

THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (2024 - B)

Today, I want to say a few things about the Mass. More specifically, I want to say something about the idea of sacrifice and how it is connected to the Mass in an essential way. This idea of sacrifice is raised in our second reading today with regard to the contrast between the sacrifice offered by the high priest and that offered by our great high priest, Jesus Christ.

Now before I say more, let me point out that we call the Sacrament of the Eucharist by many different names. We call it the Eucharist because it is an offering of thanks and praise. We call it the Lord's Supper as a reminder of the Last Supper in which our Lord instituted the Mass and gave Himself as sacramental food to His Apostles. We call it the Divine Liturgy because it is a holy work. We call it the Mass because from it, we are sent forth to bring Christ's love into the world. We call it Holy Communion because by this Sacrament we are united to Christ. Finally, we call it the Holy Sacrifice because it makes present to us the one Sacrifice of Christ, His offering of Himself to His Father.

As I mentioned, our Second Reading from the Book of Hebrews refers to this idea of sacrifice when it speaks about the High Priest who entered the sanctuary of the Temple each year to offer sacrifice. It then compares the Sacrifice our Lord Jesus Christ offered to that of the High Priest. Now this sacrifice of Christ which the Letter to the Hebrews describes is in fact the Sacrifice of the Mass, the very same Mass which we attend each Sunday.

Here it needs to be said that this idea of sacrifice is very foreign to our modern way of thinking. In fact most people don't think about it at all, and there is a reason for this. Either they don't think about sacrifice because they have lost a sense of the holiness of God, or they don't believe in God at all. It follows then that these folks will have trouble understanding their unworthiness to go before God and to stand in His presence. On the other hand, the ancient peoples did not have this problem.

For example, the ancient Israelites wouldn't even pronounce the name of God. Only the high priest could utter God's name and then only once a year in the temple beyond the hearing of anyone else. The patriarchs also understood their unworthiness to stand before God. For example, here is what Job said to God, **"Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer thee? I know that thou canst do all things ... I have uttered what I did not understand ... therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes (40:4; 42:1,3,6)."**

It was because of their sinfulness and their unworthiness that the Israelites offered sacrifice to God. Furthermore, it was because they understood clearly the holiness of God and their own sinfulness that they only approached God through the priests.

The Israelites knew that everything they had was a gift from God. They knew that they could do nothing without God. So, in thanksgiving and to make up for their own sins, they would take the best that they had, the most perfect ram from their flock or the best ox from their herd or a part of their harvest of wheat, and they would give this back to God.

They did this by taking their offerings to the temple, and there, they slaughtered the animals and burnt their flesh on the altar of sacrifice until their offering was consumed. That is how they gave back to God a small part of what He had given to them and that is how they offered sacrifice for their sins.

Now this sounds very strange to us today, but in fact, the more you think about it, the more it makes sense. When we do something wrong, our natural inclination is to make up for it. If you break something, you offer to pay for it. Judges require thieves to make restitution. After an argument, a husband might give flowers to his wife.

That's what the Israelites did. They offered sacrifice to God for their sins. They gave back to God the best that they had, and to make sure that God received their sacrifice, and that it wasn't used by someone else, they destroyed their sacrifice with fire.

Now as I mentioned, not everyone could offer this sacrifice. God was too holy for that. Instead only those whom God selected could offer the Temple sacrifices, and these were men from the tribe of Levi. They were God's priests, mediators between God and His people. The people would bring their offerings to the priests, and the priests in turn offered them to God.

However, and this is important, these offerings which the Levitical priests made on behalf of the people could not make up for the people's sins. That's because the people could only offer to God what God had already given to them, namely their animals or crops. However, that was hardly a worthy sacrifice because these were gifts God had given to them. So they were only giving back to God something they had received from Him.

Think about it this way. Suppose someone loaned you \$50 and then you gave them back \$25 and then said, "There, now we're even!" You will still owe them \$25. The fact of the matter was simple. It was impossible for the people's sacrifices to make up for their sins because they had nothing to give to God that was truly their own, nothing that God had not already given to them. That explains why the priests offered sacrifices over and over again.

But all this changed when Christ came. As Hebrews says, **"He had a priesthood that does not pass away (Heb 7:24)"** and so He is **"always able to save those who approach God through Him, since He lives forever to make intercession for them (Heb 7:25)."**

Jesus Christ became the great high priest **"who has passed through the heavens (Heb 4:14)."** Because He lives forever, He doesn't need to offer sacrifice day after day like the Levitical priests. Rather, His one sacrifice would be and is sufficient.

Furthermore, because Jesus is God the Son, His offering was not bounded by time. Remember, Saint Peter said **"with the Lord one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day (2Pet 3:8)."** So the sacrifice Jesus offered is an everlasting sacrifice. What He offered so long ago according to our time, He continues to offer today and tomorrow and the next and forever and for all eternity. That is why the Father said of Jesus, **"You are a priest forever (Heb 7:17)."**

So if the Old Testament priests offered sheep and goats and cattle, imperfect offerings, what did Jesus offer? What our great High priest offered was nothing less than Himself. Jesus offered His life for us on the cross, and that means He was both priest and victim. He was the priest in that he offered the sacrifice, and He was also the victim in that He was the offering.

So then what is the Mass? Why does the Church call the Eucharist “the source and summit of the Christian life”? Furthermore, how does it bring about unity? In answer, every time we come to Mass, we enter into that great and eternal sacrifice, that everlasting offering of the Son to the Father. The Mass is like a doorway into eternity. When we are at Mass, we are in another time zone. In fact, we are in God’s presence where there is no time but only eternity.

At Mass, we are really and truly present at the Last Supper and at the foot of the Cross. We are there with the Apostles as Jesus gives Himself to them to eat, and we are at the foot of the Cross with the Blessed Virgin and Saint Mary Magdalene and Saint John as Jesus offers His life to the Father on behalf of our sins.

Many people go to the Holy Land and make pilgrimages to the place where Jesus died, and that is all good and wonderful. However, when you are at Mass, you are at something better, you are actually with Jesus as He offers Himself to the Father. That is why the Mass is so holy and why the Church calls it the source of unity among us.

At Mass, Jesus, the great High Priest offers Himself to the Father on our behalf. Once this is understood, you can see that there is nothing on Earth more important than Mass. So then, as we come together each week for Mass, let us unite ourselves ever more closely to Jesus Christ as He offers His perfect sacrifice to the Father on our behalf. Amen.