

Our Sacrifice - The Mass

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This pamphlet presents us with a careful and accurate examination of the Eucharist as Sacrifice - that is of the perfect Gift given to God by our Lord, Jesus Christ, which, at the same time, is His greatest Gift to us which we share through Him, with Him and in Him. These pages can serve as the subject of prayerful study and discussion both in the classroom and in the home. -EDITOR

Introduction

The heart of our Mass is Sacrifice. It is a living heart. It is the most exciting and profound way we can understand and appreciate our Mass. When we look at the Mass as Sacrifice we find a beautiful mystery with many facets. We find all the variety and brilliance of a perfectly cut diamond.

When I hold a diamond in the warm glow of sunlight, it presents itself to me in many ways. I move my hand. New brilliance suddenly unfolds, new blazes of light, sparkling colours, new mysteries. I am involved with the diamond, yet somehow I can never capture it completely. It eludes complete understanding, full appreciation - but it is still there.

Our Mass is like this when we recognize that it is the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But when we consider the Mass, we are not merely looking at some elusive thing. We are involved in the endless self-sacrifice of a Person. This is why the Second Vatican Council described the Holy Sacrifice in these strong and beautiful words:

"As often as the sacrifice of the cross in which 'Christ our Passover has been sacrificed' (I Corinthians 5: 7) is celebrated on an altar, the work of our redemption is carried on.

At the same time, in the sacrament of the Eucharistic Bread the unity of all believers who form one body in Christ is expressed and brought about.

All men are called to this union with Christ, who is the light of the world, from whom we go forth, through whom we live, and toward whom our journey leads us."

Constitution on the Church 3.

From Him, through Him, towards Him; these words inspired by the Second Vatican Council will open to us many of the facets of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

1. FROM CHRIST

Whatever Christians have received from Jesus Christ may be recognized as the free gift of God the Father. Underlying all our reflection on the Holy Sacrifice is a humble and grateful knowledge that it is a gift to us, God's own gift. As with all the other gifts which save mankind, it comes to us through the God-Man, Jesus Christ. There was a specific point of time in our history when we were given the Mass.

At the Last Supper, surrounded by his closest friends, aware that he was about to face a violent and unjust death, Jesus took bread and wine and said the simple words,

"This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me. This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

I Corinthians 11: 24, 25. At the time, the disciples could not have understood exactly what he was doing, what he meant by those strange words, But they would have accepted immediately one basic meaning - this action was a new sacrifice.

These men were Jews. The language Jesus used over the bread and wine had special sacrificial meanings to Jews. This is why Christ's own People, his Catholic Church, from the very beginning firmly believed that this action with bread and wine was a true sacrifice. Whether offered with simplicity and quiet in a native hut in Central Africa or with glory and all the splendour of the art of man in a vast cathedral, this same action is the Mass. A simple action, repeating what Jesus did, remains the same, with the same meaning Jesus intended, the basic Jewish meaning - sacrifice.

Covenant Sacrifice

The Jews had many forms of sacrifice. Usually each kind of sacrifice, whether of animals, grain, etc., was a setting apart of something in order to unite man to God. The effect of the sacrifice in the lives of people was more important than the way the sacrifice was offered. When we examine the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, we can see what kind of Jewish sacrifices provided the deep meaning of the new and perfect sacrifice of the Mass.

We must first appreciate Jesus' words "the new covenant". When we come to a mutual agreement, perhaps over property or some duty to one another, it is called a "covenant". The Jews had entered a covenant with God. On Mount Sinai, Moses received a covenant from God. The terms were governed by God. We know them in the form of the Ten Commandments. The Jews also saw these covenant terms in the light of other laws, and of special promises to them as a chosen people. God would never break these promises, even if people proved untrue to the terms of the covenant. Why? The old covenant on Sinai had been sealed and settled by sacrifices.

We need not worry about the technique of these sacrifices. This is a matter for the argument and study of scholars. But it seems as if animals were slaughtered, set apart for God's use, and then eaten by the community or representatives of the community. This practice was based on ancient ways of covenant sacrifice between men in the East. The victim, slain and then eaten in a meal, bound together the people or parties making a covenant, an agreement. Eating what was "made holy" they were solemnly united to one another in a sacrificial meal - and more especially, because they were united to God by the ritual action and the ritual eating.

Perhaps we may already wonder why men act in these ways, so alien, it seems, to our modern social customs. But there is an instinct in men, found in most religions, in many forms, of wanting to be at one with God by means of a gift set apart, offered up, a sacrifice. This gift now belongs to God. We are part of the gift set apart, therefore in various ways we are united to God. The word "sacrificium" in Latin means "that-which-has-been-made-holy", set apart, consecrated. Men are made holy by their sacrifice.

