

The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass

We spoke yesterday evening about the importance of charity, of love—love of God and love of neighbor—and how it is the very essence of our Christian life. We also spoke about how sacrifice is the greatest expression of true charity, and that our Lord's sacrifice on the Cross was the supreme example of love and sacrifice—the means He used to redeem us, to save us. That moment when Jesus Christ offered Himself up on the Cross at Calvary as a Victim for our sins was *the* greatest moment in the history of the world, when the kingdom of Satan was trampled down once and for all, when the gates of heaven were thrown open for all who follow Christ, when man was redeemed and his sins expiated. We might say that at the center of history, just as at the center of Christ's life, stands the Cross. So great was that moment that He never wants us to forget it: *Do this in memory of Me*. So great was it that He even wants all of us to be present at the foot of the Cross: *As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes*, as St. Paul said. Or in the words of one of the prayers of the Church's liturgy: *As often as the memorial of this Victim is celebrated, the work of our redemption is wrought*.

Now what does all this mean? How can we be present at the foot of the Cross? Our Lord was crucified some 2,000 years ago. And wasn't Christ's sacrifice made once and for all? How can He be offered up again? And if His sacrifice was perfect, why does it need to be offered again? Welcome to the divine mystery which is the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the most beautiful thing this side of heaven.

Let's try to enter into and begin to grasp this awesome mystery. The Mass and our Lord's sacrifice on the Cross are one and the same thing. The Victim offered is the same: Christ Himself. The one to Whom the sacrifice is offered is the same: the Eternal Father. The Priest is one and the same: Christ; the priest you see before you at Mass is simply acting in the place of Christ, as Christ's instrument, as an *alter Christus*, another Christ: *This is My Body... This is My Blood*. To

borrow the words of Cardinal Charles Journet: *The Mass is the unbloody presence of the one unique bloody sacrifice of the Cross*. Now, how is this possible, and what exactly does this mean?

We know from the Gospels that our blessed Lord sometimes worked miracles from afar and sometimes by being personally present. For instance, when He cured the centurion's son, honoring the request of the centurion, Christ never physically entered the centurion's house, and yet He still cured the young boy. He cured him from a distance. Though physically separated from the boy, Our Lord was present to him, nevertheless, in a certain way: by His divine action and power; for the boy was in fact cured, and cured by no one else but Christ. We would say that Christ was present to the boy by His virtual, efficient or operative presence—by His spiritual power. This is a bit different from other miracles, like when our Lord cured the leper by physically touching him; or when he cured Jairus' daughter by taking the girl by the hand. In these latter cases Christ was present not only by His virtual or operative presence, with His spiritual power and action, but He was substantially present as well. He was there in person. This personal contact is the preferred way of Christ, and carries with it a special efficacy. We see this when our Lord visited the tomb of Lazarus and raised him from the dead. He could have cured Lazarus from afar and kept him from death in the first place. But our Lord wanted to show the importance and the power of His personal contact, and so allowed Lazarus to die, in order that He might raise him from the dead by this personal contact, by His being substantially present.

At the Mass Christ becomes present on the altar under the appearances of bread and wine. Jesus Christ is really and truly there, in person. He is substantially present—in a sacramental manner, of course, but truly and substantially there nonetheless, as He was when he cured the leper, and Jairus' daughter, and raised Lazarus. And now He is there in His glorious state; for Christ's suffering and death happened once and for all almost 2,000 years ago. As He now exists in heaven—glorious—so He exists on our altars. This is not always understood, as is evidenced

especially in those who accuse the Catholic Church of trying to perform another crucifixion at each Mass. “But Christ died once for all, never to die again,” they object, as if that fact is somehow contradictory to the Mass. Christ does not die again every time we celebrate Holy Mass; He is there on our altars in His glorious state—substantially present; He is there in person. That’s the first point to remember; and it raises another question which will lead us to the second important point.

If Christ is present at Mass in His glorious state, touching us with His substantial, personal, real and true presence, then how can we say that the Mass is a sacrifice, indeed, the very same sacrifice of the Cross? The Mass is a true sacrifice because, when Christ becomes present on our altars, He also brings with Him the spiritual power, the virtual, the efficient, the operative presence of His Cross. As His power was truly present to the centurion’s sick son while He Himself did not physically enter the house, so the power of His Cross is truly present with every Mass, even though the Crucifixion, as an historic event, happened almost 2,000 years ago. As a thing of the past it cannot be placed in the present; as the perfect sacrifice of Christ it need not be repeated. But the power of that supreme sacrifice, the virtual, efficient and operative presence of that very same sacrifice (same Priest, same Victim, same sacrifice) is transported to us over the ages by means of the sacramental words and signs, by the unbloody Sacrifice of the Mass. Such that we can truly say that the Mass *is* the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. Christ now glorious is substantially present at each Mass—He is truly there; and He is there with the virtual and operative presence of His one unique sacrifice of the Cross.

