

THE SACRIFICE OF THE MASS

By Jim Seghers

Introduction

In the early Church the Christian worship service, the Mass, was always considered a sacrifice. The renown non-Catholic scholar J. N. D. Kelly wrote:

“The eucharist was also, of course, the great act of worship of Christians, their *sacrifice*. The writers and liturgies of the period are *unanimous* in recognizing it as such.”¹

However, when Protestants attend their church they experience a liturgy centered on Sacred Scripture, which is similar to the first part of the Catholic Mass. They do not view their church services as a sacrifice.

Therefore, when they hear the Catholic Mass referred to as the *sacrifice* of the Mass, it strikes them odd to say the least, if not down right offensive. They are often erroneously taught that misguided Catholics believe Jesus is continually re-sacrificed on their altars. Loraine Boettner is typical of those who spread this false understanding of the Mass: “The Church of Rome holds that the mass is a continuation of the sacrifice that Christ made on Calvary [true], that it is in reality *a re-crucifixion* [not true] *of our Lord over and over again*, in an unbloody manner.”²

When Catholics explain that the Mass is not another sacrifice, but the same sacrifice of Jesus made present in the Catholic liturgy – not a re-crucifixion, other questions are raised. How can the events of Jesus’ Passion, Death, and Resurrection be continued? What Biblical passages support the Catholic understanding of the Mass?

The Essence of Jesus’ sacrifice

What is the essence of Jesus’ sacrifice that pleased the Father and reconciled fallen humanity with God? Was it his suffering alone, or was it his obedient surrender amid his terrible suffering? If one says, “His suffering,” the Heavenly Father is viewed as a divine sadist who takes pleasure in the pain of others, as if he waited for the intensity of Jesus’ anguish to reach its highest degree before his justice was satisfied. There is no evidence in Sacred Scripture to support this distorted view.

On the contrary, the Heavenly Father was pleased with Jesus’ obedience, which is another way of saying his submissive love:

“And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:9-11).

¹ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 214.

² Boettner, *Roman Catholicism*, p. 174 (emphasis mine).

“In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek” (Heb 5:7-10).

Notice the key points in the citation from Hebrews:

- Jesus “was heard because of his reverent submission,” not because of the extent of his suffering.
- Jesus was perfected in his human nature by his “obedience.” Obedience in Sacred Scripture is often used as a synonym for “love”.
- It was through Jesus’ obedience/love that “he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.” Indeed, were it not for Jesus’ obedience we would not have been redeemed even if he had died on the cross.
- Our salvation is not automatic; it requires that we “obey him”. This understanding is consistent with the “obedience of faith” that St. Paul uses to frame the Book of Romans (Rom 1:5; 16:26), and St. Paul’s teaching in Galatians: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love” (Gal 5:6). The centrality of Jesus’ obedience is also highlighted in other passages.³
- Jesus is identified as a priest according to the order of Melchizedek, that is, the priesthood of the father and his first-born son that continued from Adam until the Levitical priesthood was instituted because of the apostasy of the golden calf (Ex 32:29).

The Elements of Jesus’ Sacrifice

What, then, are the key elements of Jesus’ sacrifice? There are three key components. First there is Jesus’ obedient submission to the Father. Secondly, there is the sacrifice of blood, namely, his Passion and Death. Finally, there is Jesus’ offering of himself to the Father for the benefit of mankind.

Did Everything End on Calvary?

The Book of Hebrews draws a sharp contrast between the numerous sacrifices of the Levitical law and the singular sacrifice of Jesus. The sacrifices of the Old Law were many and weak. They were incapable of reconciling mankind’s broken relationship with God. In the words of Hebrews:

“For it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins” (Heb 10:4).

Jesus’ unique sacrifice, in contrast to the many sacrifices of the Old Law, occurred once and is powerful. It is so potent that it alone is fully capable of restoring sinful humanity to divine sonship. Therefore, by his Passion, Death and Resurrection Jesus completely conquered sin and death:

³ For example: Jn 4:34; 5:30; 6:38; Heb 10:7, 9.

“And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ *once for all*” (Heb 10:10).

The contrast between the Levitical sacrifices and the unique sacrifice of Jesus is briefly summarized in Hebrews 10:11-14:

“And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time *a single sacrifice* for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, then to wait until his enemies should be made a stool for his feet. For by *a single offering* he has perfected *for all time* those who are sanctified.”

