

## INTRODUCTION –The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass as source and summit

When I was asked many months ago if I would give this talk at the *Adoremus* Conference I decided that I would share with you some insights that mean a great deal to me about the Sacrifice of the Mass and about the role of the laity in the Sacrifice, particularly through the Offertory of the Mass. They are ideas that I owe especially to my brother, Fr Michael McGuckian SJ. He wrote a book called *The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass*, and it has brought me to a deeper love for the Eucharist and it is my hope that each of us here today will be brought to a deeper appreciation of mystery of the sacrifice.

Have you heard this phrase from the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

The Eucharist is the “source and summit of the Christian life.”

This phrase comes from *Lumen Gentium* (the light of the nations) a document from the second vatican council. The phrase “the source and summit of Christian life” is a sound bite from the document – let’s look at it in its fullness.

‘Taking part in the Eucharistic sacrifice, which is the source and summit of the whole Christian life, the Faithful offer the Divine Victim to God, and offer themselves along with It.’

**Taking part in the Eucharistic sacrifice ... the Faithful offer the Divine Victim to God, and offer themselves along with It.** That is the source and summit of the Christian Life.

Often, we can think that the Mass is a sacrifice only because it is the sacramental commemoration of the Sacrifice of Jesus. In fact every Mass that we celebrate is a sacrifice in and of itself.

Do we have a sense that every time we go to Mass we are offering a sacrifice, offering the Divine Victim? that we are offering ourselves, and that together we are taking part in a sacrifice?

Sometimes too the Church’s language can suggest that it is the priest alone who offers the sacrifice and that the laity simply unite themselves to his sacrifice. I want to contend strongly that everyone offers sacrifice, priest, deacon and lay person, each in his/her own unique way.

The sacrifice that we make is then taken up into the Great Sacrifice of Jesus. Our faltering efforts to offer ourselves are raised up into his great Offering.

Because no one around us ever talks about offering sacrifice anymore it can seem alien and exotic, but from the beginning of time human beings have offered sacrifice because they wanted to be at peace with God. At there best they achieved that by giving themselves totally to God through their sacrifice. This too is our call, the source and summit of our Christian life.

## SACRIFICE IS GIVING, NOT GIVING UP

Before talking about what we DO when we offer sacrifice it is important for us to consider how we think about sacrifice.

In our modern mind set, and it infects our religious thinking as well, sacrifice is giving up something good, that you like **for** some purpose. We give up food and drink for the sake of our health or our figure. Sports people sacrifice their time even their relationships for the goal of beating the record, winning the cup. In Lent we sacrifice things for the good of our souls. Sacrifice is always of something, for some purpose. It is never **to** someone.

This is the very opposite of what sacrifice meant in all the ancient religions. Sacrifice never connoted reluctance or deprivation or inevitability grimly accepted. They were occasions of the greatest joy, festivity and thanksgiving. Sacrifices were always as large as possible; the larger they could be made, the greater would be the accompanying joy and festivity. They were offered by people **to** their gods; a sacrifice not offered **to** a god was inconceivable. The stress was upon the joyful giving and not upon the giving up.

While they were offered to procure blessings from the gods, they were frequently offered after the blessing had been received, and as expressions of thanksgiving.

The ancient joyful sacrifice always culminated in a sacred meal shared with God. Listen to the Lord speaking to the people of Israel in Deuteronomy

“But you are to seek the place the Lord your God will choose ... for his dwelling. To that place you must go; there ...bring your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, what you have vowed to give and your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. There, in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the Lord your God has blessed you.” (Deut. 12:4-7)

In the Jewish understanding what was sacrificed was always something that could be eaten, not just something valuable. All sacrifice is a Meal in the presence of God.

## ONE ACT vs THREE ACT

When you think about sacrifice – what picture do you have in your mind? Is it of someone with arm raised about to .... sacrifice an animal?

(Apocolypto – Mel Gibson film)

Slaughter of animals

Our problem is that we have only one way of thinking about what a sacrifice is. We can call this the **one-act notion** of sacrifice. In it there is a priest and a victim and the destruction of the victim by the priest captures the essence of sacrifice.