The Church accepted the words of Jesus, "...this is my body ...this is my blood" as words of consecration over bread and wine. The Church accepted the new covenant in these terms of a new Sacrifice.

Christ's Command

When God gave the first covenant he gave certain commands to bind men to it. When Jesus Christ gave the new covenant he gave a clear command to bind men to it. He said, "Do this in remembrance of me."

"Do this..." Jesus meant that his followers were to take bread and wine, to give thanks or to bless the food, to break up the Bread and then to eat and drink in a shared meal. This is how they would be united to God, "in communion" with God, at one with God - and at one with one another. Obedient to Christ's command - his People the Church have done "this" for two thousand years, and will continue to "do this" until time is completed and Christ comes again to claim his own and to resolve all human history.

But this command facet of the Holy Sacrifice raises some problems. Did Jesus intend his followers to re-enact the Last Supper? Did he want his People simply to share a meal together and to remember him in a symbolic way? No. Once more we find the deeper sacrificial meaning of his words.

"Remembrance"

In English the word "remember" can simply mean calling something or someone to mind. In the Greek of the New Testament we find a stronger and deeper meaning for the word used by Our Lord. The Greek word for "remembrance", anamnesis, means a special kind of remembering, so strong and real that it almost makes the event remembered happen again. This is the kind of remembering which is like "re-living" an event, or running a "re-play" on television videotape. This is the kind of special remembering which happens in the Holy Sacrifice.

But Jesus did not say "remember this Last Supper with me", he said quite bluntly and simply, "remembrance of me". He meant, "when you do this in loving obedience, I will be there with you, for you." This is why it is wrong to say that the Mass is a mere memorial of the Last Supper, or that the Mass must be made just like the Last Supper. It is also widely believed that the Last Supper was not an ordinary meal at all, even before Jesus stepped in and gave us the Mass in the midst of it. It was a form of Passover Meal, the most sacred and important meal that the Jews share together.

"Remembrance," was already present at the Last Supper as a Passover Meal and in this special vivid way we have seen in the Greek word anamnesis. When the Jews ate the Passover, they consumed food cooked hastily and simply, recalling that exciting night when they ate their last meal in Egypt, before they fled from Pharaoh and slavery. God "passed over" them when he struck the Egyptians. God spared them because of their obedience, so that they could come out of slavery and enter a covenant with him to become his chosen People.

Our Mass is our "Passover". But the "remembrance" we make is not of the lamb eaten on the run from Egypt. It is remembrance of that Lamb of God so beautifully presented to us in John's Gospel and in St. Paul's jubilant words, "For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven (yeast for bread), the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth," (I Corinthians 5: 7.)

Together at Mass we say, "Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us." As he holds up the broken Bread, the priest says to us all, "This is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are they who are called to his supper." Jesus is the Lamb.

We approach the solemn facet of the Sacrifice. The Lamb is slain. The Bread is broken. The wine is out-poured. St. Paul's words take us closer to the heart of Sacrifice. "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." The Mass is our unique "remembrance" of the Cross.

My Body, My Blood

Just as the lamb slain and eaten assured the Jews of liberty from slavery, so the true Lamb, Jesus Christ, slain and eaten assures all believers of true liberty. Does this mean that every Mass repeats the death of Jesus on the Cross? No. That was a once-and-for-all event. The Cross cannot be repeated. What Christ clearly intended in giving us the Mass was to give a way for us to claim all that the Cross contains.

We know this from the central words he used at the Last Supper. "This is my body, this is my blood." But once again the Jewish understanding of these words is our sure guide. They were not symbolic words. Jesus was being literal. "My body" meant - "all of me". "My blood" meant "my life". For Jews, "the blood is the life" (Deuteronomy 12: 23, Leviticus 17: 11). Jesus was stating something wonderful, miraculous, consoling and clear. "This is my body, this is my blood." There is no longer bread and wine here. There is only Christ present.

But why did he not simply take one form of food, perhaps the bread, and say, "This is my body"? Would that not have been enough to make him present for all time, for all believers? No. Jesus wanted to make this action clear in terms of sacrifice. He was not saying, "Look, I will be with you when you set this food apart." He was going further. He was offering himself in the clear signs of a sacrificed victim, the body separated from the blood. He chose this special symbolism, two separate forms of food, to express his work as Victim, his valiant dying for us on the Cross.