Because Jesus now reigns gloriously in heaven never to suffer again, some have incorrectly concluded that the Jesus’ sacrifice ended on Calvary in its entirety. Is that what Sacred Scripture teaches? No! Certainly, Jesus’ suffering ended. However, Jesus’ offering of his loving surrender to the Father continues in eternity because his priesthood is eternal. Therefore, his sacrifice continues eternally. Jesus did not retire from his priesthood, just as he did not resign his kingship. Consider how this understanding is supported in the Book of Hebrews:

“We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner shrine beyond the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner *on our behalf*, having become a high priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek” (Heb 6:19-20).

Notice the sacred text draws a sharp contrast between the Levitical high priest, who entered the holy of holies through the curtain with the blood of the slain victims, and Jesus who entered into the heavenly holy of holies through the curtain of death to continually mediate “on our behalf.”⁴

The Book of Hebrews also teaches that the covenant God made through Moses was ratified with blood because it signified the need for an interior transformation that looked to the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. These Old Testament sacrificial rituals only forgave external defilement.⁵ The inspired author introduces *blood* into the text to show its ritual connection with the forgiveness of sin. These blood sacrifices foreshadowed the sacrifice of the new covenant that could restore mankind. However, the Levitical sacrifices were incapable of removing sin.

“For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, saying, ‘This is the blood of the covenant which God commanded you.’ And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins (Heb 9:19-22).

⁴ See: Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary of the Epistle of the Hebrews*, translated by Thomas L. Kingsbury, 2 vols., Minneapolis: Minnesota: Klock & Klock Christian Publishers, Vol. I, p. 323, 238.

⁵ An example of the ceremonial cleanness accomplished by the Old Testament blood sacrifices is seen in Lev. 5:9-10; 16:30. “Like every other Old Covenant sacrifice, it depended on the ultimate sacrifice of Christ even for its temporary effectiveness,” Sungenis, *Not By Bread Alone*, p.81.

The inspired author continues his comparison between the blood sacrifices of the Old Covenant and the sacrifices of the New Covenant. The significance of the plural, “sacrifices”, will be discussed subsequently in connection with Christ’s singular “sacrifice” in verse 26.⁶

“Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these” (Heb 9:23).

“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*” (Heb 9:24).

The word *now* is a primary particle of present time, meaning Jesus continues to offer himself as on our behalf. This verse reinforces Jesus’ ongoing priestly mediation in heaven, which is connected with his death on the cross. So while the death and suffering ended on Calvary, the offering continues in heaven.

“Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the Holy Place yearly with blood not his own; for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared *once for all* at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (Heb 9:25-28).

The contrast in the above passage between Jesus’ singular sacrifice and the annual sacrifices of the Aaronic high priest is again emphasized. The point of comparison is *going in* and *going out*. The high priest needed to quickly leave the Holy of Holies, only to reenter on the next Day of Atonement. If Jesus were a high priest like Aaron he would also have to go in and out. In that case he would have “*to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world,*” for like Aaron his sacrifice would not be sufficient. However, Jesus permanently resides in the heavenly sanctuary continually offering the single sacrifice of himself.

Here we discover the harmony between “sacrifices” in Hebrews 9:23 and the singular use here. Jesus’ sacrifice is one, but it is eternally offered to the Father in the heavenly sanctuary and therefore can be repeatedly re-presented (made present) on earth in the sacrifice of the Mass.

The Eucharistic celebration is also the fulfillment of Malachi’s prophesy: “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).⁷

⁶ Some have argued that the use of the plural is a mistake. However, the use of the plural in the inspired text can’t be disputed because the Greek manuscripts contain no textual variant.

⁷ Sungenis, *Not By Bread Alone*, pp. 82-83.

This prophecy can't refer to the crucifixion, which occurred in one location only. However, the unbloody sacrifice of the Mass, which is the liturgical re-presentation (making present) of Calvary, fulfills this prophecy perfectly. Some Protestant apologists have argued that the sacrifice of Mal 1:11 refers to prayers of praise, worship and thanksgiving. This argument falls apart once the language of the Hebrew text is examined. The word used for "offering," *minchah* in Hebrew, is a technical Old Testament term for unbloody sacrifices, usually a meal offering. Therefore, it cannot refer to some "spiritualized" sacrifice of prayer. This term is used to convey the opposite meaning of the Hebrew word *sebach*, which means a bloody sacrifice.⁸

The Protestant Old Testament scholar Joyce Baldwin correctly identifies the key elements in Malachi's prophecy. God's name will be honored among the Gentiles because they will come to know God. This worldwide worship will be independent from the Levitical sacrifices because this "pure offering" transcends all other sacrifices. No Levitical sacrifice was ever described in these terms. It can only refer to the singular sacrifice of Jesus.⁹

The explanation given above of the passages cited in Hebrews are in perfect agreement with earlier quoted passages. Thus, the inspired author writes in Chapter 7 of Hebrews: "The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; but he 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* [present active infinitive] *to make intercession* [present middle deponent (active) participle] for them (Heb 7:23-25).

