

UNDERSTANDING THE MASS, PART II : **OUR SACRIFICE**

In Part 1 of Understanding the Mass, we examined how the Mass relates to the Sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. In this, Part 2 of the series, we ask in what way the Eucharist can be said to be our sacrifice, the self-offering of the Church with its head. The New Testament calls Christians “priests” and priests are those who offer sacrifice of praise & thanksgiving.

In a very real way, the Eucharist is our sacrifice too. The New Testament calls us “priests,” and priests are those who offer sacrifice. “Like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5). If there is only one sacrifice, then somehow our priesthood associates us with Christ’s act of self-offering to the Father.

SACRIFICE OF PRAISE & THANKSGIVING

The Mass is also our sacrifice in that we join our own offerings to Christ’s. First, we offer a sacrifice of praise and thanks. “Eucharist” means first of all ‘thanksgiving,’” says the Catechism (par. 1360). We thank the Lord for His sacrifice, which is for us and our salvation. In the Eucharistic Prayer, a long prayer of thanks to the Father uttered toward the middle of every Mass, the celebrant speaks for us all. He thanks God for the creation of the world and for its goodness; he prays in thanksgiving for salvation history, for the whole human race is offered salvation through Jesus’ coming, death, and Resurrection.

During the Eucharistic Prayer, I always silently add in thanks for my personal blessings. I think of the natural blessings of home and work, of food on the table and the health of my family. I also thank God for my own salvation history, especially for plucking me out of the danger I was heading into as a teenager — a journey that led many of my friends into drug and alcohol abuse. I thank God for bringing me together with a woman who loves Him and loves me, and for having kept us faithful to Him and each other for many years. I thank Him for our own family’s salvation history.

If you haven’t already established the habit of adding your personal expressions of gratitude to the priest’s Eucharistic Prayer, try it next time you’re at Mass. It’s a very appropriate mode of participating in that part of the Eucharist.

SELF-OFFERING WITH CHRIST

But our Eucharistic sacrifice involves more than offering thanks for what God has done. It means offering ourselves in response to His self-gift. Note what Paul says in his letter to the Romans: “I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Romans 12:1).

In a way, this is what the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament symbolized. Animals were very precious to the Israelites, and only the best were considered worthy for offering to God. These unblemished, perfect, animals represented — even substituted for — the life of the person who offered them. Sacrificing them was a sign of the worshiper’s complete gift of self to the Lord.

This brings us to the collection at Mass! Believe it or not, the collection is really important. Whether we put in the widow's mite or have the means to give much more, our financial contribution represents the gift of ourselves. As it's brought forward at the presentation of the gifts, along with the bread and wine, our financial contribution serves as a sign of our self-offering.

GIVING & RECEIVING

It has to be said that many of us don't give much of ourselves in the Eucharist. As a result, we don't receive much back. The solution is to stop being the audience and learn to be actors in the drama of the Eucharistic sacrifice, as the Second Vatican Council exhorted us: "The laity at Mass should not be silent spectators. Offering the Immaculate Victim [that is, Christ] not only through the hands of the priest but also together with him, they should learn to offer themselves ("Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy," Sacrosanctum Concilium 48).

And here's a beautiful statement on the subject from Fr. Johannes Emminghaus, a German scholar: "In the Eucharist the Church enters into this total self-giving of Christ, and we individually attempt to enter into it as fully as possible. Merely to go through the motions of the Mass without this serious and complete gift of self would simply be hypocrisy" (J. Emminghaus, *Eucharist: Essence, Form, and Celebration*, 2nd ed. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1978, xxi).



WATER MIXED WITH WINE, OUR OFFERING IN HIS

Offering thanks to the Lord and giving our whole selves to the Father together with Christ is what the Eucharistic sacrifice is about. Obviously, we are weak and our sacrifice is imperfect. Nevertheless, during the preparation of the gifts, we should be putting everything important to us on the altar. This includes our precious treasures of time, ambitions, desires, relationships, work accomplishments, family matters, trials, and temptations.

These are our contributions, but the sacrifice is still Christ's. How could it be otherwise, since we died when we were baptized? "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God," says St. Paul (Galatians 2:20). Anything that's of merit or value in our lives is really Christ working through us.

Our offerings are added, then, to the personal sacrifice of Christ our head, giving us the privilege of sharing in His sacrifice to the Father. This is symbolized beautifully just before the consecration, when the priest mixes a small amount of water with the wine. The paltry sacrifice that is our life is like the water that is absorbed into the rich sacrifice of Christ, which is symbolized by the wine.