

Vatican II and the Year of Faith:  
How the Mass Can Change Your Life

Throughout human history, the preeminent act of worship and thanksgiving has been the act of sacrifice. We offer sacrifices on a small scale when we give gifts to each other - I deprive myself of something of value in order to show my love, appreciation, indebtedness to another. In religion, people have always offered sacrifices to show thanksgiving, love, and indebtedness to God.

This human act touches on a profound longing - the longing for meaning and purpose in life, to find something of eternal value that transcends one's suffering, loneliness, or despair. But surely, there can be no better expression of this hope in the transcendent than to render thanks to God. Thanksgiving is an act of faith, in the midst of suffering, as if to say, "There is a good here, though perhaps that we cannot see it. In faith, we thank God for it."

Catholic faith adds something sublime to this human act of thanksgiving and sacrifice - something that could be known only by faith. The Psalmist asks, "What shall I render to the LORD, for all His bounty to me?" (Psalm 116:12) We know intuitively that none of our works or sacrifices could ever be worthy of God's goodness on their own. But Catholic faith offers the supreme mystery in answer to this dilemma: I, through the Church, can give Him back His only Begotten Son. We recall the prayer of St. Faustina, "Eternal Father, I offer You the body and blood, soul and divinity of your dearly beloved Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ."

Christ's death on the Cross was the supreme sacrifice, freely offered in Love and thanksgiving to God. And, Oh - Supreme Mystery! - I approach this offering in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. In every Mass, the Church truly offers the sacrifice of Christ since He is truly present on the altar of sacrifice. (CCC 1376)

How can knowing this transform my life? The faithful do not effect Christ's sacrifice in the Mass. For this we need the ministry of the priest or bishop. But in every Mass, I can join my own prayers, works, joys, and sufferings to the infinite sacrifice of Christ and therein they acquire a whole new meaning. In the Catechism we read:

In the Eucharist the sacrifice of Christ becomes also the sacrifice of the members of his Body. The lives of the faithful, their praise, sufferings, prayer, and work, are united with those of Christ and with his total offering, and so acquire a new value. Christ's sacrifice present on the altar makes it possible for all generations of Christians to be united with his offering. (CCC 1368)

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council wanted this truth to be more widely understood and appreciated. This is why they encouraged the Reform of the Liturgy - not because they wished to change the doctrine of the Mass, but because they believed it so deeply. The Council's very first document, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, dwelt precisely on this understanding of the Mass:

The Church, therefore, earnestly desires that Christ's faithful, when present at this mystery of faith, should not be there as strangers or silent spectators; on the contrary, through a good

understanding of the rites and prayers they should take part in the sacred action conscious of what they are doing, with devotion and full collaboration. They should be instructed by God's word and be nourished at the table of the Lord's body; they should give thanks to God; by offering the Immaculate Victim, not only through the hands of the priest, but also with him, they should learn also to offer themselves; through Christ the Mediator, they should be drawn day by day into ever more perfect union with God and with each other, so that finally God may be all in all.

The innate desire to praise and worship God is the most sublime and elevated inclination of our nature. St. Josephine Bakhita, while still a slave and suffering terribly, knew nothing of God or of Christ. And yet she reflected, "Seeing the sun, the moon and the stars, I said to myself: Who could be the Master of these beautiful things? And I felt a great desire to see him, to know Him and to pay Him homage..."

When St. Josephine finally encountered the Gospel of Christ, she found the truth that corresponded to the deepest longings of her heart. Pope Benedict says of her:

She came to know that this Lord even knew her, that he had created her—that he actually loved her . . . What is more, this master had himself accepted the destiny of being flogged and now he was waiting for her "at the Father's right hand". Now she had "hope" —no longer simply the modest hope of finding masters who would be less cruel, but the great hope: "I am definitively loved and whatever happens to me—I am awaited by this Love. And so my life is good." (*Spe Salvi*)

If we bring this perspective to the Mass, our lives cannot help but be transformed. The Mass is where, by God's grace, we say "Thank You!" and offer sacrifice to the Great God who loves us, by offering ourselves along with His only Son. "In the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, " the Council says, "the perfect achievement of our reconciliation came forth, and the fullness of divine worship was given to us." (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*)