

The Sacrifice of the Eucharist



Sacrifice is not a word that we use very much. For us it usually means “giving up something.” But in fact, sacrifice means to give to God something of value to us, as an act of Worship and Praise to God our Father. It is with this meaning that we take a look at Sacrifice this morning—we will find that Sacrifice is at the very heart of our Christian Faith.

Sacrifice is found in every religion in the world, ancient and present. It runs the gamut from pouring valuable oil on a stone to the human sacrifices of the Aztecs. In essence, Sacrifice is the Offering to God of something of value, in intercession for something in return. Sacrifice means Offering, not death, and this is important to remember. In ancient Israel, Sacrifice meant the offering of a Lamb (or bull) to God to ask for forgiveness of sin. It happened in the Temple all day long. Men came to make a Sacrifice of a Lamb (or 2 pigeons if they were poor) as an act of loyalty to God, in anticipation of needed forgiveness. Sometimes, on festivals, many Lambs would be sacrificed on behalf of all the people of Israel.

Of course, every Israelite knew that the Sacrifice of a Lamb was not good enough. Ultimately, they knew that they had to offer themselves—but since they had sinned, they were not good enough—and since they wanted to continue to life, they used a Lamb as a substitute for themselves, and hoped God would understand.

The Method of Sacrifice was well established from century to century: a man brought a Lamb into the Temple and laying his hand on the head of the lamb and calling it by his own name, he was naming the Lamb as his substitute. Then the Levites there taking the Lamb from the man, cut its throat and caught the blood in a brass bowl. (This represented the Life of the Lamb and was called the Life Blood—a term we still use today). The bowl of Blood was taken to the Priest at the Altar, who, with prayer, sprinkled it on the Altar. This offering of the Life Blood is the actual Sacrifice. Sacrifice doesn't mean death, it means Offering. Finally, part of the Lamb (perhaps a hind leg) was given back to the man, who took it home, roasted it and ate it at Supper. In this way the Blessings gained by the Offering (Sacrifice) of the Blood at the Altar were apportioned to the man and his whole family. Here are the 4 steps: a Lamb is TAKEN, the Lamb is KILLED, the Blood is OFFERED, and the roasted Lamb is EATEN. Taken, Killed, Offered and Eaten. These 4 steps were known intimately by every Jew in Jesus day. And that is why Jesus used these 4 steps to Offer His Sacrifice.

Step One: Jesus is the “**LAMB** of God” (St John 1:36) declares St John the Baptist

Step Two: **Jesus DIES** on the Cross (at the same time as the Passover lambs were slaughtered in preparation for the Passover that would start that evening at 6pm)

Step Three: Jesus ascends into Heaven, and there in the Temple not made with hands, **OFFERS HIMSELF** before the Heavenly Altar.

Step Four: Jesus tells us to **DO THIS** to take part in His Sacrifice forever.

Jesus knew that everyone knew this pattern, so made sure that He fitted into them. There was no point doing something totally different because people would not know a new pattern. And He wanted people to understand intimately what He was doing. Key to understanding this comes in the Epistle to the Hebrews 9:11-12 "But when Christ appeared as a High Priest of the good things to come, ...He entered once for all (for everyone) into the Holy Place (Heaven) taking ... His own Blood, thus securing an eternal redemption." Note that like the Jewish priests who would carry the blood of a lamb and sprinkle it out on the earthly Altar, with prayer, Jesus is our high priest who takes His own Blood to plead before the Father in Heaven. The writer of the Epistle to Hebrews goes on to say (Hebrews 9: 24): "For Christ has entered ... into Heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf."

Note how Jesus uses the pattern that every Jew knew intimately, to explain what He was doing. The Cross is not the Sacrifice but is in effect the Killing of the Lamb. The actual Sacrifice is the Offering of His own Blood to the Father in Heaven, before the Heavenly Altar.

Once that is understood, we begin to see that the Eucharist (mass) is not only a participation in that Offering in Heaven, but it provides us with the way to EAT the Body and Blood of the Lamb of God, not as chewing on flesh, but a reception of the Real Presence of Jesus in the Holy Bread and Wine that He used at the Last Supper, when He gave us the Eucharist. The Bread and Wine are there certainly, but Someone has been added—Jesus Himself—so that He is genuinely Present IN the Blessed Sacrament, such that we can honestly genuflect (kneel) before Him who is Present in the Holy Bread and Wine, just as genuinely as He was bodily present when He walked the streets of Palestine. This is no remembrance or symbol, but genuine Presence as our Saviour and Lord.

What did Jesus give us at the Last Supper? He gave us a Pattern by which we could participate in His Heavenly Offering of Himself. He did it by giving us a 4fold Pattern: TAKE, BLESS, BREAK, and GIVE. When we follow this pattern, we can join with Him in His Offering of Himself before the Heavenly Altar, in praise of the Father, and for our forgiveness.

In the mass (Eucharist) after hearing scriptures, declaring our faith (creed), interceding for others, we share the Peace, which is both the ending of the "Mass of the Catechumens" and the beginning of the "Mass of the Faithful" (to give it the old wording). Then we follow the pattern Jesus gave us:

TAKE - the Offertory wherein we take Bread and Wine and place it on the Altar

BLESS - following the example of Jesus, this long Prayer of Consecration by the priest is the moment when Jesus becomes present at the Altar, and as He does, we join with Him in Offering His Sacrifice to the Father.

BREAK - the Body of Christ is broken before the people, just as He was broken for us on the Cross.

GIVE - The Blessed Sacrament of His Body and Blood are shared with everyone, in such a way that each of us is filled with His Grace.

It is this pattern that He Gave us at the Last Supper—so that we can join with Him in the Sacrifice of Heaven. Thus, the Eucharist (mass) is a Sacrifice—a real Participation in the Sacrifice of Jesus before the Father—as well as a Sacrifice of ourselves, our souls and bodies. To those object that the Sacrifice of Christ in Heaven happened only once, and is now done and gone, we know that this view has forgotten that Heaven is beyond both Time and Space. What Christ did in Heaven is still going on—No matter where we are in Time and Space, He is not so imprisoned. We participate in the One Holy Sacrifice of Christ before the Father at the Heavenly Altar because it is Eternal. It is we who are in time—not Jesus. And so, the Sacrifice of the Eucharist is a weekly participation in the One Heavenly Sacrifice that is eternal, and always present for our praise of the Father.

So, the pattern of Sacrifice in the Jewish Temple is a foretaste of the one True and Perfect Sacrifice of Christ, happening even now in Heaven. And we, in all humility, participate in that Perfect Sacrifice every time we celebrate the Eucharist. May we catch a glimpse of His Heavenly Presence at our earthly Altars each Sunday until one day we join with Him in that Perfect Sacrifice in Heaven.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen