

**The Holy Mass: The Sacrifice of the Cross, perpetuated down the ages**

In its examples of doctrines requiring divine faith, the Holy See's *Doctrinal Commentary* (1998), after mentioning Christ's real presence in the Eucharist, comes next to 'the sacrificial nature of the eucharistic celebration'. The Council of Trent infallibly defined that in the Mass 'a true and proper sacrifice' is offered to God (*Doctrine on the Sacrifice of the Mass* (1562) DS 1751). Indeed, 'the Eucharist is above all else a Sacrifice'. (John Paul II, *Dominicae Cena*e 9)

Fulfilling the foreshadowings of the animal sacrifices of the Old Covenant, Christ sealed with his Blood the New and Eternal Covenant, offering himself to the Father in the one perfect and unrepeatable Sacrifice on the altar of the Cross. 'But because his priesthood was not to end with his death, at the Last Supper...[he wanted] to leave to his beloved spouse the Church a visible sacrifice' by which the sacrifice 'that he was once for all to accomplish on the Cross would be re-presented, its memory perpetuated until the end of the world, and its salutary power be applied to the forgiveness of the sins we daily commit.' (Council of Trent, DS 1740; cf. *Heb* 7:24-27; 9:11-15)

The Protestant reformers accused Catholics of disparaging the Sacrifice of the Cross by supposedly 'adding' the Mass as a new sacrifice, as if Calvary was insufficient. On the contrary, the Church emphasises, the Mass does not 'add' to Calvary, but rather derives its entire meaning and power therefrom. The Cross and the Eucharist are one sacrifice: 'The victim is one and the same: the same now offers through the ministry of priests, who then offered himself on the Cross; only the manner of offering is different.' (Council of Trent, DS 1743)

The Sacrifice is accomplished specifically in the Consecration, at the same time as Christ becomes really present. Christ obviously does not die again in the Mass, but the *separate consecration* of bread then of wine mystically shows forth the 'separation' of his blood from his body on the Cross, when all his blood was poured out for us. 'The commemorative representation of His death, which actually took place on Calvary, is repeated in every sacrifice of the altar, seeing that Jesus Christ is symbolically shown by separate symbols to be in a state of victimhood.' (Pope Pius XII, *Encyclical Mediator Dei* (1947) 70; cf. *Heb* 9:25-27)

The apostolic faith in the sacrificial nature of the Mass was dwelt upon by St John Paul II in his final encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia [EE]* (2003): 'The Eucharist is indelibly marked by the event of the Lord's passion and death, of which it is not only a reminder but the sacramental re-presentation. It is the sacrifice of the Cross perpetuated down the ages...This sacrifice is so decisive for the salvation of the human race that Jesus Christ offered it and returned to the Father only after he had left us a means of sharing in it as if we had been present there. Each member of the faithful can thus take part in it and inexhaustibly gain its fruits.' (11)

The Church speaks of four basic 'ends' or purposes of the Sacrifice of the Mass: first, glory and praise to the God of infinite majesty, before whom we fall in adoration; second, thanksgiving for his gifts of all we have and are; third, propitiation and expiation for sins; and fourth, obtaining other spiritual and temporal blessings, which are also the object of our prayers. (cf. *Mediator Dei* 71-74; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1359-61; 1367; 1414)

Since the Mass is primarily the action of Christ the High Priest, who is also the divine Victim, it offers to God praise and thanksgiving that is infinite and perfect, and so truly worthy of him.

In the Mass, ‘the one true God receives the greatest worship the world can give him, for it is Christ himself who is offered’. (Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate* 157)

And every Mass powerfully draws down graces of repentance for sinners and remits purgatorial punishments for the living and the dead. The Council of Trent defined that the Sacrifice was truly propitiatory (DS 1753; cf. *Catechism* 1367) – ‘propitiating’ or ‘appeasing’ divine justice. ‘For the Lord, appeased by this oblation, grants grace and the gift of repentance, and he pardons wrongdoings and sins, even great ones.’ (DS 1743) There is mystery here, and we don’t conceive simplistically of God as having been ‘furious’ with humanity but then ‘pacified’ by Christ’s death: the whole work of redemption flows from the infinite love of the Holy Trinity. But sin, in its depth of evil, is repugnant to God’s holiness, and so calls for propitiation – superabundantly provided on Calvary, and applied in all ages through the Mass.

The fruits of the Sacrifice are (i) for the whole Church on earth and in purgatory; (ii) for the priest and faithful offering the Sacrifice; and (iii) for the special intention for which the priest offers the Mass (often at the request of the faithful). And since the Mass is Christ’s action, its infinite value is not removed by the unworthiness of priest or faithful. Still, in another aspect the fruits of the Mass do depend also on the disposition of the participants. Simply taking part attentively has immense value, but the more devoutly we do so, the greater the fruits.

The word ‘priest’ especially means ‘one who offers sacrifice’. (cf. *Heb* 8:3; DS 1764) So in all these things, the awesome meaning of Christian priesthood is revealed – of the ordained priest certainly, who offers the Mass *in persona Christi*; but also the priesthood of all the baptised. Sent forth and empowered by each Mass for daily spiritual sacrifices of love, the faithful then bring these back to be offered anew in union with the Sacrifice of Christ the High Priest. (cf. *1 Pet* 2:5) As Vatican II proclaimed, ‘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.’ (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* 11)

And so we can perform no greater action – for God’s glory, and for the well-being of ourselves and others (in this life and the next) – than to lovingly participate in the Sacrifice of the Altar: certainly on Sundays but hopefully more often, even daily. Ideally, if we are properly disposed, at every Mass we receive Christ, the sacrificial victim, crucified and risen, in the sacred banquet of Holy Communion. Yet even without that, the blessings of offering the Sacrifice are beyond measure. (And a Communion Service, for all its worth, cannot equal a Mass – the heart of which is the Consecration, whereby Calvary is re-presented.)

Returning to the words of Pope St John Paul II (*EE* 8): ‘Even when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always in some way celebrated on the altar of the world. It unites heaven and earth. It embraces and permeates all creation. The Son of God became man in order to restore all creation, in one supreme act of praise, to the One who made it from nothing. He, the Eternal High Priest who by the blood of his Cross entered the eternal sanctuary, thus gives back to the Creator and Father all creation redeemed. He does so through the priestly ministry of the Church, to the glory of the Most Holy Trinity.’