

The Mass (Part XIX)

by Fr. Tim Church

Giving Thanks

The word “Eucharist” basically means “to give thanks.” We first understand the importance of this from the perspective of what is proper. Our mothers taught us that. When someone does something nice, we should thank them. “You need to send your thank you notes for the graduation presents.”

It is interesting that we resist this direction. Perhaps this is proof of our fallen nature, that we have trouble thanking people for what they do for us. The religion of the Old Testament is based firmly on the notion that God is appropriately due our thanks.

We know how it feels to be thanked for doing something nice for someone, but that is not the motive for this. We are not trying to make God feel good, or even to prevent him from becoming angry, if we do not offer him our thanks.

It has to do with us, in every way. When we offer our thanks, we are changed. It is very important that we understand that any discussion of the Eucharist is centered on this, that the object and purpose of the Mass is to change us.

“In the liturgy of the church, it is principally his own paschal mystery that Christ signifies and makes present.” (Catechism, #1085)

Catholics today have a difficult time distinguishing between non-catholic worship and our own Mass. There is a fundamental difference. The focus is not on what we do, but on what he does to us. What we do is, in fact, only an offering to God. We present to him the elements that he has commanded us to bring.

Jesus instructed his disciples to go and prepare the Passover supper for him. They gathered the necessary elements in the “upper room,” the place of prayer. They had no idea what was about to happen. They were sure that it was the usual Passover supper in which they would remember the great events that God brought about in the exodus.

What they did not know, what they could not know, was that Jesus was about to institute a timeless method in which he would take our offering and turn it into himself. He would give us food that would transform our lives and the life of the world.

“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day.” (John 6:54-55)

In the proper sense this is not something that we do. If we follow the analogy of thanking someone, it is as if God instructs us to get paper, envelope, postage and a pen. We place them on the table and God writes the thank you note, in another language that we do not understand, the language of the spirit that is naturally foreign to us.

This understanding is oftentimes not the focus in non-catholic worship. It is more about what “we” can accomplish. This might help explain why they cannot believe that the body and blood of Jesus are present in the Mass. If it is about what we do, then we all know we cannot do that.

If it is about what God does, using the priest as his tool to accomplish this, then we have a completely different perspective. It is in fact rather silly to think that God is impressed with what we can do in our worship. If he is impressed, it is in the same way that a parent is impressed with the colored scribbles of a two year old. On our own, we can come up with nothing concerning how to thank God.

The authority that God has given to the church is the authority to carry out his directions. Catholic worship in the Mass is unique in this sense. This does not mean that we are in some way insignificant or unimportant. The fact is, the partnership that he has given us is extraordinary, but its focus is not on our offering, but Christ's.

This is truly the crux of the matter. We bring bread and wine to offer to God, but the true offering is Jesus. He offers himself, contained within the bread and wine, to the father on our behalf. This is a good thing, because we would eventually recognize that our offering is flawed. It would be tainted by all sorts of sins, ulterior motives, distractions and foolish intentions. But it is Christ who makes the offering of himself and his offering is without spot of blemish.