

PARISHES OF
ST PIUS X, ALDERLEY EDGE, ST BENEDICT'S, HANDFORTH
AND
SACRED HEART & ST TERESA'S WILMSLOW
WEEKLY REFLECTION

Sunday 10th May 6th Sunday of Easter
Why is the Mass a 'Sacrifice'?

From the early Reformation Protestants have rejected the idea of the Mass as 'sacrifice'. But Catholics maintain that it is. We very frequently refer to "the Sacrifice of the Mass". What do Catholics mean by this and why do Protestants object to the term? I shall address these questions in reverse order and, since the article is to be read by Catholics (primarily), I will spend more time on what we mean by it.

In the Letter to the Hebrews (10: 11-4) is written: "*we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins,..*". This can be cited in support of the Protestant viewpoint that (i) There was one sacrifice, that of Christ on the Cross; (ii) that sacrifice was once and for all; (iii) there can and should be no further sacrifice; nothing any priest can do can add anything to Christ's single and complete sacrifice of Himself.

It is entirely correct that Christ's self-sacrifice was all-encompassing; no further sacrifice is needed. So why is the Mass a sacrifice? What follows is a summary of the explanation given by Father Hardon SJ in "The Catholic Catechism"¹.

First, bread and wine were familiar sacrificial elements in Judaism. When, at the Last Supper, Jesus spoke of the New Covenant in terms of His body being offered up and His blood poured out, and of the command to do this in memory of Him – all this contained deep sacrificial implications.

Secondly, from apostolic times the early Christians followed Christ's exhortation. Thus, while the one sacrifice on the Cross was sufficient for the redemption of mankind, it was clearly understood that Christ intended His sacrifice to be perpetuated ritually to the end of time. This is reflected in the Letter to the Hebrews (7:24-25) where it states that Jesus "*...holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues for ever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them..*".

¹ (1975). Said to have been written at the request of Pope Paul VI to counter some excessive liberal and erroneous ideas circulating after Vatican II. It was published with the *nihil obstat*' and *'imprimatur*'

The Mass therefore is not simply a commemoration of the Last Supper or Calvary. It is a full and true sacrifice whereby Christ offers Himself to the Father as he did on the Cross. Only the manner of offering is different. The priest is the same, Jesus Christ, represented by the human priest at the altar. Pope Pius XII wrote² :

"68. The august sacrifice of the altar, then, is no mere empty commemoration of the passion and death of Jesus Christ, but a true and proper act of sacrifice, whereby the High Priest by an unbloody immolation offers Himself a most acceptable victim to the Eternal Father, as He did upon the cross. "It is one and the same victim; the same person now offers it by the ministry of His priests, who then offered Himself on the cross, the manner of offering alone being different."

69. The priest is the same, Jesus Christ, whose sacred Person His minister represents. Now the minister, by reason of the sacerdotal consecration which he has received, is made like to the High Priest and possesses the power of performing actions in virtue of Christ's very person."

Since Christ is really present in His humanity in heaven and on the altar he freely offers Himself to the Father. He no longer dies but his sacrifice remains the same: the continued willing surrender of Himself to the Father's will. For Catholics there is no problem reconciling the one eternal and all-sufficient sacrifice on the Cross and the sacrifice of the Mass. The Council of Trent summarised the Catholic belief of the preceding fifteen centuries of belief from the time of the apostles onwards:

*"..this sacrifice (of the Mass) is truly propitiatory and that by means thereof this is effected, that we obtain mercy, and find grace in seasonable aid, if we draw nigh unto God, contrite and penitent, with a sincere heart and upright faith, with fear and reverence... For the victim is one and the same, the same now offering by the ministry of priests, who then offered Himself on the cross, the manner alone of offering being different....."*³

Stephen S.

² Mediator Dei (68)-(69)- https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_20111947_mediator-dei.html

³ Council of Trent Twenty Second Session CHAPTER II. "That the Sacrifice of the Mass is propitiatory both for the living and the dead".