# THE EUCHARISTIC SACRIFICE

#### This Is the Mass

The Mass, the memorial of the Death and Resurrection of the Lord—in which the sacrifice of the Cross is perpetuated over the centuries—is the summit and source of all Christian worship and life; it signifies and effects the unity of the people of God and achieves the building up of the Body of Christ. It is an action of Christ himself and the Church; in it Christ the Lord, by the ministry of a priest, offers himself, substantially present under the forms of bread and wine, to God the Father and gives himself as spiritual food to the faithful who are associated with his offering.<sup>1</sup>

#### The Mass: Christ on the Cross

We are born to live. Christ, however, was born to die. On the night of the Last Supper, Christ instituted the Mass in order to leave a memorial to his beloved Spouse, the Church. He offered his Body and Blood under the species of bread and wine to God the Father. Taking bread, Christ said: "This is my body, which will be given up for you." Also taking the chalice with wine, he said: "This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven." Christ then commanded his Apostles: "Do this in memory

<sup>1.</sup> Cf.CIC, 897-898.

of me," making them priests of the New Testament. This rite anticipated the bloody sacrifice that Christ accomplished on the Cross once and for all on Good Friday for the redemption of the world.

The Church continues to offer the sacrifice of the Cross, but in a bloodless manner. The Mass is neither a repetition of nor a substitute for the cross, but the merit we gain from the Mass is the same merit that we would have gained had we actually been present at the foot of the Cross on Calvary.

The historical event of Calvary does not, however, repeat itself, nor is it continued in each Mass. The sacrifice of Christ is perfect and, therefore, does not need to be repeated. Glorious in Heaven, Christ does not die again. His sacrifice is not repeated; rather, the presence of the singular sacrifice of the Cross is multiplied, overcoming time and space.

## The Mass: The Sacrifice of the New Covenant

Of the sacrifice of Christ, the main sign or figure of the sacrifice of Christ in the Old Testament is the paschal lamb. At every Passover, the Jews recalled and renewed their covenant with God by sacrificing a lamb. This sacrificial lamb once spared the firstborn of the Jews from the exterminating angel who came to slay the firstborn of every family in Egypt.

Our Lord anticipates his sacrifice on the Cross in the Last Supper, within the Jewish ritual celebration of the Passover. In the Cenacle as on Calvary, the essential elements of the sacrifice are there: the immolation and self-offering (Body and Blood) to God the Father. Christ is the unspotted Lamb. He sets all people free

from the slavery of sin and establishes the eternal alliance between creature and Creator, the New Covenant. More than that, what had been only a foreshadowing in sign is now fully realized: the communion of Blood and of life between God and us.

When the faithful are said to offer Mass together with the priest, this does not mean that all the members of the Church, like the priest himself, perform the visible liturgical rite. This is done by the celebrant only. He has been divinely appointed for this purpose through the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

The principal victim of the sacrifice, is Jesus Christ. But the faithful, in order to exercise their common priesthood fully, should unite their sacrifice to his and thus offer themselves, also, to God the Father: "I exhort you... to present your bodies as a sacrifice, living, holy, pleasing to God—your spiritual service," wrote St. Paul to the Romans.<sup>2</sup>

The Mass "requires all Christians, so far as human power allows, to reproduce in themselves the sentiments that Christ had when he was offering himself in sacrifice: sentiments of humility, adoration, praise and thanksgiving to the divine Majesty. It requires them also to become victims, as it were, cultivating a spirit of self-denial according to the precepts of the Gospel, willingly doing works of penance, detesting and expiating their sins. It requires us all, in a word, to die mystically with Jesus Christ on the Cross, so that we may say with the same Apostle: 'With Christ, I hang upon the Cross.'"<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2.</sup> Rom 12:1.

<sup>3.</sup> Pius XII, Mediator Dei, November 20, 1942.

## The Mass: The Sacrifice of the Church

Christ bequeathed his sacrifice to the Church, not just to each individual believer. God wants to save us, not in an isolated manner, prescinding from any relationship among them, but as a people. Each Mass presupposes union among the faithful and of the faithful with their bishop, the pope, and the universal Church. Moreover, that solid union is made stronger with the celebration of the Eucharist and is a consequence of it. The Second Vatican Council states it in this manner: "In the sacrament of the eucharistic bread, the unity of believers, who form one body in Christ,<sup>4</sup> is both expressed and brought about."<sup>5</sup>

Both on the Cross and in the Mass, the priest and victim are one and the same: Christ himself. He is both the one who offers and the one who is offered. No longer is there separation between priests and victims.

