

The Mass

by Sebastian R. Fama

Are Catholics trying to re-sacrifice Jesus when they celebrate the Mass? Some people think so. And this is due in large part to a misunderstanding of just what the Mass is. Part of the misunderstanding stems from the fact that the Mass is often referred to as "The Sacrifice of the Mass." Our accuser's reason, if Jesus was sacrificed on the cross two thousand years ago how can we be sacrificing Him now? After all, doesn't the Bible refer to Christ's sacrifice in singular terms? It sure does, and Catholics do not attempt to re-sacrifice Christ. The sacrifice of the Mass is the "once for all" sacrifice of Jesus.

The New Testament sacrifice (Jesus) was prefigured by the Old Testament sacrifice. And in the Old Testament sacrifice there were two parts; the death of the victim, and the offering up of the fruits by the high priest. The same is true of the New Testament sacrifice. Jesus' death took place at one point in time and it cannot be repeated. Yet, the fruits of His sacrifice must be applied to every believer past, present and future. That is why the book of Revelation continues to portray Jesus as a sacrificial lamb. In fact, it refers to Him in this way 29 times. And that is because as the high priest of the New Covenant, He is continually offering up the fruits of His sacrifice on the cross. We partake of those fruits when we participate in the Mass.

Ironically, some of the most vocal critics of the Mass claim to be "washed by the blood of the Lamb" – blood that was shed two thousand years ago. If you asked them if they were re-sacrificing Jesus they would say "no, we are receiving the benefits of His once for all time sacrifice" (Hebrews 10:12). And so it is with the Mass.

The Mass is obviously a ritual. Many Protestants don't believe in performing rituals. They claim that Christianity, unlike Judaism, is not a religion. They say that it is a relationship with God; therefore, rituals are unnecessary. However, **Christianity is a religion, a religion where believers can have a personal relationship with their God.** In James 1:26-27 we read the following: "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this man's **religion** is vain. **Religion** that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world."

When James calls Christianity a religion, he is commenting on its nature. The Greek word that is translated into "religion" is *threskeia* (θρησκεία). *Threskeia* means ceremonial observance, which is what a ritual is. This is the same word used by Paul to describe Judaism in Acts 26:5. If rituals have no place in Christianity, why does the Word of God refer to it in ritualistic terms? Of course, Christianity is more than just a bunch of rituals. When we are open to the grace that is received at Mass and in the sacraments, we are enabled to be the people that God wants us to be.

Malachi 1:11 speaks prophetically of the Mass: "From the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place, incense is offered to my name, and **a pure offering**, for my name is great **among the nations**, says the Lord of hosts." The sacrifice spoken of is not the Judaic sacrifice. The passage refers to a pure sacrifice that will take place everywhere among the nations (Gentiles). This makes perfect sense as we are living in "the times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24).

Psalms 110 [109] provides even more detail. Verse 4 reads, "The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind, 'You [Jesus] are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.'" In Genesis 14:18 Melchizedek offered a sacrifice of bread and wine. So, Psalm 110 is a prediction that Jesus would offer a perpetual sacrifice involving bread and wine. He does this at the Last Supper and commands that His apostles do the same. Consequently, the Sacrifice of the Mass involves the offering of bread and wine (not grape juice).

The early Church understood the Mass to be a true sacrifice. Clement, the fourth bishop of Rome, wrote in the year 95 A.D., "Our sin will not be small if we eject from the episcopate those who blamelessly and holily have offered its **sacrifices**" (1 Clement 44:4). A few years later in the year 110 A.D., Ignatius of Antioch said the following: "Make certain, therefore, that you all observe one common Eucharist, for there is but one body of our Lord Jesus Christ,

and but one cup of union with His blood, and one single altar of **sacrifice**, even as there is also but one bishop, with his clergy and my own fellow servitors, the deacons" (*Letter to the Philadelphians No. 4*)

A close examination of the Mass reveals that it is saturated with Scripture. From the greeting to the dismissal, we find verse after verse drawing us deeper into the Word of God. One of many examples is "*The Gloria.*"

Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth (cf. Lk. 2:14). Lord God, heavenly King, almighty God and Father, (Rev. 19:6) we worship you (Rev. 22:9), we give you thanks (Eph. 5:20), we praise you for your glory (Rev. 7:12). Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father (2 Jn. 3), Lord God, Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world: have mercy on us (cf. Jn. 1:29); you are seated at the right hand of the Father: receive our prayer (Rom. 8:34). For you alone are the Holy One (cf. Lk. 4:34), you alone are the Lord (Rev. 15:4), you alone are the most High, Jesus Christ (Lk. 1:32), with the Holy Spirit, in the glory of God the Father. Amen (cf. Jn. 14:26).

There are two parts to the Mass. The liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. During the Liturgy of the Word there are three Scripture readings. One from the Old Testament, one from the epistles or New Testament letters, and one from the Gospels. The three readings are usually connected in some way. This shows us how Scripture works together as a whole.

The Church also has three liturgical cycles. Each of these cycles lasts a year. Each cycle features a different set of readings from the Bible. At the end of the three years Catholics have heard the vast majority of the Bible read and preached upon. This is done so that Catholics will have a balanced and accurate view of what is taught by the Scriptures.

In the Liturgy of the Eucharist, we partake of the Lords Supper. Some are opposed to the Mass because of the Catholic belief that the bread and the wine become the body and blood of Jesus. I address this issue in detail in another essay (The Eucharist). However, to touch on it briefly; Are we wrong to say what Jesus said? Are we wrong to do what He commanded us to do? That it boggles the natural mind is irrelevant. Speaking the universe into existence boggles the natural mind. But we know from the word of God that it happened. God always accomplishes what He says He will. Another example is when He said He would raise His own dead body (John 2:19). As He says in the book of Isaiah: "So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, **achieving the end for which I sent it**" (Isaiah 55:11). That wouldn't just refer to some of what God says but to all of it. As Jesus Himself said: "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, **but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God**'" (Matthew 4:4).

So, when Jesus says that He will raise his own dead body it happens. Likewise, when He says at the Last Supper that the Bread and the wine have become that same body, it happens. And of course, it only stands to reason that when we do likewise, as He commanded, it happens again. Manipulating the Word of God to appeal to the natural mind serves no useful purpose: "For we walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). The Last Supper was the first Mass. That was the belief of the Early Church and that is the belief of the Catholic Church.

But some will say, "I do not get anything out of the Mass." To the uninformed person, a candy bar seems more exciting than a million-dollar check. The colorful wrapper is certainly more pleasing to the eye, and you have a piece of candy inside. How can a plain piece of paper with handwriting on it compete with that? To the uninformed, the Mass may be viewed similarly. If you do not know what it is all about you are not going to understand its importance and you are not going to be open to what it has to offer. Thus, you will not get anything out of it.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church wisely points out that our Yes to Jesus Christ is twofold: "A trustful abandonment to God and a loving assent to all that he has revealed to us. This is possible only by means of the action of the Holy Spirit" (Nos. 150,176). If you are one of those who "does not get anything out of the Mass," learn more about it and pray for the grace to be open to all that it has to offer. It will change your life.