



Jesus Christ Dies Again?

Since we begin with the new Revised Roman Missal on the first Sunday of Advent, I thought it might be good to write an apologetic on the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Catechesis on the Mass is one thing, this article will be in defense of the Sacrifice of the Mass, a teaching that is misunderstood and even called blasphemous by many fundamentalist Christians. It may take three parts to finish this apologetic.

See if this rings a bell: the Catholic Mass is a blasphemous sacrilege which contradicts the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross. The Letter to the Hebrews couldn't have made it clearer; Christ needed to die only once. So, no more sacrifice is required for the atonement of sin. Since the Mass claims to be a sacrifice, it's obviously in direct violation of Scripture. Therefore, Catholics are dopes.

Maybe you haven't heard that last part said in exactly those words, but it has certainly been implied. Here's the crux of the problem: Catholics say the Mass is the sacrifice of Christ at Calvary, but there are countless Masses said every day in every part of the world. Hebrews is very clear that Jesus died "once for all." If the Bible says Jesus was sacrificed once, how can Catholics believe that the Mass is truly a Sacrifice?

The only way to answer this question and objection is to take a look at just how the Mass is truly a sacrifice of Christ on the cross. We begin with a quote from the Council of Trent:

"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. Therefore, the holy Council teaches that this sacrifice is truly propitiatory, so that, if we draw near to God with an upright heart and true faith, with fear and reverence, with sorrow and repentance, through it 'we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need.' For the Lord, appeased by this oblation, grants grace and the gift of repentance, and he pardons wrong-doings and sins, even grave ones" (session 22, 2).

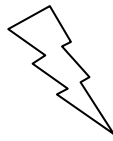
What does that mean? Notice the words "propitiatory," "appeased by this oblation" and "pardons for wrong-doings and sins." This means the sacrifice of Christ's Body and Blood (under the appearance of bread and wine) is offered to God in order to appease Him for sins we've committed, and receive grace from Him to keep from sinning again. Here's where the Evangelical reader will drop the article and scream, "Blasphemy!" To him, Christ died once as a sacrifice. There is no need to propitiate any further.

Keep in mind that "propitiation" is a fancy word meaning "appeasement" for a personal offense. In Scripture you might find the word "expiation." There is a subtle but important difference between the two terms. "Expiation" has a legal flavor. If you break a law, they pay a fine; you've expiated the wrath of the law. "Propitiation" is a more personal term. If you anger your father, then do something nice to make up for it, you've propitiated his anger. Since the Council of Trent used the word "propitiate," I'll be using that word in the article.

The Protestant position on this comes from their belief that, when Christ died on the Cross, He paid for all of our sins—past sins, present sins, and even sins we haven't committed yet. They often quote 2 Corinthians 5:21: "For our sake he {God} made him {Christ} to be sine who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God," or 1 Peter 2:24: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness." To them, these verses prove sin was completely paid for on the cross. The problem with this interpretation is twofold:

1. Neither these two verses, nor any other passage in Sacred Scripture, state specifically that Christ paid for all our past, present and future sins.
2. The Protestant interpretation contradicts the legal principles of payment. The full payment for sin is eternal damnation (Rev. 20:13-14), but Christ didn't suffer eternal damnation on the Cross. In fact, He Rose from the dead in three days. Moreover, no Scripture passage says that during those three days He suffered the punishment of hell. So, if the classical Protestant interpretation doesn't hold up, how do we interpret those verses? What did Christ do on the Cross? Simply put, both passages refer to Christ being a "sin offering" or a "propitiatory sacrifice" to God for man's sins. They don't say Christ paid the full penalty of sin. In fact, the word "bore" in 1 Peter 2:24 is from a Greek word that refers to a sacrificial offering, not a legal payment.

Such an offering, or "propitiation," is an act done by someone who is appealing to the mercy and compassion of the person he has sinned against. A worthy person offers a gift or sacrifice, in hope that the offended person will be satisfied and withdraw his wrath and retribution. St. Thomas Aquinas will put it more clearly next week.



Jesus Dies Again? Part Two

St. Thomas Aquinas puts it this way: “This is properly the effect of a sacrifice that through it God is appeased, as even man is ready to forgive an injury done unto him by accepting a gift which is offered to him....And so in the same way, what Christ suffered was so great a good that, on account of that good found in human nature, God has been appeased over all the offenses of mankind” (*Summa Theologica*, III, Q. 49).

Isaiah 53:1-12 describes in detail how Christ appeased God: “Yet it was the will of the Lord to bruise him; he has put him to grief; when he makes himself {Christ} an offering for sin...the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand; he {the Lord} shall see the fruit of the travail of his {Christ’s} and be satisfied...he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressor.”

