The Meaning of the Mass: Part Three
by Fr. Brian Mahoney

When we enter into the celebration of Mass, we must recognize it is not about what we are doing. Rather, the Mass must ultimately be understood as the action of Christ in which we, as a community, are called to participate. We are united to the one sacrifice of Christ and through this act of worship give voice to our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. Understanding that the Mass is a sacrifice is a theological truth that the Church has taught in memoriam. This was most clearly articulated by the teaching of the Council of Trent, the Second Vatican Council, and the theology of the Mass as presented in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal. In celebrating the Mass, we partake of the one sacrifice of Christ, which is a participation in his death, resurrection, ascension, and the pouring forth of the Spirit. Our sharing in this sacrifice comes through the presentation of the gifts of bread and wine and our prayer of praise. As the First Eucharistic Prayer says, “We ask you to accept and bless these gifts we offer you in sacrifice” and “We offer you this sacrifice of praise.” In the Eucharistic Prayer we unite our words of praise with the words of Christ, which form the great prayer of thanksgiving. Through this prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit, we offer back to the Father the gift He has given us—Christ, through the bread and wine transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. Through this prayer we participate in the one sacrifice of Christ. The theology of sacrifice is truly at the heart and soul of the Mass, and always has been.

Therefore, if we are to understand the Mass we must understand the true nature of sacrifice. A true sense of sacrifice calls us not simply "to give something up", but rather to offer back to the Lord some good gift that He has given to us. When we offer true sacrifice, we are called to recognize that all we have in our lives that is truly good is a gift from God, and we can only offer to God what He has given to us. Hence, sacrifice is not so much about the action as it is about attitude. As the psalmist tells us, "For you do not desire sacrifice; a burnt offering you would not accept. My sacrifice, God, is a broken spirit; God, do not spurn a broken, humbled heart" (Ps 51). When we sacrifice, we must do it with a humbled and contrite heart which then opens to the right attitude. It leads us into understanding our proper relationship with God: that we depend on God for all things and seek to live our lives centered in God’s grace and mercy.

This true sacrifice, therefore, is about seeking to give back to the Lord what is truly important to us, in order that we may be led into a proper relationship with God. The ultimate and truly pure sacrifice is, of course, that of Christ on the cross. Christ sought not his own will but that of the Father, and He offered back to God his entire being. It is on the cross that we see the great kenosis, or self-emptying of Christ. He offers the greatest gift the Father gave Him, his life and his will, back to the Father. This self-offering and self-emptying are the ultimate goal of true sacrifice. As we enter into the sacrifice, our ultimate desire should be to die to ourselves, seeking only the will of the Father—to lead us to a sort of resurrection as we empty ourselves of all that is not of God. Seeking God’s will is intended, therefore, to become not a momentary thing but a way of life.

In the Mass, then, we want to unite ourselves with the one true sacrifice which is the Cross of Christ, in order to lead a life centered in Christ and his sacrifice. How do we that? That is what we will explore over the coming weeks.