What are we, the parishioners, sacrificing at the Mass? Is it just our prayers, or are we actually sacrificing, or offering up, Jesus?

What great questions! The first thing we need to recognize is that it is not so much about what we do, as what Jesus does in the Mass. The Mass, as with all the sacraments, is an action first and foremost of Christ. We do not really celebrate the Mass; rather, we participate in what Jesus is doing.

The ultimate and only true sacrifice is, of course, that of Christ on the cross. Christ sought not his own will but that of his Father, and offered back to God his entire being. It is on the cross that we see the great kenosis, or self-emptying, of Christ. In the Mass we recognize that Christ is offering back to the Father the greatest gift God gave Him—his life and his will. This self-offering and self-emptying are the ultimate goals of a true sacrifice. As we enter into that sacrifice, it should be our earnest desire to die to ourselves, seeking only the will of the Father, in order to be led to a sort of resurrection as we empty ourselves of that which is not of God.

The sacrifice, then, found in the celebration of the Eucharist is one of ‘thanks and praise’ for what Christ has done for us. Our sacrifice does not start with us, but with Christ, since Christ called us to celebrate the Mass in remembrance of Him. It is thus made a true sacrifice by God’s grace, for our offering in the Eucharist is truly Christ’s offering on the cross. By that grace and as we recall Christ’s passion, all that we offer is united to that one perfect sacrifice. In this commemoration, we are united to the sacrifice of the cross, which has taken place once and for all.

How then can a once-and-for-all act, as spoken of in Hebrews, be enacted again? In offering the Eucharist, it is not to be understood as Christ being crucifying again; instead, it is a participation in and partaking of that great moment. Through the offering of the Eucharist, we receive the true sign of Christ crucified, for we receive Him who was crucified. On our part, it is rightly called a sacrifice because of our willingness to offer up the Eucharist; but its power comes from commemorating the Passion of Christ. We, then, by the power of God, are connected to the Paschal Mystery (Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension) through this sacramental celebration.

The Eucharistic prayer is where we are able to unite ourselves with Christ. It is not only about what the priest is doing, but how we are opening our lives to Christ. It is a prayer of blessing and thanksgiving, corresponding to Christ’s blessing of the bread and wine. In this prayer, which is the high point of the entire Mass, we celebrate and are invited to experience in faith the very mystery of salvation. We are united to the Paschal Mystery. We pray for not simply the transformation of bread and wine into the very body and blood of Christ, but for the transformation of our very selves.