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1. What Is the Mass?

When you go to Mass, you are not simply “going to church.” You are about to encounter God in the most profound way possible here on earth.

God is going to speak to you—really—through the inspired words of Sacred Scripture, which are proclaimed in the Liturgy of the Word. Will you be prepared and have the ears to hear him?

But that’s not all. His loving sacrifice on Calvary, offered two thousand years ago, is about to be made mystically present to you—really—so that you can enter into it, so that you can worship God in the most perfect way possible, so that your own heart can be changed by his love, and so that Christ can relive his total, perfect, self-giving love on the Cross more and more through you today. Are you ready for this profound encounter with Christ’s supreme sacrifice for you? Will your heart be disposed to receive this most perfect love and be transformed by it?

There’s still more. At Mass, almighty God himself comes upon the altar and becomes truly present to you in the most powerful way, as the bread and wine are changed into Christ’s very Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity in the Eucharist. And most of all, this Jesus present in the Eucharist wants to be one with you as you receive him in Holy Communion. Think about that: The Eternal Son of God, Jesus Christ, dwells within your soul sacramentally in every communion you receive at Mass!

In short, when you go to Mass, you are going to the most amazing event in the entire universe, which happens each day.

Admittedly, we don't always experience the Mass this way. We may find it boring and dry at times—it might seem like just a bunch of random, empty rituals. We may be disappointed by the priest's homily or the music or the architecture of the church. We may not experience a warm and welcoming community. Or maybe we are too distracted at Mass; our minds wander, and our hearts are not in it.

Nevertheless, God works through all these messy human realities and wants to encounter us at every Mass, no matter what the circumstances may be. For the Mass is the primary place Jesus wants to meet us, heal us, and transform us. And it is the primary place Jesus calls us to worship him and give our lives entirely to him. Indeed, the Mass is nothing less than the celebration of the Eucharist Jesus instituted at the Last Supper, when he commanded his apostles, “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19).

All that happens in the Mass cannot easily be summarized in a brief sentence or two, for the entire mystery of our salvation is bound up with the Eucharistic Liturgy.² But to help our minds begin to grasp the depths of the Mass, we will briefly consider three key aspects of the Eucharist that every Catholic should know: (1) the Eucharist as the memorial of Christ's *sacrifice* on the Cross, (2) the Eucharist as the *real presence* of Jesus, and (3) the Eucharist as *Holy Communion* with Our Lord.

The Mass as Sacrifice

Have you ever heard the celebration of the Eucharist called “the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass”? One might wonder, in what sense is the Mass a sacrifice? This is, admittedly, not easy to see. After all, Catholics do not go to Mass as the ancient Jews went to the Temple, bringing animals to the sanctuary to be slain, cut up, burned, and offered to God by a priest. The sacrifice taking place in the Mass is

clearly not one of cattle, sheep, or goats. It does, however, involve a real sacrifice—the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who in his death on the Cross offered his life as a total gift to the Father and redeemed the world.

This is crucial to understand—and absolutely amazing to realize! The Mass does not merely recall or symbolize Jesus' death on the Cross. It sacramentally makes present Christ's redeeming sacrifice, so that its saving power may be more fully applied to our lives. In other words, the Mass is not simply about reverently remembering Christ's death on Calvary. It actually makes that saving event present to us so that we can enter into it. When we go to Mass, we in a very real sense go to Calvary, for the mystery of Calvary is made present to us sacramentally. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains, "In the divine sacrifice which is celebrated in the Mass, the same Christ who offered himself once in a bloody manner on the altar of the Cross is contained and offered in an unbloody manner" (CCC 1367; see also CCC 1362–1372).

How can this be? How can Christ's sacrifice on Good Friday be made present to us today? Let us take a closer look at Jesus' words at the Last Supper and consider what he really meant when he offered his Body and Blood at that sacred meal.

The Last Supper

On the night before he died, Jesus instituted the Eucharist. In the context of the Jewish Passover feast, he took bread and wine and spoke of them, respectively, as his Body being given up and his Blood being poured out for the forgiveness of sins. He concluded the Last Supper by telling the apostles to celebrate this meal as a liturgical memorial: "Do this in memory of me."

But what does all this mean?

First, in the first-century Jewish world, the language Jesus used when speaking about his Body and Blood had strong sacrificial overtones. He said his Body would be *offered up* and his Blood *poured out*. As we will see later, this language recalled the Jewish sacrificial rites from the Temple, in which an animal's body was *offered up* and its blood *poured out* in sacrifice. By taking this sacrificial language and applying it to his own Body and Blood, Jesus at the Last Supper was already anticipating his sacrifice on the Cross. He was referring to his Body and Blood as being offered in sacrifice like that of a Passover lamb.

