seen as —so to speak— consuming the portion offered to him. Finally, if fire were man's agent for transmitting the offerings to God it would surely be preposterous to see God's supplying this element whenever he sent down fire on the victims!

It might he asked where is the sign of the acceptance of the

But the altar is also the table of God in the sense that from it God feasts his worshippers in friendship. When God accepts his portion of the offering on the altar, the remainder of the offering acquires a sacrosanct character and, when eaten, is a sign of the sacred friendship of the worshippers with God. (62)

This dignity of the altar as the scene of God's manifestation of this inward pleasure and acceptance of man's offerings is seen more clearly when the fire is of miraculous origin. So in the ordination ceremonies of Aaron the sacrifices are already burning on the altar as Moses takes Aaron into the tabernacle to present him to God. When they come out and Aaron blesses the people in the name of God, God shows his ratification of the ordination and the reality of Aaron's new dignity:

«And fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offerings and the fat upon the altar.»
(63)

The effect is to consume in an instant what is already being burnt. It is true that the miracle has for its purpose the ratification of Aaron's priesthood, but the intrinsic sense of the miracle is that the fire of the altar is a fire from God's side: a sign of his acceptance of the sacrifices.

On a later but similar occasion, as Solomon is dedicating the temple, sacrifices are lying on the improvised altar of the court of the temple between the altar proper and the holy place. Solomon kneels in prayer:

«When Solomon had ended his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the

incense sacrifice, if the fire there enters into the offering itself. Perhaps in the fact that only sacred fire could be used: and certainly, as in the case of the blood, in the very fact of the incense's being received on the altar from the hands of the one who placed it there.

- 62) So in Ex 24,11 at the ratification of the alliance. The communion sacrifice, so wide spread among the Semites, is described in Lev especially in Ch 7, but is given a somewhat inferior position, as having led, during the monarchy, to much license: CAZELLES on Lev (LSB-J) p.11. It was a sacred banquet, the choicest or most vital parts symbolically consumed by God, the rest, considered as provided by God, consumed by the worshippers. cf. 1 K 2,16, where the sons of Heli are taken to task for wanting their share before the offering has been made at the altar. The altar and its fire make the gift over to God. Made sacred, the gift now imparts sacredness to the worshippers. So God's sacredness is, at least figuratively, communicated via the altar to the offerings and so to the people.

- 63) Lev 9, 24.

sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple.»

(64)

In the first case it seems quite probable that the fire came forth from the cloud that continually hung over the tabernacle.

(65) The cloud was the sign of God's presence, and on the occasion of Aaron's blessing «the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people».

This seems to mean that the cloud became charged with a sudden illumination, and that thence came the fire on to the altar. (66) In the account of the fire at the dedication of the temple under Solomon the fire comes from heaven, and the glory of the Lord fills the temple itself, as though both phenomena come simultaneously from the heavens. (67) In any case the meaning is clear: the fire comes from the presence of God and acts in his name. The most striking instance of this fire acting in the name of God to accept and show approval, is in the sacrifice offered by Elias on Mount Carmel. Elias pours water

64) 2 Par 7,1.

65) Ex 40,34. The cloud came at the completion of the building of the tabernacle.

66) CLAMER (LSB-PC, 11) on Lev 9,24, p.84.

It has been suggested that the cloud above the tabernacle was the cloud of the continual incense sacrifice. However, while the idea is not unattractive in that it would equiperate aromatic fragrance with the divine presence, the cloud seems to be significant of the presence, power, glory and transcendent holiness of God, mainly because of its *brightness*. Cf. Durwell, *La Résurrection de Jésus, mystère de salut*, 118. While this cloud remained, the cloud of incense, rising up from altar, into the holy of holies and diffusing itself over the Ark, would thus be seen as bearing Israel's fragrant worship into the presence of God. When the miraculous cloud appeared at the dedication of the Temple (3 Kings, 8, 10-13) did God as it were invest the incense cloud with new qualities to make it the symbol of his presence? If he did so then the subsequent quasi-permanent presence of the incense cloud in the holy of holies from the twofold daily burning of incense in such large quantities would be in its way an indication of the divine presence. But as far as I can see, the formal significance of the incense clouds rising into the holy of holies and 'hiding the shrine over the Ark' (Lev. 16,13) is not so much to 'supply' for the dense, bright and all-enveloping cloud occasionally and miraculously manifesting the divine presence, as to signify the unceasing need for the prayer of the holy people to come like a fragrance into the presence of the holy God, so near his people.

E. K. Taylor, C.M.S. in an article, *Mary in St. Luke's Gospel*, The Clergy Review, July 1960, 416, seems to favour the view that the incense smoke provided the symbol of the divine presence.

67) The cloud is already over the temple as Solomon prays: 2 Par 5,13. So perhaps the same thing happens on this occasion as I suppose, on the suggestion of CLAMER (loc. cit.), happened at Aaron's ordination, namely a sudden fiery illumination of the cloud, with fire leaping from it on to the holocausts.

over the offering, the altar, the trench round about, and prays God to manifest to the people that he alone is the true God:

«Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt offering, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.» (68)

These striking instances make it clear that the fire in sacrifice is not part of man's offering: otherwise we should have the absurd position of God's acting instead of man to make the offering. It seems perfectly legitimate to apply the meaning of the miraculous fire to the humanly applied fire. So we can see that man does not, so to speak, make his gift pass by fire into the heavens and await the sign of acceptance there. He sees the sign of acceptance under his very eyes: he sees that the fire demonstrates more vividly the power of the altar to make sacred. It is the fire of God: it is the fire of the altar as well. It is because the offerings are on the altar that the fire consumes them. There are not two acceptances: one of the altar, one of the fire, rather there two ways of showing the one divine acceptance. The very being on the altar is a sign of God's having taken the offerings: the fire brings out the truth more strongly, symbolizing God's taking the offerings to himself to make them share his sacredness. (69)

The instructions for the fire show it is to be regarded as inseparable from the altar. (70) It is to be continually fed by the priests so that it never goes out. All night long the holocaust must burn, and during the day sacrifice will follow sacrifice, so that the fire will never lack its function:

«Fire shall be kept burning on the altar continually; it shall not go out.» (71)

68) 3 K 18-38.

69) DOLLINGER J.J., *Heidenthum und Judenthum*, Regensburg 1857, 208 (Quoted in MF 131) puts the meaning of the fire very strikingly, making it an organ of appropriation or the mouth of the divinity: «Das FEUER war das ANEIGNUNGS ORGAN gleichsam der Mund der Gottheit, dem das Opfer dargebracht wurde, oder die Substanz desselben in Gestalt des Rauches, ihr zufuhrte», (The fire was the organ of appropriation, as it were comparable to the mouth of the deity, to which the offering was brought, or which fetched the substance of the offering to the deity in the form of the smoke of sacrifice.)

70) CLAMER (LSB-PC,11) on Lev, 9.12-13, denies that the fire was in any sense a representation of the divinity, but simply the means of burning incense and consuming victims in honour of God. So its perpetuity was the visible sign of the uninterrupted adoration rendered God by his people. See note 61 for why I think idea only partly correct.

71) Lev 6,13.

The fire will be as it were the animating principle of the altar, a perpetual sign of the active reception by God of the continual homage of his people. God will have a «dwelling» presence in the holy of holies, signified by the cloud, and an «active» presence at the altar, signified by the fire.

There are two instances, though, where the fire has not got the meaning of divine acceptance. First, when the remains of a sin offering have to be burnt outside the camp, they are not burnt on an altar, nor by fire from the altar. (72) The meaning of the burning outside the camp is then different from that on the altar. Most probably the meaning of the former is to show the effects of the latter. By the sacrifice pardon for sin is asked. By the burning outside the camp of the skin and carcase of the animal is shown the complete destruction of the sin. (73) The second instance is in the burning of the incense. Incense must be burnt in order to be offered. Here the acceptance is shown by its being performed on a sacro-sanct altar. However, the burning must be done with the fire from the altar of holocausts: no strange fire may be used. But there is no symbolic *consumption* of incense, obviously: the symbolism of offering is in the burning and rising smoke of the incense: the symbol of acceptance in its being offered at a place sacred to God.

Two other incidents in the book of Judges add further meaning to the relation between the fire, the altar and God.

The first deals with the sacrifice offered by Gedeon after the apparition bidding him set to and prepare the deliverance of the oppressed people. The text speaks of the apparition of «an angel of the Lord» in some places, of «the Lord» in others: at the conclusion of the sacrifice Gedeon is convinced he has seen the Lord. It is possible that «Lord» has been altered to «angel of the Lord» out of respect, but it is clear that the angel—if we do not accept that it was a sort of human appearance of God himself—is acting in the name of God. (74) Gedeon asks how he will be able to deliver the people.

«And the Lord said to him, 'But I will be with you, and you shall smite the Midianites as one man.' And

72) *ibid.* 4,12; 16,27 (day of atonement for the years's sins).

73) MF 693².

74) Jud 6,14.16.23: the apparition is called «Lord»; in 11.20.21.22: «angel of the Lord». Gedeon says (22), «Alas, O Lord God! For now I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face.» TAMISIER R. (LSB-PC,111) ad loc., p.203 suggests that the word «angel» has been added out of respect.

he said to him, 'If now I have found favor with thee, then show me a sign it is thou who speakest with me. Do not depart from here, I pray thee, until I come to thee, and bring out my present, and set it before thee'» (75)

Returning with the flesh and bread offerings he is commanded to put them on a nearby rock and make a libation. Then the angel of the Lord

«reached out the tip of the staff that was in his hand, and touched the meat and the unleavened cakes; and there sprang up fire from the rock and consumed the flesh and the unleavened cakes». (76)

The sign asked for proves the heavenly origin of the message, but it is the sign we have seen used on other more public occasions. Afraid of his life for having seen God, Gedeon is reassured he will no die:

«Peace be to you, do not fear, you shall not die. Then Gedeon built an altar there to the Lord, and called it The Lord is peace.» (77)

But already the rock used was an altar, designated by God through the apparition.

The second instance occurs in the sacrifice offered by Manué, father of Samson, after the message concerning the future birth of the child. Manué brings his gifts and offers them.

«And when the flame went up toward heaven from the altar, the angel of the Lord ascended in the flame of the altar...» (78).

Primarily the miracle proves the heavenly origin of the messenger, but it seems to me there is a deeper meaning in the incident. The angel is not differentiated from God by Manué:

«The Manoah knew that he was the angel of the Lord.

And Manoah said to his wife, 'We shall surely die, for we have seen God'». (79)

So for the angel to mount heavenwards with the flame seems to suggest that equally with the flame the angel is taking the sacrifice heavenwards, that he identifies himself with the action of the flame in its acting for God. This would help to

75) *ibid.* 16-18.

76) *ibid.* 21.

77) *Jud* 6,24.

78) *Ibid.* 13,20.

79) *ibid.* 22.

define the meaning of the fire more clearly. The fire consumes, devours the offering, not to show that God literally consumes the offerings but to show what corresponds in God to man's consuming food. After all, eating means taking food into intimate vital relationship with oneself and raising it to the level of one's own life. So for God to act in relation to what is presented to him under the form of a food offering means that he takes it into intimate relationship with himself. We must add, of course, that this process is figurative or real according to the nature of the sacrifice. It is perfectly clear that the sacrifices of the Old Testament can receive nothing but a legal transformation by the fact of their being taken into God's possession: that is, their new divine status is only symbolic, nothing intrinsic taking place in the sacrifices to endow them with a heavenly manner of existence. The reality is to come. In the meantime, the divine way of consuming offerings will be figured forth by the quasi-spiritual consumption achieved by fire. Although such a process looks forward to its full realization in the perfect sacrifice to come, nevertheless it has value at the time, as indicative of man's offering gifts for a purpose and of God's agreeing to the purpose in accepting the gifts.

Having dealt with the function of the altar and its fire, we can now pass to the consideration of the law concerning the unity of worship, the fundamental law of the Book of Deuteronomy. (80) This law looks forward to the time when the tribes shall have entered the promised land, conquered it and settled down to peaceful occupation: it is a law demanding that only in the one place chosen by God should the nation offer its sacrifices. Moses enunciates it with much repetition as the tribes are preparing to enter the promised land. Four times in the one chapter he reminds the people of God's will in the matter (81). He first tells them that God wants them to destroy every vestige of pagan worship so as to avoid the danger of falling into idolatry:

«You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess served their gods, upon the high mountains and upon the hills and under every green tree; you shall tear down their altars, and dash

80) The Law is repeated about twenty times. MACKENZIE R.A.F., S.J. on Deut (CC) 211c: «...the central law of the Deut. code...» 215a: «This is the first and most characteristic law of Deut.»

81) Deut 12,2-7.8-12.13-19.20-28.

in pieces their pillars, and burn their Asherim with fire; you shall hew down the graven images of their gods, and destroy their name out of that place. You shall not do so to the Lord your God. But you shall seek the place which the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and to make his habitation there; thither you shall go...» (82).

This law of one altar has already been practised during the wandering through the desert, for all sacrifices have had to be brought to the tabernacle. It seems however that its observance was by no means perfect: not surprising, when the people even fell into the sin of idolatry en route. (83) Moreover, the law of the altar given to Moses at Sinai makes express provision for many altars, which are only to be erected, however, where God should indicate, and only until the definitive place should be chosen for the unique altar. (84)

There is no need to follow the history of the places of cult in the promised land until the final destruction of the high places of worship in the seventh century. (85) It is a complicated story with its own lessons — of danger from pagan rites; of non-insistence on the law when its purpose would have been frustrated, as during the schism between two kingdoms; of the difficulty of removing long-standing practices of mountain worship, worship on the high places (85a) even when they have become illegal, that is after the building of the temple. What is important here is to note the meaning of having only one altar. It shows the transcendence of God over the false gods, for it is for him to designate the place where he shall be worshipped: the false gods are worshipped wherever the people have a mind to. It shows that although the altar is for man's sake it is a thing of God for man's sake: God is to indicate where he wishes the symbol of his acceptance to be set up. Moreover,

82) Deut 12,2-5.

83) *ibid.* 12,8: «You shall not do according to all that we are doing here this day.» For idolatry see Lev 17,7; Num 25,2.

84) Ex 20,24.

85) 4 K 23,1-24 describes the abolition of all places of worship apart from the temple according to the prescriptions of the newly discovered book of Deuteronomy: although the reform began before the discovery, as 2 Par 34 shows.

85a) McKENZIE, John L., S.J. (*op.cit.* Ch.III: The Gods of the Semites,) interprets Semitic worship against the background of recent findings, thus showing the temptations to unbridled «sacred» sexuality the Israelites were subject to in this matter.

the supervision of worship possible at one shrine will offset the dangers of pagan rites being introduced at the hill shrines. For even though the people overthrew the pagan places of worship, their own mountain shrines in honour of God were contaminated, when the civilizations intermingled, with the pagan rites of the conquered territory. (86) But the chief reason for the unity of worship is to make the people realize their unity as the people of God, morally gathered round one altar, on which sacrifices in the name of all will rise day by day to God. The moral presence day by day will be reinforced by physical presence three times a year, on the occasion of the feasts of the Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. (87) God will finally choose this altar in the city of Jerusalem, built on a hill; (88) so the Lord's altar on Sion will become the centre of the restored worship of the return from exile, the sign of the future worship of the messianic days. (89)

The people realize the importance of there being only one altar for the public, official worship of God. When the tribes finally take possession of the holy land, some of them choose to live on the east side of the Jordan. They build a large altar and immediately there is trouble. The other tribes want to make war on them for their violation of the law of the unity of worship. However, the matter is settled by words, and the altar allowed to stand, since the reason for it is not cultural but monumental. It is to remind future generations that the tribes on the far side of the Jordan have the right, equally with the others, of bringing their sacrifices to God. In the preliminary accusations against the apparent defaulters, it is the will of God that has been violated, the will that would have social unity depend upon cultural unity:

86) MACKENZIE *op.cit.* 211c: «Smaller Yahweh sanctuaries were in existence all over the country, often on the sites of Canaan high places, and sacrifice were offered to him there, in all good faith, even by the prophets (e.g. 1 K 9,12; 3 K 3,2-4; 1 Par 21,26). Nevertheless in proportion as Israel learned to adopt the Canaanite civilization (under the monarchy), the frequent contamination of (under the monarchy), the frequent contamination of their rites with pagan practices and perhaps the identification, or at least association, of Yahweh with the local Ba'als in a syncretistic cult, became a scandal...»

87) Deut 16,16.

88) 3 K 8,44; 4 K 21,7; 2 Par 6,6 etc. stress the fact of the divine choice of Jerusalem and of the temple as the hallowed place where God's name is to dwell.

89) cf. 1 Cor 15,25; Col 1,16; Eph 1,10; Gal 4,26; Apoc 22,13. Also note 107.

«Thus says the whole congregation of the Lord, 'What is this treachery that you have committed against the God of Israel in turning away this day from following the Lord, by building yourselves an altar this day in rebellion against the Lord... only do not rebel against the Lord, or make us as rebels by building yourselves an altar other than the altar of the Lord our God'.
(90)

The building of the altar is regarded as an act of schism that will bring God's punishment on the whole community. The answer of the tribes reveals their consciousness of the one altar of the tabernacle as the centre of religious unity:

«Far be it from us that we should rebel against the Lord, and turn away by building an altar... other than the altar of the Lord our God that stands before his tabernacle.» (91)

During the northern schism Elijah rebuilds an ancient altar on Carmel, to win the allegiance of the people in a definitive manner to God. We saw the divine answer to Elijah's prayer. There is another circumstance about this occasion that shows the connection between the altar and the unity of the tribes. After the failure of the pagan sacrifice,

«Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying, 'Israel shall be your name'; and with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord.» (92)

The twelve stones united in one show the faith and unity possessed by the true sons of Jacob, and are an appeal to the present wavering people to decide once and for all to follow the faith of their ancestors and be united in the worship of the true God. So the altar, which we have considered as a sacred symbol acting on behalf of God, is now seen as a symbol of the tribes possessing faith in the true God. It seems to me that somehow the tribes themselves under this aspect of their unity in the true faith can be considered an altar, and that from that altar God wishes to receive the sacrifice of unqualified adoration. So that as the sacrifice is consumed by fire on the stone

90) Jos 22, 16.19.

91) *ibid.* 22.29.

92) 1 K 18,30-31.

altar, united adoration might rise up from the people, considered as one thing of flesh and blood sacred to God. Such is the result:

«And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, 'The Lord, he is God; the Lord, he is God,» (93)

In this act the people offer God the adoration of their minds and bodies, the sacrifice that is fittingly offered on the altar of their own persons, sacred to God by alliance and circumcision. I say this somewhat tentatively, in view of what the Fathers say later about the altar's representing the Church.

In the psalms the altar connotes joy and repose in God. The psalmist speaks of the tenour of his life, praising God at the altar of the sanctuary, which he loves so well:

«I wash my hands in innocence,
and go about thy altar, O Lord,
singing aloud a song of thanksgiving,
and telling all thy wondrous deeds». (94)

During the sacrifices it was the custom to walk round the altar, and at the same time join in the singing of the various psalms. (95) Again, longing in exile for the worship of the temple, the psalmist says:

«Oh send out thy light and thy truth:
let them lead me,
let them bring me to thy holy hill
and to thy dwelling!
Then I will go to the altar of God,
to God my exceeding joy» (96)

It is sufficient to be in the presence of the altar to be with God, and because of the song and music associated with the worship at the altar, (97) the latter becomes the symbol of joy and exultation:

«and I will praise thee with the lyre,
O God, my God.»

Psalm 83 has affinities with the Psalm (42) just mentioned, and seems to be a sequel. The singer has returned to the sanctuary, like a bird flown back to its nest. The altar is the soul's

93) 1 K 18,39.

94) Ps 25,6.

95) BIRD T. E. (CC) on Ps 25,6-8, 344c.

96) Ps 42,3-4.

97) Eccii 50,16,18; 47,9-10; Par 15,16; 16,4; 23,5,30.

dwelling, refuge and rest: that is, the singer places his soul's security in the worship of God at the altar. (98)

«How lovely is thy dwelling place,

O Lord of hosts!

My soul longs, yea, faints

for the courts of the Lord;

my heart and flesh sing for joy

to the living God.

Even the sparrow find a home,

and the swallow a nest for herself,

where she may lay her young,

at thy altars, O Lord of hosts. . . » (99)

I take it that the reference to «the altars» refers to the two altars in the temple: the two taken in their unity as the focal point of Israel's prayer and sacrifice (100)

Further spiritual teaching with regard to the altar is had in the book of Ecclesiasticus. On the one hand, observance of the Law, the doing of good to others, especially to the poor, and the schunning of evil and injustice, are so many ways of offering sacrifices. On the other hand, such metaphorical offerings do not dispense with offerings in the proper sense. These are part of the Law itself, especially at the time of the three great feasts of the Pasch, Pentecost and Tabernacles. The offerer must not only offer with a good intention but with generosity. Because the offerer is making a gift to God out of the abundance given by God, and moreover will be rewarded and outdone in generosity by God, let him always offer with joy on his face and with pleasure. Such is the theme of an exhortation. We see the same attitude of joyful, generous worship enjoined here as was spontaneously expressed in the psalms: «al thou givest, give with a smiling face, gladly bring in the tithe.» (101) More particularly, however, in this exhortation there are specific references to the altar. The fat burning on the altar and the incense rising before the face of God are material happenings that must get their true meaning from the sentiments of the offerer:

98) BIRD (CC) on Ps 83,2-5, 355c.

99) Ps. 83, 3.

100) KNABENBAUER (CSS) on Ps 83,4 p. 312 mentions that several saw in the «dove» (according to the Vulgate) a symbol of the whole people. Certainly a pleasing thought. Perhaps the «swallow» could be taken in the same sense.