St. Paul shows that Melchizedek's priesthood was limited to 20 years from age 30 to 50 (Num 4:3-43; 8:25). However, Jesus' priesthood is an everlasting priesthood because *he always lives to make intercession* for us. The use of the present tense is decisive. Jesus is the reigning active priest-king in the heavenly sanctuary who perpetually offers himself to the Father for us.

Someone might point out that Catholic priests also die. Doesn't their mortality show a lack of continuity similar to Levitical priests that would also make their mediation ineffective? The answer is "No," because sacramental priests of the New Covenant are not mediators in the strict sense. Jesus is the only mediator in the absolute sense.¹⁰ Their mediation is totally subordinate to and dependent on the perfect mediation of Jesus

⁸ Claus Westermann, *Genesis: A Continental Commentary*, 3 volumes, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, c. 1984, Vol. I, p. 294. Westermann is the Protestant professor emeritus at the University of Heidelberg.

⁹ "Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi," *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity press, c. 1972), Vol. 24, pp. 229-230.

¹⁰ [*Catechism*](#), #'s [65-66](#), [480](#), [667](#), [771](#), [846](#).

Christ. Catholic priests stand in the person of Christ¹¹ from who they derive their potency. Only Jesus' priesthood is eternal!

The texts cited above clearly show that Jesus' priestly sacrifice is eternally active in his offering, but not in his suffering. It is not just eternal in its effects. In the opening verse of Chapter 5 of the *Book of Hebrews* priesthood is defined in terms of sacrifice: "For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins" (Heb 5:1). Christ's sacrifice was not an event that occurred once in time and is completely finished.

Professor Thompson underscores the same idea. "There is a permanence to the crucified Lamb that cannot be captured by locating the crucifixion in time, for example 'under Pontius Pilate' or 'in the first century of the Common Era.' To put it differently, the crucifixion is much more than a momentary event in history. That permanence is captured in the Book of Revelation through spatial, not temporal, imagery. The 'slain Lamb' appears not only on earth but also in heaven, close to the throne (5:6)."¹²

Some have argued that the Mass cannot be a legitimate sacrifice because the Lord's blood is not shed. This conclusion is defective for two reasons. First, the sacrifice of the Mass is not a stand alone act apart from Christ's passion and death, but its re-presentation. Secondly, not all legitimate sacrifices are bloody. In Romans 12:1 St. Paul declares: "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present *your bodies* as a *living sacrifice*, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. This is achieved by surrendering to Christ in his sacrifice that is made present at every Mass.

Sufficiency

Because Jesus is the eternal, first-born Son of the Father there is no need for multiple sacrifices to reconcile the human race with the Father. His "*once for all*" sacrifice (Heb 7:27) is sufficient, because it effects all times and continues eternally. This reality raises the following questions. If Jesus' sacrifice is sufficient, why do Catholic priests offer the sacrifice of the Mass thousands of times each day? Doesn't the proliferation of Masses call into question the sufficiency of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection?

The resolution of these questions resides in the proper understanding of "*once for all*". If one understands "*once for all*" to mean that Jesus' sacrifice is a singular event that ended on Calvary then it is incompatible with the Catholic belief in the sacrifice of the Mass. However, if only Jesus' suffering ended on Golgotha, but the offering of himself to the Father continues in heaven as is explicitly taught in *Hebrews*, than the Catholic doctrine of the sacrifice of the Mass is fully compatible with Sacred Scripture. Indeed, the

¹¹ *In persona Christi Capitis*; See: [Catechism # 1548](#) citing [Lumen Gentium](#) 10; 28; *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 33; *Christus Dominus* 11; *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 2; 6; Pius XII, *Mediator Dei*; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa*, III, 22, 4c.

¹² Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire*, New York: Oxford University Press, c. 1990, p. 85 (emphasis mine). Professor Thompson is Professor of Religious Studies and Dean of the Faculty at Lawrence University.