In being appeased for our sins, God opens up an avenue of grace that can enable man to repent of his sins and reconcile with Him. Only Christ could have performed this action of appeasement, for He was worthy to offer sacrifice. God doesn’t accept sacrifice from just anybody. Also, in providing that avenue of grace, God isn’t paying something He owes to man. He is simply answering Christ’s offering by granting man an opportunity. God only saves those who respond to the grace won by Christ, as they humble themselves before Him in sincere repentance. If Christ had actually “paid” for our sins, then, indeed, God would legally owe us salvation. He would be required to bring everyone in the world to heaven because, if a debt is fully paid, there can be no further payment required. In other words, if Christ made legal payment for the sins of man, then God couldn’t send anyone to hell; in being just, He couldn’t demand double payment for the same sin. Christ’s suffering and death did not “pay” for man’s sins. Rather, they were a pleading to God to pull back His wrath and offer His grace to man.

Let’s take a look at the passages in Hebrews that say Christ died “once for all.” What do they mean? Do they really contradict Catholic belief that the sacrifice of Calvary is actually made present in the Eucharist? Do they rule out Christ continually being offered at the Mass as an appeasement for sin? Well, if so, those verses also contradict the rest of Hebrews. For example, Hebrews 9:23 states: “Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites [Old Testament sacrifices], but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these.” In other words, the people and objects of the Old Covenant were purified with animal sacrifices, but the heavenly things of the New Covenant, must be purified with “better sacrifices” than those of Old.

There are two outstanding qualities about these sacrifices: They are better and they are plural in number – sacrifices, not sacrifice.

So, when do these occur? They couldn’t refer only to the cross, because that was only one sacrifice. The next verse gives us a hint as to the meaning of the passage: “For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into Heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (Hebrews. 9:24). This verse shows that the sacrifices are occurring now in Heaven, where is offering them in the presence of God Himself. Clearly then, the once for all sacrifice of Christ on the Cross doesn’t rule out His continual offering of sacrifices to God in Heaven. If it did, Hebrews 9:23-24 would be in contradiction.

What do sacrifices do? According to St. Thomas Aquinas they’re designed to appease God for our sins. Whenever Christ offers sacrifice, it’s to propitiate God for our sins, only now, it’s occurring in Heaven in the presence of the Eternal Father.

Do any other passages support this? Yes, many. For example, Hebrews 2:17 states: “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 propitiation for the sins of His people.” Two questions arise from this verse:

1. How long is the priesthood of Christ?
2. When does Christ make the propitiation? Tune in next week for the answers.



JESUS DIES AGAIN?

Cont'd from last week.

Let's answer the first question. How long is the priesthood of Christ? Everyone would agree that Christ's priesthood began with His ministry on earth. According to Hebrews 8:1-3, however, Christ's high priesthood is continuing even now. It reads: "...we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent which is set up not by man but by the Lord. For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices." Notice, Christ isn't merely sitting at the right hand of Majesty; He's now a minister serving in the sanctuary of God. The service He performs is the service of priests---to offer gifts and sacrifices.

Not only that, but Christ's role in offering sacrifices continues. Hebrews 2:17 uses a present tense Greek verb for "propitiation." The present tense means that the propitiation is ongoing (for the purpose of appeasing God for the present "sins of the people").

The principle of ongoing propitiation is also explained in 1 John 2:1, "My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." Notice that the propitiation is ongoing, and it is applied to those who sin presently. If a past appeasement was all that was needed, then it wouldn't matter whether we sinned presently or not. According to St. John, we need a continual propitiation for our present and future sins.

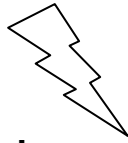
Notice also that Christ is the "propitiation...for the sins of the whole world," yet we know from other verses that the whole world is not saved. This just strengthens our previous discovery that Christ did not pay for the sins of the whole world; rather, He made appeasement for sins and is the world's intercessor, pleading for God's mercy on our behalf. Because of Christ, God will be merciful if we repent of our sins. He doesn't give grace on the basis of having received a legal payment. God's grace is offered only out of His personal love and mercy, since He is not obligated to give it to us.

Now we can see the fuller meaning of the sacrifices in Hebrews 9:23-24. Christ is *currently* presenting Himself before the Father as a sacrificial propitiation, an intercessor, for the sins of people who desire to be His brothers. What do these sacrifices correspond to on earth? The answer is the Catholic Mass, which the Council of Trent describes as a "sacrifice" which "is truly propitiatory." It's through the Sacrifices of Masses all over the world that God is "appeased by this oblation," and "grants grace and the gift of repentance, and He pardons wrong-doings and sins." According to the Fathers of the Church (Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, et al), the Mass is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Malachi 1:11, "...in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations." As Pope Pius XII said of the Mass, "As regards the offering of the Eucharistic Sacrifice, it is the case that there are as many acts of Christ the High Priest as there are celebrating priests" (Nov. 2, 1954).

