

# The Meaning of the Mass:

## Making Present the Sacrifice of Calvary

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When cavemen saw the lightning and wondered how a tree could be split in two by a streak of light, they did not understand it and called it god. When the Egyptians wondered why the Nile overflowed its banks every year to provide fertile soil in a desert environment, they called it god. When 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans wonder how information can flow almost instantaneously from one computer to the next, they call it technology. That is if they even wonder at all. We are bombarded by so many amazing things that were unknown to our grandparents, cell phones, microwaves, open heart surgery, that we suffer from technology overload. We have lost our sense of awe and wonder. We have lost our need to use God as an explanation for the mysteries of life. Yet, if we accept the fact that the all-powerful God became a weak man so that He could show us how much He loves us. If we accept the fact that God loves each one of us individually. Then we must also accept the fact that God wants to unite himself to us in His Body and Blood Soul and Divinity in the Holy Eucharist. As Cardinal Basil Hume wrote we need to recapture our devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and ( *The Mystery of the Incarnation p. 118*) “We will not do it by making it consciously cheerful, or by eccentric celebrations. We will do it by going deeper into its meaning. That is the secret.” Pope John Paul II wrote a wonderful encyclical on the Eucharist entitled, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, in which he desired to “rekindle this Eucharistic ‘amazement.’” (para.6) The “full and active participation” of the laity is much misunderstood phrase coming out of the Second Vatican Council. We read in paragraph 14 of the Council Document on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, “full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else . . . and therefore pastors of souls must zealously strive to achieve it, by means of the necessary instruction, in all their pastoral work.” Full and active

participation is to be achieved, according to the Council document, itself, by “necessary instruction.” The true meaning of this phrase was clarified by Pope John Paul II. In paragraph 40 of *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, stating that “it does not follow that everyone must necessarily have something concrete to do beyond the actions and gestures. . . . Instead catechetical instruction should strive diligently to correct widespread superficial notions and practices often seen in recent years. . . .” I once heard a talk by this Irish sister, Sr. Breege McKenna. She told the story of how when people would come up to her and say, “You know Sr. Breege, I don’t get much out of Mass any more.” Her response was, “What do you mean you don’t get anything out of Mass? You get salvation!” If Catholics really knew what went on at Mass they could never say that is was boring again. In an era of music videos and sound-bites and the desire to be entertained, we have tended to look at the Mass as something that should entertain us. Even the statement, “I don’t get anything out of Mass” reflects a self-centered and egoistic attitude that the world must revolve around me. I get annoyed when people refer to the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass as a service. “What time is the service, Father?” “That was a lovely service, Father.” If the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is a service well then, yes, I am celebrating Mass to win your approval because you are putting money in the collection basket. If the Mass is something I am doing to please you, well than, you should get what you want out of it. If you don’t like it, return it; or go somewhere where they will give you what you want. Anyone who thinks this way should read *The Lamb’s Supper* by Scott Hahn where he explains that The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is heaven come down to earth. Dr. Hahn writes (p. 5) “Yes, I insist that we *do* go to heaven when we go to Mass, and this is true of *every* Mass we attend, regardless of the quality of the music or the fervor of the preaching.” We cannot understand Dr. Hahn’s book unless we follow the advice Pope John Paul II has written in his wonderful encyclical on the Church of the Eucharist. John Paul the Great writes, “In various parts of the Church abuses have occurred, leading to confusion with regard to sound faith and Catholic doctrine concerning this wonderful sacrament. At times one encounters an extremely reductive understanding of the Eucharistic mystery. Stripped of its sacrificial meaning, it is celebrated as if it were simply a fraternal banquet. Furthermore, the necessity of the ministerial priesthood, grounded in apostolic succession, is at times obscured and the sacramental nature of the Eucharist is reduced to its mere effectiveness as a form of proclamation.” (para. 10) When people say that the Mass is boring, sometimes they decide to try and enliven it with computer screens and modern music, glitzy Hollywood style entertainment features. Some try to change the words. But attending Mass is about ritual.