Catholic Church teaches that the Eucharistic sacrifice forms one single sacrifice with the sacrifice of the cross.¹³

In his commentary on the *Book of Revelation* Professor Thompson writes: “The sacrificial action of the God-man was not limited to the moment in which flesh and blood were outwardly separated on the cross. The glorified Redeemer *still continues it in his will, and therefore in substance*. The same self-sacrificing love which accomplished the work of Calvary, still agitates His heart in heaven, and pulsates therein upon our altars.”¹⁴

This understanding provides insight into John’s vision of Jesus in Rev. 6:5: “a Lamb standing as if it had been slain.” Slain lambs don’t stand. They collapse. However this image makes sense in the context of Jesus as the eternal priest and the eternal *victim* forever offering himself to the Father. Thus, Jesus bears the marks of his passion and death in his glorified body. These marks of his eternal submission to the Father for us will always be visible. They are an eternal reminder of the price by which we are bought and Jesus’ eternally active role as priest and victim. David Chilton affirms this idea in his masterful commentary: “The *Revelation of St. John* then proceeds to show us the Lamb as it had been slain for Sacrifice.”¹⁵

The *Book of Revelation* makes it clear that Jesus’ active priesthood continues in heaven. Jesus is identified as a “lamb” 28 times in Revelation, and only 4 times in the rest of the New Testament.¹⁶ John mentions the altar in paradise 7 times, which is significant. For example *Revelation* 13:10 proclaims: “We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat.” This is an important verse. If Jesus’ sacrifice was completed on Calvary, what need would there be for an altar in heaven?¹⁷ An altar by definition is a place of sacrifice. If the cross is the only true altar, than there can be no other legitimate altar elsewhere, including heaven.

St. Paul makes the point that the Levitical priests have no right to eat the sacrificed flesh of Christ:

“We have an altar from which to eat, that those who minister at the tabernacle have no rights” (Heb 13:10).¹⁸

The Eucharistic altar where Jesus’ sacrifice is re-presented and where Christians commune is contrasted here with the consumed sacrifices of the Old Covenant. The Apostle uses the same Greek word for “altar” that is used in the Old Testament (Ex 12:1-15; 24:10; Lev 7:1-20) because both are sacrifices. It is noteworthy that “St. Paul continues to use sacrificial language to express the Christian liturgy – language that is

¹³ [Catechism](#), #'s [1137](#), [1138](#), [1139](#); [2642](#).

¹⁴ Delitzsch, Vol. II, p. 89.

¹⁵ David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, Fr. Worth: Dominion Press, c. 1987, p. 595. David Chilton was the pastor of the Church of the Redeemer, an Orthodox Presbyterian congregation.

¹⁶ John 1:29, 36; Acts 8:32; 1 Peter 1:19.

¹⁷ The same Greek word, *thusiasterion*, is used in Heb 7:13 for the altar in Old Covenant. It is also used for the altar in heaven in the Book of Revelation (Rev 6:9; 8:3, 5; 9:13; 1:1; 14:18; 16:7).

¹⁸ This verse supports the Church’s requirements that only baptized in communion with the Church can partake of the Eucharist.

very literal and specific. He contrasts the ceremonial foods eaten by Jews that have no value with the food from the altar of Christ which has great value. Since he specifies the physical eating of the sacrifice, he cannot be referring to a mere symbolic act but to the actual eating of the liturgical food.”¹⁹ Those who would reduce Holy Communion to a mere common meal of fellowship miss the point entirely.

The connection between the Catholic Mass and the Book of Revelation is striking as the following citations demonstrate²⁰

Sunday worship	1:10
a high priest	1:13
an altar	6:9, 8:3, 5; 9:13; 11:1; 14:18; 16:7
priests (<i>presbyteroi</i>)	4:4; 11:15; 14:3; 19:4
vestments	1:13; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9; 15:6; 19:13-14
consecrated celibacy	14:4
lamp stands or Menorah	1:12; 2:5
penitence	Ch 2 and 3
incense	5:8; 8:3-5
the scroll (<i>biblion</i>)	5:1
the Eucharistic Host	2:7
chalices	15:7; Ch 16; 21:9
Sign of the Cross (* - <i>tau</i>)	7:3; 14:1; 22:4
the Gloria	15:3-4
the Alleluia	19:1, 3, 4, 6
Lift us your hearts	11:12
Sanctus - Holy, Holy, Holy	4:8
the Amen	19:4; 22:21
the Lamb of God	5:6 and throughout
the Prominence of Mary	12:1-6; 13-17
Intercession of angels and saints	5:8; 6:9-10; 8:3-4
devotion to St. Michael the archangel	12:7
antiphonal chant	4:8-11; 5: 9-14; 7:10-12
Scripture readings	Ch 2-3; 5; 8:2-11
priesthood of the faithful	1:6; 20:6
catholicity, or universality	7:9
silent contemplation	8:1
marriage supper of the Lamb	19:9, 17

Ordination and Remembrance

Given what we have affirmed above, the Biblical texts cited previously do not fully explain the Catholic understanding of the Mass. Two questions remain unanswered. First, when were the apostles ordained and commissioned by Christ to celebrate the

¹⁹ Sungenis, *Not By Bread Alone*, p. 107.