101) Eccli 35,6.

«The oblation of the just man enriches the altar, and its fragrance rises before the Most High. The sacrifice of the just man is agreeable, and his memorial will not be forgotten.» (102)

On the other hand lack of worthy sentiments makes the offerings powerless. Such is the burden of God's complaints against the priests of the temple in the book of Malachy. Such lack of desire to honour God means that defective animals are used in sacrifice; these the altar fire, for all its symbolism, cannot render acceptable. The whole worship should cease rather than go on in such an insulting manner:

«O that one among you would shut the gates and that you would not kindle the fire upon my altar to no purpose.» (103)

The time is coming when such unworthy sacrifices will give way to a pure oblation to be offered among the gentiles: «in every place incense is offered to my name and a pure oblation.» (104)

Indeed, the messianic days referred to in this prophecy are foretold by other prophets as well, under the form of the temple worship. In these prophecies the altar of Jerusalem, the divinely chosen place for Israel's united worship, is to become the altar of the whole world. Isaiah pictures the gentiles bringing their gifts to be ronseirated by the altar, in a prophery ioncerning the glorified Sion as the religious centre of the world:

«Upon thee Javé shines, And over thee his glory appears... thy heart shall throb and expand, For the wealth of the sea shall be turned to thee, And the riches of nations shall come to thee... All the flocks of Kedar are gathered to thee, The rams of Nebayoth are at thy service. They come up with acceptance on My altar, Yea the house of My glory wil I glorify.» (105)

Not only that but the altar will be the Lord's table for the feasting of the peoples of the world:

«A time is coming when the Lord of hosts will prepare a banquet on this mountain of ours: a banquet of rich viands, a banquet of choice wines — of rich viands

102) Eccli 35-6. The handful of flour and incense thrown on the altar acts as a reminder to God of the offerer.

103) Mal 1,10. Translation: SUTCLIFFE (CC) ad loc., 556d.

104) *ibid.* 11.

105) Is 60,3-9. POWER E., S.J. (CC), 450c for trans.

full of marrow, of choice wines well refined.» (106)

Here is the familiar theme of the banquet of the Messianic times, in which God is pictured as giving the highest proof of his friendship and familiarity by inviting to his table. Such an image conveys the truth of God's communicating his divine riches. Already, such a communication is symbolized to some extent by the communion sacrifices of the Old Testament, but in the future there will be a significant difference: God will give his guests to feast on the very parts of the sacrifice which are reserved, consecrated and offered to him alone in the old worship (107). The altar and table of the Lord will be the meeting place between God and his new people, where they become pleasing to him by making acceptable offerings, and where they shall feast on his good things in great joy:

«It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him that the might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation». (108)

Ezechiel, too, pictures the Messianic times in his description of the New Temple, the New Cult and the New Holy Land. (109) He necessarily does so in forms familiar to himself and his contemporaries, but his detailed account of the vision of the New Temple can scarcely be conceived as a blue-print for the actual rebuilding of the temple after the exile. Rather it is a figurative account of the worship in the Messianic Kingdom: and must have been known as such, for the builders of the new temple did not follow his prescriptions, which are at times at variance with the Mosaic code. (110) The great altar of holocausts is described after the likeness of the altar set up by Achaz in place of Solomon's altar: a ziggurat form of altar, common in Assyria and Babylon, and consisting of three square blocks

106) Is 25,6. Trans. as above, 435h.

107) KNABENBAUER (CSS) on Is 25,6, p.468-9. The feasting symbol is also found in Prov 9,2; Ps 21,27; 22,5; Is 55, 1; 65,13, as well as in Matt 22,4; Lk 14,16.

Fortasse ii rem bene declarant, says Knabenbauer, after giving many opinions on the matter, qui convivium hoc in eodem sensu generali accipiunt quo communicatio bonorum divinarum in se intelligitur expressa, prout et hisce in terris et demum in caelesti patria futura sit». The feast on the good things of God is had, of course, through spiritual fellowship with the sacrificed Lamb of God.

108) Is 25,9.

109) Ez 40-48.

110) POWER E., S.J. (CC) on Ez XL-XLVIII, 492a.

of stone of decreasing area placed one on top of another. (111) The table or altar of incense is described as made of wood. Into this New Temple God enters and declares: «Son of man, here is My throne; here, eternally, in the heart of Israel, is My resting place» (112) From this New Temple and flowing past the altar comes a stream of water, symbol of Messianic blessings, to flood all the land:

«and behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east); and the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar... and wherever the river goes every living creature which swarms will live...» (113).

Sanctuary and altar are in closest connection: what is offered at the altar is accepted there by God and as it were taken into his dwelling place in the sanctuary. The blessings do not flow directly from the altar, but only past it: they are the blessings coming from the God of the sanctuary in response to the worship offered him at the altar.

To conclude this chapter we can summarize what the Old Testament reveals about the significance of the altar. Wherever he authorises an altar God will come and bless those who worship there. The matter of the altar is to be natural, earth or unhewn stones, which will remain the substantial part of the altar, even when it is surrounded by a rich casing of bronze covered wood. The natural sacredness of the altar, as representing God in the reception of the offerings, is not enough in the special legislation concerning the tabernacle worship. The altar must be anointed with fragrant oil in the name of God, thus becoming sacro-sanct, itself sacred and imparting sacredness to whatever is offered on it: it must however be purified from the sinfulness of those who have erected it. It acts in the name of God, first by receiving the blood of sacrificed animals and secondly by its fire consuming the food offerings. The fire by its quasi-immateriality is a fitting symbol of God's coming down upon the offerings to consume them in a divine manner, transforming them from their human condition to a spiritual

111) Ez 48,13.

112) *ibid.* 43,7.

113) Ez 47,1.9. cf also Jn 7,10 and 19,21 in which he shows that Christ, having promised such wonderful waters from within himself, has them issue forth after completing his sacrifice.

one. The fragrant smoke of the altar of incense wafts into the holy of holies the joyful adoration and prayer of the people. At the same time this incense can be understood to complete the symbolism of the smoke rising from the altar of holocausts. Smoke and incense rising will indicate that, as God has come down upon the offerings in fire, so he takes them to himself into his inner sanctuary, into heaven. Thus is their status raised, at least in a figurative, legal manner. Now made sacred by the sacred altar and its fire they can become the means of imparting sacredness to those who feast on them: it being understood that the whole offering is made sacred by the part offered and accepted on the altar. The offerers then become guests at God's table, feasting on food that is now not theirs but his, and thus, under the form of a present friendship is signified a richer communication of divine riches in the mesianic times. Being as the focal point of the relations between God and his people, the altar becomes a splendid sign of unity. In fact God leads the people to concentrate all their sacrificial worship on one altar, chosen by him in the mountain city of Jerusalem. There God wishes his people to rejoice in him by offering generously at his altar and living in accord with the sacrifices they offer. By this worship concentrated at the altar, blessings will flow from the sanctuary, which God, dwelling in heaven, sanctifies by his presence. The glorious days to come are dreamed of under the aspect of all nations bringing gifts that will be accepted on the altar and feasting on the richest portions of the offering reserved normally to God. Briefly, God communicates sanctity through the sacred chrism to the altar, the altar to the offerings, the offerings to the worshippers and so divine and fraternal communion is strengthened: with a view to a heavenly fulfilment beginning in messianic days.

THE MEANING OF THE ALTAR IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

A word of explanation is needed here to offset scholarly scandal! The phrase *New Testament* means that new state of affairs brought about between God and man and dealt with in new sacred writings. The state of affairs obviously existed long before the writings. The sacrifice of the Cross had been offered, and the sacrificia] activity of the Church was the centre of the new testament. The first part of this Chapter deals with the reality and the identification of the altar of sacrifice—both in the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross and in the sacrifice of the Church—by a simple process of reasoning. The method is *a priori*: sacrifice demands an altar—Christ's sacrifice is perfect—therefore it involves a perfect altar. Then in the second part the texts of the new testament writings are examined, not so much to establish the fact or the identity of the altar as to see what consciousness, if any, the sacred writers had of it.

Anyone familiar with the writings of de la Taille will instantly recognise the degree of my indebtedness to them. Hence I do not pretend here to be blazing a trail into the unknown so much as providing the reader with enough doctrinal background for the constant assessment to be made of both sacred and ecclesiastical writings. It must not be forgotten that the truth about the altar does not derive wholly from the sacred writings, even the ancient ones: hence it should not be exclusively tracked down there. The sacred and ecclesiastical writings simply show a more or less developed awareness of aspects of this truth.

The principle that altar sanctifies the offerings placed on it is confirmed by the authority of Christ, thus upbraiding the scribes and pharisees:

«You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that made the gold sacred? the gift or the

altar that makes the gift sacred?'» (1a)

The same power of sanctifying is attributed to the temple and the altar, and this indicates a moral oneness between the two symbols, the one of God's presence the other of his activity. Christ, moreover, indicates that the real temple prefigured by the material one is his own body (1b) and in so doing implicitly indicates that the altar finds its true significance there as well. So that if he is the temple of the propitiation he is to make to the Father, he is likewise the altar of the sacrifice he is to offer. In his enigmatic statement and prophecy to the Jews he hints at the transfer and elevation of the idea of temple: his risen body will be the true dwelling of God, the sanctuary of the new and eternal covenant, the tabernacle for the true sacrifice. The new worship will unite and transcend in its spirituality the earthly, shadowy and manifold cult of legal sacrifices.

(2) To similar spiritualisation and unity it is legitimate to think that the altars of the old law will also be assumed, all their significant details and functions being found in the new altar, though in a superior manner. The point of course is important. It supposes that there has to be an altar in the new dispensation. But it is legitimate, for if the new sacrifice to replace, fulfill and infinitely surpass all other sacrifices, is to be a proper sacrifice and not simply a metaphorical one (3), it must have in it what makes it recognizably a sacrifice. It is not a sacrifice because revelation says so, but revelation says so because it is. It would be arbitrary to say it is a sacrifice and then deny that one of the essentials of sacrifice, the altar, could be missing: on the grounds that such a superior sacrifice could dispense with such a lowly instrument of human cult. However, once the altar is conceived of as having sanctity prior to the victim's having it (at least in purely human sacrifices), then it will not be thought of as absent from the perfect sacrifice, but rather as itself reaching the perfection of its function. In the perfect altar there will not be any priority of sanctity to

(1a) Mt 23, 17-19.

(1b) Jo 2, 19-20.

(2) MF 154.

(3) For all these discussions on sacrifice notice a) that the internal dedication of the soul to God (the principle part of sacrifice) makes the sacrifice TRUE as opposed to insincere; b) that the external offering of the gift makes it PROPER, as opposed to improper or metaphorical. We speak of the «sacrifice» of good works.

be communicated to the victim: just as there will not be any less sanctity in it than in the victim. But where, in the perfect sacrifice, can we find the altar?

We are not called upon here to discuss the connection between the sacrificial action at the supper and the sacrifice in blood upon the cross. In some fashion Christ anticipated the blood offering of the Cross by proper sacrificial oblation at the supper. (4)

In the old sacrifices, the body of the animal which was to become a victim, a lamb of God, had to be placed on the altar, its blood already drained from it, and there await an additional sign of divine acceptance: the very placing on the altar was itself an inchoate sign of that acceptance, but had to be completed by the consuming fire and ascending smoke, preferably by fire of miraculous origin. Clearly the acceptance of the blood by its very nature, had to be confined to its being received by the altar; as a sort of compensation, the souring of the blood was done with a variety of ribes. At the supper sacrificial action the fulfilment of his old cult is now at hand. Christ takes bread into his holy and venerable hands, with a view to offering his body as the victim of sacrifice: and so at an altar. (4a) Once the victim begins to be offered it is really accepted, even though the *manifestation* of this acceptance does not occur immediately. The manifestation will occur in the glory of the resurrection, but is virtually present in the real acceptance. The real acceptance is achieved simultaneously with the real oblation at the supper, even though the oblation is not over in an instant.

At this stage it is necessary to reflect on what it means for Christ to use an altar in his sacrifice. We are outside the realm of purely material offerings, where priest, victim and altar are separate realities. In this spiritual sacrifice, where priest and victim are one, it is absurd to think of Christ's having to place the flesh and blood of the victim on some extraneous altar, as on an object symbolizing by its close con-

(4) Everyone is familiar with the main theories on the relationship between the supper and the Cross. They are well summarised and discussed passim in the *Mysterium Fidei*: except for the «sacramentalist» theory, which can be found in many modern writings. Cf. C. Tierney. *The Theology of Misteries* L. A. C. R. XXXV (1958) 15,18,276.

4a) Once the victim begins to be offered it is really accepted, even though the *manifestation* of this acceptance does not occur immediately. The manifestation will occur in the glory of the resurrec-

nection with God the place of God's acceptance (4b). Where else can the altar be except in as close connection with God as the victim? What else but the body of Christ itself? Therefore the Son of God as priest will not have to approach the Godhead with his visible offering except at the altar of his own visible self: whether we consider the visibility to be sacramental at the supper or real on the cross.

Remember we are not talking so much of the interior self-giving that accompanies outward sacrificing, as of the outward process. In the internal sacrifice we could talk perhaps of the altar of Christ's heart, at which his inner worship would please his Father, but we are concerned here with sacrifice in the proper sense of an external offering made on an external altar to God. The only possible external altar for the flesh and blood of the victim is the body of the offerer. Nothing is nearer God in the external order of reality, for God is there as in his own personal possession and temple, thanks to the hypostatic union of Christ's body and soul with his divine Person. Therefore we have to see how it is possible for Christ as priest to offer his flesh on the altar of his body and pour out thereon his precious blood.

Let us see what happens first with regard to the placing of the flesh of the victim on the altar. Uttering the words of consecration over the bread, Christ gives his body a new presence, which, linked with the following consecration, shows forth his body as drained of the blood. The sacrificial words of the two consecrations, «given for you», «shed for you unto the remission of sins», show that this body and blood are present as a sacrificial offering. Now we have seen that all animal flesh is sacrificial by being placed on a holy and sanctifying altar and lying there for its full divine acceptance. How can this sacrificial flesh of our Lord be said to «lie» on the altar of his body except by being so much «on» it as to be identical with it? No closer union between offering and altar

tion, but is virtually present in the real acceptance. The real acceptance is achieved simultaneously with the real oblation at the supper even though the oblation is not over in an instant.

- (4b) It makes an interesting bit of speculation to ask what would have happened if Christ had offered the flesh and blood of a lamb in sacrifice: would he have placed them on an altar? What if he had transubstantiated bread and wine into the flesh and blood of an already existing lamb? Such old suppositions imply that our Melchisedechian priest would have been a priest according to the order (or rite) of Aaron. They also help to focus the mind on what did happen!

can be thought of. Far from the idea seeming unreal because there is lacking the accustomed material duality of objects, offering here, altar there, this unity of victim and altar should strike us as the supreme achievement of sacrifice. Offering made to God have always been placed symbolically as close as possible to him. Here this attempt to reach him in something taking his place finds its perfect accomplishment.

But where is the divine sanctification the human offering acquires precisely by being placed on God's altar as victim? The question is similar to that which asks how can Christ merit what is already due to him, for instance, the glory of his humanity. The answer is along the same lines: namely that what is due on one count becomes due on another. So although Christ's humanity was divinely sanctified by the hypostatic union, it now has this sanctity under a new title, as being the victim of sacrifice. So what cannot be acquired, is now present in such a way as if it had been brought about by the sacrificial offering. (5)

We come next to the priestly action of pouring the sacrificial blood on the altar. By the words of consecration a sacrificial outpouring of our Lord's blood is represented. Therefore in some sense, it is being poured on the altar by the priest. If the altar is the sacred body of the Lord, then the blood is shown forth as poured out over it precisely in being shown as separated from it. In the symbol of blood immolation to come, i. e. in the double consecration, our Lord «pours» the blood over his altar body in a symbolic fashion, so anticipating the actual blood pouring over the altar-body which will follow during the course of the passion (5a).

The rite is not a mere symbol of what is to come: it is the anticipation of what is to come, such an anticipation of it as to make the supper sacrificial. Christ is here and now offering himself as a Victim to his Father. The actual victimizing of the sacred humanity is still to come». In other words, the High Priest according to the order of Melchisedech, apparently offering bread and wine at the altar of the supper

(5) MF 27.

(5a) There is no need to remind the reader that by transubstantiation Christ becomes present in the same condition he has at the moment of speaking but with a new manner of presence, different from his natural one. He is present under the bread and wine appearances in the manner in which substance is present. New presence does not alter the reality of what is present.

table, is in reality offering his own flesh and blood at the altar of his own body. On the cross, while the blood pouring is being caused by the Roman nails and is sacrilegious from the Jewish high priest's malice, it is sacrificial by the divine high priest's determination. (6)

It might be asked could we regard Christ's hands as the altar at the supper. (7) For in them he held the sacramental species indicating his victim flesh and blood. There would then be a kind of actual distribution between victim and altar as a support for our imagination: we would see the victim in some sort of visible, manner (i.e. through the mediation of the species) present on the altar by being held in Christ's hands. Then we would see the priest feeding the apostles from the victim flesh of the altar. Similarly we would see the blood on the altar in a slightly more graphic manner. However, I do not think that is the primary sense in which Christ in his humanity is the altar. Of course, it is exactly the same humanity locally to mix the two orders. I should prefer to say that as the sacrifice of the body and blood is going on sacramentally, under and apparent bread and wine offering, we should rather consider Christ's humanity in its sacramental presence as hav-

(6) It might be asked if any difference is made to these ideas by the varying interpretations given to the relationship between the supper and the cross. We recall that these interpretations are of two kinds: one kind makes the sacrifice of the cross begin by the ritual oblation at the supper, the other kind doesn't. The answer to the doubt depends on whether we are speaking of the fact of Christ's being an altar at the supper and on the cross or of its explanation. Obviously, granted the legitimacy of identifying Christ with the altar of his own sacrifice, he must be the altar at the supper and on the cross, since he is sacrificing on both occasions. But as to the explanation of this fact, de la Taille (as representative of the first kind of interpretation) would say that just as the willing suffering on the cross is known to be sacrificial not precisely from its being visibly and willingly accepted but from the ritual oblation at the supper, so Christ's being an altar on the cross is due to the same ritual consecration's «informing» the whole process with sacrificial meaning and so endowing the body of Christ with the status not only of victim but also of altar.

Is the post-mortem bleeding, from spear thrust, and from the side and the feet when the body was taken down from the cross — forms of bleeding quite clear from the evidence of the Holy Shroud — is this blood being spilt sacrificially? The priest has finished offering his immolation in blood... but, no doubt, he has willed that whatever blood be spilt have the dignity of the blood of sacrifice, even though the immolation be finished. I have never seen the point discussed.

(7) The suggestion is considered here in view of what Cabasilas will have to say later about the relation between Christ's hands and our altars. Cf. his *Vita in Christo*, 1, 111: PG. 150,580.

ing the functions of both victim and altar. When the blood reality of the passion occurs then we can see both victim and altar in the locally present aspect: Christ's material blood visibly poured out over his material, visible body. To say nothing of its practical impossibility, it is unthinkable that Christ himself should have performed on the cross any real rite of blood pouring, for example, by smearing blood over his hands. That would, indeed, have been a priestly action of smearing the altar of God with the blood of the victim, but the supposition is intolerable. Such a grotesque example helps us to see the incongruity of saying that by holding the chalice of his blood in his hands, Christ is thereby pouring the blood over the altar of himself. (8) Others are to shed his blood: no man can shed his own.

Finally we have to see how the acceptance of the sacrifice is manifested by the fire of the altar. We have seen that the altar not only receives the outpoured blood and the immolated flesh of the victim but is also the means of indicating divine acceptance. It does this by the very fact of having the blood poured on it (although this in the old worship was necessarily a very fallible sign of the divine acceptance) and by the consummation of the flesh by fire, whether of immediate or mediate divine origin. In the case of Christ's sacrifice, it goes without saying, all imperfections vanish. There will not be any question of a mere symbol of divine acceptance. Moreover, there will not be any interval between oblation and acceptance. Acceptance will be involved in the oblation. So it is that the consecration by our Lord at the supper is at once his oblation of himself as victim and the Father's acceptance of the victim. For it is by divine power that Christ changes the bread and wine into his flesh and blood: this power as originating in God sufficiently indicates the divine acceptance of what is offered. (9) The external manifestation of this divine acceptance takes

(8) The incongruity would be heightened by considering that in the supposition Christ to indicate the pouring of blood should have poured some of the blood sacramentally present over, say, his hands. It is clear I think that the altar here is in the sacramental order, as is the victim. Of course it is the visible Lord who is the victim (and so the altar), but he makes himself sacramentally present as victim: so, too, I would think, as altar. In the liturgy the Church certainly stresses Christ's hands, as though they were the sacred altar! But perhaps she wishes to stress the freedom and generosity of Christ as he deliberately takes into his hands the elements that will signify, when consecrated, the awful reality of the passion and death.

(9) cf. n.4 and MF 692.

place only at the resurrection and ascension of the victim into heaven, but the reality of the acceptance is there from the moment of the oblation. So we see that the altar of the Lord's body exerts its function of accepting in the name of God the flesh and blood present «on» it. The divine fire manifesting this acceptance will be the «fire» of divine glory, which will transfer the victim from an earthly to a heavenly condition in the fullest possible manner, and no in the mere symbolic manner of the fire of old. But like the fire of old, this divine altar fire of glory will belong to God and to the altar and thus pass to the victim: it will be the glory that belonged already by right, he from the hypostatic union, to the sacred humanity. (10) It will be given, however, under a new title: namely as the effusion of divine pleasure over a sacrificial effusion made with such filial love and obedience. We could say that this fire of glory was potentially in the sacred humanity, waiting for the moment when the latter should become at once victim and altar, and that then it issues forth, consuming victim and altar, as in the sacrifice of Elias on mount Carmel. Both victim and altar are then transferred to the condition proper to God, who has accepted the victim on the altar. From henceforth, then, there will be a heavenly altar and a heavenly victim. In taking the victim up into the glorious existence proper to himself God will not have to remove the victim from the altar as from a weak symbol of his acceptance. In this spiritual sacrifice the altar with its fire will continuously represent the divine acceptance of the victim, preserving it, so to speak, from corruptibility by endowing it with radiant mortality.

