

## ***The Mystery of the Mass***

In Christian teaching, God became incarnate in Jesus Christ to accomplish the reconciliation of God and humanity, which had separated itself from God through sin (original sin). God's justice required an atonement for sin from humanity if human beings were to be restored to their place in creation and saved from damnation. However, God knew limited human beings could not make sufficient atonement, for humanity's offense to God was infinite, so God sent his only Son to become the sacrifice of the everlasting covenant. In Christian theology, this sacrifice replaced the insufficient animal sacrifice of the Old Covenant.

Mass is seen as sacrifice. It is however, not a separate or an additional sacrifice to that of Christ on the cross; it is rather the exact same sacrifice, which transcends time and space ("the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world [Rev. 13:8]," renewed and made present without Christ dying or being sacrificed again; it is a re-presentation to God, of the "once and for all" sacrifice of Calvary by the now risen Christ, who continues to offer himself and what he has done on the cross as an oblation to the Father. The complete identification of the Mass with the sacrifice of the cross is found in Christ's words at the last supper over the bread and wine: "This is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed...unto the forgiveness of sins." The bread and wine, offered by Melchizedek in sacrifice in the old covenant [Genesis 14:18; Psalm 110:4], are transformed through the Mass into the body and blood of Christ, and the offering becomes one with that of Christ on the cross. In the Mass as on the cross, Christ is both priest (offering the sacrifice) and victim (the sacrifice he offers is himself), though in the Mass in the former capacity he works through a solely human priest who is joined to him through the Sacrament of Holy Orders and thus shares in Christ's priesthood. Through the Mass, the merits of the one sacrifice of the cross can be applied to the redemption of those present, to their specific intentions and prayers, and to the redemption of the souls in purgatory. A prophecy of the sacrifice of the Mass, offered in every corner of the world, is found in the Book of Malachi in the Old Testament: "from the rising of the sun to the going down of the same, my name has been glorified among the Gentiles, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering, for my name is great among the Gentiles [Mal 1: 10-11]."

The Council of Trent reaffirmed traditional Christian teaching that the Mass is the same Sacrifice of Calvary offered in an unbloody manner: "The victim is one and the same: the same now offers through the ministry of the priests, who then offered himself on the cross, only the manner of offering is different. And since in this divine sacrifice which is celebrated in the Mass, this same Christ who offered himself once in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross is contained and offered in an unbloody manner...this sacrifice is truly propitiatory. The Council declared that Jesus instituted the Mass at the Last Supper: "He offered up to God the Father His own body and blood under the species of bread and wine; and, under the symbols of those same things, He delivered (His own body and blood) to be received by His apostles, whom He then constituted priests of the New Testament; and by those words: "Do this in commemoration of me, He commanded them and their successors in the priesthood, to offer (them); even as the Catholic Church has

always understood and taught." [Council of Trent, Session 22, Chapter I (<http://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/ct22.html>)

The celebration of the Eucharist is a continuation, rather than a re-enactment of the Last Supper. It is a continuation of the Last Supper which is beyond time and space. The Eucharistic Liturgy is a bloodless sacrifice, during which the bread and wine we offer to God are transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ through the descent and operation of the Holy Spirit, Who effects the change. St. John Chrysostom, the mystic, comments that when the priest says "Accept, O God, our supplications, make us to be worthy to offer unto thee supplications and prayers and bloodless sacrifices for all thy people," and "Remembering this saving commandment and all those things which came to pass for us: the cross, the grace, the resurrection on the third day, the ascension into heaven, the sitting down at the right hand, the second and glorious coming again, Thine own of Thine own we offer unto Thee on behalf of all for all," and "...Thou didst become man and didst take the name of our High Priest, and deliver unto us the priestly rite of this liturgical and bloodless sacrifice...."

### ***Joining in Christ's Suffering***

The concept of self-sacrifice and those dying for Christ (martyrs) is central to Christianity. We join our sufferings to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. One can offer up involuntary suffering, such as illnesses, or purposefully embrace the suffering in acts of penance, such as fasting and almsgiving. St. Paul says: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church [Col. 1:24]. Pope John Paul II explained in his encyclical *Salvifici Doloris*:

"In the Cross of Christ not only is the Redemption accomplished through suffering, but also human suffering itself has been redeemed...Every man has his own share in the Redemption. Each one is also called to share in that suffering through which the Redemption was accomplished...In bringing about the Redemption through suffering, Christ has also raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption. Thus each man, in his suffering, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering in Christ...The sufferings of Christ created the good of the world's redemption. This good in itself is inexhaustible and infinite. No man can add anything to it. But at the same time, in the mystery of the Church as his Body, Christ has in a sense opened his own redemptive suffering to all human suffering."

The sacrifice of the Mass in the New Covenant is that one sacrifice for sins on the cross which transcends time offered in an unbloody manner, and that Christ is the real priest at the Mass working through mere human beings to whom he has granted the grace of a share in his priesthood.