

“An Ordinance Forever”

The Biblical Origins of the Mass

By: Tom Nash

ISSUE: What are the biblical origins of the Mass and the New Testament priesthood? Is the Mass really a sacrifice, or is it merely symbolic?

RESPONSE: The biblical origins of the Mass and the New Testament priesthood are rooted in the Old Testament. Both the Old and New Testaments clearly prove that the Mass is a true sacrifice, offered by a priest, and the victim is the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ.

DISCUSSION: The Bible provides the primary proof that God ordained the New Testament priesthood and the Real Presence. Furthermore, proper exegesis of biblical sources affirms the sacrificial nature of the Mass. Old Covenant sacrifices find their culmination in Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary. Crucial to this issue is that God the Father stated three times that the Passover sacrifice would be an ordinance “forever,” not for a temporary period, such as until the Messiah came (Ex. 12:14, 17, 24; cf. Lk. 22:7-20).

Christ’s Sacrifice at the Last Supper was a sacrifice of His Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity [cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Catechism), nos. 1373-77, 1362-67]. Furthermore, the priesthood of Christ is the priesthood of Melchizedek, which replaces the Levitical priesthood of the Old Testament. This priesthood, handed on to the apostles and their successors, allows His sacrifice on Calvary to fulfill the ordinance of a perpetual sacrifice through the celebration of Mass (cf. Heb. 6:19-7:28).

Abraham, Isaac and the Passover Sacrifice: Prefiguring the Lamb of God

God made a covenant with Abraham, swearing that the nations (Gentiles) would bless themselves through His descendants (Gen. 22:18). He designated Mt. Moriah as the mountain upon which He would provide the sacrificial lamb (Gen. 22:8, 14). This was prefigured by the lamb that Abraham sacrificed that day (Gen. 22:13). God the Father fulfilled the sacrificial provision in an ultimate way by offering His only-begotten Son (cf. Gen. 22:2; Jn. 3:16), the Lamb of God (Rev. 5:6).

Interestingly, Mt. Moriah’s location, Salem, is another name for Zion or Jerusalem (2 Chron. 3:1; cf. Ps. 76:2). In fact, Mt. Moriah is named as the site of Solomon’s Temple, Jerusalem, the city at which Christ’s sacrificial death took place. Also, Melchizedek was the Priest and King of Salem (Gen. 14:18). Indeed, Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Mt. 26:28; cf. Mt. 20:28; Is. 53), the High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek, who offers Himself as the sacrifice of salvation (Heb. 6:19-7:28), and the universal blessing through whom all the nations will bless themselves (Jn. 1:29-35; Acts 3:17-26; cf. Gen. 22:18).

According to the terms of the Old Covenant, the Passover sacrifice has to be offered at the Temple in Jerusalem (Dt. 16:1-6; 2 Chron. 35:1-19), a sacrifice which has not occurred since the Temple’s destruction in 70 A.D. One is left with two conclusions. On one hand, you could argue that Israel has failed to keep the covenant with God recorded in Exodus 12. Yet, if that is true, God is thereby implicated, failing to provide His people with the means to continue the ordinance He told them to keep forever.

On the other hand, you could argue that the temple sacrifice was destined by God to become obsolete and that, as the Lamb of God, Jesus perfectly fulfilled the Passover sacrifice (1 Cor. 5:7). The Church argues precisely this way. Jesus prophesied the fall of the temple (Mt. 24:1-2), an event that happened in A.D. 70 shortly after the “desolating sacrilege” of the Temple (cf. Mt. 24:15; cf. Dan. 9:25-27). Attempts to rebuild the Temple have failed, most notably the 362 A.D. effort of the Roman Emperor Julian. He hoped to discredit Christ’s prophecy about the Temple. Violent earthquakes at the site killed many of his workmen. When miraculous balls of fire kept bursting forth from the Temple foundation to prevent the approach of workmen, Julian finally abandoned his attempt.¹

The question remains, how does the Passover sacrifice of Jesus Christ continue as an ordinance forever? Just as the old Passover lamb freed us from the bondage of slavery, the new Passover Lamb frees us from the slavery of sin (Mt. 26:28). In accepting designation as the new Lamb of God (Jn. 1:29-35), Jesus clearly states that He will be both sacrificed and eaten (cf. Jn. 6:51-66; Lk. 22:7-20), just as the old Passover lamb was both sacrificed and eaten (cf. Ex. 12:8-11). Unfortunately, most contemporary Protestants don’t accept this biblically based teaching about the Real Presence of Christ

in the Eucharist.²

One Sacrifice That Transcends Time and Space

The quick Protestant rejoinder is that Christ died “once for all” (Heb. 9:26-28; 10:10), to which the Church would say, “Amen!” The Church has always taught that the one Sacrifice of Christ and the Sacrifice of the Eucharist (the Mass) are “*one single sacrifice*,” and that the Eucharistic Sacrifice “*re-presents*” (makes present) Christ’s sacrifice on the cross (Catechism, nos. 1367, 1366). How can this be? God the Son created time and space and therefore is not bound by them (cf. Jn. 1:1-3, Col. 1:16). As an eternal Being, Christ stands outside of time and therefore all of history is simultaneously present to Him. This reality is difficult to understand. We cannot fully grasp God’s omnipotence, but it is true nonetheless; it goes beyond our reason to understand this, but it does not contradict reason, just like the dogmas of the Trinity or Christ’s being both God and man. To argue that God is limited by time and space is necessarily to argue that God is not omnipotent and therefore not God (cf. Mt. 19:26).