Second, we need to understand the Jewish notion of *memorial*. In Scripture, a *memorial* does not merely recall a past event. It makes that event present. Therefore, when Jesus said, "Do this in memory of me," he was commanding the apostles to make present as a biblical memorial the sacrificial offering of his Body and Blood at the Last Supper. Indeed, the Body and Blood Jesus spoke of at the Last Supper is his Body and Blood that was sacrificed on Calvary, and this is what is made present to us in the Mass. As St. John Paul II explains, this is exactly what Jesus did at that first Eucharist: "Jesus did not simply state that what he was giving them to eat and drink was his body and blood; he also expressed its *sacrificial meaning* and made sacramentally present his sacrifice which would soon be offered on the Cross for the salvation of all."³ Similarly, the *Catechism* teaches that we participate in this same sacrifice of Christ at every Eucharistic celebration, for the Mass "*re-presents* (makes present) the sacrifice of the cross" (CCC 1366, original emphasis).

Through the Eucharist, therefore, the power of the Cross is unleashed in our lives in a unique way. As the sacrifice of Christ is made present ever anew at every Mass, Jesus is inviting us to be caught up into his perfect, self-giving love—his total gift of himself to the Father—his loving sacrifice. And he wants to live his sacrificial love ever more through us. He wants to transform us. He wants to heal our weak, selfish hearts and make our hearts more like his. And he does this in a most profound way through our participation in the sacrifice of the

Mass. Indeed, “the bloody sacrifice which he was to accomplish once for all on the cross would be represented, its memory perpetuated until the end of the world, and its salutary power be applied to the forgiveness of the sins we daily commit” (CCC 1366).

The Real Presence of Jesus

So we have seen the Mass as a sacrifice. Now let us turn our attention to a second key aspect of the Eucharist: how it contains the *real presence* of Jesus. The Catholic Church teaches that although Christ is present to his people in many ways—in the poor, in his Word, in the sacraments, and in the prayer of two or more gathered in his name—he is uniquely present in the Eucharist. For the Eucharist is the very Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ. Through the Eucharist, “Christ, God and man, makes himself wholly and entirely present” (CCC 1374).

The Eucharist is not merely a symbol of Jesus. Nor is Christ only spiritually present in some vague way in the bread and wine. At the Last Supper, Jesus took bread and wine and said, “This is my body ... This is my blood.” Unlike other Christian communities that view the Eucharist merely as a sacred symbol or “reminder” of Jesus, the Catholic Church affirms that when the priest at Mass recites these words of Jesus’ at the moment of consecration, the bread and wine on the altar are changed into Christ’s Body and Blood. They are no longer bread and wine. The theological term used to describe this change is *transubstantiation*, which expresses how, by the consecration of the bread and wine, “there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood” (CCC 1376).

This change, however, is not a chemical one. All the outward, sensible appearances of bread and wine remain. The Host still looks like bread, tastes like bread, and feels like bread. And the chalice contains

what to all the senses appears to be ordinary wine. The chemical structures of bread and wine remain the same. But underneath these appearances, Jesus' Body and Blood is really present in the Eucharist.

When Jesus himself taught about the Eucharist, he used language with a profound realism to describe how we will partake of his Body and Blood. Not only did Jesus speak at the Last Supper of the bread and wine being his Body and Blood ("This is my body ... This is my blood"), but when he gave his most extensive teaching about the Eucharist, he said we must really *eat* his flesh and drink his blood. So important was the partaking of his actual Body and Blood in the Eucharist that he taught,

Truly, truly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. (John 6:53-56)

St. Cyril of Jerusalem, an early Christian theologian, exhorted Christians to trust in Jesus' words about the Eucharist really being his Body and Blood: "Do not see in the bread and wine merely natural elements, because the Lord has expressly said that they are his body and his blood: faith assures you of this, though your senses suggest otherwise."⁴

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”

One of the biblical titles for Jesus is *Emmanuel*, which means “God with us” (Matthew 1:23). Jesus is the divine Son of God who became flesh and dwelt among us. And he so desired to remain close to us that he gave us the gift of his sacramental presence in the Eucharist. He thus continues

to be Emmanuel—God with us—in each and every Mass celebrated throughout the world. We should never take this gift for granted. The most amazing event in the universe takes place at every Mass: the Son of God himself comes upon our altars and dwells in our midst!

But God's desire to remain with us does not stop there. Christ's presence continues to abide in the Eucharistic species even outside of Mass for as long as the sacred species remain. This is why in every Catholic church the Eucharist is to be reserved in a sacred space called a tabernacle. We should reverence the presence of Christ in the Eucharist by genuflecting or making some other holy gesture as an expression of adoring Our Lord in the tabernacle. Besides our time at Mass, we also should try to spend time with Jesus in the Eucharist in the church or adoration chapel. This intimacy with Christ's presence in the Eucharist can bring great strength and consolation to the soul. St. Alphonsus Liguori notes how this is one of the most important practices we can perform: "Of all devotions, that of adoring Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament is the greatest after the sacraments, the one dearest to God and the one most helpful to us."⁵ John Paul II teaches that when we rest in the Lord's presence in the Eucharist, it is as if we become like the beloved disciple who rested on Jesus' breast at the Last Supper.⁶