This does not do justice to the reality and richness of sacrifice, and it is not helpful for us thinking about the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. I want to introduce you to a three-act understanding of sacrifice. It is seen best in the Communion Sacrifice in the Book of Leviticus

## ACT ONE

Come back with me to ancient Israel around the year zero on a given day when there are going to be sacrifices in the temple.

How does a temple sacrifice begin? A farmer and his family have had a good year, and they want to give glory and thanks to God. So, they take the finest lamb from their herd or a selection of the best produce from their fields and vineyard and they head up to Jerusalem to the temple. The wealthy family are on their way into the Temple precincts with the offerings. Around the same time there is a poor couple arriving and the woman has a baby in her arms. They had gone to the sellers in Jerusalem and bought a pair of doves or two young pigeons, as the law required for those who couldn't afford a lamb. They probably got in line behind the wealthy couple. (The poor couples name was Mary and Joseph.)

Both families brought their offerings to the priest in the temple whose role was to perform the necessary rites as laid down in the book of Leviticus.

This is a really important question: Whose sacrifice is this? Who is making the offering? In the first case it was the farmer and his family. It was Joseph and Mary who were offering their sacrifice.

We see in the Book of Leviticus that the individual who was offering the sacrifice had a distinct role to play. The process began when they prepared their offering. In the case of a cereal offering they prepared it by mixing it with olive oil or incense. Then they handed it to the priest. If the offering was an animal, the Offeror was the one who laid his hands on the animal and killed it before giving the blood to priest. (Lev. 1:4). This was the first act in the process of sacrifice; let us call it the Offertory because the word used to describe the action is 'to offer', in Greek *prosperein*.

**SECOND ACT** In the second act, the priest, having received the gifts prepared by the People then enters into the Sanctuary and performs the rituals laid down for him as mediator. The People do not go into the sanctuary but wait outside praying as the has been released and pours some of it on the sides of the altar. If it is a cereal offering, the priest takes some of it and burns it on the altar.)

### **THIRD ACT**

The third act is a sacred meal. In the case of animal sacrifice some parts of the animal are consumed by fire on the altar; this is God's part. In the case of a sin offering the priest then consumes his share of the meal. In a Communion Sacrifice the offeror and his guests also participate in the meal.

Sacrifice is not one act performed by a priest. It has three steps.

Most importantly it begins with the laity and unfolds in three steps.

1. The people make their offering
2. The priest performs the ritual proper to himself
3. Together there is a sacred meal

In light of these three acts – necessary for a true sacrifice – how then do we understand the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass?

The three distinct acts in the Mass correspond to

1. The Offertory
2. The Eucharistic Prayer
3. Holy Communion

## The First Act - The Offertory of the Mass

From the earliest times, as Christians gathered for the Eucharist in answer to the Lord's command at the Last supper they were clear that they were offering sacrifice. Everyone brought bread and wine and other gifts in kind, for the upkeep of the community and the poor. Let me quote from the Didache a document written probably around the same time as Matthew's Gospel. "On the Lord's Day assemble in common to break bread and offer thanks: but first confess your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure; however, no one quarrelling with his brother may join your meeting until they have been reconciled; your sacrifice must not be defiled."

We hear a really interesting thing from St Justin some time before 150AD. He tells us explicitly that the kiss of peace takes place before the gifts of bread and wine are offered. This is a clear reference to Matthew 5:23,24. "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift." Everyone was involved in an act of 'offering' and so they had to declare that they were at peace with their brothers and sisters before making their offering.

The importance of offering sacrifice was so strong in the mind of the early Christians that it was considered to be the great privilege of the baptised. Nowadays we will say that someone who is not yet baptised cannot receive Holy Communion. In the early church they said someone who is not yet baptised cannot offer the sacrifice. Now, of course offering the sacrifice also included receiving Holy Communion.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist was referred to as the 'Holy Offering'. It is very interesting in this regard that the Gaelic word for the Mass is '*Aifreann*', and in Welsh it is '*Offeren*'; both clearly from '*offerenda*' meaning the things which are to be offered.