To sum up this investigation, we could say that we are free to contemplate in an undivided manner the three realities of priest, victim and altar at the last supper and throughout the passion, although now one element, now another is more prominent. At the supper it is clearly the priest who is acting, while from the agony on through to the death on the cross, it is clearly the victim who is being immolated in blood. It is in the passion too, that we can see the blood of the victim being poured out over the divine altar. Victim and altar are seen

(10) The glory of the Son's Godhead, the glory received from his Father and communicated to that sacred manhood in which he is his Father's Son.

with equal intensity, with growing clarity, until the painful immolation is complete loving oblation thus consummated. It is no wonder that the cross itself so often receives the name of the altar of Christ's sacrifice, for on the cross the true altar (as, too, the true victim) is seen in its full light.

We can now pass to the texts of the New Testament writings to see how much of the meaning of the altar as just worked out, is present.

In warning the Corinthians against eating food offered in idolatrous worship, St. Paul speaks of communion (κοινωνία) now with the body and blood of Christ, now with altar, now with the divinity:

«The cup of blessing which we bless is it not a participation (κοινωνία) in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation (κοινωνία) in the body of Christ?... are not those who eat the sacrifices partners (κοινωνοί) in the altar?... I do not want you to be partners with demons (κοινωνοὺς τῶν δαιμονίων)» (11)

In this passage St. Paul refers to that complex of doctrine which unites victim, altar and the divinity: he does so in such a way as to indicate familiarity on the part of the readers with the symbolism of participation in the victim. For a moment we can recall the connections between these three realities in order to see the force of communion with the altar. In every sacrifice the victim is thought of as sanctified by the altar, which itself is sacred to the divinity. So the latter is understood as the primary source of sanctity; the altar, being representative of the divinity, as sanctified by it, and as sanctifying the victim; the victim as sanctified, and as sanctifying the communicants. So by eating the victim there is acquired a communion with the sanctity of God, communicated by him to the altar and so to the victim. Not that there is a diminution of the sanctity of God by the time it reaches the victim, nor is there a separation from God by having his sanctity immediately from the victim, as though by two steps removed. The sanctity of the victim is that of the altar, which in turn is that of God. Which means that there is really one

(11) I Cor 10,16-21.

fellowship or communion, that with the divine sanctity, but that it is possessed through the active symbolism of union with the victim of the altar. Whoever then is associated with the sanctity of the victim is thereby associated with the sanctity of the altar, and so with the sanctity of God. Moreover, the only reason for having the first of these associations is to have the second: just as this must be had only for the sake of having the third. Conversely, there is no association with the sanctity of God except by association with that of the altar, nor can the latter be had except by association with that of the victim. (12)

So when St. Paul gives a threefold *κοινωνία* as the result of the eating sacrificial foods, first that with the body and blood of Christ, secondly with the Jewish altar and thirdly with demons, he is merely referring to the same kind of thing, namely an association through eating with the sanctity of the victim, the altar, the divinity. Of course with a difference in the three classes of communicants! The pagans, by their eating, partake of the wickedness of the demons, the Jews of a divine sanctity, in figurative rites. Christians of divine sanctity by symbolic and effective rites. (13) But because only their victim is mentioned it does not mean that for Christians the eating means association only with the victim. In each type of worship the three associations are present, with victim, altar and divinity. So St. Paul implies that in eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ, we too have association with the sanctity of the Christian altar, as the Jews had it with theirs, and with the Christian God, as the pagans had it with their demons. So he concludes his remarks by saying that the Christians cannot have communion with the altar of God and that of the demons: «You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.» (14) Nor can they be associated with God and demons at the same time: «You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons.» Obviously the Christians could have physically eaten of the pagan foods, but the interior *κοινωνία* with one altar and God ruled out that with the other altar and the demons. Here again we are led to the con-

(12) MF, 476.B.

(13) The rites did not effectively signify the sanctifying grace of union with God, though such grace was had by the just under the old Covenant.

(14) 1 Cor 10,21.

clusion that the Christian altar, which must have the same real sanctity as the victim, must be the body of Christ. The full thought of this passage will then be, that by sacramental communion Christians have spiritual fellowship with Christ, sharing with him the sanctity he has as victim, altar and God. There is no need to develop the idea of the sanctity that is involved, except to show that Christ, as the heavenly altar, mediates divine sanctity through his being the victim forever on the altar, eternally maintained in that condition by the divine fire of glory that burns there. (14a)

Hence we are prepared to see some of the overtones of the statement in the Epistle to the Hebrews, in which St Paul prohibits the use by the Jewish Christians of the legal foods of the Old Law, basing his argument on the superiority of the eucharistic food:

«Do not be led astray by diverse and strange teachings; for it is well that the heart be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited their adherents. We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat.» (15)

Instead of the old sacrificial foods, Christians have the eucharistic food, which strengthens the heart in grace. What is the altar in this passage? First, let us see why St Paul says the Aaronic priests cannot eat from our altar. He compares Christ's suffering on the Cross to the burning of the sin-offerings outside the camp: since the priests could not eat of the latter sacrifice (16), neither therefore can they eat of the former. But the Christians can: hence they must go outside the camp to Christ, bearing abuse for him. They can partake of the sacrificial food, which is the eucharist, from the altar of Christ's sacrifice. Is the Cross then regarded by St Paul as the altar? No, for two reasons. First, he says «we have an altar»: the Cross is a thing of the past. Second, in his comparison with the sin-offerings, St Paul equates the suffering of Christ on the cross with the burning of the victims. Now

(14a) The divine sanctity produces a twofold effect in Christ's sacred humanity: the first, a sanctity as substantial as the hypostatic union, the second, flowing from and demanded by the first, an absolute plenitude of grace and charity in his human soul. The eating of the glorified flesh of Christ associates us, too, with the divine sanctity itself, and thus our souls are «graced.»

(15) Heb 12, 9-10.

(16) Lev. 16,27.

the burning of the victims was not the sacrificial burning on the altar: this and the sacrificial oblation had taken place within the city, and the burning outside was to show the destruction of sin, brought about by the offering. So St Paul does not think of Christ's suffering on the cross as his being offered on the altar: rather, according to the comparison, he thinks of the priestly oblation as having taken place within the city. The conclusion is that our altar is not the cross but a present heavenly one, (17) from which we can eat, the flesh of him who was consumed in the suffering on the cross: it must then be the body of Christ, the only «sedes Dei» which bears «on» it the victim of the sacrifice of the passion. It is only our imagination which is inclined to boggle at the identity of things which of old were distinct, and which in our daily experience we think of as distinct. So by considering that we have a (heavenly) altar, we are not only keeping our expectation fixed on the city which is to come, but are enabled to realize the truth that Christ, having passed into the heavens to be our great high priest in the heavenly tabernacle of his own body, is at the same time the imperishable victim of his sacrifice: to be which he is for ever present on the heavenly altar of his own humanity, whose undying fire forever communicates glorious incorruptibility to the immolated flesh. (18)

(17) MF 197. Also Bonsirven (quoted by SPICQ C. —O.P., *L'Épître aux Hébreux II*, Paris 1953, 425b), who agrees: «Ne convient-il pas qu'il soit l'autel, comme il est la victime? Nous aboutissons ainsi à une sublimation et à une unification magnifiques de toutes les figures...»

(18) This interpretation of Christ's being the altar may receive confirmation from a likely meaning of St Paul's subsequent exhortation to the Christians, «Thorough him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.» What is this sacrifice of praise, coming so soon after the mention of our having an altar? In the LXX version a sacrifice of praise is one of the three kinds of peace offerings (Lev 7,12); we call the Mass «this sacrifice of praise». So St Paul could be speaking of the eucharistic sacrifice by using this phrase. But what of the additional phrase about «the fruit of lips?» It comes from Osse 14,3: «reddemus fructum labiorum nostrorum, which, however, renders the hebrew «parim sefatenu» (=bulls, our lips), which, according to MEDEBIELLE (LSB-C. XII) on Heb 13,10, p.370, would seem to indicate that thanksgiving will take the place of sacrifice. But another probable meaning, according to de la Taille. MF 198, is «Let us render the victims we have vowed, let us offer our vows: that is our sacrifice», just as we speak in the Canon of the Mass of those «who render to thee their vows (tibi que reddunt VOTA SUA).» St Paul then adds an exhortation to well-doing and to alms-giving, «God is pleased with such sacrifices»; this metaphorical use of sacrifice, it might be said, seems to indicate a similar metaphorical use of

We can pass now to the more direct treatment of the heavenly altar that we find in the Apocalypse. First of all we see that St John makes use of the figure of the temple with its furnishings in order to convey the truth of the heavenly worship. (19) Thus we see Christ standing as victim before his Father (20); making men priests of God. (21) We see an altar of holocausts; (22) a golden altar, too, before the throne of God, (23) an altar which speaks. (24) The heavenly temple is seen on many occasions, and the ark of the covenant. (25) All this imagery lasts for the duration of the Church militant. But in the New Jerusalem, which succeeds to the Church militant, there is no temple except God and the Lamb: (26) the implication being, perhaps, there is no altar either, except in a sublimated sense connected with God and the Lamb.

The suggestion has been put forward — it seems very probable to me — that the decor of these heavenly visions has been suggested not only by the temple worship but, more directly even, by the Christian worship of the first century. In the early domestic Christian places of worship:

«the bishop sat upon his throne, which was covered with a white linen cloth, in the tablinum, facing the people across the altar; the presbyters sat on either hand in a semi-circle; the deacons stood, one on either side of the throne, the rest either at the head of the people before the altar or scattered among them

the offering of the «sacrifice of praise». But could it not be that St Paul is reminding the Christians that *metaphorical* sacrifices flow from the *proper* sacrifice of the eucharist? The interpretation of de la Taille makes the whole passage more cogent, stressing that we have a sacrifice and communion which fulfill all the old sacrifices, whether sin or peace sacrifices; that we offer and receive the victim of the Cross, not at a material altar (as some commentators thought, see LSB-PC p.368) but at the heavenly altar.

(19) ALLO E.-B., O.P., L'Apocalypse, Paris 1921, p.103 says that everything in the earthly temple had its counterpart in the heavens. CHARLES R.H., The Revelation of St John 1 (ICC), Edinburgh 1920, p.227, defending the position that there is only one heavenly altar, says, «It is wholly unjustifiable to conclude that every characteristic of the earthly temple has its prototype in the heavenly Temple in the Apocalypse.» cf. n.35.

(20) Apoc 5,6.9.12.

(21) *ibid.* 5,10; 1,5-6.

(22) *ibid.* 6,9; 14,8.

(23) *ibid.* 8,3-5.

(24) *ibid.* 9,13; 16,7.

(25) *ibid.* 11,19; 14,17; 15,5.6-8; 16,1.13.

(26) *ibid.* 21,22-3.

maintaining order; some of the sub-deacons and their assistants, the acolytes, guarded the doors; the others assisted the deacons in their various duties. The laity stood, facing the bishop, the men on one side, the women, on the other. The catechumens and strangers stood by themselves at the back.» (27)

So speaks Dom Gregory Dix. He then goes on to point out that this arrangement must have been adopted in the first century, as being later on the universal practice and also because it is reflected in the scenes of the Apocalypse. Here, he says,

«everything centres upon the golden altar which is before the throne of God. Before it stands the multitude, which no man can number, of the redeemed. Everywhere are the ministering angels. And the four and twenty elders of heaven have their seats in a semi-circle around the 'great white throne of God and the Lamb', as the earthly presbyters have their seats around the white-clothed throne of the bishop.» (28)

Hence Dix concludes that it is the practice of the Church which has suggested the symbolism of the vision. It seems then quite possible that St John has a mixture of materials in the accounts of his material taken from the temple and from the Christian practice of his own day.

The heavenly altar plays a very decisive part in the Apocalypse. For the moment taking it for granted that there is only one altar, with characteristics of both the altar of holocausts and the altar of incense, we see that the prayers of the martyrs (29) and of all the saints are offered at this altar before the throne of God. (30)

These prayers become spiritual forces, which are conceived as bringing about divine judgement: for after the prayers are offered, fire from the altar is cast down upon the earth in punishment. (31) Later a voice from the altar bids the four angels

(27) DIX Dom Gregory, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, Westminster 1945, p.28.

(28) *ibid.*

(29) 'Apoc 6,10.

(30) *ibid.* 8,4.

(31) *ibid.* 8,5. «These prayers have a double effect; they obtain mercy save when it is refused; but even when mercy is rejected and they provoke chastisement, it is chastisement that can be curative.» So MARTINDALE (CC) ad loc. 967d.

of punishment to be released. (32) Then at judgement time the angel of the altar where the martyrs are, comes forth and bids the angel with the scythe to begin the judgement; (33) for the prayers of the martyrs are now due to be answered, the number of their brethren having been filled up. Finally the altar is heard speaking once more, to proclaim that the Lord's judgements are indeed just. (34)

We can examine each of these scenes in order to see what interpretation to give the heavenly altar or altars.

The first scene occurs during the visions at the breaking of the seals on the scroll by the Lamb. Most probably these visions are indicative of great principles or energies at work in the struggle between Christ and Satan, the Church and the world. (35) When the fifth seal is broken, John sees

«under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne; they cried out with a loud voice 'O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?' Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.» (36)

There is a controversy as to whether the altar mentioned here is the same as the altar of incense to be mentioned later. (37)

(32) *ibid.* 9,18-14.

(33) Apoc 14,18.

(34) *ibid.* 16,7.

(35) MARTINDALE (CC) 996e: «he (St John) is offering a gradual exhibition of great principles, or energies at work, discernable in life by the keen sighted.»

(36) Apoc 6,9-11.

(37) ALLO, *op. cit.* 103 C.3 and MARTINDALE (CC) *passim*, are for two altars. CHARLES (ICC) on Apoc 8,5, pp.227-31, argues at length for one, from other apocalyptic and early Christian literature. He also mentions Isaias 6,6, where the angel takes the live coal from off THE altar, which, being within the temple, is presumably the altar of incense. De la TAILLE (MF 132) and MERK (Novum Testamentum Graeca et Latine Romae 1938) in his cross-references seem to think of only one altar. BONSIRVEN J., S.J., *L'Apocalypse (Verbum Salutis, XVI)* Paris 1951, p. 161 speaks of the vagueness of this altar, and thinks one altar would be admissible. Moreover the liturgy speaks of the heavenly altar as though there were only question of one: e.g. «in sublime altare tuum.» I don't think it makes a great deal of

As with the visions concerning Our Lord, who is referred to as the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of Jesse, the Lamb, the Day-Star, without our having to visualize all these as separate imaginative visions had by St John, they being rather means for conveying the multiple truth about Christ, so perhaps with the altars. It seems to me we can without upsetting the meaning of the altars imagine them as combined into one. Many of the early writers of the Church speak only of «the heavenly altar.» (38)

Here then we see the souls of the martyrs under the altar: a clear enough reference to the sacrificial blood of victims poured out at the foot of the altar of holocausts, the life being in the blood. (39) The martyrs shedding their blood being to a glorious climax the sacrifice of themselves that accompanied their offering of the eucharistic sacrifice. Theirs is the fullest identification possible with the victim of sacrifice. With Christ the victim they have achieved their own victimhood, and so are easily conceived as being with him at the heavenly altar. If we give a Christological symbolism to this altar we can see how the vision teaches the close union with Christ that the martyrs have in heaven. In fact they pray for the judgement on the wicked, as though conscious of their power to help bring it on:

«they cried out with a loud voice. 'O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and

difference whether we imagine one or two altars in the Apocalypse. I certainly cannot decide the matter: just as it is very difficult to decide with exactness what happens at the altar of incense in Apoc 8, 3-5. cf. n.43. The main thing is to understand the ideas being conveyed by the symbolic visions.

(38) cf. Chapter III, nn. 3.5.9.37.43 etc.

(39) The idea does not meet with the approval of CHARLES (ICC) ad loc., p.173-4. He thinks of the martyrs as having been sacrificed on the altar: hence they are under the altar (as though buried). Charles concludes an examination of Jewish ideas on martyrdom by saying, «...the martyr was conceived first and chiefly as a sacrifice to God, and though his body was slain on earth, the sacrifice was in reality made in heaven, where his soul was offered on the heavenly altar.» Martindale here makes «under» the altar the equivalent of «at the foot of the altar», as do all those —most commentators— who see a reference to the O.T. blood rites. In any case it is hard to see the difference between the two conceptions. For to be sacrificed on the altar (as regards the soul) and to have your blood poured out at the foot of the altar surely come to the same thing, especially as «the life (soul) is in the blood.»

avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?»
(40)

Before the seven trumpets begin to sound, announcing the same thing as the seven seals only under more concrete symbols, (41) there is a double preparatory vision. We are in the heavenly temple:

«And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer; and he was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar before the throne; and the smoke of the incense rose with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God. Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth.» (42)

Although there is controversy about the altar (one of two?) (43), about the angel (on or by the altar?) (44), about the censer (really such or a fire-pan for bringing coals from one altar to the other?) (45), the saints (the martyrs already

(40) Apoc 6,10.

(41) MARTINDALE (CC) 967e. Interpretations of the Apoc. vary between the recapitulative and successive nature of the seven seals, trumpets, etc. (Allo and Charles respectively). Martindale interprets them more in the former sense; he says St John sees the great forces at work in the Christ-Satan conflict, first in an ideal order, then more concretely, finally in the actual historical order, focusing his attention more and more on contemporary events. The same ideas are repeated but after the manner of waves, that is, «These general truths (re the transcendence of God, the rebelliousness of men, the saving and the loss of the obedient and obstinate respectively, etc.) have been several times repeated: the waves retreat only to crash farther forward; and now they will fall on to the times of John himself, and the world in which those to whom he is immediately writing have to live.» So Martindale writes, summarizing the first part of the Apoc., to 11,18: (CC) 968f.

(42) Apoc 8,3-5.

(43) Allo and Martindale suppose two. Charles one. See note 37: «Charles adduces Isaias 6,6 where the angel takes the live coal from off THE altar, which, being within the temple, is presumably the altar of incense.» According to Jewish Apocalyptic literature, the altar has all but universally the characteristics of the altar of incense. In one Talmudic passage the word «built» recalls the altar of holocausts: CHARLES, p.228.

(44) Martindale suggests «on the steps of the altar of holocausts», (CC) ad loc., 967d. Charles quotes a parallel in Amos 9,1 and then Gen 24,13.43. to show that ἐπι here, can be translated «by». »On» the altar of incense would certainly be a strange image: such strangeness inclines Allo to accept the altar of holocausts.

(45) Charles discusses this: (ICC) ad loc., p.230. He concludes that the angel held a censer, which was already full of coals. The angel is generally considered then to place the censer on the altar. How

mentioned or the saints on earth of both together?) (46), there is an obvious enough meaning to the scene, whatever be the possibility of a profounder meaning. Assisted by angelic intercession the Church's prayers reach and please God. These prayers, probably of martyrs and faithful combined, hasten the chastisements that are to further the reign of God.

For the throwing of the fire on the earth with the subsequent thunder, lightning, noises, and earthquake is done in answer to the prayers. It is the same fire which burns the incense and chastises the earth. Martindale imagines the angel's taking the burning coal with the clouds of incense rising from it and casting it on the earth. (47) The chastisements unfold as the seven trumpets are blown. After the sixth trumpet St John says, «The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent...» (48) showing that the chastisements were such as could have been curative.

This sixth trumpet plague is the worst of all: it destroys a third of mankind. The voice setting it in motion comes from the altar:

«Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet,

then would he later take fire from the altar? A Lapidé thinks of other censers on the altar! BOISMARD, R., O.P. (LSB-J) ad loc., p. 47, has two altars, a firepan (not a censor), and hence coals on the altar. This seems to be Martindale's idea too. Perhaps details are not meant to be pressed. If there is a combination-altar, the fire could well be immediately on the altar burning the incense, Isaias' vision altar was in the temple and had coals: so too in Ezch 10,2, the altar near the throne of God under the seraphim had coals. Fire on an altar of holocausts would be lacking any corresponding symbolic victim: for only animal sacrifices were made there.

- (46) Martindale without discussion takes these prayers as those of the martyrs: *ibid.* Allo and Charles point out that it is not only their prayers but those of all the faithful. It seems then that it is the prayers of all, but with stress on those of the faithful not included among the martyrs.
- (47) Martindale (CC) ad loc., 967d. He refers to the Lord's «I have come to cast fire upon the earth» (Lk 12,49). Here, according to GINNS, R., O.P. (CC) ad loc., 758e, there is very likely a reference back to Mal 3,2-3; «For he is like a refiner's fire...»: and in the context of Lk (12,42-48 —description of the fulfilment or otherwise of the will of God) the fire does seem to be one separating the good from the bad. Hence there would be a real unity of thought between this fire of Christ and that mentioned in the Apocalypse. However, the patristic thought is that there is reference to the fire of charity (Ginns, 1.c.)
- (48) Apoc 9,20.

Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.» (49)

Again there is controversy about the four angels, but in any case they are connected with the terrible invasions seen under the image of the horse-locusts. The fire from the altar is here particularized: the prayers of all the saints are actually having their effect, and the kingdom is being hastened by this chastisement of the wicked. We see, too, that the prayers of the saints and of the martyrs have the same aim: the desire to see God triumph over his enemies: enemies who have attacked him in killing the martyrs and persecuting the saints. As the martyrs and saints have suffered in the war against God, so by their prayers they share in his victory: and his victory is the meaning behind the calamities of the plagues.

