

The Eucharist: *What place does 'Sacrifice' have in the Eucharist?*

Closely connected to the word 'Passover' is the word 'Sacrifice.' The question here is: what place does 'sacrifice' have in the Eucharist, and Why do we call it the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass?

Here, the Catechism states: "Because it is the memorial of Christ's Passover, the Eucharist is also a sacrifice. The sacrificial character of the Eucharist is manifested in the very words of institution: "This is my body which is given for you" and "This cup which is poured out for you is the New Covenant in my blood." In the Eucharist Christ gives us the very body which he gave up for us on the cross, the very blood which he "poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." It then goes on to say: "The Eucharist is thus a sacrifice because it re-presents (makes present) the sacrifice of the cross" (CCC 1365).

The sacrifice of Jesus has its roots again in the original Covenant with the people of Israel. Offering sacrifices was an essential part of the Covenant, and it contributed to the response of the people to God's saving action. In the Book of Exodus we read: "Moses ...built at the foot of the mountain an altar and twelve sacred stones for the twelve tribes of Israel. Then, having sent young men of the Israelites to offer burnt offerings and sacrifice young bulls as communion offerings to the Lord, Moses took half of the blood and put it in large bowls; the other half he splashed on the altar. Taking the book of the covenant, he read it aloud to the people, who answered, "All that the Lord has said, we will hear and do." Then he took the blood and splashed it on the people, saying, "This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you according to all these words."

But as part of the unfolding of salvation history, to save humanity from sin, God sends Jesus to fulfill the law and the prophets in such a way that he himself becomes the complete sacrifice, the offering for all eternity, for our redemption. In the mystery of our salvation, we recall that "God so loved the world, that he gave us his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life" (Jn. 3: 16). This is prefigured in the Book of Genesis with the account of Abraham and Isaac. In the drama of that event, Isaac carries wood for the sacrifice but rather than being the offering, the angel says to Abraham, "Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not do the least thing to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you did not withhold from

me your son, your only one” (Gen. 22: 12).

Thus, the new altar for the sacrifice is the cross of Jesus, and Jesus becomes the eternal sacrifice offered for our sins. From the moment of his incarnation, the mission of Jesus was to be a sacrificial offering in love for us. We see this so powerfully in art. The humble stable at Bethlehem was an altar. And from there his life and ministry pointed directly to the gift of his body for us. Look at these two images. Jesus comes in humility, in the stable, ..and offering. Jesus dies for our salvation, ...in humility, ...and offering.

The Letter to the Hebrews gives us a good understanding of this when we read: “For Christ did not enter into a sanctuary made by hands, a copy of the true one, but heaven itself, that he might now appear before God on our behalf. Not that he might offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters each year into the sanctuary with blood that is not his own; if that were so, he would have had to suffer repeatedly from the foundation of the world. But now once for all he has appeared at the end of the ages to take away sin by his sacrifice” (Heb. 9: 24-26).

And so when we celebrate Mass, we enter into the most sacred prayer of **the one, eternal sacrifice of Jesus for our salvation**. He invites us to participate so that we can be transformed, renewed, and enter more deeply into the divine life of God. His sacrifice, then, is a sacrifice of love poured out for us and through which we are saved.

Reflection Questions

What are some connections between the Old Testament practices of sacrifice which we see in the passage of Exodus and the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass?

What would have motivated Jesus to be the eternal sacrifice to save us from our sins?

How have you experienced sacrifice in your own life for those you love?

How can you participate and respond more fully to the gift of salvation which Jesus won for you?

Resources

For additional reading, please see Ecclesia de Eucharistia (the Church from the Eucharist) an encyclical letter written by Pope St. John Paul II

in 2003 on the gift of the Eucharist, that the Church draws her life from the Eucharist. He writes:

When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, the memorial of her Lord's death and resurrection, this central event of salvation becomes really present and "the work of our redemption is carried out". This sacrifice is so decisive for the salvation of the human race that Jesus Christ offered it and returned to the Father only after he had left us a means of sharing in it as if we had been present there. Each member of the faithful can thus take part in it and inexhaustibly gain its fruits.

The Church constantly draws her life from the redeeming sacrifice; she approaches it not only through faith-filled remembrance, but also through a real contact, since this sacrifice is made present ever anew, sacramentally perpetuated, in every community which offers it at the hands of the consecrated minister. The Eucharist thus applies to men and women today the reconciliation won once for all by Christ for mankind in every age. "The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are one single sacrifice". Saint John Chrysostom put it well: "We always offer the same Lamb, not one today and another tomorrow, but always the same one. For this reason the sacrifice is always only one... Even now we offer that victim who was once offered and who will never be consumed".

The Mass makes present the sacrifice of the Cross; it does not add to that sacrifice nor does it multiply it. What is repeated is its memorial celebration, its "commemorative representation" (memorialis demonstratio),¹⁷ which makes Christ's one, definitive redemptive sacrifice always present in time. The sacrificial nature of the Eucharistic mystery cannot therefore be understood as something separate, independent of the Cross or only indirectly referring to the sacrifice of Calvary.