

THE HOLY SACRIFICE OF THE MASS

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THE MASS: CENTRAL ACT OF THE TRUE RELIGION

OUR FAITH teaches us that the central act of the true religion of Jesus Christ is the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. For this reason we are obliged by the Church to assist at Holy Mass on Sundays and the greater Feast Days. From our childhood, we have accepted as our bounden duty this serious obligation and by the time that each of us has reached ripeness of age, the number of occasions on which we have been present at the Holy Sacrifice is a surprising total. It is, then, well for each Catholic to ask himself the question that later will be put to him at Judgment: have I grown, with the passage of the years, in understanding and appreciation of the Mass? It is happily possible for all persons, even for the young and the unlearned, fruitfully to assist at the Sacrifice of the Mass. We cannot, however, claim that we worthily love Our Divine Redeemer, Who shed for us His precious Blood, if negligently we leave unopened the treasury of the Mass.

When one considers the accurate meaning of Holy Mass, one finds that it is useful or rather, necessary, to have explained the nature of sacrifice in general. The words one uses and the ideas that these words express at first seem difficult. Yet it must be remembered that persons of every age and type have always assisted at the offering of sacrifice. It must then be easy for everyone to grasp that which a sacrifice is meant to signify. In this context, it is not hard to employ figurative language or to describe the Mass, especially in its effects, by the use of highly-coloured phrases. It will, however, be found that the sober accuracy of the language in which the Church sets forth her teaching, if at first it tastes uninteresting, is, in the long run, the only satisfying food, on which genuine devotion can be kept alive and nourished to maturity.

THE MEANING OF SACRIFICE

Properly speaking, a sacrifice is an outward and public act of religion, which is done in honour of God alone, in order that men may admit and reverence His complete dominion. In a true sacrifice, accordingly, an offering is made to God to show forth man's total dependence on the Creator. That dependence of the creature reaches to man's existence, to his activities and to his final destiny: it covers all his being either as an individual person or as a member of society. Only by offering himself totally to God, in mind and will and body, can a man properly acknowledge his utter dependence on his Creator. Only by a visible outward ceremony can a man duly express the hidden dispositions of his soul towards God. Hence the full surrender of his being to God was expressed by the outward external offering of some visible thing, which was set apart for God alone and was taken to represent the being and the life of man. In the history of sacrifice, we find that some destruction of the visible thing thus offered or of the victim, as it was called has always taken place. Man, then, set apart for God alone and, in some way destroyed, a creature, over which he himself had dominion, as a visible sign and proof that, in lowly subjection, he offered his existence and activity to God, Who is the absolute owner of creation.

It is in the nature of man to offer sacrifice. Even if God had not Himself in person intervened to establish rites of sacrifice, some form of sacrifice would have been necessary to enable men to manifest due reverence to their Creator and to secure from human society a public admission of the supreme majesty of God:

It is not, indeed, the value of the thing itself offered to God that is chiefly to be considered in sacrifice, nor yet the full destruction of the victim, but rather the aptness of the rite or ceremony to express visibly man's inner attitude of adoration.

Moreover, since no created thing is of its nature suited to signify the peculiar honour owed to God, it follows that the rite of sacrifice must be fixed by God's authority as the sign suitable for expressing man's acknowledgement of the Sovereign Creator. Further, a person must be designated and set aside, who, in the name of human society, will perform the ceremony of sacrifice. Hence, we find in the Old Law that God Himself chose certain rites as suitable for sacrifice, with shedding of blood or some equivalent destruction and named Himself one tribe of Israel as priests to offer Him due sacrifice.

THE PURPOSE OF SACRIFICE

The first purpose, accordingly, of sacrifice is to admit and reverence the infinite majesty of God.' Man however, is a sinner and for that cause stands in the debt of his Creator. The offering, therefore, and sacrifice to God of a victim take on the additional meaning of repentance for the sins that merit the just punishment of God. Further; it is not possible for man to know and praise the Creator, without also giving thanks to Him that He has created us and kept us in existence, and without at the same time acknowledging that it is to Him we must look for the answer to our prayers. For these reasons, in fine, a sacrifice takes on the character not only of an act and sign of adoration, but also of an act and sign of satisfaction for our sins, of thanksgiving for God's benefits and of petition for our every need.

THE SACRIFICE OF THE MASS

These somewhat difficult ideas become easy to grasp, when one considers the Mass, the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ, for at once we meet the adorable Person of the Divine Redeemer, God made Man. All the sacrifices of the Old Law ordained by God had been the types of Him Whom at last men saw and heard in human form, in the towns and countryside of Palestine: they had been dim figures of the unique Sacrifice of Jesus Christ upon Mount Calvary. Our Divine Lord Jesus Christ, constituted by God High Priest from all eternity, in shedding His Precious Blood on the Altar of the Cross, offered Himself to God, in sacrifice, as a victim for our salvation. By that single sacrifice of the Cross our redemption has been once for all accomplished, satisfaction has been fully made to God for sin all merit has been won completely. Christ died for all, that they also who live may not now live to themselves unregenerate in sin, but in holiness with Him Who died for them. We are sanctified by the oblation of the Body of Jesus Christ once. Offering one sacrifice for sins, He for ever sitteth on the right hand of God.

THE MASS A PERFECT TRIBUTE OF ADORATION

Our Divine Redeemer, in His mercy, found a means of establishing a Sacrifice which would not only recall and represent His death but also apply to each and every man the Saviour's merits and satisfaction. And by the same Sacrifice so instituted mankind would be enabled to offer to God unceasingly a perfect tribute of public adoration. This is the unique and holy Sacrifice of the Mass. For, on the night before He died, Our Divine Lord instituted the Sacrifice of the Eucharist or Mass, by which in an unbloody manner, His Body and Blood would be offered to God beneath the appearances of bread and wine. "And whilst they were at supper, Jesus took bread and blessed and broke and gave to His disciples and said: Take ye and eat. This is My Body. And taking the chalice, He gave thanks and gave to them, saying: Drink ye all of This, For this is My Blood of the New Testament which shall be shed for many unto remission of sins." At the Last Supper, He Who is a Priest for ever according to the order or manner of Melchisedech ordained His Apostles priests and commanded them and their successors in His priesthood to offer the Sacrifice of His Body and Blood until the end of time. "Do this for a commemoration of Me."

THE MASS THE SAME AS THE SACRIFICE OF THE CROSS

This, then, is the unique excellence of the Mass that, being a true and proper sacrifice, it represents and recalls the Sacrifice of the Cross. In substance the Mass is the same as the Sacrifice 'of the Cross. The same Priest, Jesus Christ, continues to offer Himself to God the Father by the ministry of His lawful priests. The same Victim, Jesus Christ, is now truly present on our altars under the appearances of bread and wine. Only the manner of offering differs in the Mass from that in the Sacrifice of the Cross. In death upon the Cross, the Precious Blood was physically shed and separated from the Body. Today upon our altars, the Precious Blood is shed for us and separated from the Body, not indeed physically, but sacramentally, under a sign or symbol that expresses death: the separate consecration of the substance of the bread which now becomes His Body, apart from and previous to the consecration of the substance of the wine which now becomes His Blood.

THE PURPOSE OF THE SACRIFICE OF THE MASS

The purpose of the unbloody offering which Jesus Christ makes of Himself and of His Church to God in Holy Mass is not different from that which He made with the shedding of blood upon Mount Calvary. For this the Church teaches is the clean oblation of which the Prophet long ago made mention: "from the rising of the sun even to the

going down, my name is great among the Gentiles: and in every place there is offered to my name a clean oblation. Thus the Holy Sacrifice is an unceasing fount of adoration.