²⁰ Scott Hahn, *The Mass as Heaven on Earth* (New York: Doubleday), c. 1999, pp. 119-120.

Mass? Secondly, what is the Biblical connection that links the priest's actions on earth to the eternal reality of Jesus offering to the Father that was culminated on Calvary and extended into eternity? Let's consider these important issues in order.

The apostles were ordained on Holy Thursday when Jesus commanded them: "Do this in remembrance of me," *Touto poieite eis tan eman anamnesin* in Greek (Lk 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24). In this passage the inspired authors used the Greek verb *poieo*, "do," which is the equivalent of the Hebrew *asah* – "to offer sacrifice". *Poieo* is a technical sacrificial term that means to "offer sacrifice." It is used in this sense "over 70 times in the Old Testament"²¹ - see, for example, Exodus 29:38-39; Leviticus 9:7; Numbers 10:10 and Psalm 66:15. The words *touto poieite* have the meaning of "offer this," or "sacrifice this." Furthermore, the command "do" in Lk 22:19 is a present active indicative. It means to offer, "do," repeatedly or continually. The meaning of the passage is to offer this sacrifice continually.

The linking of the sacrifice of the Mass with Jesus' eternal sacrifice is captured by the Greek word *anamnesis*, which is usually translated as "remembrance." The use of this Greek word conveys a meaning that goes far beyond the sense of the English "remembering." To remember something is to merely recall the past event in ones mind. However, *anamnesis* means that the past event itself is made present here and now. "Christians are to enact the Lord's Supper in a recollection of Jesus which has the form of *active re-presentation* as the action of Jesus and his disciples is repeated."²² This idea was deeply imbedded in the consciousness of the Hebrew people. When they celebrated the Passover they understood that they shared in that original redemptive act that is not made present to them.²³

Anamnesis is a sacrificial term that is used frequently in the Septuagint.²⁴ In Leviticus 24:7 it is the translation for the Hebrew *'azkarah*, which was the memorial offering. It indicates a perpetual remembrance of the covenant.²⁵ *Anamnesis* is also used in Numbers 10:10 for a "memorial sacrifice."²⁶ If the Holy Spirit wanted to convey the idea of a

²¹ Jason Evert, "Is the Mass a Sacrifice?", *This Rock*, September 2001.

²² *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abridged one volume, Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich translated and edited by Geoffrey Bromiley, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., c. 1964, emphasis mine.

²³ *Dictionary of New Testament Theology* edited by Colin Brown, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, c. 1971, Vol. 3, p. 236.

²⁴ The Septuagint is the ancient translation of the Old Testament in to Greek made around the year 250 B.C. It was widely used as authoritative by Jews throughout the Empire well into the Christian era. Its influence on the New Testament is significant. For example, 300 out of 350 citations of the Old Testament quoted in the New Testament are drawn from the Septuagint, not from the Hebrew Old Testament. See: Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, p. 46; Kellmeyer, *Bible Basics*, p. 51; McKenzie, *Dictionary of the bible*, pp. 787-788; Sungenis, *Not by Scripture Alone*, p. 277; Sundberg, *Festschrift in Honor of Charles Speel*, "The Old Testament of the Early Church," p. 6; Goodspeed, *The Apocrypha: An American Introduction*, pp. v. xv.

²⁵ Cheslyn Jones et al editors, *The Study of Liturgy*, revised edition, New York: Oxford University Press, c. 1992, p. 204; Colin Brown, editor, *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, c. 1979, Vol. 3, p. 239.

²⁶ *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, William Arndt and F. Wilber Gingrich. The same idea is conveyed in many other Biblical passages, for example, Lev 2:2, 9, 16; 5:12, 6:5; Num 5:26.

