

## 9. The Christian Liturgy

A crowd was moving to and from the Catholic Church on the corner. The bus came to a halt at a pedestrian crossing and people of all ages began streaming across the road. After several minutes the driver grew impatient and edged up to the crossing, hooting the horn. The pedestrians stopped and the bus moved on into a deserted road between the silent houses of a suburb on a Sunday morning.

The conductor grumbled as he took the fare of a gentleman who had just boarded the bus.

"Same thing every Sunday morning! That goes on almost every hour till midday. It beats me! What do they get out of it?"

The gentleman chuckled.

"They get a lot out of it," he said. "But then they put a lot into it too."

He did not clarify the remark, but it was not a bad way of describing the Mass, the chief act of worship of the Catholic Church.

There is a two way communication going on all the time between God and his people in the community of the Church. We reach up to God, offering him our worship, our prayers, our lives, everything that we have and everything that we are. He reaches down to us, giving us his love, his own very life, his sanctifying grace.

Christ is the one Mediator who makes that two way communication possible between God and us. He gave us the Mass as a unique means through which we can reach up to God and worship him. He gave us the seven sacraments as the principal channels through which God reaches down to us and gives us a share in his own divine life. We call this the **Liturgy** of the Church. The word liturgy is an old Greek word which originally meant any public function performed for the people. Gradually it took on an exclusively religious meaning, referring to public prayers or worship celebrated in the name of the Church by a person ordained to do so.

### ***The Passover***

Like the Church itself, the Christian liturgy has its roots in the Old Testament. The book of Exodus in the Old Testament tells how Moses gave the Israelites strict instructions concerning a meal which they were to eat on the night of their liberation from Egypt. Each family was to offer a lamb in sacrifice and eat it with unleavened bread, that is, baked without yeast because they would not have time

in their hurry to bake it properly. The son of the king died that night and the Israelites were told to go. They marched with all their property as far as an estuary called the Red Sea and crossed over its dried bed. The king regretted his decision and sent his army to bring them back. When the chariots and men were in the middle of the causeway, the waters moved in on them and they were drowned. The Israelites saw in this the hand of God and gave thanks to him for this wonderful deliverance.

Every year they kept the anniversary of this event. Each family offered a lamb in sacrifice and ate it with unleavened bread and wine, as their forefathers had done, saying prayers and singing hymns meanwhile in thanksgiving to God for their deliverance.

### ***The Last Supper***

Jesus ate the Passover meal with his Apostles on the night before he died. He told Saints Peter and John how they would find a large upper room where he and his Apostles could eat the meal together. They brought there a lamb which had been sacrificed in the Temple and made everything ready for the meal. Jesus sat down with them at table on that Thursday night and, as was done in every devout Jewish family at that time, they said prayers, recited psalms and recalled the events of the Passover. The main prayer was the prayer of thanksgiving, called the Eucharist.

Jesus went through the normal ritual of the meal, but he did something different. He turned this old rite into a religious act infinitely holier and more effective than any other act of worship of which mankind is capable. This is how the twenty-sixth chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel describes it:

**"Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to his disciples and said, 'take, eat; this is my body.' And he took a cup, 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.'" Then he said, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Matt. 26, 26-28; 1 Cor. 11, 24-25).**

With the power of God, to whom nothing is impossible or difficult, he changed bread and wine into his body and blood and offered them to his Father as a sacrifice. He gave them to his apostles to eat and drink, so uniting them intimately with himself and with each other. He offered himself, under the appearances of bread and wine, to God the Father to atone for the sins of the world. The following day he offered that same sacrifice on the Cross, shedding his blood and giving his life.

Thus he established a "new covenant" between God and man. The old covenant made at Mt. Sinai was ratified in the blood of an animal sprinkled in the Holy Place. Jesus was the victim of the sacrifice of the "new covenant". He said: "This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many." Christ in the Supper room and on the Cross was the victim in whose blood this new covenant was ratified.

### **Sacrifice**

A sacrifice is the offering of a gift to God, in the name of the people, by a man chosen by God.

There is an instinct in men to offer gifts to those they love, to show their love, to give thanks for favours received, to beg more favours and to make amends for offences they have committed. So people give presents on many occasions. They like to give expensive things if they can afford them, but the thought behind the gift is what matters most. A mother, for example, on her birthday, is delighted to receive even a bar of chocolate from her little child, even though she has provided the money which bought it, because this is a sign of the child's love.

Men have always given gifts to God, even though they know he does not need them and in fact gave them the very things which they offer. But gifts to God were surrounded with special ceremonies. They were offered by a special man called a *priest*, on a special stone called an *altar*, and the thing offered was called a *victim*. In the old sacrifices the victims were not of great value, but so long as the intentions in the hearts of those who offered them were good, the gifts were pleasing to God.

### **Old Testament Sacrifices**

The Old Testament shows how the Israelites gradually developed a clearer idea of what sacrifice really is.

Cain, a farmer, offered the sacrifice of the produce of the soil; his brother Abel, a herdsman, offered the best animals from his flock. Cain's sacrifice was not pleasing to God not because of what he offered, but because he did not have the right dispositions of soul. Abel's was pleasing because he had the right intentions. The sacred writer who recorded this event was teaching that the intention in the heart of the one offering the sacrifice was the thing that matters most.

When Abraham returned from rescuing his cousin Lot from his enemies, a king called Melchizedek, who was also a priest, came out to meet him and offered bread and wine in thanksgiving for the victory and the liberation of Lot. This teaches that a sacrifice of bread and wine offered in thanksgiving is pleasing to God.

The Israelites offered sacrifices daily and on all the important occasions of life. There were many kinds of sacrifices, but the most suitable one was that of an animal. Its destruction was a sign that it was a gift which had been put out of human use and could not be taken back once it was offered. Also it was a sign that the gift was taken away from the earth and lifted up to God.

When the Israelites settled in their own country, King David bought some land on Mount Moriah to be a place of sacrifice, and King Solomon built the first Temple there. In front of the Holy Place, the most sacred spot in the Temple, was the Altar of Sacrifice, upon which the gifts of the people were offered up from dawn to sunset.

These sacrifices were good, but not good enough. There were times indeed when they did not please God, because they were offered merely out of routine or not with true religious intentions. The prophets often rebuked the people severely for superstition, that is, for thinking that the actions themselves were all that mattered and that the intentions in the heart and the life the people led did not matter. But the prophets knew that even when the intentions behind the sacrifice were good, something much better than the offering of animals was needed. They looked forward to the day when a perfect sacrifice would be offered in the name of the people.

### ***The Suffering Servant***

As the time of Christ's coming drew nearer, this desire became stronger. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, hints were given of a Saviour, or Messiah, who would offer his own life to save the people. In a series of poems in the book of *Isaiah*, he is called *The Suffering servant*. The passage from *Isaiah* quoted in lesson 4 speaks of this mysterious person who was to suffer terribly to make amends for the sins of men.

**"Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. . . .He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed"** (Is. 53, 4-5).

The eighth chapter of the *Acts of the Apostles* tell how St. Philip explained to an Ethiopian court official, returning home from Jerusalem, that these words were fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

### ***The Sacrifice of the Cross***

Christ stressed the fact that he went to his death freely. He offered himself as the victim of sacrifice. He said: "I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (John 10, 17-18).

When he was arrested in the garden, he showed that he could have escaped had he so wished. Those who came to arrest him fell to the ground before him when he told them that he was Jesus Christ. He went willingly to Calvary, stretched himself upon the Cross and hung upon it for three hours with outstretched arms, offering his life to save the world. When the time came for him to die, he cried out with an amazingly out voice: "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23, 46). And having said that he breathed his last.

This was the *perfect* sacrifice. He was the *priest* who offered it. Since he was God as well as man, the intention behind the offering was the purest possible. He was also the *victim*. There can be no more precious offering to God than his own Son.

The main teaching of the letter to the Hebrews is that Jesus offered the perfect sacrifice, of which the sacrifices of the Old Testament were but a faint image. He is called the "Great High Priest." In the second chapter it says:

**"Therefore he had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people"** (Hebr. 2, 17).

In chapters 5 to 10 he is compared with the priests of the Old Testament. There were many of them, offering many sacrifices. But he is the *one* priest offering the *one* sacrifice. He is compared in particular to the High Priest who every year, on the Day of Atonement, sacrificed an animal and sprinkled its blood in the Holy Place to make amends for the sins of the people. As for Christ,

**"He entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption"** (Hebr. 9, 12).

What he did on the cross, with the shedding of his blood, he did at the Last Supper, without bloodshed. This is called the Eucharistic Sacrifice, from the name of the thanksgiving prayer said at the Last Supper.

### ***The Eucharistic Sacrifice***

He gave to his Church a way of offering his sacrifice with him for all time. Not that he died again, "for we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die

again' (Rom. 6, 9). But he continues to offer the same sacrifice. He used the Jewish rite, the Passover meal, in which to offer himself under the appearances of bread and wine. He continues to offer himself in this way, using men as his instruments. He said to the Apostles: "Do *this* in remembrance of me."

They obeyed him. St. Paul, in the eleventh chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians tell how the Apostles, and he gathered about their priest for a meal called the Agape, or meal of love, in which they were united in the love of Christ and each other. Afterwards they recalled the life, death and resurrection of Christ, and during the Eucharistic prayer said over bread and wine, the priest spoke the words which Christ himself had used at the Last Supper. Christ, through his priest, changed bread and wine into his body and blood. All then partook of the Eucharistic meal. Christ, through his earthly priest, offered again the sacrifice he had offered at the last Supper without bloodshed, and which he offered on the cross with the shedding of blood. This Eucharistic sacrifice has been offered by the Church ever since. Nowadays it is called the Mass.

### ***The Daily Paschal Mystery***

The death and resurrection of Jesus was God's own plan for our redemption. It is the great central event of the Christian faith. We call it the Paschal Mystery, i.e. that unique divine event through which we pass over from the slavery of sin to a new life of union with God.

Every time the Mass is celebrated anywhere in the world Christ's sacrifice is renewed or made present again. By giving the Apostles the divine power to change bread and wine into his own body and blood, Christ ensured that his redeeming sacrifice would never cease to be present in the Church. In all ages and in all places it would be possible, through the Mass, for those who believed in him to associate themselves in a real way with the supreme act of love by which he reconciled mankind to God on Calvary.

What he himself had achieved in principle on Calvary for the whole human race, could be ratified and accepted by individuals as they participated in the Mass.

At Mass we offer the sacrifice of Calvary with Christ, and share in its benefits. We receive these benefits much more fully at Mass when we also receive Holy Communion, because we are thereby personally united with the risen Christ, and are taken up by him into the new life of divine love.

### ***The Mass and the Cross***

The sacrifice of the Mass is one and the same sacrifice as that of the Cross. The Mass add nothing to the Last Supper and Calvary. It is the same thing. There is

the same priest and the same victim, Christ. The Mass is distinguished from the Last Supper and the Cross only by the manner of the offering. In the Mass, Christ uses the hands, lips and will of man, and offers himself without bloodshed under the appearances of bread and wine.

### ***The Catholic Priest***

Some men are chosen by God to share the priesthood of Jesus Christ. These men are servants of the Church and instruments of God. It is through their hands, lips and will that Christ acts to become present at Mass. Students for the priesthood study for many years before their ordination. Through ordination they are made sharers of the priesthood of Christ. After receiving a call from a bishop they are given the power to change the bread and wine offered at Mass into the body and blood of Christ. This power was first received by the Apostles from Christ at the Last Supper. It has been handed down from the Apostles to succeeding generations of priests.

### ***The Priesthood of the Faithful***

Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated. Each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ. The ministerial priest, by the sacred power he enjoys, molds and rules the priestly people. Acting in the person of Christ, he brings about the Eucharistic by virtue of their royal priesthood. They likewise exercise that priesthood by receiving the sacraments, by prayer and thanksgiving, by the witness of a holy life, and by self-denial and active charity. (Constitution on the Church. N. 10)

The people also have a share in the priesthood of Christ. They have a lesser part to play in the ceremonies of the Mass, but they are joined to Christ and his earthly priest by their faith in the great mystery and their love of Christ. Therefore they truly offer the sacrifice. The Church encourages them to give outward expression of their unity by coming together as a congregation participating as a community with the priest who resides over this greatest of all liturgical acts.

The whole Church, then, offers each Mass---the angels and saints in heaven, all who have died in union with Christ and all those who live on earth in union with him.

### ***The Ceremonies of the Mass***

We are not sure how the Christian Sacrifice first began to be called the Mass. Probably it came from the final words of the ceremony when the priest said in Latin, "*Ite missa est*" --- "Go, this the dismissal". The prayers and ceremonies of the Mass change from time to time throughout the centuries so that they will

continue to be meaningful for the people in an ever changing world, but they are always based on those used in the early centuries of Christianity. The central action is always the same as that done by Christ at the Last Supper.

The robes or vestments worn by the priest resemble the clothes worn by the people in the early centuries of Christianity.

The Mass contains a number of parts. Two of these are the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The first centers around readings from the Bible; the second centers around the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

### ***Celebration of the Word***

In this part of the Mass we listen to God speaking to us through the Scriptures. Passages are read aloud from the Bible, one from the Old Testament, one from the letters (epistles) of the New testament, and one from the Gospels. These readings are interspersed with suitable hymns and psalms sung by the congregation or recited by the reader. The priest explains the Scripture readings in his homily. The aim of all this is to help us to grow in knowledge and love of the Sacred Scriptures and to lift up our minds and hearts to God in sincere prayer.

### ***Celebration of the Eucharist***

The Liturgy of the Eucharist begins with the bringing of the bread and wine to the altar for the sacrifice while the congregation sings a hymn of offering. The people identify themselves more personally with this offering by contributing to the collection which is taken up at that point. The priest reads a prayer of offering over the gifts and asks the people to pray that the sacrifice he is about to offer with them may be truly acceptable to God.

Then the Eucharistic prayer is said aloud by the priest. This is the central point of the Mass during which the death and resurrection of Christ are recalled. During this solemn prayer the priest repeats the words spoken by Christ at the Last Supper over the bread and wine:

**“Take this, all of you, and eat it:**

**This is my body which will be given up to you.**

When supper was ended,  
he took the cup,  
Again he gave you thanks and praise,  
gave the cup to his disciples and said:

**Take this all of you, and drink from it;  
this is the cup of my blood,**

**the blood of the new and everlasting covenant.  
It will be shed for you and for all men,  
so that sins may be forgiven.  
Do this in memory of me."**

Through these words spoken by the priest the bread and wine are changed into Christ's living body and blood. Christ offers himself through the priest to the Father, as he did on the cross and at the Last Supper. The priest raises up the consecrated bread, and then the consecrated wine, for all to see and adore.

As the solemn Eucharistic prayer continues the priest speaks for the people and offer Christ, now really present on the altar, as the perfect victim of sacrifice to the Father in heaven. The reception of Holy Communion, preceded and followed by suitable prayers, completes the celebration of the Mass. This beautiful, simple and sublime rite has been performed by the Catholic Church throughout the world since the days of the Apostles. It is the greatest act of worship of which man is capable.

### ***Seven Sacraments***

In the Mass Christ gave his Church a unique way of offering his own sacrifice with him all the time. He also gave us seven other very special ceremonies through which he gives his divine life to us. We call these the seven *Sacraments*. They are:

**Baptism,  
Confirmation,  
Holy Eucharist,  
Anointing of the Sick,  
Holy Order,  
Matrimony.**

God could communicate directly with each one of us if he wanted to. He didn't have to become man, he didn't have to call us into the community of his Church, he didn't have to give us special rites and ceremonies through which we communicate with him. But, in his love for us, he *did* give us all these things. He didn't treat us as disembodied spirits. He treated us as fully human beings. He lived and acted amongst us in a *human way*. He continues to do that through the sacraments which he has given to us in the Church.

### ***Signs of Love***

Because we are human we need signs and assurances of God's love and forgiveness. Christ gives us this in these seven sacraments. They bring us Sanctifying Grace to bring us more closely to Christ and to his Church. Through the sacraments we meet him in faith and love.

Some of the sacraments change us and give us a special relationship to Christ and to each other in the community of the Church. For example, Confirmation gives us the strength to proclaim the Christian message by our words and our way of life. By Ordination, a man is made a priest with the power to offer Mass and forgive sins as the representative of Christ. The first sacrament of all, Baptism, initiates us into the Christian community, making us God's adopted children and sharers in his own divine life. Without it, we would not be able to receive any of the other sacraments.