We have to listen with new ears to the words of the priest:

*Pray my brothers and sisters that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God the Father almighty.*

*And the words of the people:*

*May the Lord accept the sacrifice from your hands, to the praise and Glory of His name for our good and the good of all his holy church.*

The principal contribution of the lay faithful to the liturgy was in the Offertory. I invite you to think back to an early liturgy.

Keep the picture of the community gathering before your mind and remember that those early Christians were used to trade in kind and the gifts they were bringing, especially the bread were the work of the own hands; the bread was baked in their own ovens. Those people were giving something of their own substance, something fundamental to who they were. They clearly understood themselves to be offering their sacrifice, in bread and wine. Some early theologians linked this to the bread and wine offered by the High Priest Melchizedech.

The people were active participants in a sacrifice, offering their gifts as symbolic of the offering of their lives to God. And not alone do the gifts of bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ, but the accompanying gifts in kind become the sustenance of the Church, her ministers and her poor. In the offering of these gifts each member of the congregation

expressed concretely his intention of taking an active part in the sacrifice, and of making an offering of his or her very self.

In some places in the first millennium every single person brought his or her gift to the altar at the offertory. Elsewhere, they left them in the sacristy or on a special table and they were carried forward by the deacon at the Offertory.

One scholar tells us that up until the 11<sup>th</sup> century the church reinforced in synod after synod the obligation to take part in the offertory procession.

The really important point here is that what was being offered, the sacrifice, was the people's sacrifice, not the priest's, certainly not exclusively the priests. In early documents it was made clear that the priest or the bishop also brought their personal gifts of bread and wine which were brought forward with everybody else's.

I want you to picture the various kinds of Offertory Procession. When it was a case of every individual coming forward with his or her gift there were prayers that they could say. One records simply: 'Here is this spotless host, which I thy unworthy servant offer unto thee.' There were collections of such prayers, some giving words for the intentions of the individual, others insisting on the unworthiness of the sinner who is going to assist at the mystery etc.

On the other hand, where it became the settled practice that the offerings of bread and wine were carried through the nave of the church to the sanctuary by the deacon, it was called the Great Entrance; it is known as such and practised in the Byzantine Liturgy to this day. The procession is led by torches and incense; the choir sings the *Cherubikon*, one of the great hymns of the Eastern liturgy and the people prostrate in adoration. "The marks of veneration given to the gifts suggest a procession of the Blessed Sacrament. It is as if the people understood that when the sacrifice begins, Jesus is present even before the Consecration of the gifts.

Another image, from Africa today. A few years ago I attended Mass in a rural mission church in Zambia. The church was packed and at the Offertory everybody stood up and came forward in procession. With music playing and everyone singing people moved in the form of a dance; three steps forward and one step back. When they reached the sanctuary, some were carrying foodstuffs and other gifts but every single person at least dropped a small coin into a basket. This reminded me of the Widow's mite which made such an impression on Jesus. In pride of place was the offering of bread and wine.

### **The second act – priestly mediation**

The second act – the Priestly Mediation is the Eucharistic Prayer, in which the priest in obedience to the command of Jesus takes the bread and wine offered and prays over them as Jesus did at the Last Supper.

Take this all of you and eat of it, for this is my body, which is given up for you.

Take this all of you and drink from it, for this is the chalice of my blood, the blood of the new and eternal covenant which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in memory of me.

The priest in the OT entered the sanctuary for the priestly mediation.

### **The third act – a meal in the presence of God**

The third act of every OT sacrifice is a meal in the presence of God.

In the New Testament, the Meal is the Body and Blood of Christ, God himself, he who said; ‘Anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has life in me.’

Holy Communion is the Third act of the Sacrifice.

We receive back the gifts that we have given but they have been transformed...

A proper sacrifice involves all three of these acts. The offertory is an integral part of the sacrifice and is the place where the active participation of the laity is most vividly present. Why?

Just as we talk of the bread and wine becoming the body and blood of Christ we can say that our simple sacrifice of bread and wine that we offer at every Mass becomes the great sacrifice of Jesus.

