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Recommended Citation

McDonnell, Kilian OSB. "Love, Needs, and Torment." *Sign*, (June 1955) 38.

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Love, Needs, and Torment

by **KILIAN McDONNELL, O.S.B.**

CHRIST consistently does something we almost never do. He accepts people as they are. Yet He wants to change people. Especially He wants to change the sinner into the saint. But before He effects that change, divine artist that He is, He does what every good artist does. The artist is quite honest about the limitations and potentialities of the wood out of which he is going to sculpture a statue. He will not treat the hardness of wood as though it were the hardness of stone. Above all and first of all, the good artist is an honest acceptor. Christ accepts man as he is. He knows that even a God must have a divine honesty if He is to create a thing of beauty. This honesty must be fierce and relentless to create a thing of holiness.

Christ knows what is in man. He knows his needs. He knows that man must love. Loving is the very condition of life and is almost one with it. The moment man ceases loving, he ceases living. He stops being man the instant he stops loving.

But man's needs go deeper than just loving. It would be intolerable were man capable of loving but incapable of expressing that love. There is no distress so filled with quiet torment as undeclared love. In some manner love must find expression, must reduce itself to something physical: an embrace, a ring, a tie, a box of candy. Man expresses the spirituality of his love in a physical way by some gesture or gift simply because he is not only soul but also body. Since man is body as well as soul, it is only right that the expression of love have something physical about it. Love is a totality and must be expressed by the totality of man. In a spiritual way, yes, but in a physical way too.

Besides the need of man to love and the need of man to express that love, there is a third need. This need is that of expressing his love in some manner worthy of the person whom he loves. There is the tendency, not always laud-

able, of a young man to give his ladylove expensive gifts. Man always tries to express his love by giving something that will not be beneath the intrinsic merits of the person who is loved. Love is a totality. It is also an equality. Love says, "I must be equal to."

Christ knows all this. He respects it. Because He accepts man as he is, Christ gives us the Mass.

Christ knows that man loves God. He knows that man has ways of expressing that love. In the days before Christ, men offered up the flesh and blood of sheep. It was truly a human giving because it was partly physical. But for all the blood that flowed around the altar and the flesh that was offered upon it, something was lacking. It is true, these sacrifices were real, physical expressions of a real, spiritual love. But they were not expressions of love worthy of God. The worth of God far exceeded the pitiful gore that smeared the altar. What man needed was a perfect gift he could give to the Perfect One, a perfect sacrifice to give to the God of all perfection.

What was the perfect sacrifice? There is only one answer: Christ's death on Calvary. But that is Christ's sacrifice. How can it be made my sacrifice? Christ, because He is God, can put that sacrifice into my hands so that I can offer up this perfect gift, this perfect sacrifice, to God. Since Christ respects man and his nature, since man's love must have something physical about its expression, Christ wraps up His sacrifice in physical things. In things man can see and touch and taste: bread and wine.

First, let us look at Calvary and see what happened there. Christ was nailed to the Cross and the Blood of Christ flowed out through His wounds. On Calvary we have Christ's living Body separated from Christ's living Blood. This may or may not have been the actual physical cause of His death, but it undoubtedly is a sign of death. When living body is separated from living blood, death takes place.

In the Mass we have bread which becomes Christ's Body and wine which becomes Christ's Blood. Here too we have a living Body signified as separated from living Blood. When living body is separated from living blood, death is present. The separation of body and blood is the sign of death. Because the Body is Christ's Body and the Blood Christ's Blood, Christ's death is signified as present. This is not a new death. Christ does not die again in the Mass; His death is not repeated. But through the power of God the death Christ died centuries ago on Calvary is commemorated in the Mass by the separate consecration of bread into Christ's Body and wine into Christ's living Blood. This death of Christ is what we offer to God.

Christ has accepted man as he is and has given him a perfect sacrifice. Perfect because the Victim, Jesus Christ Himself, is "Pure Perfection," as an ancient writer wrote. Perfect because love has realized its equality. Here is a gift and sacrifice worthy of the God to whom it is offered. Perfect because love has realized its totality. This sacrifice fulfills our human needs, body needs and soul needs. We need to see, to touch, to taste any sacrifice we call our own.

IN the Mass, Christ's death is symbolized to us under the separate appearances of bread and wine, tangible, earthy, kitchen things. We do not watch this sacrifice take place from afar. No, the sacrifice of Christ is placed in our hands of flesh and bone. We offer it up to God. Through the priest and with the priest, we offer the sacrifice to God.

Without the Mass we could still feel the joy of loving, but we would experience the torment of not having a worthy expression of that love. The Mass holds first place in our lives because it is the only adequate way we have of loving God. Without the Mass love would be close to pain. Without the Mass love might despair.