

## Item #88 (The Mass as the Center of My Catholic Life)

**I feel safe in asserting** that the Mass has been the center of my Catholic life. In what follows I will summarize what I consider the essential elements of the Mass as set forth in what I have already published.

In what follows I will draw heavily on my two books on the Epistle to the Hebrews. The more recent of the two is *Hebrews--An Interpretation* (Subsidia Biblica 47; Gregorian & Biblical Press, Rome, 2016). The book is based on what seems to me to be the plausible view that the epistle is a writing centered on the Eucharist.

As I wrote the book the central insight which seemed to me a major step forward in our understanding of the Mass was furnished by the German Lutheran Old Testament scholar Hartmut Gese. He called attention in a variety of writings to the Jewish “sacrifice of praise” or “sacrifice of thanksgiving”. (The two expressions were considered synonymous in Judaism at the time of Christ.) This was a public ceremony proper to Jewish liturgical practice in which a Jewish man thanked/praised God for the favor of freeing him or his family or both from from death in a war or famine or similar misfortune. The ceremony consisted of a bloody sacrifice or holocaust offered by a priest on the altar of the temple in Jerusalem, and in connection with it a ceremony outside of the temple consisting of the ritual consumption of bread by the favored person in the presence of friends or relatives and accompanied by ritual prayers and hymns. The Old Testament text that serves as the basis for this ritual is found in Leviticus 7. The favor by God can be either in the past or in the future. In the latter case the act is an even greater sign of trust in God. In my book mentioned above the “sacrifice of praise/thanksgiving” is presented on pages 45-48.

In the First Eucharistic Prayer of the Latin Mass, as part of the Remembrance of the Living, the phrase “sacrifice of praise” occurs: “Remember, Lord, your servants N. and N. and all gathered here, whose faith and devotion are known to you. For them we offer you this sacrifice of praise or they offer it for themselves and all who are dear to them: for the redemption of their souls, in hope of health and well-being, and paying their homage to you, eternal God, living and true.” (See the discussion in my book mentioned above, pp. 48-49.) Here we seem to have an allusion to the Mass as a “sacrifice of praise/thanksgiving”. Thus it seems plausible to assert that at the Last supper, at the institution of the Eucharist, Jesus was following the practice outlined above in anticipation of His death on the cross and the favor to be granted Him by God of resurrection from the dead. Jesus’ death on the cross was the bloody sacrifice offered by Jesus as priest. He offered Himself, and thus was both priest and victim.

But what led Jesus to sacrifice Himself? Here I present material from my doctoral dissertation that led to my receiving a doctoral degree from the University of Oxford: *Jesus and Isaac. A Study of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Light of the Aqedah* (Analecta Biblica, 94; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981). The background of Jesus’ sacrifice of Himself begins with the story of Abraham (Our “father in faith” [First Eucharistic Prayer]) as presented in the Book of Genesis. There, in Chapter 15. God promises that Abraham will be an instrument of salvation and seals the promise with a covenant in Chapter 17. Then, in Chapter 22, God tests Abraham’s faith in His promise by commanding him to sacrifice his son Isaac who was to be the agent of salvation.

Abraham passes the test by carrying out the command of God to the point where God sends an angel to him to sacrifice a nearby ram instead of Isaac. Thus the need for the promise of blessings made to Abraham and his progeny was not fulfilled until the coming of Jesus Christ. Abraham's faith was tested successfully but his "son" was not sacrificed as God had ordered. Jesus seized the opportunity as a physical (Matthew 1,1-16) "son" ("seed", "progeny") of Abraham. He offered Himself as a "sacrifice of praise/thanksgiving" with the faith that God would raise Him from the dead. Abraham must have based this faith that God controlled life and death on God's ability to enable Abraham and his wife Sarah to have Isaac when they were well beyond the normal age for child-bearing. But the ultimate motive for Jesus sacrificing Himself was His love for His Father. In the Epistle to the Hebrews Jesus begs His Father to allow Him to sacrifice Himself as victim. (See *Jesus and Isaac*, my argumentation at Hebrews 5,7-9.) If God did not allow His Son to die as a victim, Abraham, who was willing to sacrifice his son, would have been more generous than God.

But another aspect of the Eucharist is, of course, the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist as a result of the action of the Holy Spirit at the words of consecration uttered by the priestly celebrant(s) during the Eucharistic Prayer. Surveys indicate that a majority of Catholics in the United States do not accept this Presence. They unwittingly thereby place themselves alongside the disciples of Jesus Christ who, when Jesus Himself taught them of the Real Presence refused to accept it and thereby walked with Jesus as His disciples no more. (See John 6,60-66.) St. Peter affirms his belief in what Jesus teaches by stating that Jesus alone had words of eternal life. I wonder what Catholics who do not believe in the Real Presence will say when they meet Jesus in the personal and general judgements.

NO READER OF "JAMES SWETNAM'S THOUGHTS ON SCRIPTURE" SHOULD DOUBT WHAT THE POSITION OF THE AUTHOR OF THIS WEBSITE IS AS REGARDS THE REAL PRESENCE OF JESUS CHRIST IN THE EUCHARIST. THE EUCHARIST IS THE SUPREME GIFT OF JESUS CHRIST TO THOSE WHO VIEW THE MASS AS THE REPETITION OF THE SACRIFICE OF JESUS CHRIST ON CALVARY WHERE CHRIST IS BOTH PRIEST AND VICTIM. IT IS IN THIS SACRIFICE AND ATTENDANT RESURRECTION THAT MANKIND IS GIVEN THE POSSIBILITY OF TAKING PART IN A RISEN BODY AS REAL AS THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST IN THE EUCHARIST. (**James Swetnam, S.J., February 9, 2022**)