Once more the Jewish mind would have appreciated the symbolism of the broken body from which the blood-life had been drained. But Jesus even went beyond the Jewish understanding of sacrifice remembrance, body and blood. He scandalized Jews by commanding them to eat and drink his body and blood. "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" was their cry of derision and scandal. (John 6: 52.) But we know that "this man" was not only a perfectly good human being. He was almighty God, come into our world as one of us. With God all things are possible. The believers would see that in the bread and wine changed into the whole Christ, that their God-Man, their Saviour was inviting men to a special union with God. Jesus expressed this union in a shared Sacrifice-meal in his blunt reply to the objection of the Jews.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me." (John 6: 53-57.)

Sacrifice-Meal

The words of Jesus solve a problem which confuses some Catholics today. We hear the inaccurate statement, "The Mass is a meal." It is true that the Mass takes the form of a meal, although this is not obvious to any candid observer. But to say "it is a meal" is about as helpful as telling me that a racing meeting is a gathering of people and horses. It is only a partial description of the bare

essentials. It does not go deep enough to the reality and the meaning of what is happening. So it is with the Mass.

Jesus was clear that union with his new Sacrifice, with his new life, union with his Father, would only come if the believer shared in the new meal. But the main emphasis is not on the eating or even the food, not even on being nourished by special food. The emphasis is on a real and saving union with God. This is why we term the eating at Mass "Holy Communion". It is the time when the believer shares fully in the Sacrifice-meal. The believer not only obeys Jesus' command, "do this", but also his command, "take, eat".

Once more we return to that theme of certain Jewish sacrifices, sharing a holy meal together, a meal made up of food set apart as a victim for God, a meal of unity with people wanting covenant, a meal of unity with God himself. In these terms of covenant obedience, we Catholics enter the new and true covenant. We take bread and wine. Our priest blesses it. It is no longer bread and wine. It is Jesus Christ in our midst. The broken Host and the separate chalice of his Blood symbolize the Sacrifice which is now really present, the Cross. We are united to that generous gift of Jesus as we accept his invitation and receive Holy Communion.

We may say that the Mass is the Sacrifice of Christ in the outward form of a holy meal. This is the balance of Church teaching on the Mass.

The Cross

Before we move away from the Sacrifice as it comes to us from Christ at the Last Supper, there is a basic problem to resolve. We know that Jesus does not die again in each Mass, although the Mass is a unique "remembrance" of the Cross. We know that crude cannibalistic notions of "flesh" and "blood" are wrong. Why then does the Church concentrate on the dying of Jesus Christ in her central action of worship?

Here we must recover the New Testament meaning of "the Cross". When these words were used they were meant to contain not only the dying of Jesus, but his glorious Resurrection, his Ascension and the hope of his Second Coming. The Church does not concentrate on the dying of Jesus Christ at Mass. If we examine the prayers of the Mass we notice the joy, the triumph, the praise and celebration of our worship together. The Cross is the victory of Christ. Certainly we reflect on what that victory cost him, and perhaps there is need for this in the world today. But at Mass we are celebrating the whole of the Cross; his self-offering in loving obedience; the acceptance by the Father of that self-offering; the Father's approval and proof shown in the empty tomb and appearances of the glorified Lord; the triumph of the glorified Lord returning to the dimension of heaven; the promise that he will come to judge all men.

All of this glory, these events which make Christianity, which created the Catholic Church, can be taken into that wide word "Sacrifice". The Jews would be able to get some faint insight into this. For them, the killing of the animal was not the sacrifice. The animal was slain in order to release its blood. Because "the blood is the life", this outpoured life was what was presented to God as a gift. When Jesus died on the Cross, it was the gift of his outpoured life, obedient, loving, which broke the curse of sin which hangs over our human race. His cruel death was simply the unavoidable way that self-sacrifice had to be achieved. The gift of himself did not just happen in the instant of his death. It is his very nature to give himself up for those he loves, for us. "My body for you..."

We consider the last few words from Christ about our Mass, "my body for you". Some accounts of the Last Supper read, "broken for you", or, "given for you". These could read "given up" or "handed over for you". The living action of Sacrifice is contained in these last few words which we choose as the basis of our Mass as this comes from Christ. Jesus is always "given up" for us.

As we go further and see the Mass in terms of THROUGH CHRIST new facets of his generous gift will open to us, as we see how we can join him in his offering.

2. THROUGH CHRIST

As the gift of God, the Mass comes to us from Christ. It was instituted at the Last Supper, bringing us the dying and rising again of Christ, uniting us to him in his new covenant. The words of Christ showed us these basic truths of the Sacrifice. Perhaps we noticed that all the emphasis in these words seemed to lie on God's side - his gift, his work for us, his covenant. But what can man bring to the Sacrifice? Is not the Mass our Sacrifice? Is it not called the "Sacrifice of the Church"?

