

# Remission of Sins in the Syro-Malabar Qurbana

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The celebration of the Holy Qurbana is a perennial source for the pardon of our debts and remission of sins. The common use of 'remission' in the Taksa of the Qurbana clearly testifies to the belief of the early Church that the Eucharistic sacrifice effected the remission of sins. Eucharist is the sacrament of forgiveness because it sacramentally presents and communicates the act which remits sins. As a memorial of the Cross it applies the expiatory effect of the Cross to those who celebrate the memorial by putting them in touch with the paschal event in itself through the bread and cup of the meal and invokes the infinite mercy of God on the whole world. One of the main fruits of the institution of the Qurbana is the remission of sins. Jesus said: "This is my body broken for the remission of sins" (Mt 26:28). It is the body and blood of Christ that wash away the stains and blots of our sinful life. Let us analyze the different parts of the Qurbana with a view to exploring the remitting powers contained in its prayers.

## 1. Introductory Rite

The introductory rite is from *Puqdankon* up to *Lakumara*. *Puqdankon*, being the first element in this section, reminds the community to reconcile with others before going to the offer the sacrifice (Mt 5: 23-24). This greeting stands as a call for repentance of the community.<sup>1</sup> The Lord's Prayer exhorts the community to forgive the sins of others to be forgiven. The prayer after the initial 'Our Father' designates Qurbana as "propitiatory mysteries **fi** **L** which sanctify their souls and bodies."<sup>2</sup> The prayer stands as a petition of the community to the Lord to forgive their sins. One of the main concerns of the psalms

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1 *Chavarapuzha, Remission of Sins in the Celebration of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana*, OIRSI, Kottayam, 2017, 73.

2 *The Order of Raza*, SJP, Trivandrum, 1989, 4. The word ܦܝܠܡܝܢܐ comes from the root ܦܠܡܝܢܐ which means "to make atonement" or "propitiation", "to absolve", "to pardon" etc. Cfr. Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, 150.

used in the Qurbana is to bring the people to the awareness of their unworthiness and the infinite mercy of the Lord. Psalm 15 exhorts the worshipping community to have an examination of conscience before going to participate in the Holy sacrifice. The priestly prayer of incensing clarifies the idea that incensing destroys the sins and their effects. Incensing the Madbha during the hymn of Lakumara signifies the total surrender of the people to God and the incensing of the community signifies the remission of their sins and debts.

## 2. Liturgy of the Word

In the section of the liturgy of the Word, the scriptural readings can be considered as a call to repentance.<sup>3</sup> The Scriptural readings recall the preaching of the prophets, John the Baptist and Jesus himself. It helps the community to have a sense of repentance and conversion in the life. The dismissal rite has a purifying approach towards the unworthy. Only those who are baptized, those who are signed with the sign of life and those who are receiving the Qurbana are permitted to participate in the Holy Qurbana and obtain the remission of sins. The rite of prostration in the Raza can be regarded as a preparation of the whole community to obtain forgiveness. According to P. Maniyattu, the rite of prostration expresses the unworthiness of the liturgical assembly due to their sins and the great hope in the salvific encounter with the Lord.<sup>4</sup>

The rite of washing of hands symbolizes the washing away of sins and purification of conscience.<sup>5</sup> The celebrant and the community wash their sins and faults in the immense ocean of God's mercy. It is a purification rite to make the celebrating community to offer the Holy Mysteries worthily. In the profession of faith the Church clearly proclaims her faith in the remission of sins. The Creed states: "We confess one baptism for the remission of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting".<sup>6</sup>

3 J. Chavarapuzha, *Remission of Sins in the Celebration of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana*, 100.

4 P. Maniyattu, "Structure and Theology of the Spiritual Preparation for the Quddasha in the East Syrian Qurbana", ETJ 7, 2003, 157.

5 Theodore, *Commentary on the Eucharist*, 32.

6 *Order of Raza*, 32.

### 3. Anaphora

The priest approaches the Madbha bearing in mind his unworthiness to approach the holy of holies. The prayer states that the priest is administering the divine mysteries for the remission of debts and forgiveness of sins of the people.<sup>7</sup> Mar Narsai asserts the faith of the Church in the remission of sins while explaining the entrance of the priest to the Madbha.<sup>8</sup> The mercy and compassion of the Lord help the priest to celebrate the Qurbana for the forgiveness of people. Narsai says that through the affectionate kissing of the Madbha the priest receives forgiveness and sanctification.<sup>9</sup>

Alluding to the desired end of the Qurbana, the celebrant through the first kusapa prayer implores: “Lord Jesus Christ, through your ineffable grace, sanctify this sacrifice and impart through it virtue and power that it may blot out our many sins”.<sup>10</sup> It points out the remitting effect of the Qurbana. The first G’hanta expresses the feeling of the unworthiness of the priest and the community to offer the holy mysteries, for they are sinners and weak. Actually, the remission of sins is given to those who have the awareness of their sinful state. In the Sanctus the priest feels like Isaiah 6:5 who cries out: “woe to me...”.<sup>11</sup> One basic perception of the Qurbana is the humble awareness of man’s weak and sinful nature. This awareness is the result of being in the presence of God.

In the Institution Narrative given in the Taksa, we note that both the body and the blood are said to be given for the “remission of sins” (ܩܪܒܢܐ ܕܥܝܒܐ ܕܥܡܐܢܐ). These words highlight the purificatory effect of the holy Qurbana. Here the “remission of sins” (ܩܪܒܢܐ ܕܥܝܒܐ ܕܥܡܐܢܐ), a non-biblical term, is an addition to the East Syrian formula of the words of institution.

The epiclesis is an invocation of the Holy Spirit for the pardon of offences and forgiveness of sins. The epiclesis prays: “That it may be to us, O My Lord, unto the pardon of our debts, remission of sins”.<sup>12</sup> The

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7 *Order of Raza*, 34.

8 Narsai, *Liturgical Homilies XVII*, 7.

9 “He kisses with love and affection the holy altar, and trust to receive sanctification through his lips”, Narsai, *Liturgical Homilies XVII*, 7.

10 *Order of Raza*, 34.

11 *Order of Raza*, 38.

12 *Order of Raza*, 45.

epiclesis of the Qurbana narrated in the Acts of Thomas has a purificatory effect.<sup>13</sup>

The Eucharist effects in us the remission of sins because of the presence of the Holy Spirit, for the remission of sins is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). Ephrem, Narsai and Theodore compare the fiery coal that touched the prophets' mouth and blotted out the iniquity of his body and soul to the Eucharist. Ephrem says that the priest taking the place of Seraph, "holds fire in his hands with the bread" and "blot out iniquity and gives life".<sup>14</sup>

#### 4. Rite of Reconciliation

Two psalms are given in the reconciliatory part of the Qurbana. Ps. 51:1-7 is one of the most important penitential psalms which demonstrates the essence of penitence.<sup>15</sup> This psalm depicts the man who is purified through the absolution of sins and raises his heart to God in praise and thanksgiving. Through this psalm the celebrant and the community admit their sinful nature. In the elevation of the Host priest says: "Those who receive it are saved by it and are pardoned by it".<sup>16</sup> In the prayer after elevation of the Host, people acknowledge the effect of the Eucharist: "His ministers... divide the body of Christ unto the forgiveness of sins."<sup>17</sup> In the consignation the priest says: "The sacred body is signed with the propitiatory blood our lord Jesus Christ... May they be unto us, O my Lord, for the pardon of offences and forgiveness of sins".<sup>18</sup>

After the commingling of the Body and Blood, the celebrant makes the sign of the Cross on his own forehead as well as on the forehead of the deacons. According to some liturgiologists, this rite of signing on the forehead appears to be a summary version of an elaborate reconciliation rite that existed in the early Church. The second rite of reconciliation was

13 A.F.J. Klijn, *Acts of Thomas*, 133.

14 T. J. Lamy, *Sancti Ephrem Syri*, 419-420.

15 V. Pathikulangara, *Qurbana: The Eucharistic Celebration of the Chaldeo-Indian Church*, Kottayam, 1998, 237.

16 *Order of Raza*, 47; T. Mannoorampampil, *Penitential Service in the Post-anaphora of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana*, J.Madey and G.Kaniarakath, ed., *The Church I Love*, p13-50.

17 *Order of Raza*, 48.

18 *Order of Raza*, 49; T. Mannoorampampil, "Penitential Service in the Post-anaphora of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana" J.Madey and G.Kaniarakath, ed., *The Church I Love*, 13-50

originally an independent service which was later added to the Eucharistic celebration.<sup>19</sup>

The karo-zutha of forgiveness may be divided into two parts: first, diaconal invitation for the repentance and reconciliation; second, five litanies of repentance by which people request forgiveness.<sup>20</sup> The karo-zutha is a typical example of the communitarian nature of the reconciliation and it underlines the need for purification from sins for receiving Qurbana worthily. The proclamation of the deacon reminds people about their sins. Repentance is emphasized and pardon is requested here. It is an invitation to approach the Mysteries with a pure heart without the spots of sins and transgressions. It reminds the commandment of Jesus to forgive others before going to offer the sacrifice (Mt 5:23).

