

“At the Last Supper, on the night he was betrayed, our Saviour instituted the eucharistic **sacrifice** of his Body and Blood. This he did in order to perpetuate the **sacrifice** of the Cross throughout the ages...” – Vatican Council II, Sacrosanctum Concilium, #47

The Mass: Its Sacrificial Meaning

At about the half-way point through the year of the Eucharist, proclaimed by our Holy Father John Paul II last October, perhaps it is a good time to pause and reflect on the meaning of the event, the ritual, the sacrament which plays such an enormous role in our lives and the life of the world. We believe, no doubt, that the Eucharist is the “source and summit of the Christian life”, just as the Church teaches, and most of us have probably been more keenly aware of the Eucharist and focused more upon it during this year. Perhaps we are aware of blessings, even great ones, having come into our lives through this blessed sacrament during this period of its study, appreciation, and adoration.

Perhaps too, though, we have been aware of a general weakness among Catholics in their estimation of the Eucharist as well as deficiencies and abuses—sometimes even serious ones—in the celebration of the Holy Mass. These are no secrets, sadly enough; the problems are so widespread that the Holy Father addresses them in both of his recent letters on the Eucharist. Pope John Paul is not one to be overly negative and does mention many encouraging signs of “Eucharistic faith and love” present in the universal Church. Yet in *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, the encyclical teaching on

the Eucharist and the Church, he notes, “with profound grief”, shadows alongside the lights. The Holy Father speaks of abuses of the liturgy leading to confusion, the abandonment of Eucharistic adoration, of a distorted notion of priesthood and what we might spend a few moments examining ourselves, “an extremely reductive understanding of the Eucharistic mystery.” The Mass, the Pope says, is sometimes “stripped of its sacrificial meaning, it is celebrated as if it were simply a fraternal banquet.” Simply put, some Catholics have forgotten that the Mass is a **sacrifice**.

We, however, must not forget. We must not forget that the Eucharist—as the Pope John Paul says in *Mane Nobiscum Domine* (the encyclical on the Year of the Eucharist)—“has a *profoundly and primarily* sacrificial meaning. In the Eucharist, Christ makes present to us anew the **sacrifice** offered once for all on Golgotha.”

Well, what will be the antidote to this widespread forgetfulness? How about some “intense catechesis”? That is what the Congregation for Divine Worship recommends in their recent *Suggestions and Proposals* for the Year of the Eucharist. This catechesis could have a number of points of focus; one that the CDW recommends is *mystagogy*.



Now what may be at first glance simply a long, foreign word, is really something very much familiar, if somewhat underappreciated: the words of the Mass itself! Mystagogy here is simply letting the form of the mysteries (the sacraments) speak to us. It makes very good sense, really, that the words that the Church chooses for the celebration of the Eucharist should give us a pretty clear idea of what she believes it to be. So, is the Mass a sacrifice, as the Holy Father so strongly asserts? Here are a few selections from the Maronite Mass:

“May the Lord accept your *offering...*”, “I will go to the *altar* of God...I will enter your house, O Lord, and worship in your holy *temple*.”, “The priest bears me [Christ, the Bread of Life] aloft to the *altar...*”, “This is *my blood* of the new covenant, *which is shed* and handed over for you and for many...”, “Each time you fulfill these mysteries you realize *my death* and remember my resurrection until I come again.”, “O Lord, we remember *your death*, we witness to your resurrection...”, “Through this *sacrifice*, offered to you by our sinful hands, grant, O Lord, a good memorial to our parents, brothers...”, “We have believed, and we have offered, and now we seal and break this *oblation*, the heavenly bread and living body of the Word of the living God.”, “You, O Lord, are the pleasing *victim*, who was offered for us; you are the forgiving *sacrifice*, who offered yourself for us to the Father. You are the Lamb of *sacrifice*, and yet also the priest who offered himself for us...”, “This is the cup which our Lord prepared *on the cross*.”

Now, even without all the italics and color highlighting, it is pretty obvious from these passages that the Mass is being spoken of as a *sacrifice*. No mere poetic imagery, this language reflects the earliest Christian understandings of the Eucharist. It is true, as Cardinal Ratzinger points out in his *Spirit of the Liturgy* that “the new reality of Christian worship”—the Eucharist—was born, so to speak, in the context of a Passover meal and still retains something of the structure of a meal. Nevertheless, *meal* does not suffice as a description of the Mass because it was the “new reality” which Our Lord commanded us to repeat, not the meal as such. And the new reality involved real *sacrifice*. So the Mass developed in the early Christian community and very soon, as the Cardinal points out, “found its proper and suitable form, a form already predetermined by the fact that the *Eucharist refers back to the Cross* and thus to *the transformation of Temple*

sacrifice into worship of God...”

But is this an outdated theory or an opinion of a few? No. Pope Paul VI in 1968 taught in the *Credo of the People of God*: “We believe that the Mass, celebrated by the priest representing the person of Christ by virtue of the power received through the sacrament of Order, and offered by him in the name of Christ and of the members of His Mystical Body, *is indeed the sacrifice of Calvary rendered sacramentally present on our altars.*” And the Holy Father was here echoing the solemn definitions of the Council of Trent, four hundred years earlier: “If anyone says that in the Mass a true and real *sacrifice* is not offered to God, or that the offering is nothing else than Christ being given to us to eat: let him be anathema.” Very strong and very clear; the Mass is a *sacrifice*, and not just a meal.

Well, what of it? How does knowing that the Eucharist is truly and primarily a *sacrifice* help us in this Year of the Eucharist? The answer will, perhaps, be clear if we turn to the words of the Second Vatican Council. The council fathers, speaking of Christians wrote: “Taking part in the eucharistic *sacrifice*, the source and summit of the Christian life, *they offer the divine victim to God and themselves along with it.*” So when we assist at the Holy *Sacrifice* of the Mass, we are not “mere spectators” but rather are true participants in the Eucharistic *Sacrifice*, not simply by receiving the sacrament, but by joining ourselves to Christ our High Priest, and offering up with Him all that we have, all that we do and all that we are. How awesome! It is precisely this that we must not forget.

Throughout the 20th century, the Popes constantly and forcefully preached on the sacred liturgy and the need for all of Christ’s Faithful to participate in it fully, consciously, actively (phrases the 2nd Vatican Council borrowed from the allocutions of Pope Pius X, given sixty years earlier). What we need to keep in mind in this present century is what, exactly, we are participating in. In order to do that we probably all need, as the CDW suggested, some “intense catechesis”. Well, may this be some sort of small start.

As a conclusion, why not meditate briefly on the words of Pope Pius XII, from his encyclical *Mediator Dei*? The Holy Father here presents us with a forthright call not to miss to the enormous opportunity we have in each celebration of the Holy Sacrifice. Let us never miss that opportunity!

“...[A]ll the faithful should be aware that to participate in the Eucharistic **Sacrifice** is their chief duty and supreme dignity, and that not in an inert and negligent fashion, giving way to distractions and daydreaming, but with such earnestness and concentration that they may be united as closely as possible with the High Priest, according to the Apostle: “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.” *And together with him and through Him let them make their oblation, and in union with Him let them offer up themselves.*”