From God's side of the Mass - as it comes to us from Christ - we must seek the other side, our side, man's side of the Mass as Sacrifice. But somehow we will never be able to lose sight of God's initiative. We can see in the beautiful actions of the liturgy, in our response to God's gift of his Son, so much human ingenuity. In the end, however, the mystery of the eucharistic Sacrifice reminds us that what matters is our response to what God does, not what we do.

The Action of Sacrifice

When we examine the structure of the liturgy, we find the human features of the Sacrifice. There are various ways of considering this human structure of the liturgy.

(a) The Four-fold Pattern

At the Last Supper, Jesus' actions fall into four phases. 1. He took bread and wine. 2. He blessed (gave thanks over) bread and wine. 3. He broke the Bread. 4. He distributed this Food to his disciples.

At the Mass, in our Roman Rite, we repeat these four phases of the action of Sacrifice. 1. We take bread and wine. 2. The priest consecrates bread and wine. 3. He breaks the Host. 4. He gives us the Body and Blood of the Lord.

1. Taking the bread and wine used to be called the "Offertory". Now it is called the "Preparation of the gifts". Why has the Church recently made this change? The word "Offertory" implies that the Sacrifice of the Mass is an offering of bread and wine. But, from Scripture, we have seen what the Church always teaches. The bread and wine are simply the "raw materials" for the true Sacrifice - Jesus Christ Himself, his Body and Blood for us.
2. Consecrating the bread and wine, the priest uses a long prayer, the Eucharistic Prayer. He may choose from four of these Prayers in the renewed Mass of the Roman Rite. But this Prayer is almost a hymn of praise to God. It is called the "Great Thanksgiving". In it the whole People of God are first called to respond with joy - "Lift up your hearts!" and then, "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God." Because it is men and women giving thanks for the Gift, Jesus himself, this central action of the Mass provides us with the word "Eucharist", from the Greek word for giving thanks. At the heart of the Sacrifice action is human gratitude. We were grateful for the bread and wine, "from your goodness we have this bread to offer". But now we are grateful because "We come to you, Father, in praise and

thanksgiving..." The words which follow sum up all our rejoicing - "through Jesus Christ your Son."

Soon, in but a few minutes, he is present on the altar beneath the appearances of bread and wine. Then the theme of thanksgiving expands to include "...his passion, his resurrection from the dead, and his ascension into glory", all this contained and available for us in the Holy Sacrifice, where what is "remembered" is made real here and now.

1. The third action is the breaking of the Host. Clearly this symbolizes the death of Christ, but we must be careful not to take this symbolism too far. There was an odd, but understandable theory, that the breaking of the Host was the heart of the Sacrifice. We remember that even the dying of the victim, or the destruction of fruit or grain by fire, was simply a technique of the old sacrifices, a means of making a gift available to God. For us, the breaking of the Host, "Fraction", is a practical event so that the priest may eat the living Bread easily. When large Hosts are used, they must be broken into fragments for our Communion feast.
2. The final action, echoing what Christ did, is the giving of Holy Communion. We do not help ourselves to this unique Food. It is given to us by those ordained to serve us as ministers, priests, deacons, perhaps acolytes, and even in some places, licensed laymen. We eat the Eucharist together, as a family, one People, one community.

(b) Exchanging Gifts

The four-fold pattern of Sacrifice has been simplified in terms of an exchange of gifts. We give a gift to God. He accepts our gift. Then he gives us the Gift back, changed into his Son.

This is a good way of teaching children the basic framework of the Holy Sacrifice. Adults will be able to develop it along more accurate lines. We can give God nothing. Every created thing belongs to him. He needs nothing. But we are only human. We want to give God something. We want to show how we love him, how grateful we are for being created to live in this beautiful world. Above all, we Christians want to show him how grateful we are for the saving gift of his Son, who frees us from sin and death, from fear and despair.

God understands this need in the psychology of man. It is, after all, a common experience of most religions, expressed in various forms of sacrifice, even in that most pathetic and horrible element in some religions, human sacrifice. When God became one of us, when he died and rose again for us, he not only restored and raised up our fallen race, he also satisfied this human need to give him a gift in gratitude. He gave us the way of giving thanks with gifts, the Mass.