Everybody has rituals. The Boys Scouts have rituals, families have Christmas or Easter rituals. Rituals help to mark the center as the center and that this is important. As Dr. Hahn writes, (p.41) "Routines free us from the need to ponder small details over and over again." So what do these rituals of the Mass mean? Before we can understand the meaning of the Mass we have to understand the Jewish religious context in which Jesus lived and taught. The chosen people, as the Israelites, saw themselves, had their origin in the covenant that God made with Abraham. God had promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nations and that the fulfillment of this promise would come through his son, Isaac. But now the Lord was calling Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. If Abraham killed Isaac, how could he be the father of many nations? But, Abraham trusted in the Lord. The early Christian commentators on the Bible, saw in Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, a belief in the resurrection of the dead. If God was asking Abraham to sacrifice his only son, then surely God must have a way to raise Isaac from the dead in order to fulfill the promise to be a father to many nations. We read in the Book of Genesis, "Abraham took the wood for the sacrifice and laid it upon the back of Isaac, his son: and he himself carried in his hands fire and a sword. And as the two went on together, Isaac said to his father: "My father" And Abraham answered: "Yes, my son?" Isaac said, "Here are the fire and wood but where is the victim for the sacrifice. And Abraham said: "God will provide himself a victim for a sacrifice my son." Genesis 22:6-8 One can see clearly how Isaac prefigures Jesus Christ, for not only is he the only son of his father by Sarah, Isaac carried the wood for the sacrifice on his own shoulders as Jesus carried the Cross on His. Isaac, the only beloved son, is to be sacrificed to God. When Isaac asks "Where is the sacrifice?", Abraham fittingly prophesies that God, Himself, will provide the sacrifice or it can be read that God will provide Himself as the sacrifice --meaning Jesus, the Son of God. The angel stops Abraham from the actual sacrifice of Isaac and supplies instead a ram as a substitute for Isaac. The lamb then becomes the central figure in the story of the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt. We read in the book of Exodus that "The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt ...Speak to the whole assembly of the children of Israel, and say to them: On the tenth day of this month let every man by their families and houses take a lamb ...And it shall be a lamb without blemish, a male, of one year...and the whole multitude of the children of Israel shall sacrifice it in the evening. And they shall take its blood, and put it upon both the side posts, and on the upper door posts of the houses, where they shall eat it. And they shall eat the flesh that night roasted at the fire, with unleavened bread and wild lettuce...And I will pass through the land of Egypt that night and will kill every

firstborn in the land of Egypt both man and beast...And the blood shall be a sign of the houses where you shall be: and I shall see the blood, and shall pass over you: and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I shall strike the land of Egypt. And this day shall be for you a memorial: and you shall keep it a feast to the Lord in your generations with an everlasting observance.” Exodus 12: 1, 3, 5-8, 12-14. Through this Passover sacrifice of the lamb and eating his flesh, the Jews were saved from death not only by the blood of the lamb but they also had to eat his flesh in order to be saved from the Angel of Death. St Paul in writing to the Corinthians tells them to “Purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new batch of dough, as you are unleavened. For Christ our paschal lamb is sacrificed.” 1 Cor 5:17. When John the Baptist saw Jesus, John exclaimed, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” The Jewish people listening to John the Baptist would have had some idea of what that meant. Do we have any idea of what it means when John called Jesus, “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” We say it every time we celebrate Mass. When we pray the Gloria we pray “Lord God, Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us.” After the sign of peace, we pray “Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.” Before we receive Holy Communion, the priest says, “This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” What does it mean to call Jesus, “Lamb of God?” Why don’t we call Jesus “the pig of God” or the “cow of God?” What would it have meant to a first century Jew to hear John the Baptist call Jesus, “Lamb of God?” Lambs held a special place in Jewish religious rituals. Among the many other sacrifices that the Israelites were commanded to offer to God we read in Exodus 29:38-40 the following command. “This is what you shall sacrifice upon the altar: Two lambs of a year old every day continually. One lamb in the morning and another in the evening. With one lamb, a tenth part of flour tempered with beaten oil, and the fourth part of a hin of wine for libation of the same measure.” Now, flour mixed with oil makes bread which is offered everyday with wine along with the Lamb of God. Daily offering of bread and wine and the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, now takes place everyday, except for Good Friday, at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Jesus is the perfect Lamb of God, a male unblemished by sin with no broken bones, who was sacrificed for our sins. His one, complete, and definitive sacrifice as both priest and victim ended the need for the continual sacrifices taking place in the Temple of Jerusalem. The Book of Hebrews gives us rich insight into how Jesus fulfilled the Jewish rituals sacrifices. We read in the Book of Hebrews 9:12-14 “Not by the blood of goats, or of calves, but by His own blood, He entered once into the Holy of Holies, having obtained eternal

