

Item #73 (Jesus and Isaac and Some New Suggestions)

What follows is to some extent a repetition of what has been said previously on this website. But there is much that is new. As always, all that is put forward in what follows is viewed by this writer as plausible unless proven or disproven elsewhere.

The story of God's testing of Abraham as presented in Genesis 22,1-18 was well known in the time of Jesus, being a part of the promise of God's blessing made to Abraham as recorded in the same Book of Genesis (12,7; 15,17-21). Abraham successfully passed the test of his trust in God's promise to fulfill His covenant despite the apparent contradiction present in His command to kill the one in whom the covenant was to be realized. The promise made to Abraham was fulfilled in Christ, as St. Paul observes in his Letter to the Galatians 3,16. If Paul was aware of the role of Christ in the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham it would seem to follow that Christ was aware of His role. In the account of Abraham's passing of God's test in Genesis 22 Isaac, the original victim demanded by God, is not sacrificed. His place as victim is taken by a ram, providentially present (Genesis 22,13). Jesus Christ must have been aware of this use of an animal to substitute for the sacrifice of a human called for by God. Is there any indication of the awareness of Christ of this lack in the Gospels? I suggest that there is. In Luke 2,49 Jesus tells his mother and foster father that He should have been in His Father's house, that is, the Temple, and it was there that they should immediately have thought of looking for Him when they missed Him. (The Greek is subject to a different reading when taken out of context. But the context in Luke is *the search for a place* by Mary and Joseph.) Now in the thinking of Jesus the Temple was a way of referring to His body: in the Gospel of John He speaks of His resurrection in terms of rebuilding it (John 2,18-22). The basis for making the comparison is undoubtedly the divine presence, symbolic in the case of the Temple, real in the case of Jesus. The crucial point

involved in Jesus' implied use of His resurrection is the implication that His resurrection is the culmination of a *toda* ceremony, that is, a sacrifice of praise. (For a presentation of this ceremony see my *Hebrews—An Interpretation* [Rome 2016, Chapter 2].) At the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper Jesus was aware that His sacrificial death would culminate in an act involving praise/thanksgiving. All of this is involved in His deliberately wanting to be found in the Temple when Jesus and Mary were looking for Him. This interpretation seems contrived because the “sacrifice of praise/thanksgiving” has come to the attention of exegetes only recently.

If Jesus was aware that the sacrifice ordered by God to be made by Abraham was missing God Himself obviously must have been aware of the lack. And He could not permit it to continue to be lacking, for not only was it essential for the redemption of mankind but it was also necessary to show that Abraham was not more generous than God. Both these fundamental reasons underlie Christ's plea in Hebrews 5,7-9 to His Father that He be allowed to die. (For argumentation based on the Greek of the text as well as the structure of Hebrews see my *Hebrews—An Interpretation*, in the relevant passages.) (The present writer recently heard of a group of women in the Catholic Church who could not understand how God the Father could permit His Son to die instead of taking His place in the sacrifice needed, and thus scandalized they left the Church. But they ignored the fact that God's love for His Son was greater than His love for Himself, and it cost Him more to permit His Son to die than to allow Himself to be offered in sacrifice. (If this indeed were possible even with another incarnation.) The author of Hebrews was aware of this love; hence Christ's plea in 5,7-9.

As mentioned above, the “sacrifice of praise/thanksgiving” has come to the attention of exegetes only recently, even though it seems to have been a common feature of Jewish liturgical life at the time of Jesus. I have attempted to show that the way Jesus corrects the failure of Mary and Joseph to look for Him in the Temple as soon as He was missed, together

with Jesus' identification of the Temple with His body based on His presence, symbolic in the one and real in the other, is an allusion to the outcome of His sacrificial death. This outcome, His resurrection, indicates that His resurrection qualifies His sacrifice as a sacrifice of praise/thanksgiving. What seems to us to be an obscure allusion to the sacrifice of praise/thanksgiving would seem to be an argument for its quality as an obvious allusion at the time the Gospels were written. The death and resurrection of Jesus are obviously the basis for the Mass so that the sacrifice of praise/thanksgiving is found also in the sacramental repetition of the original sacrificial death and resurrection. It was Jesus Himself who established this connection with the words "Do this in remembrance of me" spoken to His Apostles (Luke 22,19). This "remembrance" of Jesus should obviously include His interior attitude of begging to die directed to His Father discussed above. And this interior attitude of begging to die, based as it is on the love of the Son for His Father, would seem to have obvious relevance for the celibacy of the Catholic priesthood. On this website in Item #48 I have argued for the existence of celibacy based on various aspects of the Gospel of John, but an argument based on the love of Christ for His Father as evidenced by His pleading to die seems clearer and more forceful. This love of Christ for His Father should be the dominant love in the life of each priest, for it corresponds to the dominance of the Mass in the life of each priest.

In Item #28 above I have an Item on "The First Christians". In this Item I just present Mary and Joseph as they must have seemed to themselves before God "interfered" in their lives. For me the striking thing about Mary was the completely normal person she must have seemed to herself to be despite the enormous grace of having been conceived without the stain of Original Sin, that is, the grace of the Immaculate Conception. Judging from the account in Luke she considered herself to be just another young woman of 13 or 14 years of age who was entering on married life with a young man of 18 years of age who was able to

support a family. How else to explain the obvious surprise of each of them when God “interfered” through an angel (Mary) and a dream (Joseph). On the basis of what is known about their total ignorance of what was going to happen in their lives they have to be looked on as the untutored Apostles were looked on: completely innocent of being responsible for the Incarnation of the Son of God and for what this implied for their lives and ours. (And therefore God was totally responsible. This is what grace is.) But they were eventually to be involved in different ways. Joseph from the outside looking in, so to speak, and Mary from the inside looking out. No word of Joseph is recorded in the New Testament. His is the role of giving to his foster son the legal title of a descendant of David and thus investing Him with the identity of a true Israelite. Thus Jesus is in order with the Jewish Past. But He is so as human. Mary is to be an agent who puts things in order with the Christian Future. It is Mary who is introduced in John’s Gospel as the Daughter of Zion only to become under the cross Symbol of the Church, appointed by her Son to “hand on” the Spirit to all who were to be members of the Mystical Body of Christ (symbolized by the Evangelist and Apostle John . Thus Mary was the Mother of both the incarnate Divine Son of God and the Mother of His Mystical Body, the Church. And thus Jesus is revealed to be in order with the Future as divine, but He is so as divine with the Past as well. For in the Fourth Gospel the primary meaning of the crucifixion is that Jesus hands on the Holy Spirit and is therefore divine, and only secondarily that He as human dies. As Jesus faces His mother Mary and his stepfather Joseph as they found Him in the Temple such must have been His thoughts but not theirs.

Reflections. As the believing Catholic Christian mulls over what is written above, he or she must not forget that all this is taking place in a spirit of Love. All of the actions of the Triune God are done in The Spirit of Love, for the Spirit of God is the result of the Love of Father and Son for Each Other. The primary commandment for each Christian is to love God and each other as God’s inner life is dominated by Love, a Love that the Trinity pours out to

each creature. The ordained cleric should strive to let this Love dominate in his life so that he is known as a true celibate. (**James Swetnam, S.J., July 27, 2021**)