## THE GREAT SACRIFICE OF JESUS

### Did the sacrifice of Jesus correspond to 3 acts?

Since every sacrifice evolves in three acts – let us now apply the three-acts to the great sacrifice of Jesus. I am not saying the sacrifice of the cross because the great sacrifice of Jesus did not end with death on the cross. And the three-act model brings this out beautifully.

#### **The First Act**

Who offers Jesus up to death? Who hands Jesus over? The 'handing over' of Jesus in the passion accounts is very important. The Father handed him over, Jesus handed himself over, Judas handed him over to the chief priests, the chief priests handed him over to Pilate, and Pilate handed him over to the soldiers to kill him. The Christians, Judas, the Jews, the chief priests, and the Gentiles, Pilate and his soldiers did the deed, so everyone is involved. (We should see ourselves as involved in handing him over; he died because of our sins; we say in one of the Acts of Contrition for the Sacrament of Reconciliation, I am sorry for my sins 'because they ones who are offering the sacrifice.

**The second act** of a sacrifice is the priestly mediation. Jesus is certainly the priest, and the priestly mediation takes place, not on the cross, but in heaven. The Letter to the Hebrews tells us so:

*For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. (Hebrews 9:24)*

*Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest (Jesus) had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. ... Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings.*

This is why it is incomplete for us to speak of the Sacrifice of the cross for the sacrifice does not end with death on the cross; it ends in glory.



**The third act** in a sacrifice is the Meal. The Meal in the Great Sacrifice of Jesus is of course the Messianic banquet in Heaven which Isaiah foretold when he said:

**“On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine.”** (Is. 25:6)

During Mass we are in Heaven because we are present at the great sacrifice of Jesus.

In every Mass we are really present to Jesus in His Great Sacrifice:

The Offering:                On Calvary Jesus is handed over and we are there.

The Priestly Mediation:        In Heaven Jesus intercedes for us, giving glory to his Father and we are there.

As the angels are singing ‘Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts. Heaven and earth are full of your glory.’ we join our voices with theirs – we are there.

The Meal:            In Holy Communion Jesus hosts the Messianic Banquet with the Angels and Saints that will last forever – we are all already there.

## CONCLUSION

‘Taking part in the Eucharistic sacrifice, which is the source and summit of the whole Christian life, the Faithful offer the Divine Victim to God, and offer themselves along with It.’

Each time we attend Mass, we are called to bring our own lives—our joys, sorrows, successes, and failures—and lay them on the altar under the symbols of bread and wine.

We are not passive observers; we are active participants in an act of Sacrifice. Our sacrifice, which we celebrate weekly, daily, is taken up into the One Eternal Sacrifice of Jesus. At every Mass, we stand at the foot of the Cross on Calvary, join in the eternal praise of Heaven, and partake in the Messianic Banquet. The priest may stand at the altar, but each one of us, by virtue of our baptism, has a vital role in offering the sacrifice.

I invite the Priests to consider, in line with the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, that in the Offertory Procession there is a visible sign of the whole Church offering itself to God.

When I celebrate even with a very small congregation without a formal server, I feel it is important that someone brings the bread and wine and hands them to me. In every Mass it is the entire church that makes the offering through the mediation of the priest. I am a better Priest when I acknowledge at each mass my role and privilege in receiving the offering from the people whom God has called me to serve.

Let us all remember that the great privilege of the baptised is to offer the sacrifice of the new covenant to God. In the bread and wine we have the opportunity to make our offering of ourselves. Let us approach the Mass with this spirit of offering, knowing that through it, we are drawn into the heart of the mystery of our salvation and transformed by it. The Mass is not just something we attend; it is something we live.

St Ignatius Loyola gives us words that capture the total gift of self to God as the climax of his Spiritual Exercises.

“Take Lord and receive all my liberty, my memory, understanding, my entire will, all that I have and possess. You have given all to me; now I return it. All is yours; dispose of it entirely according to your will. Give me only your love and your grace; this is sufficient for me.” (*Sp Ex* 234)