

Primer on the Divine Liturgy—the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass

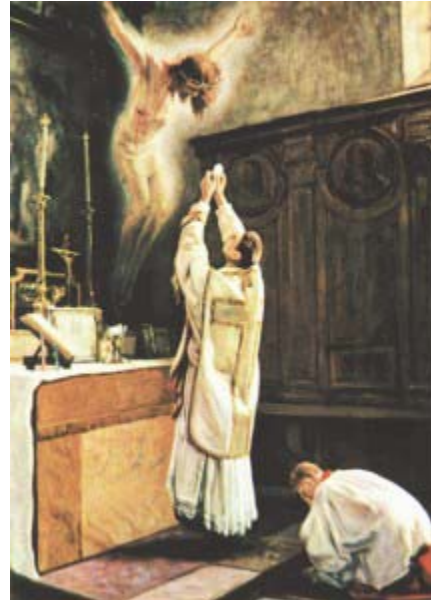
The Liturgy of the Church was kept secret in the early years. Pagans accused Christians of practicing incest and cannibalism because they “loved one another” and they “ate flesh and drank blood”.

In AD 155, Justin Martyr was the first to publicly explain the Mass in his *First Apology* written to Emperor Marcus Aurelius. He defended the faith and explained how *all* Christians worshiped throughout the world.

St. Justin Martyr explained the same liturgy as that which we still celebrate today in the Catholic Church. The Mass is divided into two parts:

Liturgy of the Word

St. Justin Martyr: “*And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended . . .*”



Liturgy of the Eucharist

. . . bread and wine and water are brought, and the presider in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons” (Justin Martyr, First Apology 1, 67).

Of this Eucharist Justin wrote: “*And this food is called among us Eucaristia [Eucharist], of which no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that the things which we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins, and unto regeneration, and who is so living as Christ has enjoined. For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Savior, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh”* (Justin Martyr, First Apology 1, 62).

A martyr eaten by lions, St. Ignatius of Antioch (35-107), a disciple of Peter and Paul, wrote, “*But look at the men who have those perverted notions about the grace of Jesus*

Christ which has come down to us, and see how contrary to the mind of God they are. . . . They even abstain from the Eucharist and from the public prayers, because they will not admit that the Eucharist is the self-same body of our Savior Jesus Christ which flesh suffered for our sins, and which the Father of His goodness raised up again” (Letter to the Smyrnaeans 6, 7).

St. Ignatius also wrote, “*Obey your bishop and clergy with undivided minds. . . . Share in one common breaking of bread—the medicine of immortality, and the sovereign remedy by which we escape death and live in Jesus Christ for evermore*” (Letter to the Ephesians, 20).

Catholics call the Mass the *Sacred Liturgy*, or the *Holy Sacrifice of the Mass*.

Mass:

The word *Mass* comes from the Latin word for *dismiss* used at the end of the service from the earliest times—*Ite, missa est*. Basically it means “Go, it is the dismissal” or “Go, you have been sent.”

Liturgy:

Liturgy (λειτουργία) means “to do service, to perform a religious function” (Vines and Strong’s) and originates from Acts 13:1–2, “*Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”*”

The word “ministering is λειτουργία. Catholics understand the Sacred Liturgy to be the “work of the people”—and the highest form of prayer. It is not just the “priest doing his thing”; rather, it is all the people of God coming together to do the work of the people—to offer sacrifice and praise to God as his people.



Sacrifice:

All true worship involves sacrifice. That is why we call the liturgy the Sacrifice of the Mass. The earliest Christians, along with St. Paul would have utterly rejected the Protestants’ dismissal of the Sunday service being a *real* sacrifice.

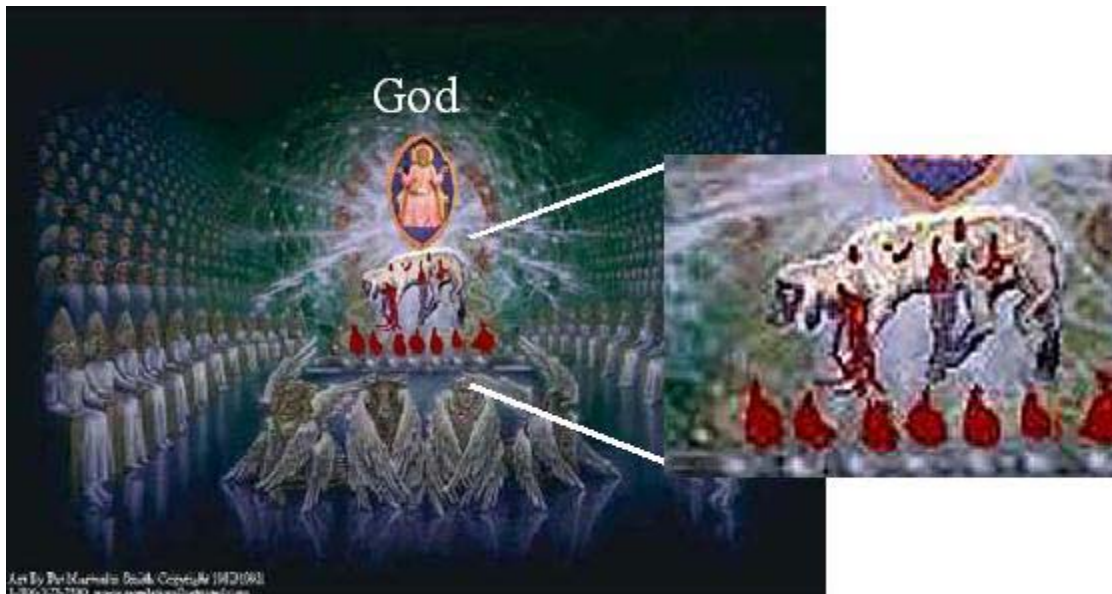
But, the Mass is not *another* sacrifice of Jesus Christ; rather, it is a re-presenting of the one eternal event that is always before the throne of God.

Jesus was crucified once and for all in AD 33 (Heb 9:12, 10:10). In the most popular Protestant Bibles we are also told he was crucified “before the foundation of the world”

(Rev 13:8: KJV, NIV, Amplified Bible) and in all Bibles that he is today standing before the throne of God as a living lamb standing as though slain (with his throat slit like a Passover Lamb) (Rev 5:6).

Jesus *is*—in the Greek present tense—our propitiatory sacrifice (1 Jn 2:2). When we celebrate Mass, this eternal reality makes itself present on the altar of the gentiles/nations as was promised in Malachi 1:11. The pure offering is the Sacrifice of the Mass—the “Thanks Offering”—the *Eucaristia*.

We present the “gifts of our hands” to God at the offertory in the middle of the Mass. We give him the bread and wine—“the work of human hands”—along with offerings for the poor and for those who teach. Our Lord then takes our humble gifts and turns them into the Body and Blood of Christ that feeds us.



The Israelites offered a Lamb to God as the Passover sacrifice and then they ate the lamb—so we offer our gifts to God and in turn he gives back to the us flesh and blood of the Lamb for us to eat—in a mystical and salvific way.

In the *Didache*, which many scholars believe was written before many of the New Testament books we read, “*Assemble on the Lord’s Day, and break bread and offer the Eucharist; but first make confession of your faults, so that your sacrifice may be a pure one. Anyone who has a difference with his fellow is not to take part with you until they have been reconciled, so as to avoid any profanation of your sacrifice. For this is the offering of which the Lord has said, ‘Everywhere and always bring me a sacrifice that is undefiled, for I am a great king, says the Lord, and my name is the wonder of nations’ (Mal 1:11)” (Didache, 14).*

At the Easter Vigil, we Catholics celebrate the Sacrifice of the Mass as Christians have done for 2,000 years. And like our forebears we receive into the Church those who have

been instructed, confessed their sins, and are ready to take their place in the body of Christ, obedient to their bishop and ready to use their spiritual gifts for the edification of the faithful.