"Through Christ our Lord". This phrase is the key to the giving of gifts in the Mass. The Son of God, Jesus the God-Man, is the Gift which men can offer to the Father. The Holy Spirit has come upon them, making them a priestly people, who have access to the Heart of God, whose prayers are heard, a people able to offer with Jesus something far more wonderful than bread or wine. They offer themselves.

(c) Giving Ourselves

It is not within my natural powers to give myself up to God. But when I enter his Church by Baptism, when I am freed from sin and filled with the Holy Spirit, I am a new person. Now I stand in a new relationship to God. I am "in Christ". I am an adopted son of God the Father.

Jesus Christ formed his covenant People as the adopted children of God. In giving them the Mass, he gave them a unique way of worship. But he made it possible for them to offer themselves. The best way that the Christian offers himself is by sharing in the Mass fully, that is by eating the Eucharist, receiving Holy Communion.

For too long we have thought of our Holy Communion in terms of "I receive Jesus Christ". Once we recognize the sacrificial heart of the Mass, this must be turned upside down. "Jesus Christ receives me." When I take his Body and Blood, the whole Christ, in Communion, I am united to Christ. But I am united to Christ as Priest and Victim. I join him in his eternal giving of himself to the Father, in the love and power of the Holy Spirit.

Suddenly we see how important it is to make a good preparation and thanksgiving for Holy Communion. We are not receiving "something". We are not even receiving doses of Grace, as if Grace were like vitamins. If we want to think of being nourished by God, it is far stronger than being nourished by a dole of food. It is more like that perpetual nourishment of the human foetus, fed by its mother in the womb, the nourishment of a vital union and communion with God. "...he who eats me will live because of me."

We give ourselves to God because God gives us himself, God unites us to his Life, to the Life of Father, Son and Spirit. We give ourselves to God as one People, as the Mystical Body of Christ, the people who continue the life and work of Jesus in this world. This is why we speak of the Mass as "our Sacrifice", the self-offering of a People made holy, a priestly People, called to bring peace, justice and love to the whole world. The Mass is the Sacrifice of the Church.

How is it the Sacrifice?

The human side of the Mass, as we see it, prompts us to ask the obvious question. How is the Mass a sacrifice? At what point precisely does the Sacrifice happen?

Western theologians have tried to unravel this mystery for centuries. It is so typical of us Westerners to hunt for scientific solutions, for clear answers. We cannot endure mysteries. We must have everything classified, summed up and explained.

The Church has never defined how the Mass is the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ. There is strong favour for one theory, far simpler and more logical than various other theories we need not mention. This theory ties the Sacrifice to the mystery of the Real Presence. Already we have hinted at it.

For any sacrifice there must be a priest and a victim. In the eucharistic celebration Jesus Christ is both Priest and Victim. Acting through a chosen Christian man, the priest, using the raw materials of bread and wine, he comes into our midst. When the bread and wine are changed into the whole Christ we may say that the Sacrifice is present. Where Jesus is, there is his Sacrifice. He is the Sacrifice, both priest and victim.

The change of bread and wine, transubstantiation, effects the Holy Sacrifice. Christ is present among his People. But we must balance this theory of the radical change as Sacrifice with the need for this action to be completed by the shared meal, by Holy Communion. The Real Presence after transubstantiation is the Presence of the risen Lord, his glory hidden from our eyes by the sacramental appearances of Bread and Wine. We are united to the risen Lord in that endless self-offering he makes, always accepted because he is the loving and obedient Son. So, in a real way, human participation in sharing Communion is essential to the Sacrifice. At times only the priest is present to eat and be united to the Sacrifice. This is still an action of the whole Church, which he

represents before God. Usually many believers are present to join in the Sacrificial feast, made present by that miraculous and radical change of our bread and our wine.

There is yet another change necessary before the Sacrifice can be available for man. This is the change in people, a change only made "through Christ".

A Priestly Sacrifice

All baptized members of the Church have the right and power to share in the celebration of the eucharistic Sacrifice. Why? They have been changed by God into new people. They have been set apart by God as his own people. They have each received a gift at Baptism which they can never lose, a gift which makes them stand in a new relationship of friendship, closeness and access to God. Their friendship reaches its intimate high point when they celebrate the Sacrifice together as a "priestly people".

As they mature in Faith, the members of the Church receive the second great gift, or "character", at Confirmation. The Holy Spirit comes, and each redeemed person receives the strength and the duty to witness to the truth of the Gospel as a Christian adult. The priestly people are to bring Christ to the world in their daily lives. More than ever before, they will need the regular assembling together as a family at the altar. The close Communion "through Christ" in the Mass will sustain them in their many vocations.

