

One aspect of our Catholic worship that poses a serious problem for our Protestant brothers and sisters is that we Catholics consider the Mass to be a Sacrifice. Where did we Catholics get the idea that a Sacrifice should be the central part of our worship in the New Covenant? Is this in the Bible?

After all, we Catholics call our leaders “priests” and we worship behind (or in front of) large altars. Throughout the ages and across all cultures and religions, “priests” were those who offered sacrifices upon altars. If that weren’t enough, consider these prayers, loaded with sacrificial language, taken from a single Mass: *“...be pleased with the sacrifice we offer you...Pray, brothers and sisters, that our sacrifice may be acceptable to God...May the Lord accept this sacrifice at your hands...we ask you to accept and bless these gifts we offer you in sacrifice...We offer you this sacrifice of praise for ourselves and those who are dear to us...Father, accept this offering from your whole family...”*

“Isn’t that pagan?” some may ask. Well, by careful study of the scriptures we can find out that this “sacrificial stuff” has a profound biblical basis. Moreover, the idea of the Mass as a sacrifice does not conflict the notion of the celebration of the Eucharist as a communal meal. On the contrary, delving deeply into the sacrificial aspects of the Mass actually can enrich and enhance our appreciation of the fellowship and communion that we celebrate.

To understand the Mass as a sacrifice we must investigate two biblical P’s: the **Passover** and the **Priesthood** of Jesus. You see, the Church considers the Mass to be the new Passover feast, and Christ to be the new (and final) sacrificial Passover lamb. The New Testament also is very clear in describing Christ as the new High Priest. Putting these ideas together will help us understand the Mass in a new, refreshing way.

First, the Last Supper in which Jesus instituted the Eucharist was a Passover meal. *“Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, “Go and prepare the Passover for us,*

*that we may eat it.” (Luke 22:7-8, see also Matt. 26:19, Mark 14:16)* Just what was this Passover? The Passover was a yearly sacrifice and feast that commemorated Israel’s deliverance from slavery in the land of Egypt. *“...It is the sacrifice of the LORD’s passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he slew the Egyptians but spared our houses.” (Exodus 12:27)*

Jesus used sacrificial words such as “body”, “blood”, “poured”, “offered” and “given” at the Last Supper. Moreover, when he lifted the cup and spoke of the “blood of the covenant” he was echoing Moses’ words when he sealed the Old Covenant with a sacrifice on Mt. Sinai. ( **Matthew 26:26-28, Hebrews 9:19-20, Exodus 24:8**)

Not only is the Mass the New Passover feast, but Jesus is the new Passover Lamb, as we see in several New Testament passages: **John 1:29, 35-36, 1 Corinthians 5:7, 1 Peter 1:19, and Revelation 5:6.** John the Baptist calls Jesus the “Lamb of God” several times in John’s gospel.

But Jesus is not only the Passover

Victim, he's the Priest too! The Letter to the Hebrews calls Jesus the New High Priest at least 15 times! What was the job of the High Priest? Among other things, the High Priest presented the blood of the sacrificial sin offerings to God in the Holy of Holies once per year. But, as the author of the letter to the Hebrews tells us, "...he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption...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 9:12,24-26) So Jesus is the new High Priest and, in some mysterious way, he continually presents his blood, shed once and for all, to the Father on our behalf.

So let's put the themes of Passover and High Priesthood together. The Mass is the New Passover, where the sacrifice on Calvary of the new Passover Lamb, Jesus, is made present to us. The unbloody Sacrifice of the Mass "connects" us with Jesus' continual offering of His blood to the Father in intercession for us. It brings us, in a certain sense,

right into the Holy of Holies. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says: "*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.*" [CCC 1364]. At the Sacrifice of the Mass we are not celebrating ourselves, but rather, *our deliverance*, just like the original Jewish Passover. Like the original Passover, we share the flesh of the sacrificed victim in a covenant meal where covenant bonds between God and his people are forged and strengthened.

## Is the Mass a Sacrifice?

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