And his presence with us is powerful. In all the tabernacles throughout the world, Jesus continues to be Emmanuel, God with us. There, in the Blessed Sacrament, we encounter the same Jesus who walked the streets of Palestine, healed the sick, called people to conversion, and offered them forgiveness of sins. And this Jesus continues his work of healing, forgiving, and redeeming in the world, only now he comes to meet us sacramentally in the Eucharist. Jesus longs for us to draw near him, and he wants to do great works in our lives, just as he did for God's people two thousand years ago. But we must come to him. And we must believe. John Paul II notes how Jesus longs for us to visit him in the Eucharist: "Jesus awaits us in this sacrament of love. Let us not refuse the time to go to meet him in adoration, in contemplation full of faith. ... Let our adoration never cease."⁷

Holy Communion

We have seen the Eucharist as sacrifice and the Eucharist as real presence. Now we turn our attention to a third key aspect of the Eucharist: the Eucharist as Holy Communion.

The New Testament reveals Jesus to be the Passover lamb sacrificed on Calvary for our sins (see 1 Corinthians 5:7-8; 1 Peter 1:19; Revelation 5:6). However, in the Passover as in other Jewish sacrificial rites, it was not enough to have the animal killed. Eating the sacrificial lamb was an essential part of the Passover celebration (see Exodus 12:8-12). A communion meal followed the sacrifice, and it was the shared meal that expressed the sealing of the covenant and forged communion between the people and God.

This has important implications for understanding the Eucharist as *communion*. If Jesus is the new Passover lamb who was sacrificed for our sins, it would be fitting that there would be a communion meal accompanying his sacrifice on the Cross—a meal in which we would partake of the true sacrificial Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. Looking at it from a biblical perspective, we might almost expect there to be a communion meal flowing from Christ's sacrifice. This would follow the biblical pattern of sacrifice and communion.

St. Paul points us in this direction in his first letter to the Corinthians, which reflects this Jewish notion of sacrifice and communion. He teaches, "Christ, our Paschal Lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us, therefore, celebrate the festival" (1 Corinthians 5:7-8). Notice the two elements together again: sacrifice and communion. Paul does not just mention the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. He doesn't say, "Christ, our Paschal Lamb has been sacrificed. All is done now." No. He writes about how Christ's sacrifice is meant to find its culmination in a festive communion meal, which is exactly what we would expect if he were following the biblical pattern. And Paul later makes clear what festive meal he has in mind: the Eucharist. In 1 Corinthians 11, he gives an

account of Jesus instituting the Eucharist at the Last Supper, and in the previous chapter he describes the profound unity established by partaking of Christ's Body and Blood: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Corinthians 10:16-17).

It is no wonder that the Catholic Church has seen Holy Communion as the climax of Eucharistic worship. As the *Catechism* explains, "The celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice is wholly directed toward the intimate union of the faithful with Christ through communion. To receive communion is to receive Christ himself who has offered himself for us" (CCC 1382). Indeed, Holy Communion is the most profound union we can have with God this side of eternity. God comes to us sacramentally on our altars at Mass and remains present to us outside of Mass in the tabernacle. This alone is quite awe-inspiring! But God's desire to unite himself to us goes even further. In Holy Communion, Our Lord enters our bodies, joining himself to our souls in this most intimate union.

This is the time to give our fullest attention to the Lord, as he dwells within us after Holy Communion. When we come back to our pew at church, we should pour our heart out to the Lord—to love him, to thank him, to share our deepest needs and petitions with him. In these moments after Communion, we become like Mary, who carried the God-man in her womb for nine months. What a mystery! Mary had her Creator and Savior in her womb! And yet what happened in Mary also happens to some degree sacramentally within us when we receive the Body and Blood of Our Lord.⁸ We become living tabernacles, housing the presence of the God-man himself. This is not the time to be looking around to see what people are wearing. This is not the time to be thinking about the football game later in the afternoon or to be developing our parking lot exit strategy. This

is the time to rest with Our Lord, who has so lovingly come to dwell within us.

Receiving Holy Communion regularly can have a tremendous effect on our lives.⁹ It can help us overcome weakness and sin, guide us in our decisions, support us in our trials and sufferings, and enable us to grow in holiness. By nourishing ourselves with the Eucharistic Body and Blood of Christ, we are gradually transformed by his very life dwelling within us. In a sense, to use a modern expression, we become what we eat! That is a point St. Leo the Great made: “Nothing else is aimed at in our partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, than that we change into what we consume, and ever bear in spirit and flesh him in whom we have died, been buried, and have risen.”¹⁰

In conclusion, we have seen the Mass as sacrifice, real presence, and Holy Communion. With this basic background, we are now prepared to begin our biblical walk through the parts of the Mass.