redemption. For if the blood of goats and oxen, and the sprinkling of a heifer's ashes, can sanctify such as are defiled, for the cleansing of the flesh: How much more shall the blood of Christ, who by the Holy Spirit offered Himself unspotted unto God, cleanse our conscience from dead works, to serve the living God.” The Holy of Holies was the most sacred part of the Jewish Temple. Only once a year on the Day of Atonement, and only the High Priest, could go behind the veil that separated the holy place from the Holy of Holies which contained the Ark of the Covenant, and offer sacrifice to God by sprinkling blood upon the Ark of the Covenant. But Jesus was not only the Lamb of God, He was also the Great High Priest who offered himself as both priest and victim as the perfect unblemished sacrifice to God. As so we read further in the Book of Hebrews 9: 7-8, 11-12, “Now these things being thus ordered, the priests indeed always entered, into the first tabernacle, accomplishing the offices of sacrifices. But into the second, [the Holy of Holies] the high priest alone, entered, once a year and not without blood, which he offered for his own, and the people's sins. . .But Christ, being a high priest of the good things to come, entered a greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hand, that is, not of this creation. Neither by the blood of goats, or of calves, but by his own blood, entered once into the holy of holies, having obtained eternal redemption.” Not only was Jesus the High Priest who entered the Heavenly Holy of Holies, Jesus was the Lamb of Sacrifice. We read in the Gospel of John 19:14-15 , “And it was the Preparation Day before the Passover, about the sixth hour, and Pilate said to the Jews: “Behold your king!” but they cried out: “Away with Him, Away with Him, crucify Him!” According to John’s Gospel, Jesus was sacrificed at the same hour as the lambs were being sacrificed for the Passover. Jesus is the Lamb of God sacrificed for our sins. And we read in Matthew’s Gospel 27: 50-51 that “Jesus again crying with a loud voice yielded up the spirit. And behold the veil of the temple was rent in two from top even to the bottom, and the earth quaked, and rocks were rent.” By Jesus’ one definitive sacrifice, He opened the gates of heaven symbolized by the ripping of the temple veil, from top to bottom. This removal of the veil then allowed the forgiveness of God to flow out to all the world. This is why the Church tells us in the instructions for celebrating Mass (GIRM, para. 118) that “It is a praiseworthy practice to cover the chalice with a veil, which may be either the color of the day or white.” The purpose of the chalice veil is to remind us of the great mystery which is about to unfold in the Eucharistic prayer. For in the Eucharistic Prayer, Christ is made present—Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity—and we are able to be in the presence of the Most Holy and Almighty God. Thus the chalice veil represents the veil of the Temple in Jerusalem. That veil, the Old Testament

tells us, was meant to hide the Holy of Holies from view. Only the high priest and only one day a year could he enter into the presence of the Most High God in the Holy of Holies. When Jesus died on the cross, the veil of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. It was ripped from top to bottom to show that it was God, who ripped the veil, not man. It was God who revealed Himself fully to His people through the Crucifixion of the Son of God. Therefore, the Old Covenant, with its hidden and forbidden God, was now made manifest to the world by the Crucifixion. This is the meaning and significance of the removal of the veil from the chalice. The Last Supper is also often depicted as a Passover meal. Scott Hahn has done a wonderful job of explaining how our Lord's Passion, Death and Resurrection from Holy Thursday's Last Supper, to Good Friday's death on the Cross, to Easter Sunday's Resurrection is really the fulfillment of the Passover Covenant. His explanation centers on what is called the Fourth Cup. Scott Hahn does such a wonderful explanation, I am just going to use his words ("Fourth Cup"): "In Mark 14:22ff we read, "And as they were eating he took bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them and said, 'Take; this is my body. And He took a cup and when He had given thanks (*the Greek word for that is eucharisto*) He gave it to them and they all drank of it, and He said to them, 'This is my blood of the new covenant which is poured out for many.'" And then He adds a kind of unusual statement: "Truly I say to you, I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." And then, when they had sung a hymn, they went out into the night to the Mount of Olives. . . ." Dr. Hahn continues on to say that "there's a big problem. Why? Because we know the way the Passover has been celebrated for centuries, for millenia; it's a very ancient liturgy, it's well known, it's no secret. Jews still celebrate it according to the same structure. There are four cups that represent the structure of the Passover. The first cup is the blessing of the festival day, it's the kiddush cup. The second cup of wine occurs really at the beginning of the Passover liturgy itself, and that involves the singing of psalm 113. And then there's the third cup, the cup of blessing which involves the actual meal, the unleavened bread and so on. And then, before the fourth cup, you sing the great hil-el psalms: 114, 115, 116, 117 and 118. And having sung those psalms you proceed to the fourth cup which for all practical purposes is the climax of the Passover. Now what's the problem?" Scott Hahn explains, "The problem is that gospel account says something like this: after the third cup is drunk Jesus says, "I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until I am entering into the kingdom of God." And it says, "Then they sang the psalms." Every Jew who knows the liturgy would expect: and then they went ahead and said the grace and the blessing and had the fourth