### ***The Presence of Christ***

Perhaps we will understand the sacraments more easily if we look at the life of Jesus Christ. When he lived on earth people crowded around him. They heard him speak words of forgiveness to sinners and saw him bless people. The sick touched him and were cured. They experienced his power in miracles and they realized that the power of God was with him. These miracles, too, were signs of a work that he had come to do on earth. He came to save men from sin, and sin in the Jewish mind was closely connected with sickness and death. Christ has now left this earth, in the sense that we no longer physically see him or hear him or touch him. But he is still with us in his Church. And it is principally through his sacraments which he gave to the Church that he reaches out to us. We, his people, come in contact with him in a very special way through the sacraments.

Jesus often explains his teaching by talking about the ordinary things around us. He talks about the flowers, the birds of the air, water, bread and wine, weddings, farming and politics. He seems to bring the whole of human life, the whole of God's Creation, into his saving work for men. Through the sacraments he continues now to use these ordinary things to help make us holy. These things that we understand so well speak to us of God's loving care for us. Through them Christ comes to us, works amongst us with his saving power and we come into contact with him.

### ***Meeting with Christ***

The sacraments are the principal channels through which we receive God's grace and live by his life. But they do not act automatically like spiritual slot machines. They are not magic rites, producing their wonderful effects independently of ourselves. Each sacrament is a call from Christ and we must reply to that call with faith and love. We believe that we meet Jesus Christ in the sacraments and the stronger our faith is the greater will be our response.

It is Christ who baptizes; it is Christ who forgives sins in confession; it is Christ who brings comfort and strength in the anointing of the sick to the dying person. We try to receive the sacraments with devotion and respect. We prepare

ourselves by prayer and thought. This is especially true of the sacraments that are received most often, Holy Communion and Confession. The sacraments are not an excuse to live slipshod lives with the idea that they will make up for what we do not do ourselves. Rather they spur us on to give us strength to live lives more centred on Christ.

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It was on Easter Sunday that Jesus rose from the dead. By his resurrection he declared himself, and became our Lord and master. Ever since then we have called Sunday "The Lord's Day".

Catholics have ever since considered it a loving duty to make Sunday holy, principally by worshipping God at Mass. With Jesus, we offer to God the Father the great offering made two thousand years ago.

There are many Catholics who go to Mass on other days as well as Sundays. Some are able to assist at Mass every day. They are aware that the Mass helps them to grow in holiness.

Sometimes the sacrament of baptism is administered during Mass. A child receives its first Holy Communion during Mass. Marriage often takes place during Nuptial Mass. Priests are ordained and bishops are consecrated during Mass. When a Catholic dies his body is carried to the church and a requiem Mass is offered, asking God to give him eternal rest in heaven.

The whole life of the community of the Church revolves around the Mass. Sometimes by arrangement with their priest, the members of a family have Mass celebrated in their own home, particularly if someone in the family is sick and confined to the home for a long period. In every Mass we re-live the great Paschal Mystery, the death and resurrection of Jesus for us. We are strengthened in our Christian Faith.

## **POINTS FOR DISCUSSION**

If you study the lessons with a friend, or friends, a discussion of the points suggested at the end of each lesson will help you to grasp the subject more fully. Points suggested for discussion are covered in the lesson to which they refer.

Even if you study alone, an effort to think out some comments on each point will deepen your grasp of the subject. Read the lesson again if you find you cannot comment meaningfully on the points suggested.

- 1. This lesson speaks of a two way communication between God and ourselves: List some of the things you would like to give to God, and some of the things you would like God to give to you.**
- 2. What are some of the reasons why the Jews before the time of Christ, offered religious sacrifices? Do we need to offer sacrifices for the same reasons?**
- 3. List some reasons why you consider that Christ's death Was the greatest sacrifice?**
- 4. What connection can you see between Christ's sacrifice on Calvary and the sacrifice of the Mass today?**
- 5. Give your own idea of how a sacrament (e.g. Baptism or Holy Communion) is a meeting with Christ in this life.**
- 6. The sacraments are the principal channels through which we meet Christ and receive his graces. By what other ways can we obtain his gifts and graces?**