The Mass, too, is the endless thanksgiving, made Jesus Christ and His Church for all the benefits of God, our Creator and our Father. "He gave thanks, says the Sacred Scripture, referring to the institution of the Blessed Eucharist. The very name of Eucharist means thanksgiving. That the Mass is equally a sacrifice of appeasement to God is the constant teaching of the Church. Christ Himself has told us that in the sacrifice of the Eucharist His Body is given for us, that His Blood is shed for many, unto the remission of sins. And if Holy Mass is instituted for the pardon of sin, it must aim no less at obtaining from the mercy of God the other needs which follow upon our state of fallen creatures. The purposes, therefore, of the Holy Sacrifice are exactly similar to those for which Our Saviour offered Himself on the altar of the Cross.

THE EFFECTS OF HOLY MASS IN REGARD TO GOD

The effects of the Holy Sacrifice correspond without change to those of the Sacrifice of the Cross. If we consider those effects in regard to God, we cannot fail to gain fresh knowledge and esteem of Holy Mass. For the Mass is a never-ending Source of perfect adoration and thanksgiving and reparation and petition. In the Mass it is God made Man Who is Himself the Principal Offerer. In the Mass it is Jesus Christ Himself Who offers Himself to God, under the appearances of bread and wine. By reason of the infinite dignity of Him Who offers, because the Victim offered is of infinite worth, the Mass cannot fail to produce the effects for which it has been instituted. Unfailingly, independently of the holiness of human celebrant or assisting faithful, each Mass will always pay to the Blessed Trinity a limitless tribute of praise and thanks. Each Mass infallibly gives God a greater reparation than all the wrong that sin of men and Angels could inflict upon the Divine Majesty. Each Mass unerringly obtains remission of sins and grace of every kind that makes for man's salvation. Such is the glory and the worth of Jesus Christ, true God, true Man, Divine Redeemer of mankind.

THE EFFECTS OF HOLY MASS IN REGARD TO US

The effects of Holy Mass, in regard to us sinners, are measured by the disposition of our souls. As a sacrifice of reparation, the Mass obtains for those, who are not obstinate in resisting God, the graces by which they are led to genuine repentance and to the fruitful reception of the Sacraments. In like manner, the Holy Sacrifice remits, immediately and unfailingly, for the living and the dead, the temporal punishment due to sin, in the measure of the charity of those who assist at Mass or for whom the Mass is offered. As a sacrifice of supplication, the offering of Jesus Christ in Mass cannot fail, of itself, to obtain the graces and the temporal benefits we need for our salvation. But it must be remembered that Holy Mass avails to win for us that only which the Providence of God sees fit to give, in proportion to the fervour and the perseverance of our prayers.

It follows that they benefit most fully by the Holy Sacrifice who properly unite with Jesus Christ in the offering of Himself in Mass. The efficacy of the Mass is infinite in that the dignity of Jesus Christ, Principal Offerer and Victim, is infinite. The efficacy of the Mass is infinite in that it applies the boundless merits of the Cross, without being limited by the number of the souls who draw the grace of Christ from out of this treasury. But they draw the greatest grace who assist at Mass with deepest faith and firmest adherence to the loving Will of God.

UNION WITH OUR DIVINE REDEEMER IN THE OFFERING OF HIMSELF

There are many methods of assisting fruitfully at the Holy Sacrifice; and all are good. One attitude of soul, however, we would emphasise beyond all others: the effort to unite ourselves more closely with the offering of Himself which Our Divine Redeemer makes to God in the Sacrifice of the Mass. This attitude is a conscious understanding of the truth that by the character of Baptism, by the grace of Christ, we are members of that Body of which Jesus Christ is Head. It is then a disposition of complete surrender to the claims of God. It is a readiness to carry the Cross of His Will in all the aspects of our life. It is a permanent inclination to do always that which is pleasing to God the Father after the model of Our Saviour, Jesus Christ. In the first instant of His existence as man, He declared His oblation of Himself to God: "Holocaust for sin did not please Thee. Then said I: Behold I come to do Thy Will, O God." In the moment of His death, He declared that He had finally accomplished all that Will: "it is consummated."

