

Explaining the Mass

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Part 9: Liturgy of the Eucharist-Priesthood and sacrifice

We left off last time just as the priest finished offering the gifts; he washed his hands as a ritual reminder of the Old Testament sacrifices (which were very bloody) and a petition for God to cleanse the heart and mind of the priest so he can be ready for what is coming next. The priest turns to the people and says, "Pray brethren (Brothers and Sisters) that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father." The people then respond, "May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands, for the praise and glory of His name, for our good and the good of all His Holy Church." This invitation to prayer and the response highlights two very important things: 1) What the priest is offering on the altar IS a sacrifice, and 2) The people are also offering a sacrifice WITH the priest!

The Second Vatican Council document on the liturgy explains this teaching very well:

"At the Last Supper, on the night when He was betrayed, our Saviour instituted the eucharistic sacrifice of His Body and Blood. He did this in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the Cross throughout the centuries until He should come again, and so to entrust to His beloved spouse, the Church, a memorial of His death and resurrection: a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a paschal banquet in which Christ is eaten, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us. The Church, therefore, earnestly desires that Christ's faithful, when present at this mystery of faith, should not be there as strangers or silent spectators; on the contrary, through **a good understanding of the rites and prayers** they should take part in the sacred action conscious of what they are doing, with devotion and full collaboration. They should be instructed by God's word and be nourished at the table of the Lord's body; they should give thanks to God; by offering the Immaculate Victim, not only through the hands of the priest, but also with him, they should learn also to offer themselves; through Christ the Mediator, they should be drawn day by day into ever more perfect union with God and with each other, so that finally God may be all in all."¹

We see in this passage many things, but the most important is the role of the *ministerial priesthood* and the *priesthood of all the baptized*. At our baptism, we become a royal and *priestly* people! The above passage tells us that, while the *ordained* priest offers the sacrifice of the Mass, EVERYONE ELSE must also participate by *spiritually* uniting *themselves* to the gifts that the priest is consecrating. To put it another way, the way that the laity exercise their priesthood is by offering the sacrifice of Christ *and* themselves *with* the priest on the 'altars' of their own hearts. If you pray the divine mercy chaplet, the prayer at the end of each decade expresses this *priestly* activity: "Eternal Father, I offer you the body and blood, soul and divinity, of your dearly beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, in atonement for our sins, and those of the whole world." How could the laity do that unless they shared in some way in Christ's

¹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 47-48. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html accessed Feb. 11, 2014.

priesthood? Obviously, the way an ordained priest offers the Mass and the way that the faithful offer Christ to the Father is different, but they are fundamentally related, since we are all members of the one body of Christ.

We must remember that at the Mass, the Eucharist is both a sacred banquet (meal) AND an 'unbloody' sacrifice. Why else would we have an altar? Altars are used only for...sacrifice! Many Protestant denominations object to this teaching of the Mass as a sacrifice, thinking that we would be 'crucifying Christ' over and over again, when the Scriptures clearly state that Christ died "once, for all."² This is an important objection, because it IS true: Christ died once, and only once, and will never die again. Yet, we say that at every mass, as the document quoted above mentions, the Eucharist 'perpetuate[s] the sacrifice of the Cross throughout the ages.' What does that mean? Simply, it means that at every Mass, we are not 're-crucifying' Christ, but 're-presenting' the ONE sacrifice of Christ on Calvary. In other words, what happens at Mass is something truly miraculous—through sacramental signs, we actually go to the foot of the cross at Calvary and watch, with our own eyes, the passion, death, and resurrection that happened almost 2000 years ago! It is the one-and-only sacrifice of Christ, made present to us through the ages by the power of the Holy Spirit. Stay tuned for more next week...

² 1 Peter 3:18, Romans 6:10, Hebrew 9:28, etc.