

The Mass and the Cross
24th Sunday in OT – September 15, 2024 – Mk 8:27-35
Ave Maria Catholic Church. Fr. David M Vidal

If we want to follow Jesus, we must embrace the cross. There are no shortcuts, no other paths. Do we want to follow Him through a different path? We certainly can, but we will not find Him. We will only find ourselves, not Him.

How can we learn the science of the cross? Who will be that experienced teacher who is capable of explaining a path that is most difficult to understand and follow? There is only One Teacher and Master, and He is Christ, and He opens the science of the cross for us during Holy Mass.

What is Holy Mass? Holy Mass is the perpetual memorial of the Sacrifice of the Cross of our Lord Jesus.

The mystery of the sacrifice of the Cross is essential. It is so essential that in God's plan of salvation, the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross became a perpetual memorial in the celebration of the Holy Mass.

To understand the sacrificial aspect of the Mass, we must not separate the sacrifice of our Lord on the cross from the events surrounding it. We must not separate the sacrifice of the Lord from the Last Supper when Jesus *"took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and giving it to his disciples said, 'Take and eat; this is my body.'"* (Mt 26:26). And then taking the cup He said: *"Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins"* (Mt 26: 27-28). Then, the Lord commanded: *"Do this in memory of Me"* (Lk 22:14; 1 Cor 11:23).

The following day, the Lord's body hung on the altar of the cross, and his precious blood washed away our sins. Then, the triumph of the cross found its fulfillment in Jesus's resurrection. The Last Supper, the sacrifice of Good Friday, and the Resurrection on Easter form one saving event. This is why Vatican Council II declared: *"As often as the sacrifice of the cross by which 'Christ our Pasch is sacrificed' is celebrated on the altar, the work of our redemption is carried out"* (*Lumen Gentium*, 3).

What do we see when we come to Mass? Holy Mass is more than Father Michael or Father Tom celebrating it. What do we seek when we come to Mass? Holy Mass is more than a good homily and some beautiful songs in a fifty-minute time-period. If that is all we see and look for, we are missing the essential.

St. John Chrysostom teaches: *"When you see the ordained priest at the altar raising the sacred host toward heaven, do not believe that this man is the true (principal) priest, but*

raising your thoughts above what strikes the senses, consider the hand of Jesus Christ invisibly extended” (Homil. LX).

We should see and look for this: Christ offering Himself for us on the altar. Here, time stops. Here, eternity enters. The past comes to our present and touches our lives. We must put our watches away for a moment and enjoy a glimpse of eternal life. We should not be distracted by the presider. We should have a more penetrating sight and see and hear Jesus Himself, who is offering His life on the altar for you and for me.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: “*The Mass is the same sacrifice as the sacrifice of the cross because, in the Mass, the victim is the same, and the principal priest is the same, Jesus Christ.*” From this, it follows three important points:

- (1) Christ, though invisible, is the principal minister, offering Himself in the Mass. The priest is the visible and secondary minister, offering Christ in the Mass.
- (2) The most important part of the Mass is the Consecration. In the Consecration, bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ, who then is really present on the altar.
- (3) The other most important parts of the Mass are the Offertory and the Communion.

This third point introduces a final idea for our reflection: *Our participation in Holy Mass.*

Holy Mass is the one and same Sacrifice of Jesus, and as such, this action has infinite value. A Mass celebrated in a little chapel with no people, or a Mass celebrated in a Cathedral with a whole congregation, choir, and servers, both have infinite value in themselves (*ex opere operato*). In both, Christ is the principal priest, and Christ is the victim offered in a sacramental manner.

However, that is not all. Our dispositions matter. The way we participate in the Holy Mass matters.

According to St. Thomas Aquinas and many theologians, the effects of the Mass related to us are limited only by the measure of our devotion. (See St. Thomas, III *Summa theologiae* q.79, a. 5, a.7 ad 2). The limits do not come from the Mass itself, but the limits come from our dispositions.

Ex opere operato (in itself), Mass has an infinite value. One single Mass can make us saints. *Ex opere operantis* (according to our dispositions), the effects of our participation in the Holy Mass will not be equal. For this reason, it is so important to dispose ourselves for a worthy participation in the Sacrifice of the Lord.

First, we must open wide our hearts to receive what Christ wants to give us. We should take some time before Mass to reflect on what we will receive. The greater the expectation, the greater the graces we will obtain.

While in Mass, we should not be spectators in a function but participants in a sacrifice. The sacrificial offering of the faithful is indicated by the presiding priest. After the offertory, he turns to the people and says: *“Pray, brethren, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God the Almighty Father.”* Both, the presiding priest and the faithful are called to unite their sacrifices to the sacrifice of Christ. Then, the music, the homily, the incense, and all the other elements of the liturgy assist us in disposing ourselves for a better offering of our sacrifices in union with the Sacrifice of the Lord.

In this way, we are better prepared to enter into a Holy Communion with Christ, not only with his life but also with his death. In his letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul teaches that communion is not only an incorporation to the “life” of Christ, but it is also an incorporation to his “death.” We read: *“For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes,”* (1 Cor. 11:26).

We must proclaim the sacrifice of our Lord with our lives. Communion is a union of love, and all love is reciprocal. Communion does not only imply “receiving” but also “giving.” That is our share. We must bring a spirit of sacrifice to the Eucharistic table; we must bring the mortification of ourselves, the crucifixion of our egoism, the death of our evil desires, and the daily crosses patiently carried.

Finally, the tremendous gift that we receive when we participate in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass should not be taken for granted. As we opened wide our hearts to obtain graces from God before Mass, we should also open wide our hearts in gratitude at the end of Mass.

Blessed Angela of Foligno tells us: *“I have absolute certitude that if a soul saw and contemplated any of the intimate splendors of the sacrament of the altar, it would take fire, for it would see divine love.”* Love and gratitude go hand in hand. A loving heart is a grateful heart.

Today, Jesus invites us to follow Him by taking up our crosses. This invitation is renewed every time we participate in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.