

The Early Church Fathers on The Mass

The Early Church Fathers believed and taught that the Mass was a true sacrifice. It was not a new sacrifice but a participation in the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross. They understood that there are two parts to a sacrifice, the slaying of the victim and the offering up of the fruits. When we celebrate the Mass, we participate in the second part. Such a sacrifice was foretold in the Old Testament. In Malachi 1:11 we read: "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 (Jesus) that will take place everywhere among the nations (Gentiles). The sacrifice of the Mass is the sacrifice which takes place everywhere among the nations.

The Didache

Assemble on the Lord's Day, and break bread and offer the Eucharist: but first make confession of your faults, so that your sacrifice may be a pure one. Anyone who has a difference with his fellow is not to take part with you until he has been reconciled, so as to avoid any profanation of your sacrifice [Matt. 5:23—24]. For this is the offering of which the Lord has said, "Everywhere and always bring me a sacrifice that is undefiled, for I am a great king, says the Lord, and my name is the wonder of nations" [Mal. 1:11, 14] (*Didache* 14 [A.D. 70]).

Clement of Rome

Our sin will not be small if we eject from the episcopate those who blamelessly and holily have offered its sacrifices. Blessed are those presbyters who have already finished their course, and who have obtained a fruitful and perfect release (*Letter to the Corinthians* 44:4-5 [A.D. 95]).

Ignatius of Antioch

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. This will ensure that all your doings are in full accord with the will of God (*Letter to the Philadelphians* 4 [A.D. 110]).

Justin Martyr

God speaks by the mouth of Malachi, one of the twelve [minor prophets], as I said before, about the sacrifices at that time presented by you: "I have no pleasure in you, says the Lord, and I will not accept your sacrifices at your hands; for from the rising of the sun to the going down of the same, my name has been glorified among the Gentiles, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering, for my name is great among the Gentiles" [Mal. 1:10-11]. He then speaks of those Gentiles, namely us [Christians] who in every place offer sacrifices to him, that is, the bread of the Eucharist and also the cup of the Eucharist (*Dialogue with Trypho* 41 [A.D. 155]).

Irenaeus

He took from among creation that which is bread, and gave thanks, saying, "This is my body." The cup likewise, which is from among the creation to which we belong, he confessed to be his blood. He taught the new sacrifice of the new covenant, of which Malachi, one of the twelve [minor] prophets, had signified beforehand: "You do not do my will, says the Lord Almighty, and I will not accept a sacrifice at your hands. For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is glorified among the Gentiles, and in every place, incense is offered to my name, and a pure sacrifice; for great is my name among the Gentiles, says the Lord" [Mal. 1:10-11]. By these words he makes it plain that the former people will cease to make offerings to God but that in every place sacrifice will be offered to him, and indeed, a pure one, for his name is glorified among the Gentiles (*Against Heresies* 4:17:5 [A.D. 189]).

Hippolytus

"And she [Wisdom] has furnished her table" [Prov. 9:2] . . . refers to his [Christ's] honored and undefiled body and blood, which day by day are administered and offered sacrificially at the spiritual divine table, as a memorial of that first and ever-memorable table of the spiritual divine supper (*Extant Works and Fragments* [circa A.D. 225]).

Cyprian

If Christ Jesus, our Lord and God, is himself the high priest of God the Father; and if he offered himself as a sacrifice to the Father; and if he commanded that this be done in commemoration of himself, then certainly the priest, who imitates that which Christ did, truly functions in place of Christ (Letters 63:14 [A.D. 253]).

Serapion

"Holy, holy, holy Lord Sabaoth, heaven and earth is full of your glory." Heaven is full, and full is the earth, with your magnificent glory, Lord of virtues. Full also is this sacrifice, with your strength and your communion; for to you we offer this living sacrifice, this unbloody oblation (*Prayer of the Eucharistic Sacrifice* 13:12-16 [A.D. 350]).

Cyril of Jerusalem

Then, having sanctified ourselves by these spiritual hymns, we beseech the merciful God to send forth his Holy Spirit upon the gifts lying before him, that he may make the bread the body of Christ and the wine the blood of Christ, for whatsoever the Holy Spirit has touched is surely sanctified and changed. Then, upon the completion of the spiritual sacrifice, the bloodless worship, over that propitiatory victim we call upon God for the common peace of the churches, for the welfare of the world, for kings, for soldiers and allies, for the sick, for the afflicted; and in summary, we all pray and offer this sacrifice for all who are in need (*Catechetical Lectures* 23:7-8 [A.D. 350]).

Ambrose of Milan

We saw the prince of priests coming to us, we saw and heard him offering his blood for us. We follow, inasmuch as we are able, being priests, and we offer the sacrifice on behalf of the people. Even if we are of but little merit, still, in the sacrifice, we are honorable. Even if Christ is not now seen as the one who offers the sacrifice, nevertheless it is he himself that is offered in sacrifice here on earth when the body of Christ is offered. Indeed, to offer himself he is made visible in us, he whose word makes holy the sacrifice that is offered (*Commentaries on twelve Psalms of David* 38:25 [A.D. 389]).

John Chrysostom

On the Preparation, on the Sabbath, on the Lord's Day, and on the day of Martyrs, it is the same Sacrifice that is performed. "For as often," he saith, "as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death." (1 Cor. xi. 26.) No time is limited for the performance of this Sacrifice, why then is it then called the Paschal feast? Because Christ suffered for us then. Let not the time, therefore, make any difference in your approach. There is at all times the same power, the same dignity, the same grace, one and the same body; nor is one celebration of it more or less holy than another (*Homily 5 on First Timothy* [A.D. 390]).

Apostolic Constitutions

You, therefore, O bishops, are to your people priests and Levites, ministering to the holy tabernacle, the holy Catholic Church; who stand at the altar of the Lord your God, and offer to Him reasonable and unbloody sacrifices through Jesus the great High Priest (2:25 [A.D. 400]).

Augustine

Christ is both the priest, offering Himself, and Himself the victim. He willed that the sacramental sign of this should be the daily sacrifice of the Church, who, since the Church is His body and He the head, learns to offer herself through Him (*The City of God* 10:20 [A.D. 413-426]).