The next appearance of the heavenly altar occurs in the visions of the judgement that are seen just before the seventh mystery is revealed. The seven mysteries tell more fully the same things as the seven seals and the seven trumpets, namely the conflict between Christ and Satan: each series winds up with the final judgement. In this series St John is gradually passing from the 'ideal' allegoric vision of the first part of the Apocalypse to that of actual history. (50) In the visions interposed between the sixth and seventh mysteries:

«another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has power over fire, and he called with a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle...» (51)

The context here is rather difficult: but again the reference to the altar is not affected. The angel appears as the delegate of the souls beneath the altar: at last the number of their brethren is complete and the time for the divine vengeance is right at hand. (52)

Finally, with his attention focussing more and more on contemporary events, St John passes from the seven mysteries to the seven plagues. After the pouring of the third bowl of the wrath of God (bowls containing plagues) the altar suddenly speaks in approval:

(49) Apoc 9,14.

(50) Martindale (CC) 969a: «The ideal, allegoric vision is now closed, though the transition to actual history (related of course symbolically) has been gradual, a melting-into, rather than a dove-tailing.»

(51) Apoc 14,18.

(52) *ibid.* 6,11. cf. 18,20; 19,2.

«And I heard the altar cry, 'Yea, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are thy judgements!'" (53)
 A speaking and living altar! It would be very tempting to take this as an indication of the personal nature of the altar and see a reference to Christ himself. But somehow that would be a bit artificial. If the altar symbolizes Christ just because it is the heavenly altar, there is no need to see it endowed with human qualities to heighten the symbolism. Rather, the voice utters the approval of the saints on earth, who, though they are caught up in the tribulations inflicted on the wicked, see these tribulations as having been hastened by their prayers (at the heavenly altar), and as contributing to the kingdom or reign of God and the salvation of humanity. «Such is the magnificent optimism of the Apocalypse.» (54)

The only other mention of an altar is of an earthly one: St John is told to «rise and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there.» (55) It is not the altar of holocausts in the temple of Jerusalem, but that altar and temple used as a symbol of the Church on earth. The symbolism of measuring is indicative of the preservation of the essential Church even during world-persecution. The Church will shrink until she seems to have no more even a minimum witness-voice,

«and when they (the two witnesses) shall have finished their testimony, the beast will... kill them» (56)
 But her altar remains. And on the general lines that the earthly temple is an image of the heavenly, according to the injunction given to Moses to make everything after the plan shown him on the mountain, we can say that there is a close connection between the heavenly and earthly altar in the Apocalypse. But can we, from the texts examined, say definitely what the heavenly altar does stand for?

In the final visions of the book, St John sees the holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride for her husband. The city of God covers the whole earth, of which the mountain is a sign. The city is represented, probably, after the style of the ziggurat temples of Babylon, great constructions rising tier after tier and

(53) Apoc 16,7.

(54) *Allo*, op. cit. 235, C.7.

(55) Apoc 11,2.

(56) *ibid.* 7.

crowned with a shrine. (57) But this city of God is different:

«And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb» (58)

The previous composition of place can now lapse, namely of the heavenly temple with its furniture. So we must conclude that St John sees no more altar. Can we make the same conclusion about the altar, then, as about the temple? I would say, Yes, with some reserve. It is hard to see how God can be called an altar, although easy to see how he can be called a temple. For it is in him that the Church praises him, just as it is in her that he abides and is praised. Moreover, this mutual indwelling is «in Christ», so that Christ is the temple too. As there is the closest connection between temple and altar, we can say Christ is the altar as he is the temple, and that he is the altar precisely as being anointed in his humanity by the divinity, but it seems to me that there we should stop. That is, not think of God's being the altar, but of his being at the altar, of his being the reason why the sacred humanity can be called the altar of God par excellence. (59) Perhaps, too, we could say the same about God's being the temple: for it is true that he is such only by the Son's being the temple. There is no mutual indwelling of the divine Persons and men except «in Christ», in the Son made flesh, and through the spiritual causality of that flesh. In his sacrificial flesh Our Lord at once became the perfect temple of God and offered sacrifice at the perfect altar. All those who are one with him become temple and altar too, (just as they enter into his priesthood and victimhood) in some way that we shall see later from other Christian writings. Unless we make some such supposition about the heavenly altar of the Apocalypse, we are left at the end with a kind of flatness. The altar has figured prominently in the course of the dramatic conflict between Christ and the satanic world; the martyr's souls are in bliss at the foot of the

(57) Martindale (CC) in Apoc 21, 9ss., 972a.

(59) MF 161,1: St Thomas (8 S. 83,4,9m) calls God an altar. Alanus ab Insulis has something the same. He thinks of three altars in the temple, the third being the propitiatory. Then he says «ita in templo Christi, id est in eius humana natura, tria resultant altaria... tertium altare est DIVINITAS, in qua elucescit divinae auctoritatis majestas. (Sermo in Annuntiatione Beatae Mariae; PL 210, 202), de La Taille adds: «... rectorius modus loquendi est, ut dignitas altaris ADESCRIBATUR humanitati, et REPETATUR ex divinitate. Propter enim insidentem substantialiter divinitatem est humanitas dominica altare perfectissimum.»

altar, their blood having, as it were, been poured out there. Thence they can call for the divine vengeance, and through an angel-delegate ask for the judgement to begin. Thence, too, rise up the prayers of the Church militant: the altar, as the medium whereby these prayers, sweetened by incense, reach God, orders the chastisement of a third of mankind; during the actual working out of this chastisement, which helps bring on the reign of God, the altar in the name of the saints, cries out its agreement with this divine way of acting. Then its earthly counterpart is preserved right through to the end, along with the earthly temple and the worshippers, with which it forms one complex symbol of the Church. Is all this mere imagery for indicating worship? The Lamb is not said to be on the altar: yet the Lamb is seen standing as having been once slain in sacrifice, and history unrolls as the successive or growing triumph of this Lamb's sacrificial blood. Therefore at least the Lamb belongs to the altar, for the Lamb signifies Christ as the eternal victim, and victim and altar are correlative and inseparable ideas. So it seems to me most reasonable that under the imagery of the altar, which imagery St John implicitly gives up at the end together with that of the temple, Christ is being spoken of.

The souls of the martyrs are «under» this altar. Will that be a symbol of their being victims with the chief victim, but in a subordinate fashion? As we have seen the Lamb is not placed in explicit connection with this altar, but perhaps such an obvious connection needs no mention; all the more so if the two symbols of Lamb and altar are referring to the same Lord under two aspects — namely as being both the victim and altar of his sacrifice. The martyrs, who on earth offered this victim at the heavenly altar during the eucharistic sacrifice, and who fully lived out their own victimhood, signified in the eucharistic sacrifice, now find themselves as eternally made over to God at this same heavenly altar. Now they are truly victims, truly God's. They have bliss (signified by their white garments); they can raise their voices, asking God for judgement to take place: because they have communion with Christ as victim (they were slain for his sake), and as altar (they are «under» the altar).

On earth the saints pray, especially at the great prayer of the eucharistic sacrifice. Their prayers rise from the heavenly altar, mingled with the angel's incense. Whatever

about the identity of the angel, his action is indicative of the angelic assistance given to the prayers of the saints. If the altar is Christ, then angelic and human intercession are seen as reaching God «per Christum». Whether the prayers are the eucharistic prayers or prayers in general, asking for the hastening of the kingdom, I have never seen discussed, but in any case, all prayers are seen as having their efficacy only through contact with the heavenly altar.

As mentioned previously, I do not consider the altar's speaking as itself indicative of Christ's being the altar, but rather as the sign of the intimate relation of the saints' prayers with Christ.

Finally, the inviolability of earth's altar as well as of its temple, will show that the Church on earth lives in Christ as in her temple, and is gathered round him as round her altar. The heavenly and the earthly altar will then refer to the same thing, the body of Christ as the means of approach to God, present openly or hiddenly according to the heavenly or earthly condition of the Church.

In conclusion, the passages in the New Testament (60)

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- (60) In an article by SCHMITT, J., *Petra quod erat Christus* (Maison-Dieu 29 (1952) 17-31), a distinction is made between the Palestinian and non-Palestinian writings of the N. T. owing to the difference in mentality between Jewish and non-Jewish Christians. The former thought of the Renewal under Christ to be the restoration to primitive purity of the ancient cult. So the injunction to leave one's gift before the altar to be reconciled with one's brother (Mt 5,23) indicated the habit of frequenting the temple services, but in a new spirit, that of the perfection of charity, in imitation of the Father in heaven (p.23). Again, witness Christ's rebuke (Mt 23, 17-19) on the value of the altar. Then there is the Apocalypse. In these writings the O. T. worship is seen as the analogue of the new. But Schmitt points out that in the writings for the Hellenized Christians there is nothing to prove that the latter considered the temple and altar to have permanent values, to be realized and sublimated in the eschatological times. He says the speech of St Stephen (esp. Acts 7,42) stresses the passé nature of the temple (and presumably of the altar), pointing to the new spiritual presence of God among his people. Then St Paul can hardly be said to stress the idea of the altar's receiving fulfilment, in spite of the references in the letter to the Corinthians re participation in the altar, and the passage from the letter to the Hebrews. Schmitt stresses that for St Paul Christ replaces all the old order, that the temple and altar were preliminaries only. In place of the «limited and episodic» presence of God indicated by the altar, there is Christ who by his Spirit, the Spirit Sanctifier of the Father, fills the creation. Concluding, Schmitt says that the essential difference is that whereas of old the altar sanctified the gift, it is Christ who sanctifies the Table of the Lord (p.31). It would be natural, of course, that writing to the Hellenized Jews not much stress would put on

referring to the altar are in a sense rather unsatisfactory. They are brief; they do not explain themselves; mostly they are incidental. However, we are entitled, I submit, to interpret them in the light of two facts: first, Christ's own indignant reminder to the Jews of the sanctifying power of the altar; second, the need to find a perfect altar's being found where there is a perfect sacrifice. The Christological interpretation «read into» the texts may actually be there all the time, taken for granted. «We have an altar» says St Paul. The following chapter will examine whether there is any indication of such a Christological interpretation among the early writers of the Church, up to the time of Origen.

temple-worship and the altar, seeing that these were not very familiar realities to them. Whereas the theme (developed at length by Schmitt) of the «rock which was Christ», the manna, in fact all the «types» of Exodus, would appeal easily to these Christians as themselves having the realities looked forward to in Exodus symbols. Through the eucharist these Christians were drinking of the waters that flowed from Christ the Rock. But I must confess I find Schmitt's idea unnecessary, distinguishing as he does between the things that are mere preparations (the altar) and things that are to be fulfilled (the manna, rock etc.). Surely if there is a perfectly sound sense in which the altar CAN be fulfilled without artificiality, it is fulfilled and not merely replaced by Christ. Again, the limited and episodic presence of God at the old altar will not induce a similar limitation in him who, fulfilling the figures necessarily spiritualizes them, giving them permanence and universality.

Temple and altar are eminently suitable images for transposing heavenly realities until the time for vision comes: then he who is temple and altar in a perfect manner will be grasped not through an image but in himself. (cf. the concluding vision of the Apocalypse. «I saw no temple...»). The limited significance of old is not due so much to the nature of the symbol-idea of altar and temple, but, to the nature of the preliminary worship. Finally, Schmitt is surely right in attributing the holiness of the Table of the Lord, as it is visibly amongst us, to the virtue of Christ, but he does not seem to me to be touching the heart of the matter.

The table at the Supper and our material altars cannot be altars in the primary sense of the word: they are like the wood of the Cross, made sacred by contact with Christ, but in no wise fulfilling the main function of the altar, which is to sanctify the victim. It seems to me arbitrary, just because we are dealing with the perfect sacrifice, to change the essential idea of the altar.

THE ALTAR IN EARLY WRITINGS

In this chapter I propose to examine what is taught or implied about the altar up to the time of Origen. So far the altar has been seen as part of the sacrificial mediation between God and man, and therefore inseparable from Christ himself, in his sacrificial mediation. We want to see if the early writers show any consciousness of this Christological interpretation and whether they introduce any new currents of ideas.

First we examine what St Ignatius of Antioch says in his letters, written about the year 110 en route to Rome. The general purpose of these letters is well known: they warn the faithful against a certain Jewish gnosticism, which, besides wanting to reintroduce Jewish customs, denied the reality of Christ's humanity and tried to break up the liturgical unity of his Church. Independent groups were to take the place of the Church united round the Bishop. (1) Our interest lies in those passages in which the saint inculcates liturgical unity by referring to the altar. Although few and not all as clear as we should like, they contain a surprising amount of doctrine when interpreted in the light of one another.

Ignatius uses the word *θυσιαστήριον* for the altar. Like other writers of the time he uses it in conjunction with or at least as connoting *ναός*, temple. (2) Both words in these

(1) TIXERONT J., *Precis de Patrologie*, Paris 1920, 21.

(2) In the Apocalypse, *passim*; Epistle to the Hebrews 13, 10; Clement's Letter to the Corinthians, XXXII, 2 and XLI, 2 (F.P. 1, 138.150); Polycarp to the Philippians IV, 3 (F.P. 1, 300). Clement stresses the order and unity needed in the eucharistic sacrifice and elsewhere, taking his argument from the fact that sacrifices could be offered only in Jerusalem, and only at one altar. I don't think he is hinting here at the Christians «having an altar». Polycarp's reference to the widows (see later in text) I think also refers to the altar at Jerusalem, because of the word *ὑπομυσχοῦνται* which is used for God's inspection of the sacrifices. It was the

early writings look back to the altar and temple of Jerusalem as to terms of comparison, but then are used to illustrate or refer to some Christian reality. (3)

When Ignatius uses this imagery in his letter to the Magnesians, he is plainly inferring that it has a new content. Thus he exhorts the faithful.

«Hasten to come together, all of you, as to one temple of God; as to one altar, even to one Jesus Christ, who comes forth from One Father and is with One and departed unto One». (4)

Admittedly Ignatius does not say straight out that Christ is the altar. But seeing that the context is dealing with the eucharistic sacrifice (5) it seems enough that Christ is not being merely compared to the altar as to a centre of unity for the Christians, but is thought of himself as the real unifying altar of sacrifice, of which the temple altar centre of Israel's life, was only an image. This, the clearest of Ignatius' references to Christ as the altar, helps in the interpretation of his other passages. Writing to the Ephesians he says, «Let no one be deceived; if anyone be not within the altar, he lacks the bread of God.» (6) That this altar also has a Christological meaning seems clear not only from the passage to the Magnesians, but also from the great improbability of its having any other meaning. For if it meant a material altar, the phrase «within the altar» would not make sense. If it meant a material sanctuary, why should Ignatius urge all the Christians to crowd up there and leave the rest of the place deserted? Besides, the meaning of Christian sanctuary did not come in until the fourth century (7) Ignatius is using temple imagery, much as it is used

regular word for the inspection of the old sacrifices, and is used in this way by Clement (l.c. XLI,2): *μωμοσκοπηθῆν τὸ προσφερόμενον*

(3) MF 215.

(4) Magnesians 7: LIGHTFOOT J-B., *The Apostolic Fathers* 11, London 1889, 552. In his notes on the Greek text (p.125) L. suspects that Θεοῦ should become Θεόν: the imagery would then become more distinct, the approach to God being made through Christ the altar. On the other hand, there is nothing inconvenient in having Christ as the temple of God and the altar, so that not only through Christ but in him is access had to the Father.

(5) «Do nothing without the bishop... let there be one prayer, one supplication ...» *ibid.* The Greek words refer to the eucharistic sacrifice. Cf. MF 217.

(6) Ephesians 5: *ibid.* 543.

(7) Canons 19 and 44 of the Council of Laodicea, held between 341 and 382 A.D. (ca.372) Canon 19 it is only lawful for priests to

in the Apocalypse. There in two places, (8) and here, the word *θυσιαστήριον* but not to the whole sanctuary seems to refer at one and the same time to the altar. That is the image: what is the reality Ignatius is referring to? Not a material altar or sanctuary in the Christian sense, as we have seen. He is talking clearly enough about ecclesiastical unity, for he adds almost immediately, «Whoever, therefore, cometh not to the congregation, he doth thereby show his pride and doth separate himself.» Not to be within the altar means not to be one with the assembly of the bishop. Nowhere else can the bread of God be eaten: other assemblies are unlawful. But Ignatius, while showing that not to be within the altar and to abstain from the assembly come to the same thing, still not does say one is the other. In other words, he is not saying the assembly is the

enter the *θυσιαστήριον* ; Canon 44 forbids women to enter the *θυσιαστήριον* (HARDUIN, Acta Conciliorum) t.1. Paris 1715, coll. 785-6. 789-90. Both Latin translations, however, give «altare». Lightfoot, *op.cit.* 43 and de la Taille, MF 215,1 think the meaning is, rather, «sanctuary».

- (8) Apoc 11,1: «... measure the... altar and those who worship there; 14,18: «and another angel came out from the altar. It is probable that the word includes the sacrificing area immediately adjacent to the altar; hence it would mean «sanctuary». Lightfoot thinks the word included all the inner court of the congregation, as opposed to the outer court of the gentiles. The inner court covered the parts reserved for the priests, for the men, and for the women, while only that for the priests could be called the sanctuary, L. concludes that, *θυσιαστήριον*, being at once the place of sacrifice and the court of the congregation, was used metaphorically for the Church of Christ.» In other words, Ignatius is simply transferring a past reality to the present: the altar of old meant the area round the altar for all the worshippers and hence stood for the body of worshippers. So it does now. I suggest, however, that Ignatius is referring to a PRESENT altar, even though under the old imagery. He is not referring to a present material altar or sanctuary as we have seen, but to an altar that is able to create the unity of the body of worshippers by their having spiritual contact with it. He speaks in one sentence of the necessity of being within the altar, in the next of the power of the prayer of the community, «For if the prayer of one ... hath so great force, how much more that of the bishop and the whole Church», and in the next of the excommunication inflicted on himself by one who stays away from the assembly, «Whosoever therefore cometh not to the congregation... hath separated himself: (he pronounces, as it were, the sentence of excommunication on himself: so L.). Thus Ignatius relates being within the altar to being within the assembly, and, as I say in the text, seems to see them as cause and effect. In this interpretation it is not necessary to suppose the very large interpretation given by L. to the altar, but simply to see that «within the altar», has a definite, material meaning in the old worship, and can easily

altar. (9) Rather he is indicating something deeper. Once we suppose the altar is the body of Christ then we can see Ignatius', mind more clearly. For the body of Christ is the effective sign of ecclesiastical unity; to be «within» the former, then, means to participate in the latter. (10) To leave the latter is not to be «within» the former. The line of argument of Ignatius will then be as follows. First it is an indisputable principle that whoever is not within the altar cannot have the bread of God, which belongs to the altar. Now a person who abstains from the assembly has really severed himself from it: hence, it is implied, he is no longer *within the altar*. Nor can he any longer eat the bread of God. For the bread of God not only belongs to the altar, but brings communicants into closer contact with the altar. It cannot possibly be given to one who lacks contact with the altar through lacking contact with the bishop and the assembly. Such, I take it, is the thought behind Ignatius' forceful, though casual, remark in this letter.

The interpretation is confirmed, I submit, by another, similar passage in the letter to the Trallians,

«He that is within the altar (ἐντός θυσιαστηρίου)
is clean; but he that is without the altar(ἐξτός)
is not clean, that is he that doeth aught without the
bishop and presbytery and deacons, this man is not
clean in his conscience.» (11)

Again there is the close connection made between liturgical action apart from the hierarchical assembly and being «without the altar». To abandon the assembly is a sign breaking communion with the altar. The reference would be easily understood if we interpreted the altar as Christ himself, considered to be the living, heavenly and invisible altar, source of life and unity for the liturgical assembly gathered not merely round it, but «in» it; from the one victim and altar, through the hierarchical ministry, streams forth a unifying force that must needs be co-operated with.

be used to speak of the new reality. Instead, then, of the altar's being a metaphor for the assembly, or even for the whole Church, I should say that it is the explanation of the unity of the assembly or of the whole Church. Unity is had by communion with the altar, whereon lies the heavenly, sacrificial bread of God.

(9) As Lightfoot says. See previous note.

(10) MF 216,2.

(11) Trallians 7: Lightfoot, 556.

Finally, with this interpretation in mind, we can see the amount of meaning in the passage from the letter to the Philadelphians,

«Be ye careful to observe one eucharist (for there is one flesh of Our Lord Jesus Christ and one cup unto union in his blood: (there is) one altar, as (there is) one bishop, together with the presbitery and the deacons my fellow-servants), that whastsoever you do, ye may do it after God.» (12)

Here Ignatius exhorts the Philadelphians to have only one eucharistic assembly, giving as the supreme motive the unity that already exists there of victim (once flesh... one cup), altar, and priesthood in Christ. (13)

The intrinsic evidence would seem to point to a kind of inarticulate awareness among the faithful of the fact that Christ is their altar as well as their priest and victim. For the doctrine is not elaborated: only appealed to as providing a sure rallying ground for tempted loyalty. The faithful are urged simply to think of the state of affairs, «there is only one altar», and to correspond with it, «hasten to come together... as to one altar, even to one Jesus Christ.» (14) The teaching of the Apocalypse about the heavenly temple and altar was surely familiar about this time, so it is not too much to conjecture that there must have been a fairly lively awareness of unity around Christ, as around the glorious altar—a unity manifested and known for such, however, only by the clear fact of ecclesiastical communion. If this underlying sense were not present, it is hard to see how an appeal to it would make much impression: yet Ignatius does appeal to it.

Ignatius wrote letters to the faithful and to the Bishop of Smyrna, where he had been received on his way to Rome. After he had passed through Philippi, the faithful there wrote to the bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, asking him to write them some words of exhortation and to send them any letters he had of Ignatius. (15) Thus we possess Polycarp's letter to the Philippians. It is of interest for our matter, because it men-

(12) Philadelphians 4: *ibid.* 564.

(13) MF 217,2.

(14) Cf. note 4.

(15) POLYCARP, Epistle to the Philippians, 3,13: ed. Lightfoot (*op. cit.*, 111), 472-476.

tions the altar, but in quite a different sense from the letters of Ignatius. The latter, as we saw, most probably speaks of Christ himself as the altar. Polycarp only mentions the altar once, and then in connection with widows and their function in the Church. From them is to rise a continual sacrifice of prayerful intercession, which must not be contaminated by any evil:

«Our widows must be sober-minded as touching the faith of the Lord, making intercession without ceasing for all men, abstaining from all calumny... and every evil thing; knowing that they are God's Altar, and that all sacrifices are carefully inspected, and nothing escapeth him either of their thoughts or intents or any of the secret things of the heart.» (16)

It would seem that the idea was already familiar to the Philipians: for Polycarp only mentions it as if to remind them of a truth that will make a deep impression on them. The widows are to remember that they are a living altar (all of them together, it would seem), and to think of their prayers of intercession as a sacrifice rising therefrom. Of old, all sacrifices were scrupulously examined by the priests before being placed on the altar. (17) So the widows must see that their sacrifice of prayer is free of any blemish. Any evil thing can cause such a blemish, not just external actions, but even the most secret thoughts of the heart, love of money, for example. If there are evil things within they infect the sacrifice, and of course do not escape the eyes of the Lord, to whom the sacrifice is being offered. Such, I take it, is the thought of this passage. It could also be taken in a broader sense, including all the interior thoughts etc. as sacrifices, and considering God as their inspector. However, the previous explanation gives more prominence to what was regarded as the widows' peculiar contribution to the life of the Church, namely their intercessory prayer (18), and keeps the comparison with the old testament practice more faithfully.

Before seeing if there is a deeper meaning in Polycarp's calling the widows the altar of God, it will be useful to remind ourselves of the special care God always demanded for the poor,

(16) *ibid.* 473.

(17) CLAMER A. (LSB-PC) on Lev 1,3, p.31.

(18) 1 Tim. 5,5.

especially for widows and orphans. He is proclaimed their guardian, «The Lord... upholds the widow and the fatherless» (19); through the Mosaic legislation the people are to implement this divine care by themselves making over to the widows and orphans, Levites and strangers, every three years a tithe of all they possessed (20) At the feasts in Jerusalem the people must bring some of their goods in order to rejoice before the Lord in his sanctuary, and invite the widows and orphans to share in the feasting. (21)

Moreover, in the temple, provisions are set aside for the sustenance of widows and orphans. (22) The duty of caring for these members of the people of God is sacred, for it is the command of God. So the gifts to the poor every three years, being sacred, have to be examined for ritual purity, as though they were being made over to God himself. (23) In this sense they seem to be on a par with the tithes to be made over to the Levites. These tithes are an offering to God, and it is God who gives them to the Levites. (24) The feasts at the temple are not strictly sacrificial, for they are in addition to the communion in the flesh of the sacrificial offerings; nevertheless they «share» in the sanctity of the latter, and have to be eaten «before the Lord.» (25) Finally, the gifts kept in the temple at Jerusalem could be looked on as given to God for his poor. The general idea is that it is God who is caring for the poor, but he does it through the collaboration of his people. The gifts are not given as clearly to God and by him to the poor, as in the case of the tithes to the Levites, and the sacrificial offerings with which God supports his priest, but there is a similarity.

This care for the poor, especially for widows, passed over into the Church. Trouble was caused in Jerusalem over alleged neglect of some of the widows in the daily distribution of relief. (26) St Paul gives Timothy detailed instructions about the honour to be given to widows, their own obligations, their

(19) Ps 145,9.

(20) Deut 26,12.

(21) *ibid.* 11,16.

(22) 2 Mach 3,10; 8,28.

(23) Deut 26,14.

(24) Lev 18,24.

(25) Deut 12,6-7.

(26) Acts 6,1.

enrolment in the order of widows. Normally the faithful who have widowed relations must support them privately, but widows without this private assistance are cared for by the church. St Paul states, «The woman who is a real widow, and is left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day... Command this that they may be without reproach.» (27) With regard to the really needy ones, «let the church not be burdened, so that it may assist those who are real widows.» (28) The old practice of the people of God will not fall into abeyance, whereby they support their poorer brethren.

Now when Polycarp calls widows the altar of God, he possibly has something like the following in mind. Of old the people supported the widows by gifts. These bore an analogy with the sacrificial gifts, for they were given either at the command of God, or on the occasion of sacrificial feasts, or from temple offerings. In any case they were Godward gifts, for they were given to those who were proclaimed as the direct charge of God. Now sacrificial gifts were changed at the altar into a pleasing fragrance to the Lord. So when people now support the widows with their gifts, they are as it were giving gifts to God on an altar. Moreover, the gifts are then changed into the pleasing fragrance of the widows' prayers of intercession. The gifts are the people's offering to God via his poor: the widows must transmit these offerings to God in the form of prayers. These prayers must not be spoiled as «sacrifices» by personal blemishes. However Polycarp does not develop his idea, and what I have said is only a possible explanation, rooted in a strong tradition of care for the poor. Was the idea commonplace or simply a happy turn expression on the part of Polycarp?

In the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, written about the year 250, there are several references to the widows' being considered an altar. The author is a Syrian or Palestinian bishop giving general instructions about the Christian life. (29) To inculcate reverence he makes a comparison between the mem-

(27) 1 Tim. 5,5.

(28) *ibid.* 16.

(29) CONNOLLY R. Hugh, *Didascalia Apostolorum*, Oxford 1929, lxxxvii. The translation is from the Syriac version, together with Latin fragments. The latter are, generally, a more literal version of the original Greek: but not always, (xix-xx).

bers of the Church and their sacred counterparts. The bishop, for instance, is to be considered in the place of God, the deacon of Christ, the deaconesses of the Holy Spirit, the presbyters of the twelve apostles, while «orphans and widows shall be reckoned by you in the likeness of the altar.» (30) No reason is given here, so we must examine the other passages. The comparison is used to exhort the widows to their vocation:

«... let a widow know that she is the altar of God; and let her sit ever at home, and not stray and run about among the houses of the faithful to receive. For the altar of God never strays or runs about anywhere, but is fixed in one place... now such a widow (the vagabond type always wanting to get things, gossiping etc.) does not conform to the altar of Christ; for it is written in the Gospel; 'If two agree (...) it shall be given them'» (31)

The visible altar is here the term of comparison: the somewhat fanciful lesson given to the widow should not make us conclude that the comparison itself is along the same lines. What the relationship is, is not yet clear. I cannot say for certain what is the meaning of the last part of this passage: it is surely enigmatic! (32) Perhaps it is a reference to the unanimity that must reign between the widows, all whom together are thought of as the altar, as the next passage shows.

While the bishop is to let each widow know who gives her alms, she is to keep the name secret, lest the other widows think they have been unfairly treated and run off to the benefactor or administrator with complaints. Hence the widows are told,

«But do thou in praying for him, suppress his name; and so thou shall fulfil that which is written, thou and the widows who are such as thou: for you are the holy altar of God, (even of) Jesus Christ.» (33)

The idea seems to be that the widows as a group form the altar, and it would be the height of impropriety for the altar to be di-

(30) *ibid.* Ch. IX, 88; «in typum altaris.»

(31) *ibid.* Ch. XV, 133-4.

(32) «non est conlegata altario Christi» («does not tally with her description as the altar of Christ» says Connolly, p. 135 note.)

(33) *ibid.* 143.

vided by the dissensions likely to arise out of the benefactors' names being mentioned in common prayer. Besides this point of view, there is also the question of not doing for the benefactor what he is not supposed to do. «According to that which is written», refers most likely to the Lord's advice not to let the left hand know what the right hand is doing, «that your almsgiving may be in secret»: there would not be much point in the benefactor's keeping quiet about his gifts if the recipient were to broadcast his name.

The use of the altar comparison broadens in the next reference to include all those who have been supported by the alms of the faithful. While woe is pronounced against those who receive help without really needing it, the poor person, whether orphaned, aged, sick, or educating children,

«shall even be praised; for he is esteemed as the altar of God, therefore shall he be honoured of God. For he did not receive idly; because he was praying diligently (and) unremittingly at all times for those who give; for his prayer, —which is his strength— he offered as his payment.» (34)

God honours his altar because of its close connection with him: his way of honouring it is to accept the gifts placed thereon. Here the altar, being a living altar, is active in the transmission to God of what it receives. It is not an inert altar, passively accepting the gifts of the faithful. It sees that these gifts reach God in the form prayers on behalf of the donors.

We begin to see that the comparison is more serious than we might have suspected, when it becomes the motive for rejecting certain offered gifts. Only spotless offerings are made on an altar: hence the gifts made to the poor must be scrutinized, not so much in themselves, as in their donors. If the gift comes from innocent hands it may be put on the altar of God, to be consumed as an incense offering through the prayers of the recipient:

«Do you the bishops and the deacons be constant in the ministry of the altar of Christ — we mean the widows and the orphans— so that with all care and

(34) *ibid.* Ch. XVII, 154. «altaris enim Dei deputatus est a Deo, et honorabitur, quoniam...»

diligence you make it your endeavours to search out the things that are given, (and to learn) what manner is the conversation of him, or of her, who gives for the nourishment —we say again— of «the altar.» For when widows are nourished from (the fruits of) righteous labour, they will offer a holy and acceptable ministry before Almighty God through His Beloved Son and His Holy Spirit: to whom be glory and honour for evermore.» (35)

What if tainted gifts are accepted? As usual they will be changed by the fire of the widow's charity into the incense of prayer, but this incense will not please God. The prayers for wicked offer will not be answered, and so the latter dishonour God by their anger,

«There shall not go up upon the altar (that which cometh) of the price of a dog or the hire of a harlot' Widows will otherwise pray for the evil and shall not be heard, and so there will be blasphemies.» (36)

Not even great necessity can allow this rule to be changed, on the grounds of its being imposible to do evil (especially in the sacrificial order) to achieve a good result:

«Take good heed that you minister not to the altar of God out of the ministrations of transgressions... it were better for you rather to be wasted with famine than to receive from evil persons.» (37)

How can we understand this insistence on the name «altar» for the poor, especially for the widows? We know that in the early days of the Church the faithful brought all kinds of gifts with their bread and wine for Mass: gifts of a fool nature generally, but which could be, and over the years were changed into money gifts. These offerings were placed on or near the altar, and were blessed at the end of the eucharistic prayer. (38) The principle behind the offering of other things

(35) *ibid.* Ch. XVIII, 156.

(36) *ibid.* 159.

(37) *Ibid.*

(38) HIPPOLYTE de Rome, *La Tradition Apostolique*, ed. BOTTE D., Paris 1946, V. VI. XVIII. V and VI deal with the blessing of oil, cheese, olives after the Canon of the Mass. XXVIII with the offering of first fruits to the bishop and their blessing. There is no indication in the document of the rite of offering of bread and wine for the sacrifice by the faithful: the deacon makes the offering to the bishop. So Botte, p. 22, quoting section IV of the

besides what was strictly required for the celebration of the eucharist was, that if you were to spread the table of God with your offerings, then you had to supply enough for the livelihood of those who served at the altar. Not that you were conferring a direct benefit on the clergy by your offerings. Rather, you offered to God, and it was he who gave to his priests what they needed for their sustenance. But it was not only the clergy who had a right to sustenance from the altar: on the grounds namely a religious obligation. The poor, too, had a right to sustenance, as being dependent on the clergy, on the authorities of the Church, who dispensed help in the name of God: so on the grounds of mercy or religious liberality. So while it was strictly speaking enough to provide for the sustenance of the clergy who offered the eucharistic sacrifice it was not unfair to ask the faithful to include also the sustenance of the poor, as being dependents of the altar of God via the clergy. (39) Because, then people provided en masse for the altar and its dependents, clergy first and the poor through the clergy,

document. However, the fact of offerings by the faithful is clear, even if there is no formal rite attached to the offering. For section XX, 10 speaking of those to be baptized says they are to bring no other vessel except for the Eucharist, and adds, «For it is right for every one to bring his oblation then.» And the same passage in the *Testamentum Domini* says, «... (they) shall not bring anything save one loaf for the Eucharist.» True the passages quoted do not say that the gifts offered and blessed either within the sacrifice or on other occasions are regarded as forming one with the bread offering for the eucharist, that is, as made over to God so that he might support his priests. But the matter seems clear from the following passages of the *Didascalia*. Bishops are the dispensers of God, when they are dispensing the gifts made to the Church (I. 11, XXV, 2: FP 1,98); the old testament practice of oblations, first fruits, tithes etc. is said to be a foreshadowing of what happens in the Church (ibid. 5-6; 96); what were then first fruits and gifts are now «prophora», which are offered to God by the bishop for the remission of sins (XXVI, 2: 102); laymen are to offer the fruit of their labours to the bishop, who will use them himself and administer them to the poor, «and your oblation will be received by the Lord your God for a fragrant sweetness» (XXXIV, 5-6: 118). See following note.

- (39) MF 340 and 340c. Also art. *Les Offrandes de Messes*: Gregorianum IV (1923) pp. 355-405; 556-590. Here are de la Taille's main conclusions. He traces the thought of the Fathers with regard to the oblations of the faithful, deciding that the O. T. practice of the priests' being supported by God from the gifts of the people in continued under the N.T. «Aussi voyez comme les anciens ont eu soin de marquer que le prêtre ne doit pas y voir une retribution (praemium), mais une allocation d'en haut pour le soutien de son existence, pour le soutien des clercs, engagés avec le prêtre au service de l'autel, et pour le soutien des pauvres, dont

the latter were regarded as part of the altar. Just as the real altar offerings would be changed into the victim of the eucharistic sacrifice, which would then reach God as particularity the gift of the offerer of the bread and wine, so the offerings placed on the widow-altar would reach God by being transmitted to him in the form of prayers for the donors. (40)

Is there any relation with the heavenly altar implied in these passages of the Didascalia Apostolorum? I do not think so. The comparison seems to me to be rather with the material altar used in the eucharistic sacrifice, and with the oblations made thereon by the faithful, with a view to their becoming the true sacrifice on the true altar. Certainly, the document talks about the altar of God and of Jesus Christ. But if the material altar is the image of the heavenly altar it will be given sacred names. I do not think there is any reference to the widows' being the altar of personal sacrifice, in the sense in which all those who offer the eucharistic sacrifice can be called the priest, victims and altars of their sacrifice. (41) The stress is on the widows' responsibility, deriving from

l'Eglise doit se regarder comme chargée au nom de Dieu, parce qu'ils n'ont que Dieu pour prendre soin d'eux: tellement que le bien de l'Eglise, le bien de Père de famille, est leur patrimoine à eux.» (391) A distinction must be made between the gifts made directly to the poor (an improper sacrifice) and gifts made directly to God via the priests. These gifts are then given to the poor by God, but, again, through the priests. (586-7)

«Nous y (S.Th. 2.2ae S. 86,2,c. and ad 1m) surprenons la destination proprement divine des dons offerts par le peuple en vue du sacrifice; leur retour au prêtre, qui en retire sa subsistance; et leur extension éventuelle, aux pauvres, qui sont de droit divine commis à la charge de l'Eglise. (587).

(40) MF 1612: «Viduae oblationibus fidelium (iisque liturgicis, ac cum oblatione eucharistiae concretis) onustae tenebantur fidelium vota veluti ad Deum transmittere per suas preces: quo in munere altaribus parificabantur.»

(41) They can be so called because of their offering SPIRITUAL sacrifice. We may note in this connection that Christ's sacrifice was spiritual, as opposed to the corporeal sacrifices of old, where priest, victim, altar and temple were all separate things. Christ was priest and victim: it should not surprise us if he was also altar and temple. Moreover he offered with divine power, not according to a human effort. Nor was there any physical act of blood-pouring on his part: his blood was shed by others, his victim body slain by others. His sacrifice was known only to the eyes of faith. Finally the effects of his sacrifice were supremely spiritual. (MF 155,1; 228-9).

So when we offer the eucharistic sacrifice, we are engaged in and with Christ in spiritual worship. The Church is identified with Christ in the sacrifice. In him she shares his priesthood; offering the same victim as he, she makes herself a victim: (this

the fact that the faithful's God-directed oblations have been entrusted to them as to an altar: a living altar, one therefore which needs nourishment, but which considers the nourishment as a gift to God on the part of the faithful, and takes care to pass it on to God in the form of prayer. Not only must the gift be blameless, as coming from blameless hands, but its prayer equivalent must be equally blameless, as coming from a heart free of all evil.

Having seen the widow-altar theme, we can now go back a little to see other references to the altar.

The Pastor of Hermas, written most probably between the years 140-154 during the pontificate of Pius I (42), has two interesting references to the altar. The Shepherd gives Hermas long instructions on the harm done by wavering in prayer, by anger and by sadness. He shows what happens in the case of the man who lets sadness invade his mind:

«first of all he does evil in saddening the Holy Spirit, who was given to man for joy: then, besides afflicting the Holy Spirit, he commits an impiety in not praying to the Lord and in not confessing his sins to him. For the prayer of the sad man never has the power to rise up to the altar of God. —Why, I asked, does the prayer of the sad man not rise up to the altar

is a somewhat difficult point, I consider: I mean the exact sense in which those who offer the eucharistic sacrifice can be called the victim with Christ. In offering the victim, present sacramentally, is the Church offering herself, too, as the victim, that is, considering herself as the spiritual «extension» of the sacramental victim? Or do we find in the eucharistic sacrifice simply that interior religion which is the *sine qua non* of the external offering? de la Taille has an interesting passage (MF 737) on the martyrs, contrasting their death with Christ's sacrificial death: «Numquam (martyres) corpus suum mystico ritu traiciunt in Deum; immo corrumpitur, et perit: non ratum per se esse hostia Domini, pabulum Domini, nisi in conjunctione spirituali ad Hostiam illam unicum unicum sacrificii, cui per gratiam incorporantur ut et suscitentur.» Perhaps the same can be said about the death of all those who have offered the eucharistic sacrifice: that in Christ it is sacrificial, as being the passage to glory, to a participation in the glorifying power of Christ, himself glorified as sacrificial victim. Hence the glory to come will be analogous to Christ's, the consummation of sacrificial victims, one with the sacrificial victim that Christ is.) In some sense at least we are the victims of our eucharistic sacrifice: it should not surprise us that we are the temple and altar as well; all, it is clear, in Christ.

(42) *Le Pasteur d'Hermas*: ed. LELONG A. (Lès Pères Apostoliques, IV), Paris 1912, 116-118.

of God? —Because, he replied, sadness resides in his heart; and sadness, in mixing with prayer, prevents it from rising pure towards the altar. For just as vinegar, mixed with wine, makes this lose its good flavour, so also does sadness, mixed with the Holy Spirit, weaken the efficacy of prayer.» (43)

The altar is mentioned casually as being quite a familiar thing, both to this not very well instructed layman (44) of the early second century and to his readers. Hermas is not speaking of the altar «of the heart», which is regarded as the starting point of the prayer, and where the trouble is caused by the interference of sadness in the élan of prayer. The language would be forced if it were referring to a visible, material altar. There remains the idea of the heavenly altar, regarded then in the common mind of the ordinary faithful as the goal of prayer. To draw anything more from the text would not be fair.

The second mention of the altar is enigmatic. It occurs in the eighth Parable, in which Hermas divides the Roman Christians into thirteen categories, and passes them in review. Duchesne calls it «a vast examination of conscience of the Roman Church.» (45) The Shepherd is entrusted with the review of several of the categories by an angel: their value is to be esteemed by the state of the palm branches once given them and now due for inspection. According to the condition of these branches will be the position occupied in the tower, the symbol, in this Parable, of the Church. The angel gives the inspecting commission to the Shepherd:

«... Make a minute inspection and take care that none escape thee! If there is one who does escape thee, I will check them all on the altar» (46)

What are we to make of this reference, again so casual, but far more puzzling than the previous one? I am unable to offer any solution to this question. I can only conjecture that Hermas thinks of the heavenly altar not only as the goal of prayer, but also as the centre of heavenly affairs, where what

(43) *ibid.* Precepte X, 3, 2-3, p.119.

(44) *ibid.* pp. LVI.LXXX: «un petit bourgeois sans instruction.»

(45) *ibid.* quoted p.20.

(46) *ibid.* Similitude VIII,2,5, p.197: «ἐγὼ αὐτοὺς ἐπὶ τὸ θεσιασ-
τήριον δοκιμάσω».

is done amiss here is seen in its proper light. Let a sinner—for those with the defective palm branches are sinners in greater or less degree—find a higher place than he deserves in the Church: his hidden position with regard to the heavenly altar will not be incorrect. The angel, who is called the angel Michael at the beginning of the Parable, actually seems to be identical with Christ himself: (47) perhaps, then, Hermas has in mind the relation between Christ and the heavenly altar, so that it is Christ who assigns one to each according to his spiritual condition on earth a corresponding spiritual relationship with himself as the altar in heaven. This may be reading too much into an isolated text: the only warrant for doing so is that Hermas speaks of the altar here as of something not needing an explanation later on from the Shepherd, as nearly every other detail of the Parable demands one, and secondly, that Hermas regards the angel's (Christ's) action at the heavenly altar as remedying any defective judgement on earth.

Writing about half a century after Hermas, Irenaeus mentions the heavenly altar as such only once, but in such a way that it seems to have the meaning of the body of Christ. He makes the reference when discussing the eucharistic sacrifice. He is arguing against the gnostic position that early creation does not come from the God of the Christians. Briefly, his thought is that the heretics themselves must see the falsity of their position if they consider the Church's sacrifice. For there, there is no longer common bread but the eucharist, composed of two things, one earthly, the other heavenly. The former is the element which has the properties of bread and wine, the latter is the body and blood of Christ. But this one eucharist the Church continually offers to God: and since it is a heavenly offering, she makes it at the heavenly altar. How could this possibly be so if earthly things—the bread and wine appearances remaining—were not as much from God as heavenly things! The part that interests us, however, is the short passage that concludes the argument:

«... (the Word of God) wishes us to offer the gift as the altar frequently, without ceasing. The altar is therefore in the heavens (for thither are our prayers and oblations directed)...» (48)

(47) *ibid.* pp. LXXVIII-IX.

(48) IRENAEUS, *Contra Haereses*, 1.4,c.18,n.6: PG 7, 1029-30.

Irenaeus is talking of the eucharistic sacrifice, but he obviously does not mean that first of all we have the eucharistic oblation and then direct it towards the heavens. No, he means that we make our oblation at the heavenly altar, for it is a heavenly oblation that we make. Our bread and wine become the heavenly oblation at the consecration. They must then be on the heavenly altar. Our conclusion then is that this altar must be the body of Christ, for nothing but that can support the heavenly victim. Just as nothing can be the victim on such a heavenly altar except the body of Christ. (49)

Clement of Alexandria, writing in the first decade of the third century, speaks of the Church and of the soul as the altar of God. First of all he points out that if what is constructed in honour of God is sacred, then the Church, the gathering of the faithful, is above all sacred. For it is constructed not by hand but by the will of God, exists for the honour of God, and is made holy by the sacred knowledge of God. The Church is a living thing of *great* value: it is consecrated to him who is of *infinite* value, and that through its abounding sanctity. Similarly he is the true «gnostic», of great value too in whom God dwells, rather, in whom the knowledge of God is consecrated. (50) Clement sees the Church, then, as the assembly of those who have received the divine knowledge and have become the sacred dwelling place of God as a result. If the soul likewise has this sacred knowledge, it too has God within it and is temple of God. This is the burden of Chapter V of Book VII the *Stromata*. Chapter VI then deals with the activity of the Church and the soul in relation to God. Its purpose is to point out the futility of the pagan ideas regarding their gods, who were thought of as feeding on the flesh of sacrifices or at least as being soothed by the inhaling of fragrance. Obviously, Clement is berating the crass and material meaning given to animal and incense sacrifices. However, instead of pointing out the symbolic meaning of such offerings, he shows that as God does not need such material refreshment the Christians do not offer it to him. Rather they offer prayers. In a

(49) *ibid.* In another passage (*op.cit.*, 4, 8: PG 7, 995) Irenaeus mentions priests as serving the altar and God. While the context does not make it clear whether he is referring to the heavenly or to an earthly altar, the manner of speaking of the early writers makes an allusion to the former more likely.

(50) CLEMENS ALEXANDRIAE, *Stromata* 1.VII,c.V: PG 9,437 C.

few words Clement draws a picture of Christian prayer: concentrating on its element of praise. The Word has communicated knowledge to us: through him therefore we glorify God, the subject matter of our praise being the things we have learnt. Prayer then is the excellent and most holy sacrifice we offer, together with the justice of our lives, to the most just Word. Then Clement sees the Church forming one vast altar, from which rises this sacrifice of prayer:

«So the altar (θυσιαστήριον) we have here on earth is the assembly of those who are intent on prayers, having, as it were only one voice and one mind common to them all.» (51)

So the Church is at once temple and altar: from the altar-minds of the faithful, made sacred by the consecrating knowledge of God, personally infused by the Word of God, rises the most holy sacrifice (θυσία) of prayers, filled with the praises of the revealed wonders of God. Clement goes on to ridicule the pagan attribution to God of bodily characteristics, whereby he is thought of as breathing as we do. There is no *respiration* in God: rather there is *conspiration* in the Church.

«For the sacrifice of the Church is the prayer which is exhaled from holy souls, while with this sacrifice the whole mind is opened to God.» (52)

Clement then makes a reference to a pagan altar (βωμὸν) said to have been frequented by Pythagoras, but which lacked the gross defilement of blood and slaughter. Will the pagans not believe us then, he asks, when we say that the truly holy altar (βωμὸν) is the just soul and that the incense rising from it is its holy prayer. (53) So we pass from the Church as a whole to the individual member.

Similarly we pass from θυσιαστήριον to βωμός : but I think there is no importance in the change of word. βωμός is used for the soul of the just man simply because it has been used immediately before in the reference to Pythagoras.

We pass from Clement to Origen, also of the Alexandrian School: the gap is about half a century. Origen speaks much about the heavenly altar and also about the altar of the mind. He does not say that the heavenly altar is Christ himself, as

(51) *ibid.* 444B.

(52) *ibid.* 444C.

(53) *ibid.* 445A.

neither does Irenaeus. However a close examination of Origen's ideas about the heavenly altar makes such an identification probable.

Let us first of all consider the homily on the levitical prohibition against the high priest and his son's drinking wine before going into the tabernacle and approaching the altar. Origen applies the matter to Christ and the apostles. The gist of the homily is to point out that Christ, who has entered the tabernacle and is assisting at the altar, refrains from drinking the wine of perfect bliss until he shall have achieved the work of redemption in his members. Christ is sad and afflicted over the sins of those he has redeemed. However, the part that interests us is insistence with which he speaks of Christ at the altar. Perhaps we can glean something of his mentality from the several references taken together.

He shows first that Christ did drink wine during his lifetime, that is before he was due to approach the altar of sacrifice. Then when the supper came, it was time to enter the tabernacle and move to the immolation of the victim on the altar: hence it was time to abstain from wine. Let us see the first, somewhat vague, reference to the altar:

«When the time of the cross came, and he was about to go to the altar, where he would immolate the victim (hostiam) of his flesh: 'Taking the chalice, he blessed and gave to his disciples saying: Take and drink from this'. You, he said *drink* you who are not about to approach the altar. But he, as about to approach the altar says of himself: 'Amen I say to you that I shall not drink of the fruit of this vine, until I drink it new with you in the kingdom of my Father'.» (54)

It would be an obvious interpretation to say that for Origen the altar is the cross, where the immolation of the flesh is to take place. Or it might be said that the mention of the altar is simply to keep contact with the passage from Leviticus, but that nothing in particular is thought of as the altar: that it is used simply as a metaphor to indicate sacrifice. A difficulty arises against these interpretations from subsequent passages, where Christ is considered as assisting at the altar in

(54) in Lev hom. VII,1: GCS VI,378.

heaven. It does not seem possible that Origen can be speaking of the same altar: yet one passage would seem to indicate that he is, for he says, after indicating the wounds of the members over which the divine healer grieves,

«For all of these, therefore, he stands before the face of God interceding for us; he stands before the altar, that he might make propitiation for us to God; hence he said, as about to approach that altar: 'I shall not drink of the fruit of this vine...» (55)

A little previously to this he asks,

«How can he, who has gone to the altar in order to make propitiation for me a sinner, (how can he) be in joy, to whom the sadness of my sins (peccatorum meorum moeror) is forever rising up?» (56)

Origen seems to imagine Christ at the supper as about to approach the altar of his sacrifice in blood and at the same time the altar in heaven. Hence the cross seems to be ruled out as the altar. It is true that in a previous homily on Genesis Origen says,

«... according to the flesh he is offered on the altar of the cross.» (57)

But this meaning would not fit in with his saying that Christ at the supper was about to approach the altar that is now in heaven. Is the meaning metaphorical only? There are grounds for saying so. For Origen imagines Christ as sad all the time that he assists at the heavenly altar, making intercession for the curing of his members. When the resurrection comes, the bliss of Christ will be complete, for it will be shared with all members of his mystical body,

«...he does not drink now, because he is assisting at the altar and grieves over my sins... after these things (the resurrection) he will drink wine, but new wine in a new heaven and a new earth... and with new men, and with those who sing him a new song.» (58)

It looks as though once the work of redemption is accomplished, Christ will no longer be sad and will no longer have to

(55) in Lev hom. VII,1: GCS VI,375.

(56) *ibid.*

(57) in Gen hom. VIII,9; GCS VI,84.

(58) in Lev hom. VII,2: GCS VI,377-380.

stand at the altar making propitiation for sins... Perhaps there is another solution. Perhaps Origen, in a somewhat involved fashion and without making anything explicit, has in mind Christ himself as the altar, as he is clearly the priest and victim. The use of the word altar and of Christ's standing at it will be symbolic, just to make it possible to speak in a human fashion about the simple reality. In this way we could understand Origen's thinking of the same altar at the time of the cross and now in heaven. For Christ *was* about to approach the altar of his body in the passion, an altar «on» which his victim flesh was to be immolated, or «on» which he was to immolate or offer his flesh and blood. (59) At the same time he was approaching the altar that now is in heaven, for precisely through the sacrifice of the cross was he to become an immortal propitiatory victim on the same altar of his body, now made glorious. Finally, after the general resurrection it is clear that Christ will no longer have to assist or stand at this altar in order to heal the wounds of his dearly loved members. Origen does not deny that Christ will be forever the priest at the altar in heaven, presenting his victim flesh as the eternal redemption of all the redeemed, forever and, so to speak, continuously being the propitiation for all forgiven sins. The homily is concerned only with the present «affliction» of the priest as new sins arise, needing his intercession. If Origen implies that Christ no longer stands at the altar after he is able to drink the cup of bliss with his fellows, it is only to show that Christ's present activity is different from what it will be when all things are brought under his subjection. It must be admitted that the interpretation I have given, while perhaps satisfying the exigencies of the different texts, is not clearly the mind of Origen, nor, perhaps, are the texts to be taken as rigidly as I have made out. Other homilies will help to see the mind of Origen on this matter. (59a)

In a later homily Origen speaks of the necessity Christ

(59): I hasten to repeat that Christ performed no visible rite of sacrificing on the cross. According to de la Taille, Christ's submission to the passion and his recorded words indicate visibly the continuation of his sacrificial will but do not constitute a recognisable priestly gesture of offering a victim.

(59a) The point is, rather, would Origen recognise this as a legitimate interpretation of his statements: in fact agree with them as making his implicit thought explicit?

had of approaching the heavenly altar to achieve a fuller purification, and to endow his representative humanity with perpetual purity:

«It was necessary ofr my Lord and Saviour not only to be born among men, but also to descend into hell, so that... coming forth his work achieved, he might ascend to the Father, and there be more fully purified at that heavenly altar, so that he might endow with perpetual purity the pledge of our flesh, wich he had taken with him.» (60)

From the context the meaning is clear enough. Origen is referring to the perfection of a victim status acquired by Christ in his resurrection and ascension; only then did he shed all the appearance of sinful flesh and put aside the mortality of his human nature. The human condition of his humanity had allowed Christ to make of himself the victim of sacrifice. The acceptance of the victim manifested in the resurrection and ascension, that is in the acquisition of the glory proper to the humanity of the Son of God, meant that the humanity was «purified» of its earthly status: there was no part of it which was not completely filled with divine glory. It is by being in a state of acceptance on God's altar that the human offering becomes a divine victim, possessed by God and thereby filled with the sanctity of God. It is also clear that Our Lord's humanity was thus «filled» with divine sanctity only in the sense of the substantial sanctity of the Incarnation exerting its full effects. The humanity during Christ's earthly life was deprived of its connatural condition in some things, according to the exigencies of the redemption: thus by a special dispensation it was a passible and mortal humanity. The substantial sanctity of the hypostatic union would have produced, if unchecked, the connatural effect of a glorious humanity. So, perhaps, we can interpret Origen as meaning that Christ approached by the heavenly altar so that this gap between the exigencies of the substantial sanctity and the effects it produced on earth might be closed. In drawing his humanity «closer» to the substantial sanctity inherent in it Christ closed this gap. His sacred humanity, precisely as sacred, is then the heavenly altar: for from the sacredness of hypostatic union there

(60) in Lev hom. IX, 5: GCS VI, 425.

flows that extra purification Origen mentions, the disappearance of the temporary, earthly condition the humanity had in the sacrifice of the passion, by the invasion of the divine glory connatural to a divinely assumed humanity. The perpetual purity must be thought of as a continuous influx of the Godhead throughout the sacred humanity, making it «purely» divinized, without any admixture of the natural mortality, it once had as an extraordinary measure necessary for the sacrificial redemption. True, Origen does not make this identity of the heavenly altar with the sacred humanity, but what other explanation —unless if be merely metaphorical— can be given of his language? The heavenly altar is regarded as in some respects superior to the human nature Christ took to heaven, but how, it might be asked, can the sacred humanity be superior to itself! Only in the sense that under the aspect of its being the altar it can enable the victim to possess its inherent sanctity on new grounds and acquire the full effects of glory. The image then of Christ's approaching the heavenly altar by his resurrection and ascension is a pleasing representation of a profound reality.

The interpretation of this approach of Christ to the heavenly altar as meaning the bringing of his humanity completely into the glorifying influence of the hypostatic union is illustrated by further remarks of Origen on the altar fire. Commenting on the first chapter of Leviticus, with its instructions about putting fire on the altar and keeping it alight with wood, Origen teaches that the fire symbolizes the effect of the divinity of Christ on his humanity endowing it with the glory of the resurrection through the wood of the cross. There the temporary dispensation of a mortal humanity was finished with, and the divine fire exerted its full effect in the subsequent resurrection and ascension:

«It is from above that divinity of Christ comes, whither that fire (the fire mentioned in Leviticus) hastens. Fittingly therefore all these things which were performed by the Saviour in his body, the heavenly fire consumed, and restored everything to the nature (condition demanded by the dignity) of his divinity. Now this fire is fed by wood: for the passion of Christ in the flesh was carried even to the wood; but when he was suspended from the wood, the dis-

pensation of the flesh was over; for rising from the dead he ascends into heaven...» (61)

Origen comes back to the theme of the heavenly altar when speaking about martyrdom. He compares the martyrs to the priest of old, who by the blood rites at the altar seemed to be administering the remission of sins. The difference is that the martyrs really do administer the remission of sins to those who pray for it; this they do by assisting at the heavenly altar. It is most fitting that they be there. For the altar is the place for the priest, and what a priest is the martyr!

«... the souls of those who have slain... assisting at the heavenly altar, do not in vain minister to those who pray for the remission of (their) sins. At the same time we know that as Jesus Christ offered himself as a victim, so priest... offer themselves as victims, and are therefore seen standing next to the altar, as in their proper place. Who is that immaculate priest, who offers an immaculate victim... unless he who achieves martyrdom...?» (62)

The martyrs are closely related to the Lamb, seen by John, standing as though slain. Hence «not without reason are they seen by John as standing at the heavenly altar.» (63) This is

(61) in *Lev hom.* 1,4: 286.

(62) *Exhortatio ad Martyrium* 30: GCS 1,27.

(63) *In Joannem* 1,6, n.35-6: GCS IV,162. In his first homily on Leviticus O. has some difficult references to the heavenly altar. Starting from some references in the Levitical text he speaks of the possibility of an allusion to the two altars involved in Christ's sacrifice, the one at Jerusalem, the other in the heavens. Annas and Caiphas are considered, as having condemned him to death, to have shed his blood at the former altar (elsewhere O. refers to the Cross as the altar: in *Gen hom.* VIII, 9: GCS VI,84), while, «supernum altare, quod est in coelis... idem ipse sanguis adsperserit.» By this double sacrifice both the things on earth and heaven are reconciled (Col 1,20). «Hic quidem pro hominibus ipsam corporalem materiam sanguinis sui fudit, in coelestibus vero, ministrantibus —si qui illi inibi sunt— sacerdotibus, vitam corporis sui virtutem velut spiritale quoddam sacrificium immolavit» (GCS VI, 285). At the very least the language is puzzling! To begin with, the «quae in coelis sunt» does not yet seem to have received a satisfactory solution: «the most probable interpretation is that Paul is referring to angels» (LEAHY D.J. (CC) ad loc., 911b). Then Origen seems to be speaking of active sacrificial action on the part of Christ in heaven. He may, however, only be putting in dramatic language either 1) that the angels are not without a relation to the sacrifice of Christ: not that they receive grace as healing but only as elevating, from Christ, the glorified victim of sacrifice (MF 526); or 2) that Christ is

a rather interesting interpretation of John's words about the martyrs being «under the altar»! Origen seems to take the phrase as indicating subordination to the high priest who is also at the heavenly altar. He considers this approach to the heavenly altar as the supreme ideal;

«let us consider whether perhaps we have been preserved for this reason that washed in our own blood and cleansed from all sin, we may associate at the heavenly altar with those who have fought in a similar way.» (64)

Finally, expressing the power of the martyred soul to make its way unscathed through enemy territory (the opposition of demons) to heaven, he asks:

«for who can follow the soul of the martyr, which having overcome all the powers of the air, makes its way to the heavenly altar? ... blessed then are the souls which follow Christ in the manner in which he preceded them. And because they follow him in this manner they reach the altar of God itself, where the Lord Jesus Christ himself is, high priest of the good things to come.» (65)

In the homilies on the book of Josue, Origen seems to identify this altar with Christ. For example he treats the old worship as the shadow that will one day give way to the reality. The earthly was a figure of the heavenly. At the Incarnation the reality came down from heaven, and all the shadows fled. «The temple fell, the altar was taken away ...» (66) When the temple that was formed in the womb of the virgin was present, the temple made of stones was overthrown. When the priest of the good things to come was present, the old order of priests ceased. So Origen takes a few instances of the shadows giving way to the reality. Then he imagines a Jew coming

forever presenting his blood at the heavenly altar, blood sprinkled once in active sacrifice on earth, and now, as sprinkled, reconciling those who are in heaven: not the angels, who need no cleansing, but redeemed souls, who are forever kept in a cleansed state by the efficacy of the once sprinkled blood. Then there is the reference to the possibility of ministering priests, while Christ immolates the vital force of his body at the heavenly altar. What complications! I do not pretend to be satisfied with these remarks.

(64) *Exhort. ad Martyrium*, 39: GCS 1,37.

(65) In *Judic. hom.* VII,2: GCS VII,508.

(66) In *Jos. hom.* XVII,1: GCS VII,401.

to Jerusalem and seeing everything overturned. He must not weep, but look for the heavenly reality that has taken its place:

«Look upwards and there you will find the heavenly Jerusalem, which is the mother of all. If you see the altar abandoned (*destitutum*), I do not want you to be sad; if you do not find the high priest, I do not want you to despair: the altar is in the heavens and the high priest of the good things to come is assisting at it...» (67)

If, in general, all the old worship was the shadow cast by the reality that was to come, then surely the reality IS all at once what was piecemeal and sketchy until then. If temple gives way to Christ, if priest, if sacrificial lamb, then altar too.

A similar implicit identification seems to be contained in Origen's reflections on the altar built by the trans-Jordan tribes. He makes a parallel between them and the other tribes on the one hand and the Jewish people and Christians on the other. The trans-Jordan tribes had an altar that was only an image of the true one among the other tribes. So this one was only an image of the true one, come with the Saviour:

«Although they had an altar then before the arrival of the Saviour, they knew and understood (*sciebant et sentiebant*) that that altar was not the true one, but that it was an image and figure of this true one to come (*futuri veri huius altaris*).» (68)

Origen then points out that it is not the Christians who have refused the Jews a share in the Lord's inheritance and altar, but, «they themselves of their own accord have rejected the true altar and the heavenly pontiff...» (69)

These few passages from the homilies on the book of Josue make it not unlikely that Origen means by the heavenly altar the present condition of Christ, who coming from heaven of old, showed the Jews the reality after which all their worship was patterned, that they might channel their devotion to temple, priest, altar and sacrifice towards him.

In the light of this interpretation we can consider the other passages, dealing with martyrdom, adding to them the

(67) In Jos hom. XVII,1: GCS VII, 401-2.

(68) In Jos hom. XXVI,3: GCS VII, 461.

(69) *Ibid.* 463.

passage of Irenaeus. We see that there are three things to be accounted for by the heavenly altar. First, it is the means whereby our gifts become sanctified by their being changed into the body of Christ. Second it adds to the passible and mortal flesh of Christ a sort of fuller sanctification, namely that of glory. Third it gives the sufferings of the martyrs a propitiatory value and to the martyrs themselves a sacrificial, priestly dignity. The conclusion seems obvious that there is some sort of identification implicit in the minds of Irenaeus and Origen between Christ and this wonderful altar. I have mentioned what I consider to be the aspect of Christ under which he can be considered as the heavenly altar. De la Taille has a masterly statement of the case:

«What other altar can these Doctors be understanding than the substantial sanctity of the humanity assumed through the Word himself? From this sanctity the Son of Man is competent to transfer his mortality into immortality, to place before God in a heavenly condition what leaves us in an earthly one, to make the sharers of his passion sharers of his glory. In other words, Christ himself took and takes the place of the altar, because the victim he offered had no sanctity which did not take its origin from the incarnation; no sanctity for which there was not sufficient principle in the substantial sanctity of the humanity.» (70)

In his homilies on Exodus and Leviticus, Origen interprets the altars of the Old Testament in another sense, that is without referring to the heavenly altar. In his homily on the tabernacle he first shows how all must contribute to the building of one tabernacle, which is the Church. He then turns to the possibility of each one's constructing an image of the tabernacle in himself, and describes what will correspond in such a spiritual construction to the material elements of the visible tabernacle. He speaks of the soul's not resting until it has built a dwelling for the God of Jacob, in the spirit of psalm 131:

- »I will not give sleep to my eyes, or slumber to my eyelids, until I find a place for the Lord, a dwelling

place for the Mighty One of Jacob.»