In short, then, God cannot create something, including time and space, that can limit Him. For example, because of God’s omnipotence, all of us, *not just one of us*, can be temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:9). This demonstrates His ability to be *transpatial*, for the Holy Spirit is present in the souls of *all* believers: the saints who have died (Rev. 6:9-12) and, within time, the faithful who are living today as well as tomorrow’s Christians. Therefore, we can speak of God’s being *transhistorical*, able to be present throughout time on earth and also outside of time in heaven. If Christians can recognize that the Holy spirit can apply the merits of Christ’s one Sacrifice throughout time via Baptism, why couldn’t an omnipotent God make present or re-present in sacramental form that one Sacrifice itself? In summary, relative to the eternal God, everything is present; relative to us as men, everything we experience within the world is bound in time and space.

The transpatial nature of the Eucharistic Sacrifice is indicated by the prophet Malachi: “For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts” (Mal. 1:11). The Church sees the sacrifice of the Mass being prophesied in Malachi, for what other truly pure sacrifice could there be that Christians can offer throughout the world every day?

The Mass’ transhistorical nature is first illustrated when Christ offered His glorified Body and Blood at the Last Supper, the day *before* he actually died on the Cross (Catechism, nos. 1337-40); it is illustrated thereafter in the Mass offered by His disciples. If God is eternal and transcends time, then what He does as the God-man transcends history. St. Paul notes that Christ’s sacrifice as the new Passover Lamb is once for all, but he also explains that its celebration somehow continues on in history: “For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us, therefore, celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Cor. 5:7-8).

Because Christ died “once for all,” we speak of the Eucharist as “unbloody.” He is not killed again and again at each Mass; if that were so, there would be many sacrifices. Rather, as the Council of Trent teaches, “the same Christ who offered himself once in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross is contained and offered in an unbloody manner” at each Mass (Catechism, no. 1367).

He’s Got His Whole Self . . . In His Hands?

Some people ask incredulously, “Could God hold Himself in His hands at the Last Supper? And, could He offer up a sacrifice the day before He actually died?” Well, yes, Jesus could because He can do all things (Mt. 19:26), such as when He appeared to His disciples in the flesh miraculously after His resurrection, despite closed doors (Jn. 20:19, 26). To answer the question about the Last Supper adequately, we must examine the biblical and other historical evidence for the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist, analyzing whether God really offered His Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity at the Last Supper and whether priests re-present the same one Sacrifice at every Mass.

Consider Jesus’ words,

He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. . . [H]e who eats this bread will live for ever (Jn. 6:54-58).

Some Christians argue that Christ meant this statement figuratively, just as He did when He described Himself as the vine (Jn. 15:1-5) or the door (Jn. 10:7-9). However, “to eat the body and drink the blood” of someone was an ancient Hebrew idiom that meant to slander a person. Psalm 27:2 testifies to this figurative meaning: “When evildoers assail me, uttering slanders against me, my adversaries and foes, they shall stumble and fall.” A footnote in the Revised Standard

Version confirms that “uttering slanders against me” in Hebrew literally means “to eat up my flesh.” If we then insert the figurative meaning in John 6:54, Jesus says that “he who slanders me has eternal life.” Such an accurate translation of the figurative meaning would make our divine Lord look very foolish.

While the Levitical priesthood prohibited the consumption of blood (Lev. 17:14; cf. Gen. 9:1-2), Jesus comes to do away with this old law and its temporary disciplines (Heb. 7). Given that these Levitical prohibitions were still in force when Christ preached that day in Capernaum, you could understand the Jews’ disbelief and would therefore logically expect Christ to clarify Himself if He intended a figurative interpretation of His Words, especially in light of the Jews’ ensuing departure (Jn. 6:25-66). Jesus provided no clarification. As the aforementioned Hebrew idiom attests, His words could not have been figurative.

St. Paul further affirms the Real Presence during the sacrifice of the Mass in 1 Cor. 11:23-32. How can people be “guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord,” and why are they getting sick and even dying if they’re merely consuming bread and wine? As Jesus conveys and St. Paul affirms, the re-presentation of this one Offering—this breaking of bread—was to continue in the Church (Lk. 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:23-26; cf. Acts 2:42). We partake of this one Sacrifice in a sacramental manner, i.e., under the appearance of bread and wine and in a way that doesn’t diminish God, who is infinite. Jesus not only replaces Passover with Easter, He also makes possible the New Covenant of His Sacrifice to be re-presented every day at Mass (cf. Acts 2:42).