Hold on a second. If Hebrews 9:23-24 is so clear concerning the present sacrifices of Christ, what would a typical Evangelical say about these verses? How could they get around the Catholic interpretation? Here's a sample from of Catholicism's more strident opponents:

"He enters into the presence of the Father, having obtained eternal redemption. Christ presents Himself before the Father as the perfect oblation in behalf of His people. His work of intercession, then, is based on His work of atonement. Intercession is not another or different kind of work, but is the presentation of the work of the cross before the Father... the Son intercedes for men before the Father on the basis of the fact that in His death He has taken away the sins of God's people, and therefore, by presenting His finished work on Calvary before the Father, He assures the application of the benefits of His death to those for whom He intercedes."

Sounds pretty Catholic doesn't it? This because the evangelical author of the above is forced to deal with the clear language of the verse—language that undeniably connects the cross of Christ with His ongoing Priesthood in Heaven. Catholicism claims the same thing for the Mass that the Evangelical Protestant author claims for his own faith. We can use his own words and say with confidence the Mass is a "presentation of the work of the Cross before the Father" which "assures the application of the benefits of His death to those for whom He intercedes." The only real difference is that Catholics often use the word "representation" instead of "presentation." It's funny, then, that opponents of the Church are so appalled at Catholicism's view of the benefits of the Mass when, in fact, they believe something very familiar to it. We will sum all of this up in next week's final installment on the Mass. God bless you.



Jesus Dies Again? Final Installment

...But, why does the writer of Hebrews describe the cross as a “once for all” sacrifice, if, as he says in Hebrews 9:23-24, Christ is presently offering sacrifices to the Father?

The answer is Hebrews 9:12, where Christ, by His suffering and death, is described as having “entered once for all into the Most Holy Place.” His one-time entrance is contrasted to the priests of the Old Testament who had to go “in and out” of the Most Holy Place, once per year on the Day of Atonement (Hebrews 9:7). In other words, once Christ enters the Most Holy Place (Heaven), He doesn’t have to go out of Heaven and then enter it again. Once He enters, He’s there to stay, because His Priesthood is permanent. Thus, the once-for-all aspect of Christ’s work doesn’t puzzle the Catholic at all. In fact, when properly understood, it supports the Catholic claims for the Mass much better than does the Protestant claim that no more sacrifice occurs or is needed at the Cross. The very reason Christ can presently offer sacrifices to the Father is that He has entered Heaven, once for all, by His death on the Cross. What Christ now gives to the Father is the sacrificial representation of crucifixion (though He no longer suffers or dies). This is why Revelation 5:6, which refers to the present time, speaks of “a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain...” God is on the throne, observing the re-represented sacrifice of Christ, and is appeased for our sins.

With all of this in mind, just what is it that Jesus is getting us by offering Himself to the Father? Why does He need to continue doing it?

The answer is obvious when we recognize that 51% of the Letter to the Hebrews pertains to warnings against falling into apostasy and losing one’s salvation. Nearly every chapter, from two through thirteen, contains warnings against apostasy (cf, 3:1, 6:12, 14; 4:1, 11:14; 6:4-6, 11-12; 10:26-28; 12:1-3, 14,17, 25-29). The only interlude comes in chapters seven through nine, which directly describes Christ’s priestly intercession. Those chapters comprise 40% of Hebrews. There is also chapter eleven which, not surprisingly, highlights examples of those who remained faithful against great odds and didn’t fall into apostasy.

The connection between 51% of the verses in Hebrews pertaining to apostasy and 40% pertaining to Christ’s priesthood becomes quite clear: Christ’s present priestly intercession before the Father is *done for the very purpose of helping His brethren on earth to not fall into apostasy*. If they find life difficult and are tempted to forsake their calling, they can call upon Christ, Who suffered as they did, and Who appeals to the Father for mercy and effectual graces to fight against the lures of sin. These brethren can depend on Christ to be there when they need Him, for He’s not like the priests of the Old Covenant. He has a permanent priesthood, one that is “able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him (Heb. 7:25).

At the Mass, Christ’s one sacrifice on the Cross is made present again. The priest offers it up as propitiation, to appease God for the sins we commit in our lives. In exchange for this offering, the Father gives us the grace to remain His children, the grace to keep ourselves from sin. And all of this, because Christ has entered the Most Holy Place...once for all.

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