The words of Jesus Christ at the Last Supper—"Do this in memory of me"—command the continuation of his sacrifice on the Cross in every Holy Mass celebrated anywhere in the world until the end of time. This was announced in the Old Testament with these words of the prophet Malachi: "From the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place there is a sacrifice and there is offered to my name a clean oblation."

Following Christ's command, the priest offers the Mass acting as the representative of Christ. That is why he does not say, "This is the body and blood of Christ," but rather, "This is my body" and "This is my

<sup>4.</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 10:17.

<sup>5.</sup> LG, 3.

<sup>6.</sup> Mal 1:11.

blood." The priest is the chosen instrument of Christ in the same manner that the brush is the painter's tool. In the Mass, Christ is no longer alone on the Cross. As in any other Sacrament, the Mass is an action of Christ and also of the Church. At the moment of the preparation of the gifts the entire Church presents itself for sacrifice with Christ.

We have testimonies from the very beginning of the life of the Church that the Christians had the celebration of the Holy Mass on Sunday, the Lord's Day, when the victory and triumph of the Lord's Death became present.

In the Old Testament, the Jews rested on Saturday, giving thanks to God for the gift of creation. In the New Testament, we celebrate a new creation, to the life of grace: a supernatural creation far superior to the material creation of the world. No wonder, then, that the Church requires under pain of mortal sin that we to go to Mass at least on Sunday.

"The holy Mass cheers the heavenly court; it alleviates the poor souls in purgatory; it attracts all sorts of blessings to the earth; it gives more glory to God than all the sufferings of the martyrs put together, the penances of all the monks, all the tears shed by them since the beginning of the world and all their deeds until the end of time."

### The Mass: The Life of Each Christian

Because the Mass is the same sacrifice as Calvary, sacramentally renewed, with all its strength and sanctifying power, the Church considers it the center of its life and the life of each of the faithful.

<sup>7.</sup> St. John M. Vianney, Sermon on the Holy Mass.

"The Eucharistic sacrifice is the 'source and summit of all Christian life'. It is a single sacrifice that embraces everything. It is the greatest treasure of the Church. It is her life."

The Mass is also the center of the life and mission of each priest, who finds in it the direction and goal of his ministry.

"The holy Mass brings us face to face with one of the central mysteries of our faith, because it is the gift of the Blessed Trinity to the Church. It is because of this that we can consider the Mass the center and the source of a Christian's spiritual life.

"It is the aim of all the sacraments. The life of grace, into which we are brought by Baptism, and which is increased and strengthened by Confirmation, grows to its fullness in the Mass."

"The more perfect form of participation in the Mass whereby the faithful, after the priest's Communion, receive the Lord's body from the same sacrifice is warmly recommended to those who are duly prepared and in the state of grace." <sup>10</sup>

Since the sacrifice of the Mass is the same as the sacrifice of Calvary, their purpose is the same:

 To adore the Blessed Trinity. The sacrifice of the Cross was first of all a sacrifice of adoration and praise of God. Although the Mass is sometimes offered "in honor and in memory of the saints, the Church teaches us that the Mass is not offered

<sup>8.</sup> St. John Paul II, Prayer on Holy Thursday, 1982.

<sup>9.</sup> CPB, 87.

<sup>10.</sup> Vatican Council II, Sacrosanctum concilium, 55.

to the saints but to God alone who has given them their crown."<sup>11</sup>

- To give thanks for the many benefits we receive from God, including those of which we are not aware. The second aim of the Mass is thanksgiving. Only Christ our Lord can offer God a worthy hymn of thanksgiving. He did so at the Last Supper when he gave thanks and when, hanging on the cross, he continued to give thanks; our Lord continues to thank God the Father for us in the holy sacrifice of the Mass.
- To ask pardon for our sins and for the many times we have not loved God as we should. This desire for expiation and atonement should lead us to make a good confession. The same Christ who died on the Cross for our sins is present and offered in the Mass "so that sins may be forgiven."
- To ask for the spiritual and material things we need. The fourth purpose of the Mass is petition. Jesus Christ on the Cross died "offering prayers and supplications and was heard because of his reverent obedience" and now in Heaven "lives always to make intercession for us." These graces benefit those present at Holy Mass and the persons for whom it is offered.

## The Mass: External Participation

We should participate in the Mass externally, taking care of some details.

