

The Sacrifice of the Mass

By Greg Witherow

The Eucharist¹ as celebrated by Catholics has two characteristics that distinguish it from the Protestant communion table. First, it is the body, blood, soul and divinity of Christ. Sometimes this is called the Real Presence or the miracle of Transubstantiation. The second distinctive is that the Eucharist as celebrated in the Mass is a Sacrifice. While Protestants disagree with the Real Presence, they often have their own ways of understanding a “Real Presence”². In this way, it could be said Protestants are at least sympathetic about the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox doctrine. However, nothing of the sort can be said about the Sacrifice of the Mass. On this matter, Protestants are scandalized over the teaching and in a large way, this is what makes the Mass so offensive. In this short essay we will review the Biblical explanation, let the Church explain herself and listen to historical testimony for this Catholic doctrine.

The Passover and Eucharistic Feasts

Christ instituted the Eucharist as a fulfillment of the Passover. This is important. Why? The Passover was a Sacrifice-Meal that served as a memorial of the deliverance (salvation) of the Hebrews from the Egyptians. A Lamb without blemish was sacrificed and then the people ate the Lamb. It was to be celebrated annually. In the gospels where Christ institutes the Eucharist he takes the Passover meal and makes it a Eucharistic meal. In all the accounts, there is no mention of a Lamb in the Upper Room Passover meal. Why? It is because the Passover lamb is replaced by the true Lamb of God. This name for Christ is meaningless apart from sacrifice. The Christian is to feed on the true Sacrificial Lamb.

Saint Paul underscores the link between the Passover Sacrifice and the Eucharist in his letter to the Corinthians where he states,

“For Christ our Paschal Lamb has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival” (1 Corinthians 5:7, 8)

Protestant commentators acknowledge that the feast Paul speaks of is the Eucharist (Lord’s Supper)³. A noted Protestant John Gill says the following of 1 Corinthians 5:8,

“Not the feast of the Passover which was now ceased - but rather the feast of the Lord’s Supper is here meant.”

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church says the following on the same passage,

“Here is a plain allusion to the Lord's supper, which was instituted in the room of the Passover.”

¹ I use the term Eucharist in this paper but in my evangelical upbringing we used the term the Lord’s Supper or Communion. I never heard the term Eucharist until I was in college.

² Even a Baptist who believes Communion is purely symbolic will (rightly) claim that where two or three are gathered in Christ’s name, Christ is in their midst in a special way. Calvin and Luther had their own theories of Christ’s Real Presence in the Eucharist. Luther’s view of Consubstantiation claims Christ is physically present under the elements.

³ I don’t mean to imply Protestant commentators believe in the Sacrifice of the Mass. However, their testimony reinforces the link between the Passover Sacrifice and the Sacrifice of the Mass.

Sacrificial Language

The words Christ used to institute the Eucharist are words of Sacrifice. Notice the wording Christ uses.

“And he took bread, and when he had given thanks **he broke it** and gave it to them saying ‘This is my body **which is given for you**. Do this is remembrance of me’.” (Luke 22:19)

“And he took the chalice and when he had given thanks he gave it to them saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant **which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins**.’” (Matthew 26:27, 28)

John leaves out the institution of the Eucharist as he already covers the topic in Christ’s discourse in chapter 6. But here John makes it clear that the flesh we are to eat is the sacrificed flesh of Christ.

“I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread he will live forever; and the bread **which I shall give** for the life of the world is my flesh.” (John 6:51)

Protestants correctly note that Christ intends the Eucharist to be a memorial. The implication is that such language **negates any possibility** of a present reality. In other words, the Lord’s Supper is like a birthday cake; food that helps recall a past event. But Moses used memorial language to establish the Passover.

“This day **shall be a memorial day**, you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as an ordinance of the Lord.” (Exodus 12:14)

Passover was a memorial **and also** a sacrifice. A memorial does not negate the possibility of sacrifice.

Perpetual But Not Repeated

Some mistakenly claim the Catholic Church intends to re-crucify or re-sacrifice Christ in the Mass. If such a claim were true, it would be a fatal flaw in Catholic teaching. Scripture is clear on the matter.

“Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly as the high priest enters the Holy Place yearly with blood not his own; for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for men to die once, and that comes judgment, so Christ having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.” (Hebrews 9:25-28)

Of Christ’s work on the Cross it can be said; it is finished, it is unique, it is final, it is not repeated. How does the Church align these facts with the Sacrifice of the Mass? The Church teaches Christ’s one unique sacrifice is **made present** in the Mass, but not repeated. His finished work is applied to the believer.

This perpetual or continual nature of the Sacrifice is indicated in the book of Revelation. John’s vision of heaven took place nearly 60 years after the crucifixion. A scene in heaven illustrates that while Christ’s Sacrifice on the Cross was finished and not repeated, it remains perpetual in the Courts of Heaven. John sees a Lamb, a clear reference to the Passover Sacrifice that Christ fulfilled.

“And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a **Lamb standing as though it had been slain**.” (Revelation 5:6)

This vision of Christ does not claim a repeated Sacrifice has taken place, where Christ is again suffering. Instead it attests to the perpetual and timeless nature of his Sacrifice.

In his commentary on the book of Revelation, Protestant David Chilton states the following.