«Let this soul —says Origen— have established within itself also an altar, on which it may offer sacrifices of prayers and victims of mercy to God, on which by the knife of continence it may immolate pride as a bullock, anger as a ram, luxury and all voluptuousness as goats.» (71)

The soul must also have within it the altar of incense, so that it may say «for we are the good aroma of Christ». (72) Officiating at these altars will be that part of the soul «by which we can be receptive of God.» (per quam capaces esse possumus Dei.) (73) The matter is left in a certain vagueness: the altars are within, the first as firmly fixed (*defixum*), the second within the depths of the heart (in *penetralibus pectoris sui*). The application is pleasing because it enables a personal use to be made of the Old Testament sacrifices, seeing in the various animals sacrificed not only symbols of the perfect sacrifice of Christ, but also symbols of the sins for which the animals and Christ were sacrificed, symbols therefore of the internal sacrifice that must always accompany the external offering. The immolation in the internal sacrifice will mean death inflicted on the mind's sinful tendencies, so that it itself might be made over as a spotless offering to God.

This internal altar Origen again mentions in his polemics against Celsus. Celsus has attacked the Christians for not having altars and temples and images, and so of remaining an obscure and secret society.

«He does not notice that our altars (*βωμοί*) are the mind (*τὸ ἡγεμονικόν*) of each righteous man, from which true and intelligible (*νοητός*) incense with a sweet savour is sent up, prayers from a pure

(71) In Ex hom. IX, 3: GCS VI, 241.

(72) in Ex hom. IX, 3: GCS VI, 242. Also in Num. hom. V, 3: GCS VII, 29, «Alii sint altare incensi quicumque orationibus... vacant in templo Dei, orantes non solum pro semetipsis, sed et pro universo populo». Hom. X, 3: *ibid.* 73, «quoniam altare orationis indicium est ...» Here O. likens the interior altar to private prayer («intra in cubiculum tuum» etc.); the exterior to public prayer offered with a clear voice. The first is to pray «in mente», the second «in spiritu», according to St Paul (1 Cor 14, 15).

(73) *ibid.*

conscience.» (74)

And again, but this time with the additional idea that the presence of the altars in the soul depends on the soul's wanting to have them:

«Anyone interested may compare the altars which I have described with those of which Celsus speaks... He will clearly recognize that the latter are lifeless and in time become corrupted, while the former abide in the immortal soul so long as the rational soul is

(74). *Contra Celsum* lib. VIII,17: GCS 11,234. Version, CHADWICK Henry, Origen: *Con. Celsum*, Cambridge, 1953, p.464. In Stoic philosophy τὸ ἡγεμονικὸν meant the «authoritative part of the soul (reason).» (Liddeñ and Scott, s.h.v.) For Origen it is the central part of man, his mind, heart, spirit: the part open to God, receiving from God the fire of faith. From his first homily on Genesis we see better what meaning O. attaches to «mind». God made «heaven and earth». «Heaven» here means «spirit».

«Et ideo illud quidem primum coelum, quod spiritale dicimus, MENS NOSTRA est, quae et ipsa SPIRITUS est, id est SPIRITUALIS HOMO NOSTER, qui videt ac perspicit Deum. Istud autem corporale coelum, quod firmamentum dicitur, EXTERIOR HOMO NOSTER est, qui corporaliter intuetur.» (in Gen hom. 1,2: GCS VI,3).

SPIRITUS is also the dwelling place of God, for it is «coelum». and God says, «coelum mihi sedes est.» A little later O. speaks of the heaven of our heart, «in CORDIS nostri caelo» (ibid.8). So spirit and heart are the same.

Later, the mind has to produce its good and bad thoughts from the waters that are within it. Then we find, «de CORDE namque velut de aquis...»: so the HEART is within the MIND...; sure enough, a little further on, the thoughts of our MIND are produced from the depths of the HEART. So SPIRIT, MIND, HEART are practically the same for Origen, with the heart, perhaps, enjoying some priority for indicating depth.

For the distinction between SPIRITUS and ANIMA we have first the comment on man's being created male and female:

«Interior homo noster ex spiritu et anima constat. Masculus SPIRITUS dicitur, femina potest ANIMA noncupari.» (ibid. 19).

The SPIRITUS is the part of man open to God, the mind with the heart in its depths (should we say today, the substance of the soul with its mutually inclusive faculties of mind and will?), while the ANIMA is what St Paul and so many others mean by «the animal man.» It is not necessarily sinful,

«Qui etiam si peccatis non urgeatur nec sit praecipuum ad vitia, non tamen habet in se aliquid spiritale et quod figuratim carnes verbi Dei reputentur.» (in Lev hom.11,2: GCS VI, 291).

ANIMA is in the natural order (we should say it is the soul as informing the body and active in the senses). If the soul remains wedded to the spirit all goes well, and a progeny of children, consisting of good thoughts, results; should the soul go after the desires of the flesh then there is an adultery in man's make up, resulting in a brood of imperfect offspring destined for death. (in Gen hom.1; GCS VI,19).

willing for them to remain in it.» (75)

In a complicated, terse, comment on Ps 25,6, «I wash my hands in innocence, and go about thy altar, O Lord, singing aloud a song of thanksgiving, and telling all thy wondrous deeds», Ps. —Origen (76) gives a dynamic sense to this internal altar. The mind is the rational altar of God when it contemplates corporeal and incorporeal realities. At the same time the priestly soul «goes about» this altar when it turns its attention away from the exterior to itself and its centre: only when it «knows» itself does it proclaim the wondrous deeds of God.

Possibly God is considered to be at the centre of the soul, dwelling at the altar there. By recollection, the soul considers its own spiritual nature; also instead of merely seeing the outside of things, it «contemplates» visible reality in the light of God and is then able to praise God. Thus the soul is purified from activity not fitting its religious nature. Then the mind is thus occupied, it acts as the altar of God; at the same time the altar fire becomes active: it consumes any unrational thought that might rebel against its being a sheep in the Lord's flock. Thus the fire and the act of contemplating have the same effect: the fire consumes inappropriate thoughts

(75) *ibid.* 236. Celsus accuses the Christians of not having temples, altars (βωμοί) and images. Origen agrees that the only altars (βωμοί) are the minds of the faithful. However he does speak of material altars (θυσιαστήρια): of their consecration «by the precious blood of Christ» (in *Jos hom.* 11,1: GCS,296) of the faithful's contributing to their adornment (*ibid.*, *hom.* X,3: GCS VII 360); of clerics giving bad example when at the altar (in *Jud hom.* 111,2: GCS VII,481). Cyprian, of the lack or the fewness of the altars (altaria) of God (*ad Demetrium* XII: PL 4,553). Tertullian speaks of a Christian standing before the «ara» Dei (*De Oratione* 19: PL 1,1182). On the other hand, just before Tertullian Minucius Felix admits the pagan charge that the Christians have no temples or altars (delubra et aras) (*Octavius* 32: PL 3,339). So Arnobius (ca 296) says the Christians make neither *altaria* nor *aras*, but the context shows he is talking about these objects as they are understood among pagans (*Adv. Gentes* 1,6: PL 5, 1162)

Origen applies the word altar to the cross on one occasion (see note 57). Later writers apply it to the table at the last supper (Ephraem, *Hymnus de crucifixione tertius*, str. 12, ed. Lamy, t.1,662).

(76) Eusebius (H.E.,1,6,XXIV,2) speaks of Origen's Commentaries on the first 25 Psalms, but the Commentary on Ps 25 in PG does not seem to be genuine, according to BARDENHEWER Otto, GAL 11, Freiburg 1914, p.141. I include the passage as being more

when the mind gives itself to the contemplation of reality, both corporeal and otherwise. No difficulty is felt in making the mind at once the altar and the priest going round about it to sing the praises of God. Here is the passage:

«Our mind is the rational altar of God, on which we burn up with the fire sent from the Father on to the earth every irrational thought which skips away rebelliously from the Lord's flock. Now when the soul looks not outwards but toward itself and its own centre, it goes about the altar of God... so the altar is contemplation of corporeal and incorporeal realities, in which the mind is cleansed; whoever goes about the mind, that is, knows it, he it is who tells all the wonderful deeds of God.» (77)

The fire from the Father is (in Origen's homiletic language) that which Christ came to cast upon the earth, and which he refers to when bidding us keep our lamps burning as we wait for him. The lamp of knowledge must be kindled by the fire, which is the fire of faith. (78) As we have just seen, a purifying effect is ascribed to this fire when it «consumes». Of old the fire «consumed» the victim, not in the sense of removing defects from it the victim had to be technically spotless—but in order to show the divine acceptance. Of course, this acceptance meant the removal from the victim of the basic «defect» of being in an earthly, human condition, and endowment of it with a heavenly, divine one (at least in the figurative order.) So Christ as victim received a purification, namely that implied in his passing into the heavens and into the glory of his Godhead. That glory «preserves» Christ as victim, endowing him with incorruptibility; no victim flesh in the old law could retain its victim quality beyond three days Ps.—Origen may perhaps be considering this aspect of the

or less according to Origen's mentality, although it is somewhat more complicated than Origen himself normally is!

(77) Comm. in Ps 25,6: PG 12,1273.

(78) *ibid.* «Igne a Patre in terram misso.» Much the same idea in Origen, see n.79. Origen stresses that the fire is that of faith: eg. in Lev hom.IV,6: GCS VI, 324, «Si vis sacerdotium agere animae tuae, nunquam recedat ignis de altari tuo. Hoc est quod et Dominus in evangelis praecipit, ut 'sint lumbi vestri praecincti et lucernae vestrae semper ardentes. Semper ergo tibi IGNIS FIDEI et lucerna scientiae accensa sit.»

divine fire of faith, namely that it preserves the victim status of the mind. The mind's thoughts are the Lord's flock, his property, a victim made sacred to him. The fire of faith keeps the mind's thoughts in this condition, and should some thought arise in the mind contrary to its victim status, the fire will naturally tend to preserve the mind by destroying the thought. (79)

When referring to the manner in which we can fulfil what was required of the priest of old, Origen teaches that the altar and the fire are to be found in the minds of fervent Christians. Of old the victim had to be skinned, cut up, and placed in order upon the altar. Now the Christian priest fulfils this rite by removing the veil of the letter from the word of God, considering the spiritual riches hidden therein and expounding them to those «who are the altar of God, in whom there is always burning the divine fire, and in whom the flesh is always consumed.» (80) Origen describes in particular what it means to divide the victim up into parts. It means for him the ability to explain the progress to be made attachment to Christ, starting from the touching of the hem of his garment, progressing to the washing of his feet and the anointing of his head and finally, to the lying close to his breast. Origen makes other applications of this dividing of the victim: they are concerned with the ability to show the progress in spiritual doctrine, starting from the law, progressing to the prophets, and arriving at the plenitude of the gospel; or in demonstrating how various kinds of Christians are to be nourished with the word of God. (81)

(79) in Lev hom. V,3: GCS VI,338-9 for more remarks on the fire of God. God is a fire, consuming sins. This fire Our Lord brought to earth. He took on our sins and, like a fire, consumed them.

(80) in Lev hom. 1,4: *ibid.* 285.

(81) in Lev hom. 1,4: *ibid.* 286. This homily shows how easily Origen passes from the idea of the Word clothed in the flesh (section 3 discusses the sacrifice of Christ in terms of Levitical prescriptions to that of the same Word clothed in sacred scripture (section 4 discusses how the words of sacred scripture are to be «skinned», so that the underlying mysteries concerning Christ and the Christian life might be «divided up and placed» on the altar of Christian minds.) Maybe this manner of speaking is not far removed from that quite common among the Fathers, whereby sacramental communion with the flesh of Christ and contemplation of the Word, knowledge of the faith, study of the scriptures, were looked upon as sign and signified. De la Taille writes, «Manducatio eucharistica est sacramentum manducationis spiritualis, quae fit per fidem vivam (cuius propria est contemplatio caritativa Verbi, et

He then comments on the wood that must be placed under the fire by the priests in order to keep it burning strongly. The fire of faith must be kept burning by speaking of the divinity of Christ:

«He adds wood to the altar, whereby the fire may be animated and burn, whose speech is not only about the bodily virtues of Christ but also about his divinity.» (82)

He then makes a comparison between this fire in the mind, to be nourished by hearing about the divinity of Christ, and the heavenly fire of glory that took possession of Christ in his resurrection. The heavenly fire in that case was fed by the wood of the cross: in the sense, I take it, that only by the wood of the cross could the heavenly fire of glory exert its potentiality, «consume» the human activity of Christ and restore his human nature to its proper condition. We saw the passage before. (83) Fire by its nature leaps heavenwards. It is then a symbol of what the heavenly fire (of the divinity) did at the time of the glorification of Christ. And now the mind fire is compared with this heavenly fire. The mind fire, or fire of faith, will have a similar result: it will ensure that Christ's human activity return to the «nature of his» divinity, that is, be understood as the activity of one, whose divinity lies hidden beneath the outward appearances. Such is, I suggest, a track through the rather involved thought of Origen in this part of his homily.

There is a somewhat different development in the Homily on the high priest's entrance into the holy of holies. (84) First Origen says that the exterior, visible part of the tabernacle represents the Church on earth, the holy of holies, heaven. Only priest can minister at the altar of holocausts, but then all Christians are priests. They offer the holocaust of

pia veritatis in Scripturis revelatae meditatio.» (MF 231) Hence an interchange of terms that seems overbold to our way of thinking, «Nec mirum proinde quod libere dixerunt panem et potum, vel carnem et sanguinem esse ipsam fidem, contemplationem, doctrinam, cuius est sacramentum seu symbolum, aut vice versa: pro quanto scilicet unum alteri cohaeret ratione et causalitatis et significationis seu similitudis.» (ibid.)

(82) *ibid.* 286: «addit et ligna altari, quo ignis animetur et ardeat, is a quo ... etiam de divinitate eius sermo misceatur.»

(83) see note 61.

(84) in Lev hom. IX,9: GCS VI,436.

themselves, while keeping at the altar of holocausts, the heavenly fire Christ came to cast upon the earth:

«... each of us has his holocaust in himself and kindles (succendit) the altar of his holocaust, that it may always be burning.» (85)

Some of the holocausts are mentioned; renouncing all, taking up one's cross and following Christ, becoming a martyr, laying down one's life for the brethren. Origen then says that the high priest, who is Christ, sets out from this altar to pass into the holy of holies, where he will offer the sacrifice of incense. From the altar of holocausts and its vicinity he takes burning coals and incense: Origen asks,

«Do you think my Lord the true high priest will honour me by taking some 'sweet incense beaten small' from me, to take it to the Father? Do you think he will find in me some little bit of fire (igniculi) and my holocaust burning, so that he will do me the honour of filling his censer with coals of fire from it and on them offer a sweet fragrance to God the Father?» (86)

The incense, compounded from many substances and ground small, is the well thought out spiritual sense of the sacred scriptures, united with the balanced practice of the virtues: all this becomes a sweet fragrance of the intelligence to God. (87) The fire, again, is the fire of faith, accompanied by the warmth of charity. Origen imagines the misery of the soul wherein the Pontiff, looking for burning coals, finds only dead

(85) *ibid.*

(86) in Lev hom. IX, 9: GCS VI, 437.

(87)! *ibid.* »Beatus, in cuius corde invenerit tam subtilem, tam minutum tanque spiritalē sensum et ita diversa virtutum suavitate compositum, ut repleri dignetur ex eo manus suas Deoque Patri suavem odorem intelligentiæ eius offerre.» On p. 433 there is a detailed description of this incense. The Lord filled his hands with incense by doing good works for our redemption. The incense is compounded of the variety of virtues. It is ground up small when we have a fine as opposed to a gross understanding of the scriptures, or when we can give an account of the most subtle and minute working of God's providence. God wants this understanding of his providence and scriptures from those tending to perfection. We must seek to have something corresponding to the Lord's good works, some incense to offer the high priest as he goes into the sanctuary. Our actions must be harmoniously virtuous and «informed» by spiritual understanding.

«Pontifex igitur noster Dominus et Salvator aperit manus suas et suscipere vult ab unoquoque nostrum incensum compositionis minutum...»

ones in a heap of ashes. (88) The secret of keeping the fire alive is to hear the divine words. If the fire of the altar, which is the fire of the Lord, is out, then only forbidden fire will burn in the heart, and the same lot will befall those who enkindle such fire, as befell Nadab and Abiud, the sons of Aaron, who burnt strange fire before the Lord and perished. (89)

Commenting on the scene in the book of Numbers in which Aaron stood in the midst of the people between the living and the dead to make intercession for the people, Origen, applying the action to Christ, says,

«See how the true pontiff Jesus Christ, having assumed the censer of human flesh and placed therein the fire of the altar, without doubt that wonderful (magnifica) soul with which he was born in the flesh, adding also incense, which is his immaculate spirit, stood between the living and the dead...»
(90)

I give this passage to show that Origen does not teach mechanically. There is nothing much here resembling the fire of faith and the incense of understanding allied to a virtuous life, although a certain connection between these things, as Origen depicts them in us and as he speaks of them in Christ, might be worked out. (91)

In the homily on Josue's building an altar, Origen introduces a new aspect of his mind regarding Christ and the altar.

(88) *ibid.* «at contra, infelix anima, cuius fidei ignis extinguitur et refrigescit caritatis calor; ad quam cum venerit coelestis pontifex noster quaerens ab eo ignitos et ardentis carbones super quos incensum offerat Patri, invenit in ea aridos cineres et frigidam favillam.»

(89) *ibid.* 438. «qui de altari est ignis, ignis est Domini» (*ibid.* 432); O. adds that the fire opposed to it is the sinner's own fire, adducing the Lord's «ignis eorum non extinguetur.»

(90) in Num. hom. IX,5; GCS VII,60.

(91) There is incense and fire in the Christian. The fire is the fire of faith; the incense is compounded of the variety of virtuous acts that make up Christian living and is ground up small by the mind's having a minute, spiritual, subtle understanding of the sacred scriptures and of divine providence. (GCS VI, 433). In the passages mentioned in n. 90 Our Lord's humanity is the thurible, his soul the altar fire, his spirit the incense. It would require a little violence to work out a unity of thought with regard to Christ and Christian from this data! We would have to say that corresponding to the fire of faith in the Christian was the fire of glory in the soul of Christ; to the incense of good deeds informed by the subtle understanding of scripture, in the Christian the «good deeds done for our redemption» in Christ's «im-

It is the ecclesiastical sense of the altar that he speaks of, and with a sweeping vision he sees the Church as the building by Christ, acting through his Spirit, of a mighty altar. The scene in the book of Josue is described briefly as follows:

«Then Joshua built an altar in Mount Ebal to the Lord, the God of Israel... 'an altar of unhewn stones, upon which no man has lifted an iron tool'; and they offered on it burnt offerings... and he wrote upon the stones a copy of the law of Moses...» (92)

All Christians are the living stones, says Origen, which form the great temple of God. But in the temple is the altar, and Origen offers the suggestion (*ego arbitror*) that the stones used in its construction by Jesus, the true Josue, are those of his listeners who are ready to be a living altar. This they will be who are

«able and willing to give their time to prayers, to offer day and night beseechings to God and to immolate victims consisting of supplication». (93)

The stones must be integral and untouched by iron. Each one can tell from his own conscience how he stands in the matter of moral integrity; whether he is untouched by the iron of contention (*pugnae ... bellae ... litium*) and is, instead, peaceful, calm, gentle, fashioned from the pattern of Christ's humility (*ex Christi humilitate formatur.*) Origen gives pride of place to the apostles as the stones for this altar, although somewhat tentatively (*ego puto quod forte...*). The reason is the unanimity and concord of the apostolic college. They prayed with one voice and one spirit, and therefore

«they are the ones who should form all together one altar, on which Jesus may offer sacrifice to the Father.» (94)

The apostles are held up as the pattern after which we should

maculate spirit.» The latter parallel works out easily enough, for virtuous acts originate in the spirit, and corresponding to the Christian's subtle understanding are «all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge» (Col. 2,3). But if O. uses «soul» here in the sense he has given it elsewhere (see not 74) then it is hard to see how it corresponds to the fire of faith in the Christian. Perhaps the effort to conciliate O.'s treatment of fire and incense is idle: however his treatment of them with regard to the Christian is fairly consistent, and insistent.

(92) Jos 9,30-32.

(93) in lib Jos hom. IX,1: GCS VII, 347.

(94) *Ibid.*

mould our lives into a perfect, fraternal harmony: thus we too shall be fit to become stones for the altar. In fact, this construction of the altar seems to be a kind of ideal towards which the Holy Spirit is working, in his causing us to pray and in offering our prayers to the Father 'with sighs too deep for words': in acting thus in us, Origen says, the Spirit «is unceasingly seeking from us (sollicite requirat) the construction of the altar.» (95) Finally, Christ writes the new law, the true Deuteronomy, on the hearts of those worthy to be chosen for this altar.

In his commentary on Our Lord's question about the altar in St Matthew's gospel, Origen dwells at length on the relation of altar and gift as applied to the spiritual gifts made on the spiritual altar, built by the just man within himself. He reminds us first of the general principle:

«... what is placed on the altar, is already judged to be a gift of God by the very fact of its being received on the altar.» (96)

Then he repeats his doctrine of the other commentaries: the altar is the heart of man, because it is the principal part in him (quod principale habetur in homine); sacrifices and gifts on the altar are all the things placed on the heart: prayers, psalms to be sung, an alms to be given, a fast.

