

The Mass

In the midst of the CoronaVirus pandemic, and the restrictions it has placed on our ability to gather and worship as a community of faith, I thought it might be an excellent time for us to reflect upon the rich and beautiful Catholic theology of the Mass. It is my experience that quite often Catholics have been horribly catechized about their faith. Maybe this reflection will help us all appreciate the gift Christ gave us at the Last Supper. My hope is to post a part of this reflection twice per week on the Parish website, so please check back regularly.

Part 1

From the very beginning of the Church, the Mass has been the central act of Christian worship. It is the very celebration of the act Jesus performed at the Last Supper, as he ordered his disciples to “Do this in memory of me.” The Mass is the very mystery of salvation all bound up in a single act of worship. Pope Saint John Paul II said that the saving mystery of Jesus’ death and resurrection “is as it were gathered up, foreshadowed and concentrated forever in the gift of the Eucharist.” (Eucharistia de Ecclesia No. 5)

The Sacrifice of the Mass:

Often times the Church speaks of the “Holy sacrifice of the Mass”. This should be a familiar phrase to all Catholics. However, a sacrifice connected with a religious act is far from our normal human experience in 2020. We do not, for example, worship as the ancient Jews did at the Temple in Jerusalem, when they brought animals to the priests to be slaughtered in the sanctuary as a blood sacrifice to God. When we go to Mass we don’t witness the sacrifice of sheep or goats as expiation for our sins. That being said, that doesn’t mean that the Church is incorrect when it talks about the sacrifice of the Mass. There is indeed a sacrifice at the Mass. The sacrifice that the Church speaks of is that of Jesus Christ, who through his bloody death on the cross offered his life to the Father for the redemption of the whole world. The Mass sacramentally makes present Christ’s redeeming sacrifice on Calvary, so that its saving power may be more fully applied to our lives. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church states in no. 1367: “In the divine sacrifice which is celebrated at the Mass, the same Christ who offered himself once in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross is contained and offered in an unbloody manner.”

It is clear by reflecting on what Jesus said at the Last Supper, that his intention was to draw an unbreakable and unmistakable connection between his actions that evening and the sacrifice he would make on Good Friday. That evening he took bread and wine and spoke of them as his body and blood, which he would sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. All of which is why he concluded the Last Supper by directing his apostles, and all those that would come to faith through their preaching, that this should be done “In memory of me.”

It is here that I think it would be worth examining the meaning behind the words that Jesus used at the last supper. Our modern American notion of the word “memorial” is connected to a past event. A memorial is defined as something, especially a structure, established to remind people of a person or event. However, in the Jewish mind of the New Testament, a “memorial” was far more than just that. In Scripture, a memorial doesn’t just recall a past event. It actually makes that event present. That’s why when Jesus said, “Do this in memory of me,” he was instructing the apostles to make present as a biblical memorial the sacrificial offering of his body and blood at the Last Supper. Therefore, every time Mass is celebrated, the body and blood that Jesus spoke of at the Last Supper, and which was sacrificed on the cross on Calvary, is really and truly present in the Eucharist. That is why the Catechism in no. 1366 teaches that the Mass “*re-presents* (makes present) the sacrifice of the cross.” Through the Eucharist, “the bloody sacrifice which he was to accomplish once for all on the cross would be represented, its memory perpetuated until the end of the world, and its salutary power would be applied to the forgiveness of the sins we daily commit.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1366)

For Reflection:

“The Mass makes present the sacrifice of the Cross; it does not add to that sacrifice nor does it multiply it. What is repeated is its *memorial* celebration, its “commemorative representation” (*memorialis demonstratio*), which makes Christ's one, definitive redemptive sacrifice always present in time. The sacrificial nature of the Eucharistic mystery cannot therefore be understood as something separate, independent of the Cross or only indirectly referring to the sacrifice of Calvary.”

“By virtue of its close relationship to the sacrifice of Golgotha, the Eucharist is *a sacrifice in the strict sense*, and not only in a general way, as if it were simply a matter of Christ's offering himself to the faithful as their spiritual food. The gift of his love and obedience to the point of giving his life (cf. *John 10:17-18*) is in the first place a gift to his Father. Certainly it is a gift given for our sake, and indeed that of all humanity (cf. *Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; John 10:15*), yet it is *first and foremost a gift to the Father*: “a sacrifice that the Father accepted, giving, in return for this total self-giving by his Son, who 'became obedient unto death' (*Phil 2:8*), his own paternal gift, that is to say the grant of new immortal life in the resurrection.”

“In giving his sacrifice to the Church, Christ has also made his own the spiritual sacrifice of the Church, which is called to offer herself in union with the sacrifice of Christ. This is the teaching of the Second Vatican Council concerning all the faithful: “Taking part in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, which is the source and summit of the whole Christian life, they offer the divine victim to God, and offer themselves along with it.”

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Pope St. John Paul II