

The Eucharist as Sacrifice

How often do we use the word “sacrifice” to mean something we “offer up” or “do” for ourselves or someone else? The word “sacrifice” often has connotations of self-deprivation, inconvenience, or even suffering. Some examples of sacrifices are when parents lose sleep to care for a sick child, or spouses mutually cooperate to build a life together. Everyone makes financial sacrifices to ensure a more secure life in the future. During Lent, we sacrifice food to share it with those who would otherwise go hungry. Sometimes someone sacrifices a kidney so their loved one can live. The word sacrifice conveys many meanings; however, at the root of each of these examples is love.

The Eucharist is a Real Sacrifice. During the Eucharistic Prayer, the priest says the words of Jesus at the Last Supper over the gifts of bread and wine: “This is my Body, which will be given up for you,” and “This is the chalice of my Blood ... which will be poured out ...” These words point forward to the death that Jesus would die for us on the Cross, making the Last Supper a sacrificial meal.

The sacrifice of the Mass is not a reenactment, imitation or a dramatization of the Last Supper; rather, the Catechism of the Catholic Church says it “makes present the one sacrifice of Christ.” Scripture tells us that Jesus Christ “entered **once for all** into the sanctuary ... with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.” (Hebrews 9:12) The historical sacrifice of Christ on the Cross is not repeated, but instead, the sacrifice of the Mass is a memorial in which Christ’s sacrifice is sacramentally present.

The Eucharist as sacrifice has another dimension. After the gifts of bread and wine have been presented by the assembly and placed on the altar, the priest invites us to pray in these words: “Pray, brothers and sisters, that my sacrifice **and yours** may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father.” The privilege of participating in the Eucharist is that we take part in what we enact. God’s Love for us, manifested in the Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, begs a response from us: love in response to love; sacrifice in response to sacrifice. When we participate in Mass, we offer God our thoughts, prayers, words, deeds, trust, service and charity — our very lives and everything that we are — and we pray that we may be transformed and so be gathered into one in the unity of the Body of Christ. As St. Paul says in his letter to the Romans, “by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” (12:1) Eucharistic Prayer IV explicitly asks that God’s people “may truly become a living sacrifice in Christ.”

The Eucharist is a Real Sacrifice — it is Christ’s once-for-all, loving sacrifice for us. It is also our sacrifice — the loving surrender of our wills and our lives to God. When we receive Holy Communion, we are strengthened by Christ’s Real Presence so that we can do the Father’s will. The Mass, which perpetuates the unbloody sacrifice of Christ, strengthens us to live the sacrifices which the Christian life demands.