

Is the Mass a Sacrifice?

Is the Mass a propitiatory sacrifice? Is it offered to appease God's wrath and make satisfaction for our sins?

From Eden to Calvary, Bible history is stained with a trail of blood. From Abel to Noah, from the Patriarchs to Moses, from Aaron to the coming of the Messiah, God had appointed sacrificial offerings as the way of reconciliation and fellowship with him.

The various sacrifices and offerings prescribed in the Law of Moses could be classified into two groups: unbloody (such as the first-fruits, tithes, incense) and bloody (such as the burnt offering, sin and trespass offering). It is highly significant that the sacrifices intended to atone for sin were bloody; the victim was slaughtered and the blood was shed.

Why did God require the shedding of blood of thousands of animals during the Old Testament? What is the lesson he wanted to teach his people? God himself explains:

'For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul' (Leviticus 17:11).

From the very beginning, God had warned that the penalty for sin is death. Divine justice demands the death penalty for the transgression of the Law. Yet divine wisdom found a way to show mercy to the sinner while fulfilling the demands of justice. God accepts the blood of the sacrificial victim as 'atonement' – a cover for sin. The punishment (death) is suffered by the victim; the sinner is set free.

Now of course the blood of animals could never take away sin. The animal sacrifices were but a picture pointing forward to that perfect once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. 'We have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins' (Colossians 1:14).

But the Old Testament sacrifices underline the principle that a propitiatory sacrifice must involve the shedding of blood. 'Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.' (Hebrews 9:22).

The Catholic Church teaches that the Mass is a sacrifice for sins (propitiatory); in fact, the Mass is said to be the same sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross.

'The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are one single sacrifice: The victim is one and the same: the same now offers through the ministry of priests, who then offered himself on the cross; only the manner of offering is different. And since in this divine sacrifice which is celebrated in the Mass, the same Christ who offered himself once in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross is contained and is offered in an unbloody manner . . . this sacrifice is truly propitiatory' (Catechism 1367).

The Mass is the sacrifice of Christ on the cross except for one crucial aspect. The sacrifice of the cross was offered in a 'bloody manner' whereas the sacrifice of the Mass is offered in an 'unbloody manner.'

Contrary to what some evangelicals think, the Catholic Church does not teach that Jesus dies all over again during the Mass. It is an 'unbloody' sacrifice. In his encyclical, *Mediator Dei*, Pope Pius XII clearly states that Christ does not die during the Mass:

'On the cross He completely offered Himself and all His sufferings to God, and the immolation of the victim was brought about by the bloody death, which He underwent of His free will. But on the altar, by reason of the glorified state of His human nature, death shall have no more dominion over Him, and so the shedding of His blood is impossible...'

What can we say about all this? Since the Bible teaches that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness, and since it is admitted that there is no shedding of blood during the Mass, we must conclude that the Mass cannot be a propitiatory sacrifice. Since Jesus does not give his life on the altar, the Mass cannot make satisfaction for sin.

The next time you attend Mass, listen to what the priest asks the congregation: 'Pray, my brothers and sisters, that our sacrifice may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father.' As you pray, keep in mind that the Bible teaches that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness, and ask the Father if he can accept the unbloody sacrifice of the Mass.