

The Lord's Supper - Roman Catholic Interpretation cont'd

We've been talking about the doctrine of the sacraments, in particular the Lord's Supper. Last time we examined the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, perhaps the most radical interpretation of the Lord's Supper. You will recall that we saw that Catholics believe that when the bread and the wine are consecrated by the priest they literally are transformed into the body and blood of Christ. Although they don't *appear* to us as flesh and blood, they really are in their substance. They merely have the accidental properties of bread and wine, but in fact they are the body and blood of Christ.

That however does not exhaust the importance of the Eucharist (or the Lord's Supper) for Roman Catholics because there is another very important facet of their doctrine that needs to be emphasized, and that is that the Eucharist (or the Mass) is a *sacrifice* which is offered to God. In early church history the church father Irenaeus (130-202), who was the Bishop of Lyons in France, characterized the Lord's Supper as a thank offering which believers offer to God. It is an offering of thanksgiving to God for what he has done. During the third century after Christ, however, in the West the view of the Eucharist as a rite of thanksgiving began to give way to the belief that this was a propitiatory or expiatory sacrifice offered to God. You will remember when we talked about the doctrine of Christ, we looked at the work of Christ, and we saw that Christ's atoning death is a propitiation for our sins. That is to say, it satisfies divine justice and allays the wrath of God. It is also expiatory in the sense that it cleanses us of our sin. In the Roman Catholic Church, the doctrine developed that when the Mass is celebrated and the body and blood of Christ are present there, they are offered to God as a propitiatory sacrifice for our sins.

This doctrine became codified as official Roman Catholic doctrine at the Council of Trent during the Counter-Reformation in response to Protestant theologians. This Council met for a number of years between 1545 and 1563 and came to codify standard Roman Catholic doctrine over against Protestantism. At the Council of Trent, the church affirmed that the body and blood of Christ are indeed really present in the Eucharist. The bread and the wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ. In addition, the church also said that the body *and* blood are both present in each element. So when you drink the wine, it is not simply the blood of Christ that you partake of, rather you also partake of the body of Christ in drinking the wine. Similarly, if you eat the bread, you take in not only the body of Christ but the blood of Christ as well. With respect to each element there is a communion with *both* the body and the blood of Christ. Therefore the church declared that laymen should be permitted to take the bread only and not to drink the cup. The cup was reserved for the priests. Laypeople get to participate only in eating the bread. But there is no blessing denied to them because in taking the bread, they get both the body and the blood of Christ.

In the 22nd session, chapter 2 of the Council of Trent^[4], the Council declared that "the same Christ is contained and immolated in an unbloody manner, who once offered Himself in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross." In other words, it is the same Christ who shed his blood on the cross who is offered in the Eucharist (or in the Mass). Then it was a bloody manner in that he shed his blood on the cross. Now we don't see the blood; it is present there but it is offered in a different manner to God. Trent declared that the sacrifice of the Mass is propitiatory; that is to say, it satisfies the demands of God's justice and allays his wrath. The only thing different between the sacrifice that is offered in the Mass and Jesus' original sacrifice on the cross is just the manner of offering. It is a different manner of offering but the sacrifice is the same.^[2] Back then Christ offered himself to God but now he offers himself to God via the priest. The priest consecrates the elements, and God turns them into the body and blood of Christ, and Christ offers himself via the priest. So the Council of Trent declares that the Mass is offered for sins and punishments not only of the living but also of the dead who may not yet be fully purified.^[3] The reference here is to those who are in purgatory – people who have died but who are not yet sufficiently purified to go to heaven. So the Eucharist can be offered on behalf not only of the living but also on behalf of the sins of those in purgatory as well. So the Lord's Supper is a sacrifice offered to God which is propitiatory for sins and punishments of both the living and the dead.

In Canon 1 of the Council of Trent, the council says that the Mass is a "true and proper sacrifice" which is offered to God. In Canon 3, the Council says the sacrifice of the Mass is not only of "praise and thanksgiving" nor is it "a bare commemoration of the sacrifice consummated on the cross," but it is a "propitiatory sacrifice." So this is a direct repudiation of Protestant views. The Lord's Supper is not a mere commemorative meal where you remember Christ in his death and sacrifice, nor is it a sacrifice of thanksgiving alone such as Irenaeus contemplated. Rather, the Mass is offered to God as a propitiation for sins and punishments.

This doctrine was further unfolded at the Second Vatican Council during the 1960s (aka Vatican II). In the declaration on The Church, section 11, we've already seen that the Eucharistic sacrifice is the "fount and apex of the whole Christian life."^[4] I pointed out before how that makes the Mass so important to Roman Catholics. It is the fount and apex of the Christian life. But here I want to draw attention to the wording "the Eucharistic sacrifice." It is a *sacrifice* that is being offered to God and is therefore the fount and apex of the whole Christian life. The Council goes on to say, "for in it people offer the Divine Victim and themselves to God."^[5] So Christ is offered to God in the Mass, but now the Council adds that the communicant offers himself to God as well. It is an offering not only of Christ, but the communicant should also be offering himself to God, dedicating himself.

In section 28 of the document on The Church, Vatican II says that, "in the Eucharist the priest re-presents" [notice it does not say "represents"; it says "re-presents," that is, the priest presents again or presents anew] "and applies in the Mass the one sacrifice of the New Testament and joins to it the offering of the faithful."^[6] So in the Mass the priest re-presents the sacrifice made on Calvary to God and then joins with it the offering of the faithful who have come to celebrate the Eucharist.

In the declaration on Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council, the Council declares that Christ offers himself through the priest.^[7] Then in the Decree on Ministry and Life of Priests, the Council says, "In the Eucharistic sacrifice the work of our redemption continues to be carried out."^[8]

So I think you can see why the celebration of the Mass would be so vitally important to Roman Catholics. It is literally a re-offering to God of Christ's body and blood for our sins. It is a propitiatory sacrifice. It is not a new or different sacrifice – it is Christ's sacrifice – but every time the Mass is celebrated that sacrifice is being re-presented to God for sins and the punishments that sins deserve.

That is a quick summary of the Roman Catholic view of the Lord's Supper: transubstantiation and the Eucharist as a propitiatory sacrifice offered to God for sins.

Next time we'll look at the Lutheran view of the Lord's Supper. Until then, may God bless you.^[9]

^[6] An English translation of the Council of Trent's canons and decrees [ed. and trans. J. Waterworth (London: Dolman, 1848)] can be found at <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/trentall.html> (accessed June 2, 2014).

^[7] "For the victim is one and the same, the same now offering by the ministry of priests, who then offered Himself on the cross, the manner alone of offering being different." (Council of Trent, Session 22, Chapter 2).

^[8] "Wherefore, not only for the sins, punishments, satisfactions, and other necessities of the faithful who are living, but also for those who are departed in Christ, and who are not as yet fully purified, is it rightly offered, agreeably to a tradition of the apostles." (Ibid.)

^[9] cf. "Lumen Gentium," Chapter II "On the People of God," §11.

See http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (accessed February 28, 2021).

^[5] Ibid.

^[6] Ibid., Chapter III "On the Hierarchical Structure of the Church and in Particular on the Episcopate," §28. For this specific translation, see Walter M. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966).

^[7] cf. "Sacrosanctum Concilium," Chapter II "The Most Sacred Mystery of the Eucharist," §48. See http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html (accessed February 28, 2021).

^[8] cf. "Presbyterorum Ordinis," Chapter III "The Life of Priests," §13. See http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_presbyterorum-ordinis_en.html (accessed February 28, 2021).

^[9] Total Running Time: 13:38 (Copyright © 2021 William Lane Craig)