

TRANSFORMED BY THE MASS

Steve Ray was an ardent Protestant raised with Billy Graham on TV and influenced by anti-Catholic books. He recalls with fondness that his parents presented him to God at Joy Road Baptist Church in Detroit. His wife Janet traced her Protestant roots to the Mayflower landing in 1620 and even earlier. However, their study of the Bible and the writings of the early Church led them to the point of embracing the Catholic faith. They had never spoken to a Catholic priest or even been inside a Catholic Church.¹

In December of 1993 Steve came to the startling recognition that in his heart he was Catholic. So, he called his friend Al Kresta, a former Evangelical pastor, with the surprising news. Al invited Steve and Janet to attend Mass with them. Steve agreed with hesitation saying, "OK, but let's arrive late, sit in the back and leave early." Steve later remarked humorously that he was already a better Catholic than he knew! They were nervous because they had heard stories that the Mass was a pagan worship and the re-crucifixion of Jesus. Therefore, they decided that it was safer to leave the children at home. What happened next was a life-changing experience, narrated next in Steve's own words.²

"About halfway into the liturgy, I suddenly realized that the exact *same* liturgy, with the exact same Scripture readings was being celebrated around the world in Asia, Japan, Russia, New York, Israel, Egypt, South Africa, India, Rome, and everywhere else. ... This same ancient liturgy was being celebrated by the apostles, Polycarp, Tertullian, Irenaeus, Clement, Cyril, Athanasius, Augustine, and all the other saints and our predecessors in the early Church. ... We realized that the same liturgy is going on continuously in heaven before the throne of God. ... The risen Christ, the Lamb of God, the Bread of Life was here, right on the altar in the forms of bread and wine! We were partaking of an eternal event, something that transcends space and time."³

The Mass is a mystery.⁴ This amazing reality is so sublime and wondrous that eternity is far too brief to marvel at its beauty and profundity. It is a storehouse of inexhaustible riches. The Mass is so powerful that its ability to transform lives and conquer evil exceeds anything we can imagine. Civilizations, military strength, economic power, political influence, wealth, and satanic attacks are mere trifles in comparison to its awesome might. One of the great wonders of the Mass is that it extends Jesus' redemptive act throughout time and into eternity.

¹ Steve Ray, *Crossing the Tiber: Evangelical Protestants Discover the Historic Church*, pp. 17-18.

² Ray, *Crossing the Tiber*, pp. 81-83.

³ Ray, *Crossing the Tiber*, pp. 84-85.

⁴ Pope Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei*, September 3, 1965, # 15.

The Second Vatican Council called the Mass “the source and summit of the Christian life.”⁵ In its beautiful instruction on the ministry and life of priests, the Council also proclaimed: “The other sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate, are bound up with the Eucharist and are orientated toward it. For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Pasch.”⁶ The Mass is “the sacrament of our salvation accomplished by Christ on the cross.”⁷

The Mass is correctly called a sacrifice because in it the same Jesus, priest and victim, makes present⁸ the total sacrifice of himself on the cross. The same Jesus “who offered himself once in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross is contained and offered in an unbloody manner” at every Mass.⁹ Thus, Jesus is the eternal high priest;¹⁰ “for Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands [the Jerusalem temple], a mere copy of the true one, but has entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (Heb 9:24; also: Heb 8:1-2, 34). In heaven Jesus eternally offers his entire self to the Father for us.

So, while the Eucharist is essentially the one sacrifice of Jesus offering himself to the Father, it is also the sacrifice of his members, the Church. The marvel is that we are invited into the mystery of his sacrifice, not as spectators, but as participants. Here we, too, must become victims with Jesus as we bring to the Father our whole life history, even the dark painful elements that give us the most shame. This intentional act of offering ourselves with Jesus constitutes the essential element of what the Second Vatican Council called “full, conscious, and active participation”¹¹ in the Mass.

At every Mass there is a two-fold sacrifice offered to the Heavenly Father. Principally, it is the offering of Jesus made through the priest acting in the Person of Christ, but it also includes the offering of ourselves. Thus, the offertory ends with this prayer: “Pray brethren, that *my sacrifice* and *yours* may be acceptable to God the almighty Father.”

⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, # 11; see: *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (henceforth cited as CCC), # 1324.

⁶ *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, # 5.

⁷ CCC, # 1359.

⁸ CCC, # 1366.

⁹ CCC, # 1367.

¹⁰ Heb 2:17; 3:1; 4:14-15; 6:20.

¹¹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, # 14.

Therefore, when Jesus pronounces through the priest the sacrificial words,¹² “This is my body which is given for you,” we should be saying with him, “Father, I offer to you all my hopes, dreams, and my whole self.” Then, when our Lord offers, “this cup which is poured out for you;” we should add, “Dear Father, I willingly offer all my suffering to you - even my death.” Then the Mass becomes transformative when we participate in Jesus’ sacrifice with our whole heart.

There is also a nuptial aspect to every Mass that adds to its profound intimacy. Jesus was asked the question: “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast” (Mk 2:18). Jesus gave a prophetic reply that both connected him with the heavenly bridegroom of the Old Testament (Hos 2:16-20; Is 54:5-6) and identified Holy Thursday and Good Friday as his wedding celebration.

“Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them [Jesus’ death], and then they will fast in that day” (Mk 2:19; See also: Jn 2:29).

The procession to the altar that opens every Mass is a reminder of Jesus’ wedding procession as he carried his wedding bed to Calvary where our sins nailed him to it. The recessional at the end of every Mass is a reminder that the resurrected Jesus, the divine Bridegroom, is leading his bride (Jn 3:29; 2 Cor 11:2; Rev 19:7; 21:2, 9), faithful Christians, to the heavenly Jerusalem and the glorious eternal celebration of the “marriage supper of the Lamb” (Rev 19:9).

The sacrificial and nuptial elements of every Mass come together in a breathtaking manner in the worthy reception of Holy Communion.¹³ Jesus, the “true bread from heaven” (Jn 6:32) and the “bread of life” (Jn 6:35, 48), assumes the humble form of bread and wine to create an intimate relationship with his spouse. Our nature is superior to the ordinary food we eat. We assimilate the nutrients to sustain our life, for a time. But then, our bodily waste management system discards the useless elements. However, when we worthily receive the Blessed Eucharist, Jesus’ nature is infinitely superior to ours. So, while we take him into our body, he transforms us with the bread that “endures to eternal life” (Jn 6:27), as the heavenly waste management system casts out the unwanted elements of selfishness and the flawed attachment’s that prevent us

¹² CCC, # 1365 on the sacrificial nature of the world of consecration.

¹³ St. Paul gives a stern warning regarding the unworthy reception of the Blessed Eucharist (1 Cor 11:27-30).

from abiding (Jn 6:56; 15:1-11) in him so we can be remade into Christ (Rom 8:29; Col 3:9-10; 2 Cor 3:18; Gal 4:19).

This brief discussion ends with a question. If the Mass and Holy Communion are so powerfully transformative, why do we seem so little changed after attending numerous Masses and receiving frequent Holy Communions? The painful answer is that this deficiency lies in us, in our inadequate dispositions, in our lacks of a vibrant faith, and in our failure to invite Jesus into the activities of our daily life. God's love never forces. Grappling with this issue will be the focus of next month's essay.