OUR BLESSED LADY AS OUR MODEL AT HOLY MASS

This union with the offering of Jesus Christ in the Mass is by the grace of God easy to all. Even a child can understand it, while the unlettered, and specially those who suffer, can here outstrip the learned in their contrition and their fervour. This is that disposition of soul which was most perfectly possessed by Our Blessed Lady. At the Annunciation, Mary, in accepting to become the Mother of the Saviour, offered herself to God, in fullest union with Her Divine Son, to do the will of God as His lowly hand-maid. From that moment, each successive trial of her life only served to increase the depth and merit of her sacrifice. At the Presentation, she heard the words of Simeon, which, foreshadowing the Cross, transfixed her soul. In the Three Days' Loss, in the Home of Nazareth, in the Public Mission, she was being made ready for the final agony of the Passion and the Cross. Standing beneath the Cross, she offered herself in union with her Son, Whom she fully knew to be the Saviour, in the unique Sacrifice which was *the* redemption of mankind. It is because she was so closely linked with Jesus Christ in the offering of Himself on Calvary, that the Mother of the Divine Redeemer is now the universal Mediatrix who intercedes for human kind and distributes, all the graces of Christ.

UNION WITH JESUS CHRIST IN MIND AND HEART

No grace more precious—unless it be the grace of final perseverance—can be won for us by Mary's intercession than the enduring union of our mind and heart and soul with Jesus Christ, in the perfect worship of the Holy Mass. This is that "spirit of lowliness and sorrow of heart" of which mention is made at the Offertory, and for which we are prepared by the confession of sin at the beginning of Mass, by the petition of all the Collects and by the instruction of the Epistle and Gospel. In such an attitude of humble adoration we acknowledge in the Preface that through Jesus Christ all benefits come to us from God. Before the Consecration as suppliants, in union with the glorious ever Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, together with all the Saints, the Pope, our Bishop and all who make profession of the one true Faith, we beg to present to God the Father the Host and Chalice about to be consecrated as the sign or offering of submissive adoration made by us His servants and by all the family of His Church. After the separate Consecration, symbol of death, by which the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ become truly present on the altar, "as servants of God, His holy people, we offer by the hands of the priest to the most excellent majesty of God the pure and holy and spotless Victim, the holy Bread of eternal life, the Chalice of eternal salvation." We most humbly beg "to be filled with all heavenly graces and blessings through Christ Our Lord." As sinners we entreat Him to grant us "some part in the fellowship of His elect, not, indeed, in consideration of our merits, but according to the kindness of His pardon through Christ Our Lord." For, we confess, through Jesus Christ all honour is paid to the Most Holy Trinity and good things of salvation secured to men. Continuing in the prayer of Christ Himself, we petition God that He may be known on earth, that we may do His Will, and obtain the graces necessary to be free from sin and peaceful through Jesus Christ. Then addressing ourselves directly to the Divine Redeemer, Who taketh away the sins of the world, in the prayers before Communion, we beg that Jesus Christ may not regard our sins, but may look upon the faith of His Church and make us to cleave at all times to His commandments.

To assist at Holy Mass in the disposition that these prayers evoke is to unite ourselves completely with the offering made by Jesus Christ upon the Cross and renewed perpetually in the Holy Sacrifice. We should then, seriously endeavour to understand more clearly the meaning of the Mass, so that, being united with Jesus Christ, our God and Saviour, our lives may be made entirely subject to the Will of God and the teaching of His Church. It is our very earnest desire that we who are privileged to assist at Mass so often may, by the intercession of Our Blessed Lady, more fully submit to God in contrite adoration, more humbly thank Him for His benefits and more completely satisfy for our sins, so that, in each and every aspect of our daily lives, we may "more lovingly adhere to His commandments nor ever be separated from Him," by the merits of the Sacrifice of "the one Lord Jesus Christ, only begotten Son of God, Who for us men and our salvation came down from Heaven and became incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man and was crucified for us."