

The Eucharist: A Way of Life

The Catholic Church has always taught that the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is essentially one and the same sacrifice that Christ offered to God on the Cross. At Mass, the one sacrifice of Christ on Calvary is made present once more in a mysterious, sacramental fashion through the miracle of the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ that takes place at the time of the consecration. But, although the Mass is essentially the same sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, if we compare Christ's sacrifice on the Cross with the sacrifice of the Mass, there are also certain differences, for example, the differences of time and place. And there is yet another difference between Christ's sacrifice on Calvary and the sacrifice of the Mass that has important consequences for understanding our part in offering and participating in this sacrifice. The difference I am referring to is this: on the Cross, Christ offered Himself to the Father *as He was then*; at the Mass, He offers Himself to the Father *as He is now*. And the difference between *then* and *now* is that now Christ has joined a body to Himself, the Mystical Body of the Church. Whenever someone is baptized, he becomes a member of Christ's Mystical Body; we have all been incorporated into Christ through baptism. And this union with Christ in His Mystical Body is a very deep and mysterious thing. Pope Pius XII wrote an encyclical on the Mystical Body of Christ and in this encyclical this is one of the things he had to say: "Our union with Christ in the Body of the Church ... is very close indeed; it is so intimate that a very ancient and constant tradition of the Fathers ... teaches that the divine Redeemer, together with



His social body [that is, the Church], *constitute one mystical person*, or — as St. Augustine expresses it — ‘the whole Christ’”. And in another place he writes: “The name ‘Body of Christ’ means more than that Christ is the Head of the Mystical Body; it means also that He, after a certain manner, so lives in the Church that she may be said to be another Christ.”

Since at Mass Christ becomes present on our altars as He is now it follows that it is the whole Christ that is made present and offered to the Father, it is Christ *together with* all the members of His Mystical Body. So, as the Church teaches, the sacrifice of the Mass is not only the sacrifice of Christ, but the sacrifice of the Church as well — or another way of putting it: it is the sacrifice of the whole Christ, Head and members. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: “With Christ the Church herself is offered whole and entire. In the Eucharist the sacrifice of Christ becomes also the sacrifice of the members of His body. The lives of the

faithful, their praise, sufferings, prayer, and work, are united with those of Christ and with His total offering, and so acquire a new value. Christ's sacrifice present on the altar makes it possible for all generations of Christians to be united with His offering” (CCC n. 1368).

This means that we are all present in some fashion with Christ on the altar at every sacrifice of the Mass. When we are at Mass we should, then, consciously and of set purpose unite ourselves and all that we are to the sacrifice on the altar and offer ourselves together with Christ to God. That is the most important and most essential element when it comes to an “active” participation in the liturgy.

And this truth has some further implications that our Holy Father highlights in his Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*. If the proper way to participate in the Mass is to offer our lives and all that we are together with Christ in the Eucharist, this means *that our lives must be worthy of being offered*. We do not offer to God things that are bad, we only offer Him things that are good and worthy of offering. So it is simply impossible to divorce our worship of God on Sunday from the rest of our lives. If the Eucharist is only something we do on Sundays and it has no meaning for the rest of the week, then we obviously can't even celebrate it well on Sundays. In other words, by its very nature *the Eucharist commits us to a whole way of life*. This is a point upon which the Holy Father lays great emphasis in his Apostolic Exhortation: Eucharistic worship commits us to making our whole lives a self-offering to God.

We live in the midst of a secular society that would have us believe that, yes, we are free to do whatever we want on Sunday, but whatever people choose to do on Sunday is a purely private affair, and should be kept private; it should have no bearing on how they live in the midst of the world. And living in the midst of this secular society we will tend to think and shape our lives according to its norms. But obviously this is contrary to what Christianity is all about. In this regard the Holy Father had this to say in one passage of his Exhortation: "Significantly, the Synod Fathers stated that 'the Christian faithful need a fuller understanding of the relationship between the Eucharist and their daily lives. Eucharistic spirituality is not just participation in Mass and devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. It embraces the whole of life.' This observation is particularly insightful, given our situation today. It must be acknowledged that one of the most serious effects of the secularization just mentioned is that it has relegated the Christian faith to the margins of life as if it were irrelevant to everyday affairs. The futility of this way of living — 'as if God did not exist' is now evident to everyone. Today there is a need to rediscover that Jesus Christ is not just a private conviction or an abstract idea, but a real person, whose becoming part of human history is

capable of renewing the life of every man and woman. Hence the Eucharist, as the source and summit of the Church's life and mission, must be translated into spirituality, into a life lived 'according to the Spirit' (Rm. 8:4ff.; cf. Gal. 5:16, 25). It is significant that Saint Paul, in the passage of the Letter to the Romans where he invites his hearers to offer the new spiritual worship, also speaks of the need for a change in their way of living and thinking: 'do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect' (12:2). In this way the Apostle of the Gentiles emphasizes the link between true spiritual worship and the need for a new way of understanding and living one's life. An integral part of the Eucharistic form of the Christian life is a new way of thinking, 'so that we may no longer be children tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine'" (Eph. 4:14).

In this context one is reminded of a teaching that the children of Fatima received from the angel who visited them on several occasions before Our Lady began to appear to them. One of the things the angel taught the children was "to make of everything you do a sacrifice to God". Obviously, the angels understand their theology of the Eucharist very well. This truth also points out the great value and importance of the morning offering prayer. Pope John Paul II once said that the practice of praying the Morning Offering is "of fundamental importance in the life of each and every one of the faithful." There are many different versions of the morning offering. A typical formula goes like this:

O Jesus, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary, I offer You my prayers, works, joys and sufferings of this day for all the intentions of Your Sacred Heart, *in union with the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass offered throughout the world*, in reparation for my sins, in reparation for the sins of the world, for the conversion of poor sinners, and in particular for the intentions of the Holy Father.

That is a wonderful prayer and one that brings out the fundamentally Eucharistic dimension of a Christian's way of life. ✠