



### **Sacrifice of the Mass**

We often refer to the celebration of the Eucharist as the “sacrifice of the Mass” -- a sharing of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. If we are to share in his sacrifice, then, we must be willing to submit our own wills to the Father’s. We must offer ourselves to God as Jesus did.

Learning to offer ourselves is neither easy nor quick. As we celebrate the Eucharist week after week, we are gradually drawn into its deeper meaning and gradually transformed by the experience. We come to understand more and more what it means to say “Amen” to the Eucharistic Prayer that recounts Christ’s sacrifice. We recognize bit by bit the radical demand that the Eucharist makes of us, for it challenges us to shape our lives on the example of Christ and to be willing to give our lives for others as he did.

The basic dynamic for us, as it was for Jesus, is one of surrender. The liturgy itself guides us into this dynamic. When we gather for worship, we surrender our defenses and link ourselves with the other members of the Body of Christ. When the celebration begins, we surrender ourselves to the action of the liturgy itself, becoming part of a mystery much larger than ourselves. When the word is proclaimed, we are called to listen with open ears and open hearts. During the preparation of the gifts, we are asked to surrender some of our wealth to the poor and to the church. In the Eucharistic Prayer we recall how Christ allowed his body to be broken and his blood poured out and we are called to follow his example. By allowing God’s grace to exert its power in our hearts and our lives, we will become more fully part of Christ’s body and share ever more completely in his sacrifice.

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# WELCOMING THE ROMAN MISSAL 3RD EDITION

## Part XII -- Overview of the Mass

### *Christ Present in the Eucharist*

*On November 27, 2011, English-speaking Catholics in the United States will begin using a new translation of the Roman Missal (the book containing the prescribed prayers, chants, and instructions for the celebration of Mass in the Roman Catholic Church).*

One of the memories that “pre-Vatican II” Catholics have of the Mass as it was then celebrated was the anticipation of the sound of bells or chimes that were sounded at the time of the consecration. They knew immediately that they could look up at that time and adore the presence of Christ in the Host and Precious Blood as they were being held aloft by the priest (sometimes for a lengthy space of time). For most Catholics, this was the prime moment in the Mass, the time when Catholics could be one with their Lord. To be distracted or to miss the sound of the bell was tantamount to “missing Mass”. It never occurred to Catholics then (how could it?) that there might be other ways that Christ was present when we gathered for the celebration of the Mass.

### **HOW DO WE ENCOUNTER CHRIST?**

Certainly, we encounter Christ in our personal prayer, in times of quiet before the Blessed Sacrament, in the gift of a newborn child, or in receiving the selfless love of another. But for us Catholics, the preeminent experience of Christ’s presence is in the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy, the holy sacrifice of the Mass.

The bishops at the Second Vatican Council, in their *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, reminded us of the Church’s long-held belief that Christ is present in the Eucharist in more than one way. Citing this document, the *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* says, “For in the celebration of Mass, in which the Sacrifice of the Cross is perpetuated, Christ is really present in the very assembly gathered in his name, in the person of the minister, in his word, and indeed substantially and uninterruptedly under the Eucharistic species.”

### **CHRIST AMONG US**

The first way that Christ reveals his presence at the Eucharist is in the assembly as it gathers. On this point, the *General Instruction* is clear: “At Mass or the Lord’s Supper the People of God is called together, with a Priest presiding and acting in the person of Christ, to celebrate the memorial of the Lord or Eucharistic Sacrifice. In an outstanding way there applies to such a local gathering of the holy Church the promise of Christ: ‘Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst’ (Mt. 18:20)” (#27)

When we gather in Jesus’ name, he is really there. The gathering of the assembly can be understood as the reassembling of the body of Christ. All who are baptized into Christ Jesus form part of his body. During the week we are scattered throughout the community, at home, on the job, and wherever we go. On Sunday, the body comes back together to be a visible body assembled as one in Christ. As we gather, Christ reveals himself to us in one another.

### **CHRIST IN THE PRESIDER**

The one who presides at worship is the leader of the assembly during the celebration. Since the true leader of our worship is really Christ himself, the church recognizes Christ functioning through the presider to lead us in sharing his worship of the Father. The priest does this by the way he acts and speaks -- with dignity, reverence and humility -- so that the living presence of Christ is conveyed in and through him (GIRM #93)

## CHRIST SPEAKS TO US TODAY

In their *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, the bishops at Vatican II reminded us that Christ is present during the Liturgy of the Word. “He is present in his word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scripture are read in the Church.” (CSL, #7) The Introduction to the *Lectionary* says, “The Church is nourished spiritually at the table of God’s word and at the table of the Eucharist.” (#10)

These two statements point us toward a proper understanding of the purpose of this part of the Mass. Like the rest of the Mass, the Liturgy of the Word is intended to bring us into contact with the living Christ, who speaks to us today through the proclamation of the scriptures in our midst. Christ is truly present and wants to nourish us spiritually through his word. It is meant to be an opportunity to draw close to the Lord, to be transformed by his grace, and to know his love for us.

Our task is not necessarily to grasp and remember every word that is spoken. Our goal is simply to hear the word of the Lord that Christ addresses to us that day. In all the words of the readings, the psalm, the gospel acclamation and the homily, there is a word that Christ intends for each of us to hear. The Introduction to the *Lectionary* notes that it is the Holy Spirit who enables each person to hear the inspired word fruitfully. If there is one word, one thought or idea, that really touches my life at a given liturgy, then I have been nourished by Christ speaking to me.

## THE BODY AND BLOOD OF THE LORD

The fourth mode of Christ’s presence during the Eucharist is in the bread and wine transformed into his body and blood. He gives himself as our food and drink to nourish us. We call our sharing in the eucharistic banquet “communion” -- a term that reminds us that it involves both union with Christ and union with all members of his body. St. Thomas Aquinas, centuries ago, insisted that the purpose of the Eucharist was not the transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. That is only an intermediate step. The purpose of the Mass, Thomas taught, is the unity of the church. That is, the purpose of the Mass is not to transform the bread and wine but to transform those who share the meal into the body of Christ. As St. John Chrysostom put it in the fourth century: “What is this bread? The body of Christ. What becomes of those who participate in this bread? The body of Christ.”

All who are baptized are part of Christ’s body. Hence St. Augustine in the fifth century told the newly baptized that it is their own mystery they see upon the altar. “Be what you see,” he challenged them, “and receive what you are.” When we eat and drink the body and blood of the Lord, we are formed more intensely into the one body of Christ that is the church. We are called to live every day as part of that body, revealing Christ’s presence to the world.

Thus reverence for Christ’s presence in the body and blood brings us back to reverence for his presence in one another. He becomes present as our food and drink in order to unite us in his body. Communion, then, is essentially community-oriented. The communion rite is not a time primarily for private prayer, as if Jesus were present to me alone. It is a time to express and celebrate our identity as the body of Christ.

As we open ourselves to encounter the risen Christ at Liturgy in each of these four ways, we cannot help but be strengthened and transformed for our daily work of transforming our broken relationships and our hurting and hungry world. We don’t just go to Mass because it is one of the rules, but because it is at the very core of who we are and what we do as the Body of Christ. What an awesome gift! What an awesome responsibility!

*In our next installment, we’ll explore once again the texts of the Mass that will be changing beginning November 27.*

## Discussion Questions

1. Why did Christ give us the Eucharist?
2. Have you had the experience of Jesus being present to you in different ways at different times? How?
3. How would you explain Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist?