

Ask Fr James

How is Mass a Sacrificial Celebration?

"The notions of sacrifice, expiation and reparation have become foreign to contemporary vocabulary, so much so that people can hardly imagine our human sins as offending God and even less that they could necessitate an expiation such as God sending His only begotten son to the cross. This lack of understanding of the Mass as a sacrifice has led many Catholics to celebrating the Mass as if it were simply a fraternal banquet." In 2003, Pope John II wrote a letter to the whole Catholic world titled; *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* or *The Eucharistic Church*. In the letter, the Pope reminded us to not forget the sacramental meaning of the Mass. By this statement, the Pope intends to bring back the sacrificial dimension of the Eucharist by emphasizing the unity and connection of the sacrifice of the Mass and Calvary.

The Pope explains that Sacrifice does not mean the destruction or immolation of something as in a traditional ritual, but it is the transformation of "man" in love. Love of God is at the heart of sacrifice. Sacrifice must first of all unite us with God. When we see the Eucharist only as a fraternal banquet we "horizontalize" it (EE #10). But what we are called to at Mass is to recover its sacrificial dimension - the vertical dimension. He says this means that we must understand that when we attend Mass, it is in thanksgiving for the three moments of sacrifice:

1. the moment of self-offering of God the Father in the gift of sending of the Son;
2. the moment of self-giving response of the Son in the power of the Spirit to the Father
3. the third moment consists of our human mutual self-giving of ourselves as we are empowered to do by the same Spirit in Jesus.

Pope John Paul II urged that there is the need to elevate this experience of fellowship "to a degree that surpasses that of the simple human experience of sharing a meal" (EE, 24). The Pope also says we should not be afraid of extravagance in worship. Meaning that we should be like the woman who anointed Jesus in Bethany (Matthew 26:6-13), devoting and giving the best of our resources to expressing wonder and adoration before the unsurpassable gift of the Eucharist" (EE, 47-48).

Later, in 2007, Pope Benedict XVI in his letter called *Sacramentum Caritatis* (Sacrament of Love) expressed the same Eucharistic theology. He reiterates the beauty and aesthetics of the Eucharist and that as Catholics, we are to be mindful of the sacrifice of God and His Son, Jesus Christ and therefore respond sacrificially through active participation (#55); have preference for the Latin language and Gregorian chants (#62); kneel during the Eucharistic Prayer as sign of reverence (#65); do Eucharistic devotion in several forms, e.g., "processions with the Blessed Sacrament, especially the traditional procession on the Solemnity of Corpus Christi, do the Forty Hours devotion, attend local, national and international Eucharistic Congresses" (#68); place the tabernacle in the center of the sanctuary (69), place the cross at the center of the altar so as to be able to fix our gaze on him who is our Creator and not on ourselves; Genuflection when we enter the church or when we cross in front of the Tabernacle, respect the moment of consecration and to be mindful not to lose the sense of the sacred in our liturgical celebrations.

In doing all these, the Eucharist becomes a sacrifice in the strict sense, a thanksgiving for gift given for our sake, and indeed that of all humanity (cf. Mt. 26:28; Mk. 14:24; Luke. 22:20; Jn. 10:15), and our thanksgiving becomes a sacrifice that the Father accepts, giving, in return his own paternal gift, that is to say the granting of new immortal life in the resurrection" (EE, 13).

You may email/send your faith questions to Fr. James and he will answer them in our Sunday Bulletins.