Cardinal Journet states: *Not without reason does Christ, now glorious, come to us under the appearances of His Body given for us, of His Blood poured out for the remission of sins; it is in order to signify that He comes to us with the application, the contact, the power and the presence of His one redemptive sacrifice, of the unique bloody sacrifice. One could say that, just as each*

consecrated host is substantially Christ because it multiplies the real substantial presences of the one Christ, so proportionately each Mass is a true and real sacrifice because it multiplies the real operative presences of the unique redemptive sacrifice [The Mass]. Just as some do not understand that Christ is not crucified at each Mass, so others ignore the fact that the Mass is a sacrifice, the very same unique sacrifice of Christ on the Cross; and so they treat the Mass as if it were merely a meal, a banquet. In fact, our Holy Father, Pope Benedict recently had to discipline a group who celebrates Mass sitting around a big table, acting more as if they were at a bar than at the foot of Calvary. Yes, Christ is now forever in His glorious state and comes to us as such at each Mass, substantially and truly present; but He brings with Him the operative and virtual power of His Cross, carried to us by means of the divine liturgy, the sacramental rite.

See, our Lord uses material things to communicate spiritual realities. He uses water at baptism to communicate grace and the removal of the stain of original sin; He uses oil at confirmation to communicate strengthen us with His Holy Spirit. At Mass He uses bread and wine mixed with water to communicate His very Self, His own Body and Blood.

Fine. Now, why do we even need the Mass if Christ died for us once and for all? The answer is very simple: Because, as St. Ambrose once wrote: *If we proclaim the death of the Lord, we proclaim as well the remission of sins. If every time His Blood is poured out it is poured out for the remission of sins, then I must always receive it in order that it may always remit my sins. I, who sin always, always need a remedy.* By His death on the Cross Christ merited for mankind all the graces we need; but because we, to whom those graces are given, are material beings who exist in time, He communicates or applies those graces through material means (sacramental signs). And so with every Mass there is not another new offering for sin; but a new presence, an application, an actualization of that one offering. In such a way the death of the Lord is proclaimed until He comes again.

At every Mass, no matter if it is celebrated with due reverence or not, at every Mass we are drawn to the foot of the Cross; at every Mass Christ now glorious comes down upon the altar to offer Himself to the Father on our behalf and to pour down immense graces not only upon those who assist, but upon the whole Church, and even upon the entire world. Every time a Mass is celebrated, no matter if it be a sung Mass or a spoken Mass; no matter if it is celebrated privately in some little chapel at 4:00 AM while the rest of the world is asleep, or at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome before thousands, or in some little village in China—every time a Mass is celebrated an ocean of graces flows down from heaven to the Church and to the world. Every Holy Mass is one more spiritual nuclear blast, the effects of which are felt all throughout the world. Or in the words of Cardinal Journet: "Every Mass is an explosion of divine love." Or in the words of a great Carmelite theologian, Fr. Joseph De Sainte-Marie: "Every Mass is another beat of our Lord's Sacred Heart," pumping new life into the Mystical Body. The Encyclical *Mediator Dei* states: *Men have perpetually needed the Blood of the Redeemer to destroy the sins which offend divine justice. The sacrifice of the altar is a supreme instrument by which the merits of the Cross are communicated to the faithful. Souls throughout the world—and let's not forget the souls in purgatory—are hanging on our every word, 'Hoc est corpus meum...'* The Mass requires from us so little and the effects are so great, indeed infinite.

So let's review. The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is a divine mystery, so don't be discouraged if you cannot completely understand it; our minds have to be enlightened by faith. The Mass is the very same sacrifice of the Cross, offered some 2,000 years ago on Calvary. It is a re-presentation of that sacrifice, an unbloody presence of that bloody sacrifice, where Christ is truly there on our altars under the appearances of bread and wine, but truly there, offering Himself up to the Father for us sinners. To assist at Holy Mass is to be present at the foot of the Cross with the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. John. Because we exist in space and time, and because we neglect so many graces

given to us, we need as many Masses as possible, offered up again and again, so that the power of the Cross, the fruits of our Lord's sacrifice, might be applied to us again and again.

What an awesome gift God has given us in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass! He loves us so much that not did He die for us, but He also wants to be remembered by us, not only as a mere memory, but in such a way that, through sacramental signs and words, He is present to us really and truly, Body and Blood, soul and divinity, along with the power, the virtual presence of His one eternal sacrifice. The Mass is the greatest gift God has given to the world, the most beautiful thing this side of heaven. The one question we now have to ask ourselves is, "How do accept such an amazing gift?"