

October

From a series of monthly meditational essays by Eugene Haliday

This month was so called from the Latin "octo" *eight*, because it was the eighth month of the year of Romulus, founder of Rome. When Numa the successor of Romulus changed the beginning of the year to January, October became the tenth month. The Roman Senate and the Emperors Commodus and Domitian tried to change its name.

To honour Domitian the month was called Domitianus. After Commodus, whose athletic performances were unequalled, it was called "Invictus", the *Unconquered*. To honour Faustina, wife of the Emperor Antoninus Pius, it was called Faustinus.

Many Roman festivals occurred in October, chief of which was the sacrifice at Rome of a horse to Mars, the God of war, of agriculture and husbandry. The value of the horse to Rome was shown when the Emperor Caligula made his horse into a priest and consul, built it an ivory manger, and gave it wine from a golden goblet.

The god Mars was said to be the father of Romulus and thus of the whole Roman people, for Roman civilisation was built by war and agriculture. In honour of Mars the Romans held athletic exercises in the Campus Martius, a field specially so named to honour this god.

Mars had many temples in Rome. Most famous of these was the one on the Appian Road outside the Porto Capena. and another, the temple of Mars Ultor built in the Forum by the Emperor Augustus.

The martial basis of Roman society can be seen in the many titles Mars possessed. He even shared the title "pater" (*Father*) with Jupiter. As the war-like god he was called Mars Gradivus. As a rustic god he was called Silvanus. From his services to the Roman state and his special concern for Roman citizens, he was called "Quirinus".

In the worship of Mars the priests danced in complete armour, an activity we can hardly imagine performed by the priest of any other god.

We have said that at Rome a horse was sacrificed to Mars, a fact showing the high value of the horse to Roman civilisation. Here we see the very principle of sacrifice, for we do not pay respect to someone we worship by offering that person something valueless.

Ancient people sacrificed the best example they could find of things they most valued, the first fruits of their harvests, the most perfect of their valued animals, the "lamb without blemish".

All real sacrifice involves offering up to the Highest Being some representative

of our highest values. Ancient agricultural peoples offered up to their gods the pick of the best fruits of the earth. Those who bred animals selected from these the most perfect examples they possessed. Everywhere man hoped by such offerings to keep himself in harmony with the source of his life's necessities.

But no matter how perfect the fruits and animals offered, such offerings could not of themselves be a fully effective means of bringing to mankind the healing and inner harmony so ardently desired. A more perfect sacrifice had to be found.

Finally the sacrifice must be of man himself, but because an imperfect thing cannot in principle be the object offered, the supreme sacrifice must be a perfect man.

The basic idea behind the sacrificial rites of ancient peoples had been the desire to attain union or oneness with some power greater than that of the sacrificer, and finally with a power infinitely great, the power of the God of gods.

Some thinkers believe that a sacrifice was originally a gift made by a worshipper to some supernatural being, possibly the spirit of an ancestor who was believed to have attained to some position of influence in the divine world. Such a gift could be an act of thanks for some benefit received, or it might be to gain some future favour, or avert the anger of some spirit or god.

Other thinkers believe that sacrifice is a communion of the worshippers and the object of their worship. In this communion the worshippers somehow absorb the energy of a higher life. By this communion is gained strength of soul and spirit, and with this the power to live more effectively and joyfully.

Man's sense of sin may also have a part in the origination of sacrifice. Man often feels that he has offended against the Law of his being, that somehow he has put himself out of harmony with the world in which he lives, with the supreme power which lies beyond all things.

We have seen that in their sacrifices ancient peoples offered only the best they had. From what Mother Earth has given them in the form of fruits and vegetables they selected the best and returned these to the earth as a thanks-offering. From what the animal kingdom had given them they selected the most perfect and free from blemish.

Then arose finally the idea that man himself should become a sacrifice, and that only the perfect man would be acceptable, that only such a man could establish the harmonious connection between man and the supreme power of the universe.

And because continuous aspiration finally brings into being the realisation of its goal, there appeared the perfect sacrificial figure. For Christians this was Jesus of Nazareth. The sacrifice was made. The perfect man died. Yet the world of men has not yet attained the communion this sacrifice aimed at. Why?

It is because although the sacrifice was perfect, yet not all men *believed* in its perfection. Men cannot be *compelled* to believe. They may be compelled to pay a

belief lip-service, but a man's secret heart is his own. Only he and his Maker know his innermost motivations.

If man's innermost motive is not perfect, then whatever he appears to do of a sacrificial nature cannot be perfect. The gestures of sacrifice may be there, but if his secret heart is not in them, the sacrifice must be non-effective. For sacrifice to be effective there must be proper disposition of mind and will. Without sincerity there can be no efficacy.

Jesus Christ showed how to be the perfect sacrificial victim. But men in general have taken His words as a "council of perfection" beyond the power of ordinary men to emulate. Thus men have not striven with all their strength to follow in His way.

Of course, men are born into a world where imperfection is daily demonstrated and perfection appears only as an ideal. Men therefore cannot hope to become perfect in one moment.

Michelangelo spoke truly when he said, "Perfection is made of trifles, but perfection is no trifle". And a wise oriental has said, "As the silversmith slowly refines silver, so does the wise man fine away his defilements".

If men have not yet the full perfection of Christ, yet every now and then for brief moments they can attain to perfection. And each brief moment must, as a moment of true sacrifice, have its effect, and all are cumulative.

The Roman's October horse was sacrificed because it was valuable in the work it performed for Rome. Man, where he works faithfully and truly, if only for a moment, is a true sacrificial being. And his fellow men must receive inevitably the fruits of his sacrifice.