cup which climaxed and consummated the Passover. But no, the gospel account says they sang the psalms and went out into the night. ... You don't just sidestep the most important part. It would be like saying the Mass and skipping the Eucharist, forgetting the words of consecration. So why did Jesus do it? ... John 19 describes in unique detail the sacrifice of our Lord. There's no mistaking the fact that St. John, the beloved disciple, understood our Lord's sacrifice as the culmination, the fulfillment of the Old Testament Passover. ...” According to Dr. Hahn, “John sees in this so much more than we can get into, but one thing in particular. Verse 28, "After this" - at the very end of his cruel sufferings - "Jesus, knowing that all was now finished said, in order to fulfill the scriptures, 'I thirst.'" Now, he's been on the cross for hours. Is this the first moment of thirst. No, he'd been wracked with pain and dying of thirst for hours. But he says, in order to fulfill the scripture, "I thirst." Why? To fulfill the scripture. "A bowl of sour wine stood there. They put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch - the same kind of branch the Israelites had to use to sprinkle the lamb's blood on the doorpost, coincidentally enough - and held it to his mouth. Before when they offered him wine, what did he do? He refused it: "I will not taste of the fruit of the vine I am coming into the kingdom." He skipped the fourth cup and then he went to pray, 'Remove this cup, not as I will, but as thou wilt,' And now he has gone and fulfilled that will to the uttermost, in perfect suffering obedience to the Father, in an act of unspeakable love. "They put a sponge full of the sour wine on hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine he said the words that are spoken of in the fourth cup consummation, "It is finished." What is the it referring to? ... He said, 'It is finished', and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit, his breath. The it, of course you realize by now, is the Passover sacrifice. Because who is Jesus Christ? He is the sacrifice of Egypt, the firstborn son. Remember, the Egyptians involuntarily had to offer up their firstborn sons as atonement for their own sins and wickedness. Christ dies for Egypt and the world. Plus, he is the Passover lamb, the unblemished lamb, without broken bones who offers himself up for the life of the world. This fits with John's gospel, because as soon as Jesus was introduced in chapter 1 of the fourth gospel by John the Baptist, what did John say? He said, "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." You can actually find Dr. Hahn's whole lecture on-line: Google Scott Hahn Fourth Cup Transcript. Pope John Paul II, in his magnificent encyclical on the Eucharist wrote (#11) that “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.” Pope John Paul also wrote “At times one encounters an extremely reductive understanding of the Eucharistic mystery. Stripped of its sacrificial meaning, it is celebrated as if it were simply a fraternal banquet. Therefore, according to Pope John Paul, we must get away from the idea that Mass is a ‘fraternal banquet’ and recover the more ancient theology that “the Mass makes present the sacrifice of the Cross; it does not add to that sacrifice nor does it multiply it.”(para 12)

That the past is currently present is a strange concept to a modernist world that believes only in what it can see. The Greek conception of time is that there is *chronos*, from which we get the word “chronology,” but there is also the Greek word, *kairos*, which is closer to meaning “eternity.” When the priest celebrates Mass, we enter, in some respect, into *kairos*, into eternity. This is why I generally take my watch off when I celebrate Mass; to remind me that we are entering into *kairos*. Until we can grasp this central mystery that the Almighty, Omnipotent, Omniscient, Creator loves us so much that He is willing to be present among us among us in an intimate and physical manifestation we cannot grasp the boundlessness of God’s love. For as John Paul writes, “The Eucharist is truly a glimpse of heaven appearing on earth.” ( para. 19) and the living God is held on our tongue or our hands, then Mass cannot simply be a fraternal banquet but is recognized for what it truly is, “the unbloody sacrifice of Calvary” made present for us. Are we prepared to receive so great a gift? One of the silent prayers that the priest says before receiving communion is “Lord Jesus Christ, with faith in Your love and mercy I eat Your Body and drink Your Blood. Let it not bring me condemnation but health and mind and body.” St. Thomas may have seen and touched the physical presence of the man, Jesus, but it was his faith that made Thomas exclaim, “My Lord and My God.” St. Thomas touched the physical Body of Christ and expressed his belief in the Eternal Word of God. In a similar way, we too also come forward to touch the Body of Christ which we receive in Holy Communion. Our senses tell us that there is a physical presence, we can feel the host in our hands and in our mouth, but we must rely on faith, on the faith of the Apostles and on the constant Tradition of nearly two thousand years that tells us that there is more than just the physical presence of a host. It is none other than Jesus Christ, Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity, risen from the dead, whom we receive. When we come to communion, let our “Amen” echo in our hearts the words of St. Thomas the Apostle, “My Lord and My God.” Jesus offered himself to God the Father as the sacrifice to remove our sins. This is what happens at every Mass, whether the music is good, whether the