The deacon's admonition is followed by the litany of forgiveness in which the central theme is the remission of sins. The response for the litany is "Lord, forgive the sins and offences of your servants".<sup>21</sup> It is a direct prayer for the forgiveness of sins. According to Timothy II, the five strophe litany symbolizes the five converted sinners in the Gospel: Zacheus (Lk 19:1-10), the Publican in the Temple (Lk 18:9-14), the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32) the sinful woman (Jn 8: 11) and the penitent thief (Lk 23:39-43).<sup>22</sup> Further, these five litanies symbolize the purification of the five senses of the faithful.

## **5. Rite of Communion**

While the deacon and the community pray the litany of forgiveness, the celebrant recites the prayer in a low voice. This prayer is a supplication for the worthy reception of the body and blood of Jesus Christ in purity and holiness. It clearly asserts the worthy reception of the Eucharistic gifts that result in the forgiveness of sins.

After the litany of forgiveness and Kusapa, the priest recites the Slotha which can be called 'a prayer of absolution'. Here the priest asks the Lord to 'forgive the sins and offences your servants'.<sup>23</sup> Narsai says,

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19 G.P. Badger, *The Nestorians and Their Rituals*, Vol. 2, London, 236.

20 *Order of Raza*, 50.

21 *Order of Raza*, 50.

22 Timothy II, *On the Mysteries of the Church*, 114.

23 *Order of Raza*, 52; T. Mannoorampampil, "Syro-Malabar Qurbana and Reconciliation", (CO 2006, June) 47-58; Id. *Remission of sins through the Participation in the Syro-Malabar Qurbana* (CO1983, March) 64-82.

“Then the priest prays to and begs God that he will sanctify us and blot out our sins by his grace”.<sup>24</sup>

After the rite of reconciliation and the prayer of absolution, the community feels confident enough to call God “Father”. Lord’s prayer is one of the important preparatory prayers for the holy Communion. Forgiveness of sins and mutual reconciliation before approaching the Madbha of God can be considered as the reasons to recite Lord’s prayer before the Communion.<sup>25</sup> The rite of peace after the Lord’s prayer can be considered as an explicit expression of reconciliation of the celebrating community among themselves and with God before the Communion. Narsai sees an atmosphere of forgiveness in the rite of peace.<sup>26</sup>

### 5.1. Reception of the Holy Communion

The reception of Holy Communion is one of the important moments to receive the remission of sins in the life of the faithful, for the heavenly nature of Qurbana is intensively revealed here. Holy Communion is the communion in the victim of the sacrifice and is a means to enter into the movement of the sacrifice rendered present in the consecration. The prayers related to the Communion underline the truth that man attains forgiveness through the Qurbana.<sup>27</sup> After the celebrant has received the Communion, he gives it to the deacon saying: “May the body of our Lord Jesus Christ be to the deacon of God unto the remissions of sins”.<sup>28</sup> While giving the chalice to drink, the celebrant says: “May the precious blood of our Lord Jesus Christ be to the deacon of God unto the remission of sins”.<sup>29</sup> These prayers are emphatic statements about the remission of sins through the Communion. The precept ‘let a man examine himself’ (1 Cor 11: 28) should be called to the mind for those who receive communion.

While giving the body to the faithful the priest says: ‘The body of our Lord Jesus Christ be to the devout believer unto the remission of sins’.<sup>30</sup> Giving the chalice, the priest says: “The precious blood of our

24 Narsai, *Liturgical Homilies XVII*, 25.

25 R.Taft, “The Lord’s Prayer in the Eucharistic Liturgy: When and Why”, *Ecclesia Orans 14*, Roma (1997) 153.

26 Narsai, *Liturgical Homilies XVII*, 9.

27 *Order of Raza*, 54-56.

28 *Order of Raza*, 54.

29 *Order of Raza*, 54.

30 *Order of Raza*, 55.



Lord Jesus Christ be to the devout believer unto the remission of sins”.<sup>31</sup> Commenting on the communion of the body and blood of Jesus Christ by the people, Narsai says that the reception of the Qurbana provides the remission of sins.<sup>32</sup> The prayers during the purification of the sacred vessels also contain the aspect of the remission of sins through the Qurbana. The first prayer of the celebrant during the purification of sacred vessels is a summary of all prayers of the Communion which request the forgiveness of sins. The prayer “let not our weakness lead us to condemnation rather the mercy of the Lord” brings the forgiveness of sins. The second prayer of the celebrant is notable for mentioning the example of the good thief who attained the paradise at the last moment (Lk 23: 40-43).<sup>33</sup> According to V. Pathikulangara, these prayers assert that the sins and debts are absolved through the Qurbana and thus the faithful are divinized to enter the realm of divinity.<sup>34</sup>

Likewise, in and through the Qurbana, the faithful with deep faith can be purified from the stains of sins. It purifies the interior eyes of man and frees him from spiritual darkness. Pope Francis in his apostolic letter *Desiderio Desideravi* states that the liturgical celebration purifies the people, proclaiming the gratuity of the gift of salvation received in faith.<sup>35</sup> As the fire of the coal, purifies everything, Qurbana purifies the sinner; As the medicine brings life to a sick person, Qurbana brings remission to a sinner. The Eucharist should be presented “as the medicine by which we are freed from our daily faults and preserved from mortal sins”.<sup>36</sup> In the Syriac tradition, Qurbana is called the ‘medicine of life’ (ܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܚܝܐ). Aphrahat, Ephrem and Narsai consider sin as illness and Jesus as physician.

The prayers of the thanksgiving by the people contain the notion of forgiveness of sins through the reception of Holy Qurbana.<sup>37</sup> The thanksgiving prayers of the celebrant on Sundays and ferial days are typical example for the explicit reference to the remitting power of the

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31 *Order of Raza*, 56.

32 Narsai, *Liturgical Homilies XVII*, 29.

33 *Order of Raza*, 57.

34 V. Pathikulangara, *Qurbana*, 262.

35 Pope Francis, *Desiderio Desideravi*, Rome, 2022, no. 20.

36 Council of Trent session XIII, *Decree on Eucharist*, Chapter 2, Denz 875 (1638).

37 *Order of Raza*, 57-58.

Qurbana and it can be considered as the climax of consistent reference to the concept of forgiveness in and through the Qurbana.

In the huttama for the commemoration of the dead, the celebrant begs the Lord to pardon the sins and offences of the departed ones by accepting the Qurbana which is offered. It affirms that the Qurbana causes forgiveness not only for the dead but also for the friends of the dead. At the end of the huttama, the celebrant wishes that all who have participated in the Qurbana be made worthy for the forgiveness of sins through the mercy of God. The power of the Qurbana to remit the sins of the living and the dead is recapitulated in it in the following words: “Receive O Lord, this sacrifice on his behalf, pardon and forgive his offences and blot out his iniquities, and of his friends... Let all men, the great and the lowly, and this choir which participated in today’s holy services be made worthy of the forgiveness of sins through God’s mercy.”<sup>38</sup>

The prayer of farewell to the Madbha brings out the picture that the Madbha is the abode of forgiveness. It is from here that the people have received the Qurbana for the pardon of offences and forgiveness of sins. It is because of its propitiatory nature that the Madbha is called the ‘altar of forgiveness’ (ܩܕܝܫܐ ܕܡܕܒܗܐ). The fruit of the Qurbana according to this prayer is the pardon of debts and remission of sins.<sup>39</sup>

## 6. Penitential Nature of Eucharist

If the Eucharist offers reconciliation, then what is the relevance of the sacrament of the reconciliation? The Church clarifies the importance of confession as “no one who is having committed mortal sin even if he believes himself to be contrite should approach the holy Eucharist without first making the a sacramental confession”.<sup>40</sup> Therefore the faithful are constantly encouraged to approach the sacrament of reconciliation so that they can receive the Eucharist with clear conscience and divine grace. The Eucharist remits the sins of those who receive it, provided one repents of one’s sins with grief and compunction. The Eucharistic sacrifice remits the sins of the participants in virtue of the propitiatory dimension of the death of Jesus at Calvary.

38 *Order of Raza*, 62.

39 *Order of Raza*, 62.

40 Council of Trent session XIII, *Decree on Eucharist*, Chapter 7, Denzinger 880 (1646-1647).



## **Conclusion**

We were analyzing the prayers of the Holy Qurbana in order to find out the prayers which explicate the concept of the remission of sins through the participation in the Holy Qurbana. A good number of prayers in the Taksa clarify the belief that the participants receive the remission of their sins through the Holy Qurbana. The Liturgy of the Word prepares the faithful to participate in the Qurbana with a sense of repentance. The prayers in the anaphoral part express the feeling of the unworthiness of the priest and the community to offer the holy mysteries which remit the sins of the faithful. The effect of Eucharistic communion should be understood in the light of Christ's sacrificial death and the shedding of His blood for the forgiveness of sins. The prayers after the Holy Communion express thanks for the forgiveness of sins which was accomplished through the celebration of the Holy Qurbana and the reception of the Holy Eucharist.