“Philip Carrington suggests the Greek word ‘standing’ (hestekos) is ‘a rough Greek translation of the Hebrew Tamid, which means ‘standing’ or ‘**continual**’ and refers to the daily burnt-offering in the Temple.”⁴

In this way the Church embraces the Passover context and the sacrificial language used to institute the Eucharist, while **avoiding the heresy** of a repeated Sacrifice warned against in the book of Hebrews.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church

1362 The Eucharist is the memorial of Christ's Passover, the **making present** and the sacramental offering of his unique sacrifice, in the liturgy of the Church which is his Body. In all the Eucharistic Prayers we find after the words of institution a prayer called the *anamnesis* or memorial.

1364 In the New Testament, the memorial takes on new meaning. When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, she commemorates Christ's Passover, and it is made present the sacrifice Christ **offered once for all on the cross remains ever present**. "As often as the sacrifice of the Cross by which 'Christ our Pasch has been sacrificed' is celebrated on the altar, the work of our redemption is carried out."

1365 Because it is the memorial of Christ's Passover, the Eucharist is also a sacrifice. The sacrificial character of the Eucharist **is manifested in the very words of institution**: "This is my body which is given for you" and "This cup which is poured out for you is the New Covenant in my blood." In the Eucharist Christ gives us the very body which he gave up for us on the cross, the very blood which he "poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

1366 The Eucharist is thus a sacrifice because it **re-presents (makes present) the sacrifice** of the cross, because it is its *memorial* and because **it applies its fruit**:

[Christ], our Lord and God, was once and for all to offer himself to God the Father by his death on the altar of the cross, to accomplish there an everlasting redemption. But because his priesthood was not to end with his death, at the Last Supper "on the night when he was betrayed," [he wanted] to leave to his beloved spouse the Church a visible sacrifice (as the nature of man demands) by which the bloody sacrifice which he was to accomplish once for all on the cross would be re-presented, its memory perpetuated until the end of the world, and its salutary power be applied to the forgiveness of the sins we daily commit.¹⁸⁹

1367 The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist **are one single sacrifice**: "The victim is one and the same: the same now offers through the ministry of priests, who then offered himself on the cross; only the manner of offering is different." "And since in this divine sacrifice which is celebrated in the Mass, the same Christ who offered himself once in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross is contained and is offered in an unbloody manner. . . this sacrifice is truly propitiatory."

⁴ David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* [Ft. Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1987], 172.

Tradition Speaks Through The Church Fathers

Ignatius of Antioch

"Make certain, therefore, that you all observe one common Eucharist; for there is but one Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, and but one cup of union with his Blood, and one single **altar of sacrifice** - even as there is also but one bishop, with his clergy and my own fellow servitors, the deacons. This will ensure that all your doings are in full accord with the will of God" (*Letter to the Philadelphians* 4 [A.D. 110])

Justin Martyr

"God speaks by the mouth of Malachi, one of the twelve [minor prophets], as I said before, about the sacrifices at that time presented by you: 'I have no pleasure in you, says the Lord, and I will not accept your sacrifices at your hands; for from the rising of the sun to the going down of the same, my name has been glorified among the Gentiles, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering, for my name is great among the Gentiles . . . [Mal. 1:10–11]. He then speaks of those Gentiles, namely us [Christians] who in every place offer sacrifices to him, **that is, the bread of the Eucharist and also the cup of the Eucharist**" (*Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* 41 [A.D. 155])

Augustine

"In the sacrament he is **immolated** [sacrificed] for the people not only on every Easter Solemnity but on every day; and a man would not be lying if, when asked, he were to reply that Christ is being immolated. For if sacraments had not a likeness to those things of which they are sacraments, they would not be sacraments at all; and they generally take the names of those same things by reason of this likeness" (*Letters* 98:9 [A.D. 412])

Was not Christ **once for all offered** up in His own person as a sacrifice? And yet, **is He not likewise offered up in the sacrament as a sacrifice**, not only in the special solemnities of Easter, but also daily among our congregations; so that the man who, being questioned, answers that He is offered as a sacrifice in that ordinance, declares what is strictly true? (Epistles, 98, 9; NPNF 1, Vol. I)

Conclusion

Protestant Church historian Phillip Schaff says the following.

“The Catholic church, both Greek and Latin, **sees in the Eucharist** not only a sacramentum [sacrament], in which God communicates a grace to believers, but at the same time, and in fact mainly, a sacrificium [sacrifice], in which believers really offer to God that which is represented by the sensible elements. For this view also the church fathers laid the foundation, **and it must be conceded they stand in general far more on the Greek and Roman Catholic than on the Protestant side of this question.**”⁵

Schaff concedes two things. First, the Church Fathers saw the sacrifice offered as more than just the praise of worship, which many Protestant apologists assert, but contained in the Eucharist itself. Second, even as Schaff believed the Church was in error, he concedes the Church has been consistent. This testifies the Church always has believed Christ gave the apostles **the ability and command** to celebrate the Sacrifice of the Mass with the words, “Do this in remembrance of me”. It has always been so.

⁵ (History of the Christian Church, Vol. III: Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity: A.D. 311-600, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974, from the revised fifth edition of 1910; \$96. "The Sacrifice of the Eucharist," 503)