

We have been hearing from the Letter to the Hebrews now for several weeks but I haven't spoken about it very much. A lot of our understanding of Jesus as the eternal high priest comes from this letter. Much of our theology of the nature of the Mass also comes from this letter. Unfortunately the letter is not the easiest to understand. I'm going to touch on Hebrews a little bit but then I want to do something else too. I love celebrating Mass. But I didn't always love going to Mass. I am sure that at least some of you feel the same. One of the reasons for this change in myself is that in order to celebrate the Mass, I have had to learn the Mass on a much deeper level. So I want to show you a couple of things in the Mass that might help you to enter more deeply into it yourselves.

First Hebrews. A lot of our language about the sacrificial nature of the Mass comes from this letter. In today's reading we see Jesus as the perfect high priest offering the perfect sacrifice in the perfect sanctuary. The sanctuary is heaven. The sacrifice is himself. He is offering himself in redemption for our sins because we cannot do this on our own.

Now I'm going to go way backwards, all the way to the beginning. When Adam and Eve sinned in the garden of Eden, they sinned against God and damaged their friendship with him. That original sin has been passed on to us as part of our spiritual DNA. In order to restore the friendship with God, reparation needs to be made. This reparation needs to be made by a human--we are the ones who sinned, we are the ones who have to do whatever it takes to make things right. The problem is, we can't do it. We are mortal, finite creatures. We can't do whatever has to be done to fix the situation because the one who was offended by the original sin is God, the immortal infinite creator. God is God and we are not. So what does God do? He sends his son to fix it. Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. Because Jesus is both true God and true man, he can do what we can't do for ourselves. As a human, he is the appropriate one to offer the sacrifice that is needed to restore the friendship with God. Since he is also divine, the payment is paid in full.

What I just described is known as the economy of salvation and it's the key to understanding what we are hearing in the letter to the Hebrews. Jesus is different than any other priest who came before or after him because he alone could offer the sacrifice needed to redeem us from our sins. He is both the perfect priest and the perfect victim--it was through his blood that we are redeemed.

How does this apply to the Mass? Every Mass is a participation in what the letter to the Hebrews describes. We don't recrucify Jesus, though. That's not what's happening here. Bishop Liam Cary, whom many of you will remember from Medford, used to describe it like this. He said that when the priest extends his hands over the gifts on the altar during the epiclesis and makes the sign of the cross over the bread and wine, it is as if he is cutting through time and space to go back to that moment on Calvary when Jesus gave his life on the Cross.

When the priest does this, he's calling down the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit hovers over the bread and wine and then, during the words of consecration, first the bread and then the wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus.

Jesus becomes sacramentally present on the altar and in a mysterious way, we become present at Calvary. Every time Mass is celebrated, we are participating in that one sacrifice that redeems us and reopens the gates of heaven for us. That one sacrifice is good for all eternity because the one who *offered* the sacrifice, the one who *was* sacrificed...is himself eternal.

I want to point out something else about the consecration. The body and blood are consecrated separately. When the priest speaks the words of consecration over the host, he says, in the words of Jesus: "This is my body." Then when he speaks the words of consecration over the wine in the chalice, he says, again in the words of Jesus, "This is my blood." So Jesus' Body and Blood are separate. What happens to us when our blood becomes separated from our bodies? We die. Consecrating Jesus' body and blood separately represent his death. Is there a point in the Mass which represents life or resurrection? It happens during the fraction rite while you all are praying the Lamb of God. The priest breaks the host--which is now the Body of Christ; the breaking again represents death. Then the priest takes a small portion of the body and puts it in the chalice with the precious blood. Body and blood have been reunited and this represents the Resurrection. One word of clarification about this though: Jesus is truly and fully present in both species. Right now you guys are not able to receive the precious blood from the chalice. You guys are still receiving the full body, blood, soul, and divinity of Christ even though it is only in one species.

If you don't like coming to Mass, try to learn more about it. A great resource is a short little book called "What Happens at Mass?" It's by Abbott Jeremy Driscoll from Mount Angel Abbey. Bishop Robert Barron has a great series on the Mass and so does Formed.org which you all can use for free through the parish

subscription. You really owe it to yourselves to get to know the Mass on a much more intimate level. The Mass is the source and summit of everything that we do as a Church. It is through the Mass--and only through the Mass--that Jesus becomes truly, physically present in the Eucharist. It is only through the Mass that we can receive Jesus' body and blood in Holy Communion.

In order to have the Eucharist, we need the Mass. In order to have Mass, we need priests. In order to have priests, we need vocations and people to pray for and encourage vocations. This week is national vocations awareness week. Most vocations to the priesthood and consecrated religious life begin at home. Please encourage vocations within your families. We need men to offer their lives to the Church so that we can have priests to stand in the place of Christ and give us the Eucharist. We need men and women who are willing to lay down their lives for the church in consecrated religious life to pray for the church and the world. So please: pray for vocations and encourage them at home.

Very quickly, I'm going to end with the two other sacrifices we heard about today: those of the two widows in today's other readings. The widow in the first reading only had a little bit of flour and oil to feed herself, Elijah, and her son but God made it last for a year. The widow in the Gospel had only a little coin but Jesus said it was worth more than all the other gifts put into the treasury because she offered it with her whole heart. No sacrifice is too small in the eyes of God. Offer it to him with great love and your whole heart and he will put it to good use.