 Attend the Mass with a spirit of prayer, praying as the Church teaches us to pray, avoiding dis-

<sup>11.</sup> Council of Trent, Session 22, chapter 3.

<sup>12.</sup> Heb 5:7; 7:25.

tractions. Be one with the words, actions, and gestures of the celebrant, who acts in the Person of Christ. Give up personal preferences; accept the option that the celebrant, considering the circumstances of the people in each community, has chosen from among the legitimate possibilities that the liturgy offers to us.

- Listen, respond, acclaim, sing, or keep opportune silence, in order to facilitate union with God and to deepen your reflection on the word of God.
- Stand, sit, and kneel—and be serene—even if you see someone who does not do so.
- Be punctual. This is a considerate detail for Christ our Lord, himself, and for others who are attending Mass. Arrive before the priest goes to the altar. Leave only after the priest has left.
- Use your missal, or the missalette available in the church. By following the prayers of the priest, you can avoid distractions. The more complete missals for the faithful have the prayers of the Mass distributed in three main sections: Fixed Prayers of the Order of Mass, Proper Prayers, and Readings. The missalettes for the use of the faithful usually contain some of the variable prayers for each day's Mass and most of the fixed parts of the Order of Mass arranged in their usual sequence.
- Dress properly as for an important meeting and not, for instance, as if you were going to participate in a sport. Dress ought to convey the respect, solemnity, and joy of the Mass.<sup>13</sup>

### The Mass: Communion and Thanksgiving

Having the right intention in receiving Communion means having these good purposes: to please God, to achieve greater union with him through charity, and to apply this divine remedy to one's moral weaknesses. The Sacrament should not be received out of routine, vainglory, or human respect.

We are bound, under serious obligation, to receive Holy Communion at least once a year—ordinarily during Easter Time—and when we are in danger of death.

Holy Communion may be received a second time on a given day, when and if one attends Holy Mass, or when one in danger of death receives the Blessed Sacrament as Viaticum.

- Complete the Mass with an intense thanksgiving. Devote a few minutes to private prayer. In this way, your Mass will have direct influence on your work, your family life, your dealings with others, and the manner in which you will spend the rest of your day. In short, the Mass should not be an isolated event of the day; rather, it should be the inspiration and the dynamo for all your actions.
- Turn the whole day into a continuous preparation for the holy sacrifice of the Mass—working and praying—and, at the same time, into a neverending act of thanksgiving. For a Christian, all honest activities can be turned into prayer.
- Imitate the piety of the Blessed Virgin Mary and ask it of her. While our Lord offered and immolated his flesh, Mary offered and immolated her spirit. Participate in each Mass as if it were your last.

#### Guidelines for the Reception of Communion

For Catholics: As Catholics, we fully participate in the celebration of the Eucharist when we receive Holy Communion. We are encouraged to receive Communion devoutly and frequently. In order to be properly disposed to receive Communion, participants should not be conscious of grave sin and normally should have fasted for one hour. A person who is conscious of grave sin is not to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord without prior sacramental confession except for a grave reason where there is no opportunity for confession. In this case, the person is to be mindful of the obligation to make an act of perfect contrition, including the intention of confessing as soon as possible (canon 916). A frequent reception of the Sacrament of Penance is encouraged for all.

For Other Christians: We welcome our fellow Christians to this celebration of the Eucharist as our brothers and sisters. We pray that our common baptism and the action of the Holy Spirit in this Eucharist will draw us closer to one another and begin to dispel the sad divisions which separate us. We pray that these will lessen and finally disappear, in keeping with Christ's prayer for us "that they may all be one" (Jn 17:21).

Because Catholics believe that the celebration of the Eucharist is a sign of the reality of the oneness of faith, life, and worship, members of those churches with whom we are not yet fully united are ordinarily not admitted to Holy Communion. Eucharistic sharing in exceptional circumstances by other Christians requires permission according to the directives of the diocesan bishop and the provisions of canon law (canon 844§4). Members of the Orthodox Churches, the Assyrian Church of the East, and the Polish National Catholic Church are urged to respect the discipline of their own Churches. According to Roman Catholic discipline, the Code of Canon Law does not object to the reception of communion by Christians of these Churches (canon 844§3).

For those not receiving Holy Communion: All who are not receiving Holy Communion are encouraged to express in their hearts a prayerful desire for unity with the Lord Jesus and with one another.

For non-Christians: We also welcome to this celebration those who do not share our faith in Jesus Christ. While we cannot admit them to Holy Communion, we ask them to offer their prayers for the peace and the unity of the human family.

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