Making Sense of Salvation History: A Priesthood Forever According to Melchizedek

Christ’s priesthood forever according to Melchizedek (Heb. 5:6; Ps. 110:4) makes the connection between the Last Supper, Jesus’ crucifixion, and the Mass understandable. The author of Hebrews teaches that, through His suffering and death on the Cross at Calvary, Christ “became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him . . . as a high priest after the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 5:7-10). Melchizedek offered bread and wine (Gen. 14:17-20) and Christ offers His glorified Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity under the appearances of bread and wine (Mt. 26:26-28; cf. Jn. 6:48, 58). Christ’s flesh and blood is real food and drink that provides salvation, i.e., eternal life (Jn. 6:54-55); His one Sacrifice is re-presented, commemorated and celebrated forever (Rev. 5:1-14); and we partake of that one Sacrifice on earth by consuming His Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity under the appearance of bread and wine at Mass.

Various other passages refer to a New Testament ministerial priesthood by name or allude it. These include 1 Peter 2:5, 9; Revelation 1:5-6, 5:10, 20:6; and Romans 15:16. Undoubtedly, though, the clearest evidence for this new priesthood are the various biblical passages that prefigure and substantiate the Eucharist and its sacrificial nature, and also the overwhelming testimony from the early Church:

The Lord, having loved those who were his own, loved them to the end. Knowing that the hour had come to leave this world and return to the Father, in the course of a meal he washed their feet and gave the commandment of love. In order to leave them a pledge of this love, in order never to depart from his own [cf. Mt. 28:20] and to make them sharers in his Passover, he instituted the Eucharist as the memorial of his death and Resurrection, and command his apostles to celebrate it until his return; “thereby he constituted them priests of the New Testament” (Catechism, no. 1337).

Christ is the one mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5), but He allows man to participate in His mediation, such as through exercising authority in general (Mt. 28:18-20), granting forgiveness of sin (Jn. 20:21-23), and re-presenting His one Sacrifice sacramentally (Mt. 26:26-28). The Catholic Church is the new and fulfilled Israel, a spiritual house and holy priesthood (1 Pet. 2:5). The Eucharist is disconcerting to some Christians, not only because it simultaneously shows God’s awesome omnipotence and humble condescension, but also because it reminds us that salvation is not a momentary, once-for-all event, but a process that involves our saying yes to God each and every day. Salvation is by grace, but our free-will assent is needed for salvation to be efficacious in our lives.

Christ has perfected the Passover ordinance. He has torn down the barrier between God and man (Mt. 27:51), enabling us to be reconciled with the Father and again partake of His divine nature (Rom. 5:15-17; 2 Pet. 1:4). Heeding Christ’s command, we continue re-presenting and partaking of that One Sacrifice at every Mass. While this is a hard saying to digest (Jn. 6:60), it is very much in keeping with salvation history, and not too remarkable for a God who created us out of nothing and became man to save us from our sins (Jn. 3:16). Our response to such an incredible gift should echo the words of St. Peter when asked by Christ if he also would leave Him: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God” (Jn. 6:68-69).

¹ See George Sim Johnston's September 1994 *Lay Witness*. Call Information Services (800-693-2484) for a copy.

² Interestingly, Martin Luther and John Calvin, leaders in the Protestant Reformation, believed in the Real Presence, although their doctrine was inaccurate. Luther believed that the Body and Blood was present with the bread and wine, while Calvin believed Christ was present spiritually with the bread and wine. Neither, however, recognized the sacrificial nature of the Mass.

AVAILABLE FROM CUF BOOKS AND TAPES BY MAIL

Holy Bible

Catechism of the Catholic Church (Paperback and hardback available)

Old Testament Priests and the New Priest, Albert Van Hoya, St. Bede's Publications Father

The Bible and the Mass, Fr. Peter Stravinskas

To order, call Benedictus Books toll-free: 1-888-316-2640. Ask for prices. CUF members receive 10% discount.

The Bible and the Liturgy, Jean Cardinal Danielou, S.J. (Loome's: 651-430-1092)

The Mass, Fr. Joseph Jungmann (Loome's: 651-430-1092)

FAITH Facts, Answers to Catholic Questions; Suprenant and Gray, \$11.95 • CUF Member...\$10.75

To order, call Emmaus Road Publishing toll-free: 1-800-398-5470.

Faith Facts, Free Member Service: 1-800-MY FAITH (693-2484)

• Christ's Real Presence in the Eucharist • Augustine's Real Faith in the Real Presence • The Prohibition of Blood in the Old Testament • Salvation History of the Catholic Church • The Biblical Reality of Mortal Sin • Moral Conscience • Not By Faith Alone: The Catholic Understanding of Justification

Catholics United for the Faith
827 N. Fourth St.
Steubenville, OH 43952
(800) 693-2484

© 1999 Catholics United for the Faith, Inc.

Last edited: 8/6/99