homily is interesting, whether the heating or the sound system works. The Mass makes the sacrifice of Calvary present, whether there is one person present or hundreds. Did you ever notice that when the priest gets to the altar, he kisses it? And before he leaves, he will kiss the altar again? Why does he do that? The altar symbolizes Christ; it is also the place where the sacrifice of Calvary is made present. This action only makes sense if we realize what the late great Pope John Paul II stated in his marvelous encyclical on the Eucharist. “The Mass makes present the sacrifice of the Cross; . . . [it] 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.” This is why the priest kisses the altar, for it is upon this altar that the sacrifice of Calvary is made present. It is also the reason why the priest kisses the Gospel book, because Christ is present in the proclaimed Gospel. It is upon this altar that Jesus’ sacrifice for our sins is made present in an unbloody fashion. It is upon this altar that our sins are forgiven. This is why Pope John Paul laments elsewhere in his encyclical, that in some places the Mass has been “stripped of its sacrificial meaning, it is celebrated as if it were simply a fraternal banquet.” If the Mass were merely a banquet where we come together to socialize with one another, no wonder so many people complain that Mass is boring. Sunday Mass is a pretty poor excuse for a party. We are not saved by a dinner party. When was the last time you kissed your dinner table? Would you be willing to die for your dinner guests? Because if there is a sacrifice, there must be a victim. That victim is Christ who makes himself an offering for sin, though He Himself knew no sin. Archbishop Sheen writes “If the shepherd is not willing to be a victim for his sheep, the wolves come and devour them. Each morning, we priests hold in our hands the Christ who shed Blood from His veins, tears from His eyes, and sweat from His Body to sanctify us. How we should be on fire with that love, that we may enkindle it in others.” “Could it be,” Sheen asks, “that our lack of vocations comes from our failure to stress sacrifice.” Fulton Sheen also has a wonderful explanation of the consecration. Why is it that we consecrate the bread separate from the wine? Because the sacrifice of Calvary is made present. On the cross, Christ’s body was separated from His Blood. Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary is made present with the separate consecration of the bread and the wine. When is the resurrection of Christ? When is His Body reunited to His Blood? Did you ever notice that before the Lamb of God, the priest will take a small bit of the host and drop it into the chalice. This ritual called the “fremmentum” and dates to the days when the bishop would celebrate Mass and send around a piece of consecrated host to all the priests of his diocese.

By adding that little piece of host to his chalice, the priest was recognizing his union with the bishop and that what we celebrate is really one Eucharist. The theological meaning however, is that the Body and Blood of Our Lord is reunited so that we may receive him Body and Blood Soul and Divinity whether we receive from one species or both. Fulton Sheen explained that “Using human words, to describe divine things, we can say that each time we offer Mass Our Lord shows His Heavenly Father, the scars in His hands, His Feet, His Side. For this very reason He kept them.” We too are called to share in Christ’s saving action on the Cross. We bring forward gifts, that not only include bread and wine, but we should also place our lives and our selves on that paten to be offered to God. The priest also remembers this great mystery every time he says Mass for there is an inaudible pray that he says when he pours the water into the wine saying, “By this mystery of this water and wine may we come to **share in the divinity of Christ** who humbled himself to share in our humanity.” By His Incarnation, death and resurrection, we are called to share in the very life of Trinity if we but pick up our cross and follow Him. Fulton Sheen was very fond of quoting poetry, one poem he liked to quoted is by Amy Carmichael, “Hast thou no scar? No hidden scar on foot or side or hand? I hear thee sung as mighty in the land. I hear them hail thy bright ascendant star. Hast thou no scar? Hast thou no wound? Yet I was wounded by the archers spent. Leaned me against the tree to die and rent. By ravening beasts that compassed me, I swooned. Hast thou no wound? No wound, no scar. Yet, as the Master shall the servant be, and pierced are the feet that follow Me. But thine are whole. Can he have followed far Who has no wound or no scar?”