“reminder” that was not a “memorial sacrifice,” he would have inspired St. Luke and St. Paul to use the Greek word *mnemosunon*, which is the correct term to describe a nonsacrificial memorial as is used in Matthew 26:13; Mark 14:9, and Acts 10:4. However, the inspired use of *anamnesis* clearly conveys the reality of a memorial offering, that is a re-presentation of the actual sacrifice of Jesus made present again in time.

Drawing on the rich Biblical meaning of *anamnesis*, the *Catechism* teaches: “The Eucharist is the memorial of Christ’s Passover, the *making present* and the sacramental offering of his unique sacrifice in the liturgy of the church which is his Body.”²⁷ “In the sense of Sacred Scripture the *memorial* is not merely the recollection of past events but the proclamation of the mighty works wrought by God for men [citing Ex 13:3]. In the liturgical celebration of these events [Old Testament remembrances], they become in a certain way *present* and *real*.”²⁸

Thus the *Catechism* concludes: “In the New Testament, the memorial takes on a new meaning. When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, she commemorates Christ’s Passover, and *it is made present*: the sacrifice Christ offered once for all on the cross remains *ever present*.”²⁹ This explains St. Paul’s use of sacrificial language in his *First Letter to the Corinthians*. In verse 21 of chapter 10 he refers to the “table of the Lord,” which is a clear reference to an altar of sacrifice both in the context of the passage and in reference to Old Testament usage in Leviticus 24:6; Ezekiel 41:22; 44:16; and Malachi 1:7, 12.

Let me summarize in plain language the concept of *anamnesis* so we can better understand the marvel that occurs at every Mass. The sacrifice of the Mass makes present the total gift of Jesus to the Father that began at the moment of Jesus’ conception, reached its culmination during the Last Supper and on the cross, and eternally continues in heaven where the resurrected Jesus reigns as the eternal high priest, victim and king at the right hand of the Father.

The cross is sometimes referred to as the altar upon which Jesus was immolated. While it is true that Jesus voluntarily gave up his life on the cross, the instrument of his death, the cross was not the altar upon which he offered himself to the Father. Rather Jesus offered himself on the heavenly altar in the heavenly sanctuary of which the altar in the temple of Jerusalem was a mere prototype. Consider to how this reality is explained in the Book of Hebrews:

“Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens [Jesus is here described as a priest king], a minister in the *sanctuary* and the *true tent* that the *Lord*, and not any mortal, has set up.” [Where is that? Clearly, it is in heaven.] “For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices [the essential function of a priest]; hence it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer [himself].

²⁷ CCC, # 1362, emphasis mine.

²⁸ CCC, # 1363, emphasis mine.

²⁹ CCC, # 1364, emphasis mine.

Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all [Jesus was not of the tribe of Levite, but of Judah], since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law [the Levitical priesthood]. They offered worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow [a mockup] of the *heavenly one*; for Moses when he was about to erect the tent, was warned, ‘See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain [the heavenly design]. But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is [not *was*] the mediator of a better covenant [of his own blood, not that of animals], which has been enacted through better promises” (Heb 8:1-7).

Jesus is a “priest forever” (Heb 5:6), that is, he has an eternal priesthood. So when Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to the Father he did not retire from his high priestly office any more than he retired from reigning as king.³⁰ Thus when the Book of Hebrews speaks about his “once for all” sacrifice (Heb 7:27) it means Jesus’ sacrifice is *perpetual* or *everlasting*.³¹ “Once for all” does not mean that Jesus’ sacrifice is over. It means it is everlasting! The reason the Church teaches that the Mass is not a repeat of Jesus’ sacrifice is because that sacrifice has never ended. In the words of the Catechism “the sacrifice Christ offered once for all on the cross remains *ever present*,”³² and “the sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are *one single sacrifice*.”³³

Because the Mass brings us into the presence of Jesus’ offering of himself, the separation of time and space dissolves as we are simultaneously brought to the foot of the cross and are elevated to participate in the heavenly sanctuary.³⁴

There is a lovely hymn that asks the question, “Where were you when our Lord was crucified?” When we attend Mass we can answer: “I was there. I stood with Mary, John, and the holy women.”

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³⁰ See: [CCC](#), # [1137](#), [1138](#), [1139](#), [2642](#).

³¹ [CCC](#), # [1139](#): “It is in this *eternal liturgy* that the Spirit and the Church enable us to participate whenever we celebrate the mystery of salvation in the sacraments.”

³² [CCC](#), # [1364](#) citing Heb 7:25-27, emphasis mine.

³³ [CCC](#), # [1367](#), emphasis mine.

³⁴ [CCC](#), # [1370](#).