«Every sacrifice (votum) of man is made venerable and holy his heart, from which the sacrifice is offered to God.» (97)

Therefore it is like the blindness Our Lord speaks of in his rhetorical question to the Jews about the relative value of altar and gift, to consider the greatness of the alms, the length of the prayers, and so on. The heart-altar is what makes these things precious. So whoever has a clear conscience and a good heart can have confidence towards God, not because of his gifts, but because, «if I may so express it, he has constructed well the altar of his heart.» (98)

In conclusion, we may argue —not without probability— that Origen implicitly identifies the heavenly altar with Christ himself. Christ first of all «approached» it to receive the ex

(95) in lib Jos hom. IX, 1: GCS VII, 348.

(96) in Matt Commentariorum Series, on Matt 23, 19: PG 13, 1623.

(97) in Matt Commentariorum Series, on Matt 23, 19: PG 13, 1624.

(98) ibid. 1625.

tra purification of his glory. There he «stands» with his martyred members, priests and victims with him. Either the language is pure metaphor or it is putting into symbolic form the truth that Christ is for himself the heavenly altar: that is, he is now, in his heavenly condition, and with regard to himself as victim, what an altar is to the victim that lies on it. In his own person he is forever presenting himself as the glorious victim, never to be removed from the heavenly altar, never to lose incorruptibility. From this heavenly altar and victim flows continually, under the martyrs' intercessory ministrations, remission of sins to those who ask for it. Then again, has the old worship, with its temple, altar priesthood and sacrifices, disappeared? That is because it has served its purpose until the reality should appear on earth and draw all after himself into the heavens. There the disappointed Jew will find what his worship was preparing for. There is the real priest, victim and temple: there, too, the real altar. The identification of altar with priest and victim is all but explicit. But Origen does not explore the possibilities of this doctrine, either with regard to Christ's sacrifice on earth (he mentions the cross as the altar) or with regard to our eucharistic sacrifice.

When it comes to the internal altar, the application is not made explicitly to Christ, although he is said to possess the incense of his good works (fruit of his immaculate spirit) in the thurible of his body, burning on the altar-fire of his wonderful soul.

Rather, all the altar applications are reserved for Christ's members, now taken singly, now in their fraternal oneness in Christ. When taken singly each member is priest, victim and altar all at once: within him, too, is the altar fire and the incense to be offered with the holocaust of himself. The altar is in the centre of the soul, in the heart or mind: there do all actions get their value. The stress is put on the action of the altar fire, which, contrary to our expectations, is not the fire of charity but the fire of faith. The fire of faith includes of course the warmth of charity, but the emphasis is unmistakably on the former: faith being thought of as the fire to be nourished by renewed application of the mind to the divinity of Christ. This piercing through the flesh of Christ to vivid belief in his divinity causes the fire of faith to leap upwards,

carrying towards the divinity the offering of oneself. The incense to be consumed in this fire is the mixture of perfumes to be found in the practice of all the virtues in harmonious living an indispensable element of which is the subtle, spiritual understanding of the sacred scriptures, as opposed to a crude, superficial, understanding of them. The whole of one's life seems to be regarded as a fragrant holocaust. When taken in fraternal oneness, the members are to allow themselves to be made into an altar by Christ himself: this they will do by striving for complete harmony of mind and voice in prayer, thus imitating the apostles, and forming one ecclesiastical altar with them. On this altar Christ offers to the Father. In the sense, no doubt, that within his members so united he, through his Spirit, causes prayer to rise from their altar hearts and links it with his own. There is no mention of Christ offering the eucharistic sacrifice on the altar of his united members. It is not hard to see, however, that the two sacrifices are related as cause and effect, as sign and signified. The united faithful under the priestly influx of Christ, offer the eucharistic sacrifice on the heavenly altar with him: at the same time, again under his influence, offering the holocaust and incense of their lives on the altar of their united hearts. Such seems to be the synthetic teaching of Origen on the altar. By implication Christological it is explicitly ascetical, as being more in keeping with the purpose of the homilies. But the ascetical application is nicely placed within the framework of the Christian mystery: Christ through his Holy Spirit is engaged in the building up of his members into a sacrificial unity, offering himself in them to the Father, from the intimate depths of their hearts as from a living altar.

CONCLUSION

Some of the conclusions of this study have already been given in the summaries of the chapters. Here they can be viewed somewhat more synthetically.

1. God, who dwells in a special manner in the holy of holies, symbol of heaven, receives the offerings of his people from the altars, basic symbol of his acceptance.

2. Because it acts on his behalf, is as it were his impersonation, the altar is anointed with fragrant oil, which —by its sweetness and pervading nature— is indicative of divine sanctity. So in receiving the offerings the altar sanctifies them, gives them a new and nobler condition befitting their new ownership. From now on the offerings are God's and can impart divine sanctity to those who participate in them. The sanctity communicated varies with the nature of the worship offered, being figurative or real according to the latter's being figurative or real.

3. The basic, «accepting» function of the altar is sufficient for indicating divine reception of poured-out blood or burning incense. But with offerings made under the appearance of food the manifestation of divine acceptance reaches its highest and purest form in consumption by fire: not fire which destroys but which transforms.

4. The sacrificial altar and the incense altar seem to complement each other, the latter's offering stressing the devotion and prayers which should inspire and accompany the former's. Hence the two altars can be considered as though they were one. Together they manifest the attitude of the people to God: the incense wafted into the holy of holies will indicate that the offerings outside, for all their unavoidable «materiality», are really as «spiritual» as the incense offering and are made «before the face of God.»

5. The altar not only impersonates God receiving, but also seems to be a symbol of the people as well, in as much as

on occasion it is constructed of stones indicative of the twelve tribes. In this sense it would be a rather powerful sign of the unity of God and people, and in fact it is at the altar that God instills a sense of this unity. At Sinai the people are drawn towards God through the altar, for they are sprinkled with the blood of the altar, eat of its offerings. After centuries of worship at many altars, the people are finally gathered round one altar, the centre of their national existence. They «have an altar» from which those outside their unity cannot eat. They must approach this altar three times a year with deep sincerity and joy, nor can they make sacrificial approach to God anywhere else.

6. As the priestly people of God they are united, ideally at least, in their expectation of a new sacrificial era. Then even the gentiles will have their offerings accepted on God's altar on mount Sion, and the messianic feasting, spoken of in such rich terms, seems to offer a new intimacy with the altar-table of God. The life-producing effect of the blessings signified by this joyful feasting is symbolized under the form of waters flowing from the holy of holies past the altar to renew the land and the Dead Sea. Thus, by the fact of unity round the unique altar, and by the messianic expectations, are preparations made for the new people of God, which will be brought into existence and sustained by a new sacrifice offered at new altar. Christ, priest of the new sacrifice, transcends all the stages preparatory to his coming, not by destroying but by fulfilling. He does not approach the altar of the temple in order to reach God, but is himself the means of approach. He then is both the temple and the altar of his sacrifice.

7. God is not figuratively present at this new altar to receive what is offered, but anointing it with the divinity itself is present in a manner too real to comprehend. Thus anointed through and through with the divinity the sacred humanity of Christ has substantial sanctity. This means that Christ has by right the absolute fullness of grace and glory, even though, temporarily grief is possible in his soul and pain in his body. This lack of the complete effects of the divine anointing means that Christ can make of himself a victim, thus passing from a human into a heavenly condition. The sanctification flowing from the altar to the victim in Christ's

case, however, will not mean the reception of something that was not, at least by right, possessed or due before. If some of the effects of the substantial sanctity, absence of grief and glory of body, were not previously present they were due with as much right as the plenitude of grace. The sanctification of Christ as victim will simply give a new title to these effects, as to the plenitude of grace itself. The sacred humanity has all its sanctity not only because it is that of the Son of God, but also because it is that of the Lamb of God. Thus the actual release of the full power of the substantial sanctity will take place only as the result of the sacrificial offering, when God will take possession of the victim. This release will be the consuming fire of God's glory. Thus the fire of God will consume its last and chief victim, enabling it to remain incorrupt as victim flesh for ever. (1)

As of old the fire of God belonged to the altar, forming one with it to signify divine acceptance, so now. The divine fire of glory belongs to the sacred humanity as the altar of God, consuming it as the victim-Lamb of God. This fire always belonged to it, but was not kindled till the time came for the sacrifice. For Christ was anointed both as altar and priest at the incarnation. But the priest does not approach this altar to bathe it with his blood nor to offer his flesh to its fire until the time of sacrifice begins. The «fire» of the passion consumes the sin offering outside the camp, but the sacred fire of the altar does not appear till later. At the resurrection it is enkindled on the altar and takes divine possession of the body of the victim, endowing it with glorious incorruptibility. This fire is from heaven and also from the altar, for if it comes from the substantial sanctity of the altar body, its ultimate source, as is that of the substantial sanctity, is in the divinity, present so mysteriously at the altar.

8. This fire of divine glory, due from the start but deferred, acting in the tomb but hiddenly, now causes the Lamb of God to illuminate heaven. The fire will never cease to be glorifying the victim of the glorious altar. The priest is now engaged in imparting the divine sanctity of this altar and victim to his members, thus leading them to share in glory.

(1) Cf. *Worship*, Feb. 1958 for an article describing the fire of the Easter Vigil as symbol of the Holy Spirit acquired by Christ's death at work in his resurrection through him, in us.

9. I do not claim that all this is expressly stated in the matter I have studied! What is basically there I have endeavoured to complete by a twofold process. First, what seems an implicit identification of Christ with the altar I have made explicit. Then I have transposed this identification to a theological level, to see how the theological statements of the truth about Christ may illuminate such an identification. The first, that the altar is Christ, is suggested on three grounds: the importance of the altar in the divinely appointed sacrifices of old, the eminent perfection of Christ's sacrifice, the early attribution, one way or another, of the Old Testament or of the heavenly altars to Christ. The detailed theological speculation concerning Christ as altar is drawn from some of the doctrinal riches concerning Christ's sacred humanity. Even though this second degree of Christological interpretation is not found in what I have studied—except to some extent in the «divine fire» passage of Origen—still I suggest that its elaboration—while not due to textual research—is not out of place, in order that the few new Testament texts might be enhanced against such a background. It is necessary, I think, with whatever limping of language, to show that Christ's being called an altar, far from being a somewhat fanciful idea, in reality is concerned with deep things in the very mystery of the incarnation. If altars were anointed, he is the anointed one par excellence, anointed in his manhood by his Godhead.

10. Again this meaning given to the altar makes a coherent whole of the principle, «the altar sanctifies the gift», of the statement, «We have an altar...», of the argumentation, «... are not those who eat of the sacrifices partners in the altar?», and of the golden altar (allied to or one with the holocaust altar) seen by John in heavenly vision. Without this meaning all these altar references become rather pallid. With it they possess a living actuality.

11. Like the altar of old this new altar is the centre of unity for the new people of God: where they gather, where they offer, whence they receive—the place of their approach to God and of his to them in sacrifice and communion. Ignatius in one place clearly intimates that Christ is such a unifying altar: in other places he most likely has the same idea in mind. But his contemporary, Polycarp, makes no reference to this meaning. He has no need to do so: the Ephesians to whom he

writes have read Ignatius' remarks on the matter. Instead, Polycarp calls widows the altar of God, probably using Old Testament imagery and wanting thereby to stress the widows' social obligations in their prayers to God. Donor's gift must become widow's sacrifice: moral blemishes must not make the sacrifice spotted.

12. Shortly after Ignatius and Polycarp, Hermas uses the heavenly altar theme to inculcate useful lessons on prayer and sincerity in one's private life. A certain vagueness would allow a Christological meaning to be given this altar, but it could not be asserted confidently.

13. The application of the altar theme to persons within the Church is resumed from Polycarp by the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, and yields a solid amount of doctrine. The high value of gifts made over to the Church for the widows and the poor, the obligation on the donor to give only what he has acquired honestly, the imperative duty of widows to pass these gifts on to God in the form of prayer, rising from themselves as from the altar of God, the unity that must bind the widows together as being one altar, these are some of the lessons inculcated by the *Didascalia*. The appropriateness of the widows' being called the altar seems to be the close relation between the oblations of the people for the use of the altar and for the use of those who, either by service (the clerics) or charity (the poor) are dependent on the altar, as on God.

14. With Clement begins the personal application of the altar theme to the faithful, but without reference to responsibility towards others that is characteristic of the *Didascalia* treatment. There is no hint of any Christological theme either: only comparison of the new Christian interior sacrifice of prayer and praise with the material sacrifices of paganism.

15. There is no need to repeat what was said at the end of Chapter III concerning Origen's diversified treatment. His predilection is for seeing the fulfillment of the old order in Christ, and for making useful application of the same to Christ's members. He can concentrate on the individual member, leading him within himself to see the altar, the fire, the holocaust and the incense that he, the priest, has at his disposal. Or he can unite the members together in a common aspiration to breathe forth united prayer, thus forming one altar, like the apostles, on which the high priest might sacrifice.

What is the value of these conclusions? I suggest that they help us to see what is the primary and root meaning of the altar. Up to the point where our investigation ceases, mention has not been made of the supper table's being an altar, and only in a passing way has the cross been so named. Later writers will refer to these and other objects as altars, but that can only be in a relative way. That our altars represent the supper table because the supper table was an altar, or the cross because that was an altar, may be a fairly common assumption but cannot I suggest, be taken very seriously. For although in close contact with it, neither table nor cross received the victim in order to sanctify it! The table carried the bread and wine, but the actual sacrificial action was carried out in the hands of the priest (even as today); the cross supplied a support for the real altar, and also provided the wood for the burning of the sin offering in the fire of suffering. Thus table and cross can easily be called altars in a secondary sense, which however, should not be allowed to obscure the deeper meaning of the word. Among the orientals the actual altar is called the «table», and our own altars can be seen as representing either the supper table or the cross. But they can be seen also, and primarily, as *earthly* symbols of a unique proto-type, just as the golden altar of John's vision is a *heavenly* symbol of the same proto-type.

The second value of these conclusions is that the application yesterday of the altar theme along ascetical lines will show the naturalness and usefulness of the same thing today. Yesterday's extensive applications could easily be integrated with today's and give them more interest. For example, the consideration of the mind as the altar, whereon those who participate in the eucharistic sacrifice offer their own «sacrificial» tears, prayers and immolation, will be enriched if the detailed treatment of, say, Origen is pressed into service.

Finally, to return to the theme of the material altar, this thesis might prove a useful preliminary to further investigations. In the Introduction mention was made of the strange lack in the ceremony of consecration of the altar, of its being referred to Christ, despite the clear utterances elsewhere to this effect. A study could be made in the growth of this interpretation. As mentioned, I think it is already legitimate from what has been studied here, to see a Christological meaning for the visible altar. However, to make a more certain Judg-

ment, it would be necessary to see what is said of the material altar in the ages following the period treated. Eusebius' sermon on the occasion of the consecration of the basilica at Tyre in 314 would provide the obvious starting point for such an enquiry. The unique altar is taken as the symbol of the unique Son of God (2) Again, the splendid passages of Ps.— Denis could be examined, in which the consecration of the altar symbolizes the consecration of Christ as source of all holiness. (3) The fourteenth century disciple of Ps. Denis, Nicholas Cabasilas, has a similar idea, as part of an extremely rich doctrine. (4). The more detailed commentaries of the middle ages on the consecration ceremonies and on the altar in general would be useful additional matter for rounding out a view of the intellectual milieu in which the consecration ceremonies were ac-

- (2) EUSEBIUS, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.10, IV 68: PG 20, 877. «The venerable, the great the unique altar, what is it if not the pure holy of holies of the soul of the priest common to all? Before it on the right stands the great Power of all, Jesus himself, the only begotten of God...» This passage (and its context) certainly needs some interpretation, but the symbolism of the altar seems clear enough from the use of the same word describing it and Christ.
- (3) *Dionysiaca*, ed. CHEVALLIER Ph. Pt 111 (Des Hommes. De la hierarchie dans l'Eglise, Ch.4) 1306: In connection with the altar consecration with chrism Ps.-D. urges his readers to think of its importance: «... let us consider with heavenly eyes that this most divine altar Jesus... is perfected by this same most holy chrism.» Further references to this divine altar in Ch.V, p.1355-6 (where approach to and genuflection before the visible altar is to signify to the ordinandi a spiritual offering worthy of the divine and most holy temple and altar), and 1374 (where the deacons are to see that the «purified» approach the divine altar for the consecration of their minds.)
- (4) Cf. his *Liturgiae Expositio* XXX: PG 150, 436, and his *De Vita in Christo*, especially I.V, Ad sacrorum divinorumque mysteriorum absolutionem altare etiam necessarium esse: PG 150, 625-636. See also the very instructive article by Mme. M. LOT-BORODINE, *Le cœur theandrique et son symbolisme*: *Irénikon* 13(1936) 651-671, Cabasilas makes the heart of Christ the centre and substitute for his person, the organ of his loving will, the seat of the Holy Spirit, the source of all holiness. Because the altar is the visible centre of sacramental holiness it is like an incarnation of Christ's heart. Again, Christ's hands are the instrument of his will (as the heart is its organ): from them flows the sanctification of the Holy Spirit. But this sanctification also flows from the sacred chrism. Hence the chrism is equated with the imposition of hands. Hence, too, the altar, anointed with chrism, is equated with Christ's hands. To receive from the altar is to receive from Christ's hands, the first altar, from which the apostles received. Finally, the bishop coming to consecrate an altar is to realize that he must first construct an altar in the depths of his soul, before proceeding to erect a material altar. These are some of the main heads of the wealth of doctrine that Cabasilas derives from the idea of the altar.

completed.

There is no need to point out that an interesting study could also be made of the later interpretations given to the Old Testament altars and to their Apocalyptic counterpart (whether treated in commentaries on the Apocalypse or on the «heavently altar» of the liturgical). St Cyril of Alexandria's *De Adoratione in Spiritu et Veritate* (5), the exposition of Leviticus by Hesychius (6), St Cyril's disciple in Jerusalem, and the Venerable Bede's *De Templo* (7) would loom large in any synthesis of the «altar» ponderings made over many centuries by those wanting to understand and live better the mystery of their sacrificial union with Christ. (8)

(5) Especially BKS. 9. 10: PG 68.

(6) PG. 93.

(7) PL 91.

(8) A modern English writer G. WEBB shows that the Christological interpretation of the altar gives a very satisfying reason for the rubrical prescriptions or recommendations concerning its construction and furnishing. For example, concerning the use of the coloured frontal, he says, «Our Lord, as represented by His consecrated altar, puts on robes of majesty to identify Himself with those in whom His victory has borne fruit; His own purity reproduced again in the white robe of the virgin saint; His own heroic fortitude in the red robe of the martyr... in the green robes of certain Sundays and feria He wears the colour of innumerable leaves and grass, seeming to identify Himself with the multitude which no man can number, rather than with the special flowers of canonization. (*The Liturgical Altar*, 65). And on p. 66: «... the coloured frontal also serves to bring into clear prominence the union of the Head with His ministers of the altar, who are vested in the same colour.»

The poetic nature of these reflections should not minimise their value. Admittedly, if they were not rooted in the symbolism of the altar they might seem extravagant: as it is they are a healthy flowering of the imagination. They certainly make it clear that the Church's strong recommendations concerning the complete clothing, the coloured clothing of the altar, are more than a matter of decoration. May it not be that the lack of consciousness concerning the deep meaning of the altar is at the back of two things: first the superficial emphasis put on displaying either the shape or the material of the altar, neither of which is more than a secondary consideration; secondly, the lack of enthusiasm for compliance with the Church's instructions concerning the robing and royalty of the altar: the latter in the form of some majestic covering extending over altar and footpace alike, the former in the coloured antependia, which are really part of the clothing of the altar that, dating from the earliest times, is given such prominence for its symbolic meaning in the rite of ordination to the sub-diaconate: «The altar of Holy Church is Christ himself... the cloths covering the altar (*pallae*) and the corporals (*corporales pallae*) are the members of Christ, that is, the faithful of God, with which the Lord is girded as with most precious garments, according to the psalmist: The Lord reigns as king, robed in majesty. And Blessed John in the Apocalypse saw the Son of man with a golden girdle about him, that is, the company of the Saints.» (*Pontificale Romanum*, Mechliniae 1895,39)

ABBREVIATIONS USED

- ACR Australasian Catholic Record. Manly N.S.W. Australia.
- CC A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture, edd. B. ORCHARD, E. SUTCLIFFE, S.J., R. FULLER, R. RUSSELL, O.S.B. London 1953.
- CSS Cursus Sacrae Scripturae, edd. R. CORNELY, I. KNABENBAUER, Fr. de HUMMELAUER et alii S. J. Paris 1895 ss.
- ComSS Commentarium in Sacram Scripturam; C. A LAPIDE, S.J. Melitae 1861 ss.
- DPL Documenta Pontificia ad Instaurationem Liturgicam Spectantia (1903-1953), curante A. BUGNINI, C.M. Rome 1953.
- DictBibl Dictionnaire de la Bible, ed. F. VIGOUROUX. Paris 1926 ss.
- EB Encyclopedia Biblica, edd. T. CHEYNE & J. BLACK. London 1899.
- FP Patres Apostolici, ed. F. FUNK S.J., Tübingen 1913.
- GAL Geschichte der Altkirchlichen Literatur. O. BARDENHEWER. Freiburg 1914.
- GCS Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller. VI VII Band: Origenes Werke. von W.A. BAEHEENS. Leipzig 1920|21.
- ICC International Critical Commentary, edd. S. R. DRIVER, A. PLUMMER, C. A. BRIGGS, Edinburgh, 1907 ss.
- LSB-J La Sainte Bible de Jerusalem, Paris 1951 ss.
- LSB-PC La Sainte Bible, direction L. PIROT et A. CLAMER. Paris, 1946 ss.
- MF Mysterium Fidei, M. de la TAILLE S.J. Paris 1931.
- PG Patrologia Graeca, accurante J.P. Migne, Paris 1886 ss.
- PL Patrologia Latina, accurante J.P. Migne, Paris 1878 ss.

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