But some are called to the third great gift of God, to receive the ordained priesthood. Their call is to a unique way of life, for they, as it were, turn around to serve the priestly people. Their primary duty is to proclaim the Gospel, with the authority given by Christ, passed on to his apostles and their successors the Pope and bishops. But the supreme point of their vocation is the Sacrifice of the Mass. For this they are ordained. From this alone do they derive any meaning in their lives. In this they serve the people in a unique way, which no other men may claim. They alone have the power to re-enact the actions of Christ at the Last Supper, to make him truly present beneath the appearance of bread and wine, to bring to this place, this community, this portion of the Church the priestly Sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

All the initiated members of the priestly people rely on the ordained priests for the Sacrifice of the Mass. Once more, we see how God understands our human psychology. We need priests. We need men set apart, but set apart in a special permanent way so that they can come closer to us, closer in certain ways than even our best friends, our wives, husbands, children. Jesus Christ is the one Priest. He invites all Christians to share his priestly work. He invites some to that special share of his active priestly offering, his work as the "go-between" or Mediator between God and man.

At the altar, the ordained priest is our mediator, serving us in this demanding role of service and sacrifice. As an individual, under his bishop, he represents Christ in the local community. Like most Christians, he may not be a saint, but he has a permanent gift which gives him the power to offer Sacrifice "through Christ". God does not work in democratic ways. He selects people for special roles, and he gives unique gifts for these roles. But the priesthood is a paradox. At the altar, leading the Church in her Sacrifice, the priest is still a servant. He exists for others, and his whole life is caught up in that mystery of selfless Sacrifice which we see on the Cross and in the renewal of the Cross on our altars.

A Community Sacrifice

You cannot bribe God. This is a danger in that gift idea of sacrifice, which was mentioned previously. Some people seem to think that if they do the bare minimum - attendance at Mass - that God will be satisfied, that somehow that will quieten him down, assuring us of comfort in this life and heaven in the next. Obviously this is hollow religion but ...not entirely.

Perhaps there are some people for whom the effort to get to Mass, and to be present in the church, even at the back of the church, is really a wonderful effort. God knows our hearts. He knows that even this step will be a great act of generosity in some lives. This is why devout Catholics must be careful not to pass judgement on "the young people (or older people) up the back of the Church". They are at Mass. By a simple act of will they are sharing in the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ, his community.

But, we can see that they could do better. We would hope that they would be disposed to come to the altar and share together in the Sacrifice by that intimate union with God, Holy Communion. This is the fullest and best way of worshipping in the celebration of the Mass. When the people come together in receiving Holy Communion, we see the Mass as our community Sacrifice. We are one with God, in "communion". We are one with one another.

St. Paul put this in these terms, "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ, The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." (I Corinthians 10:16, 17). The word "participation" is a rich word in Greek, *koinonia*. We could also translate this word as "communion" or "fellowship" or "sharing together as one".

The way Paul introduced this eucharistic reflection is important. If we turn to I Corinthians 10, we find him arguing about pagan sacrifices. He clearly understood the Mass as our Sacrifice, for he contrasts the cup we offer God, Christ's Blood, with drink offered to demons, false gods. He understood that the worshipper who drank from either of these sacrificial cups was entering union, communion, either with God or a demon, depending on his choice. The Christian community, for Paul, is formed by the eucharistic Sacrifice. Here we show our common choice for the true God.

Apart from disposing ourselves to eat the Eucharist together, if this is possible, we should form community at Mass in other ways. We should try to devote all our attention to what is happening, to the readings in the Liturgy of the Word, to the homily, and then to the action of the Liturgy of Sacrifice. With one voice, a united community praises God, in word and song together. The acclamations, responses, the parts we say together are for active participation, so that anyone entering our community can see at once that this is community worship.

Human Ingenuity

The final area to consider as the human dimension of our Sacrifice is the way in which the Eucharist is celebrated. We use the word "celebration" of the action of Mass. The priest, representing the Person of Christ, is the "celebrant". Together with him, led by him, we "celebrate". In Christian context, this word "celebration" must be understood carefully. It has a similar meaning to celebrating a birthday, an anniversary or a marriage. The Mass is joyous. Jesus has risen from death. His Sacrifice is accepted, and we are united to him, accepted with him. But there is a subtle quality about our religious "celebration".

The Latin word behind "celebration" suggests a large assembly, a festival, religious solemnity, praise, honour, fame, proclaiming news. In these wide terms we "celebrate" the Lord's Sacrifice of

love and joy. Therefore, we do not make the Mass into a secular party, or just a big meal. We control our behaviour at Mass - although we should be happy and we should enjoy Mass. We are celebrating the Person who liberates us, who will take us to himself one day. We keep celebrating, every Sunday, marking the day he broke death and proved all he had ever taught or done. We use human ingenuity in this special kind of constant celebration.

Bright candles, flowers, beautiful vestments, fine linen, chalices of gold and silver, altars raised from the sacrificial generosity of the people, all this glory is so human, so natural. Yet it reflects the glory of God. We use musical skills to provide chants, hymns and noble music for our celebration. At times, on great feast days at least, all the human senses will share in the celebration, as the atmosphere is perfumed with incense, that ancient sign of total sacrifice. Over the centuries, we have devised human acts of ritual, processions, gestures, clear signs of what is really happening, ways of highlighting the main moments in the splendid drama of the Lord's Sacrifice. All this the Church has welcomed, controlled, directed and recently renewed. It is the "etiquette" for her great sacrificial banquet.

Why is there all this "fuss"? Why this waste of money? The Christian cannot see a few dollars expended on beautiful worship as a waste. It is yet another way of underlining the sacrificial meaning of what God gives us at Mass. These little "sacrifices", the work of human hands, the product of the human mind and ingenuity, are like so many small lights, all focussing a natural gratitude on the great Gift we receive.

When Mary Magdalene broke a bottle of costly perfume to anoint Christ at a feast, we read that the one who objected was Judas. He complained that the perfume should have been sold, that the money would then be available for the poor. Jesus replied, "The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me." (John 12: 8.) Our altars, our liturgy, the tabernacle which enshrines the sacred Host, reflect our natural response to these words of Christ. All that we do at Mass is offered "through Christ".

The Sacrifice of the Mass has been seen as it comes to us FROM CHRIST, instituted in the words used at the Last Supper. Our human involvement has been seen in terms of the priestly work of Jesus, in that phrase so frequently heard in our prayers, THROUGH CHRIST. The final area which the Second Vatican Council indicated shows the purpose and the effects of the Sacrifice of Christ, summed up in the words TOWARDS CHRIST.

3. TOWARDS CHRIST

The Mass has a strange quality about it, clearer after the recent reforms. Not only does it renew the self-offering of Christ, the Cross. Not only does the Mass bring into our present time the events of our past. The Mass seems to leap towards the future. After the chalice has been raised for adoration, we cry, "Christ has died! Christ is risen!" - and then, "Christ will come again!"

The Mass points to our eternal destiny, towards Christ as our future. We have seen the covenant, the need for union with God, the Sacrifice-meal as true union, the ways in which we share in this, making Christ's offering the Sacrifice of his Church. But all these facets of the eucharistic Sacrifice can be resolved into one fundamental truth. Our union with God in the Eucharist is intended by him to last for ever. What we do, our celebrating and eating together in Faith, will one day be seen without any need for Faith, with clear vision. There will no longer be any need for sacraments in eternity, in heaven. We will be enjoying the eternal worship of the Holy Trinity. We will consciously

share in the Love of Father, Son and Spirit. We will recognize that in the sacramental signs of our Mass we were already entering the Life of the Trinity.

But we are still in this world. There are still various barriers and problems to be overcome before we come to our destiny. A major purpose of the Holy Sacrifice is to help us overcome these difficulties, to help us towards heaven.

Expiation Sacrifice

The Mass has been termed by the Church a true "propitiatory" and "expiatory" Sacrifice. These are unusual words, but they indicate an important facet of the Mass as it affects men, in this life and in the next life.

Scripture presents the dying of Jesus in terms of the death of the "Suffering Servant", the Innocent One dying for his people, the representative victim who lays down his life for his friends. His death makes peace between God and man.

How this happens, we do not know. We partly understand this mystery in terms of Jesus doing perfectly what we cannot do - offering perfect love and obedience, perfect adoration. But if this does away with the disobedience, the sin, of mankind, we see his obedient death as a cleansing from our personal sins. He is the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world".

His innocent death is the Sacrifice of infinite power. All that God asks of man is a free acceptance of this generous work of Christ. Men must recognize that Jesus is their personal Lord and Saviour. At Mass they claim the power of that Blood, that outpoured Life, which Matthew's account of the Last Supper described as "my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins". (Matthew 26: 28.)

The cleansing of sin, its forgiveness, the way it is wiped out by God's power is called "expiation". We seek God's expiation for our sins when we share in the Mass. We seek this best when we come to Holy Communion. Prepared by a good confession, by acts of heartfelt contrition, we enter that union with God which fully wipes away all our faults. We seek this saving union for ourselves, for our loved ones when they approach death. But the power of expiation in the Mass extends even beyond death.

From various writings in the early centuries of the Church, it is plain that men realized that the infinite power of the Sacrifice could be directed to help the dead, as well as the living. We have considered the way we can share in this powerful expiation of our sins, by active participation in the Mass. But we can also seek expiation for others, by "applying" the Mass for their intentions, for their needs.

Impetration

Mass for the dead is a most powerful form of prayer, the most powerful prayer we can offer. We seek the expiation of the sins and faults of those who have died, who have passed into that process of purification which the Church calls Purgatory. They need our help, and because they are at one with us in the one Church, we can help them. This pleading for them is called "impetration".

We have already seen that the whole of our human sharing in the Sacrifice may be summed up in the prayer phrase "through Christ". In Requiem Masses we are pleading "through Christ", in his Name, for the dead. Jesus promised: " ...if you ask anything in my name, I will do it." In Faith and trust, we ask in his Name. We unite our prayers in the action of the Mass to his eternal intercession.

We are confident that this helps those who have died, just as it shows that mutual love and concern which bridges even that change men call "death".

In 387 A.D., St. Monica spoke to her son St. Augustine of her death, "Lay this body where you will, let not any care thereof disquiet you; this only I entreat, that you will remember me at the altar of the Lord, wheresoever you be." Monica died soon after making this request. Her son noted the details of her funeral, "when the Sacrifice of our Redemption was offered for her...". These sentiments have not faded with the changes of many centuries. Today, Catholic Christians see to it that the Holy Sacrifice is offered for their loved ones who have died, those who have gone before them on the journey "towards Christ".

The Eternal Sacrifice

The belief that the infinite power of the Mass extends beyond death indicates a further deeper truth. What we call the "Mass" or the "Eucharist" is really the time bound form, the sacrament of, the eternal worship of God. This is the love or worship which is always within the three Persons of the Holy Trinity. We express this in the words of the liturgy.

At the end of the Eucharistic Prayer, the priest sums up the eternal quality of the Sacrifice he has made present on the altar. Raising the Host and the Chalice, he says, or sings a praise of the Holy Trinity.

"Through Him, with Him, in Him, In the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour is yours, almighty Father, for ever and ever."

To this, the people respond with the great "Amen".

The Holy Trinity seems central to the liturgy. Before the Liturgy of the Word can begin, the celebrant must inaugurate our assembly "In the Name of the Father ...Son ...Holy Spirit..." At the end of the Liturgy of Sacrifice, he dismisses the people with the Blessing, again, "...the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." Before the solemn moments of consecration, the whole assembly sings or says, "Holy, Holy Holy..." in honour of the three Persons. The liturgy proclaims the presence of the Holy Trinity in our world, focussed in the worship of this Holy Sacrifice.

On the Cross Jesus himself, God the Son, offered his loving obedience to the Father. He was able to do this in the power of the Holy Spirit, who filled him with the life of his Resurrection. Since we have seen that the Mass is one and the same Sacrifice as the Cross, we also see from this that the Mass is one and the same with the eternal Life of the Trinity.

The symbolic language of the Book of Revelation, depicts this eternal Sacrifice as the offering of a slain Lamb, set upon an altar before God in heaven. This is purely symbolism. But it helps us to realize the supernatural dimension of our eucharistic celebrations. The Eastern rite Christians are aware of this eternal Sacrifice, heaven coming to earth, God, as it were, "catching man up" into his endless Life of Love between the Father, Son and Spirit. The instinctive reverence and awe Christians have towards their liturgies shows how we appreciate the mysterious way time seems to vanish at the altar. The past events of Jesus are renewed. But not only the past, for the future, our own future, comes to us and already in human ways we are sharing the endless worship of heaven, a faint and cloudy glimpse of that "Beatific Vision" which will be truly ours for all eternity.

This is the most difficult facet of all the many facets of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. It is the great mystery of our journey "towards Christ". It is the mystery of knowing that with him, and in him, we

are all journeying to the Father. Turning to John's Gospel, we find Jesus approaching his self-sacrifice with a yearning to "come home" to his Father. Many Christians find that the Mass not only strengthens them to live this life fully, loving others as Christ loved us, but that the Mass gives them a real yearning for God, for the Father.

As we joyfully celebrate this same Sacrifice as the Cross, we can look at one another in community, we can see this action changing us, preparing us for eternity with God. Sharing in this our Sacrifice, we may appreciate the balance of St. Irenaeus' words, "The Glory of God is a living man - but the life of man is the vision of God."
