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## 'My sacrifice and yours'

By Msgr. Richard Antall \*

Another of the changes of the new translation of the Latin Mass into English has to do with the invitation the priest makes to pray “that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father.” The response to this has remained the same, “May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands for the praise and glory of his name, for our good and the good of all his holy Church.” The celebrant’s words have changed, however.

Why the change from “our sacrifice” to “my sacrifice and yours”? Is this merely a question of a more literal translation? The response itself does not make any reference to the sacrifice being the priest’s, the people’s or both of theirs but only asks that it be for “our good and the good of all his holy Church.”

The original prayer, in Latin, makes the distinction between “meum ac vestrum.” I think the change can provoke us to thought about three particular aspects about the Eucharist.

The first is that it is a “sacrifice.” There was a time after the Council when some professors wanted to discount the idea of sacrifice and say that the Eucharist was a common meal for the faithful. This implied that a sacrifice would never include a shared meal, and that has proved to be incorrect.

Most of the sacrifices of the Bible had an element of meal because most included the consumption of what was sacrificed by both the priests and the families offering, according to a protocol which gave the priests the choicest portions.

Priests in the Old Testament were quite the carnivores and I suspect that some of them had more of a physical resemblance to beefy butchers with blood on their aprons than we might be comfortable with because of our experience of unbloody sacrifices. The blood was offered at the altar, and the fat burned, but then the family and the priests received the meat. Only the holocaust sacrifices were to be burned up completely and not consumed, so normally the priests had good rations of meat.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in his book, "Feast of Faith," which should be required reading in seminaries and rectories, wrote an essay about the trend to overemphasize the "meal" aspect of the liturgy and to discount or marginalize the element of sacrifice. If it is only a meal, even one that makes real the "agape" (the shared love of God of the community), attendance without consuming is an absurdity.

I heard priests seem to say that a Mass without communion was meaningless, like going to a friend's house for dinner and not eating. But assistance at Mass even without communion is worthwhile. It is of course not the ideal way to participate in liturgy, but presence while the sacrifice is offered has meaning even without communion. Going to a friend's house, even though no meal is shared, is, after all, still an act of friendship.

The Mass is the renewal of the grace of the sacrifice of the Son to the Father for the community of believers which is thus spiritually present at the foot of the cross. That prayer has merit even if we are not disposed to receive for some reason. This could be for health reasons, or because we had not calculated the fast, or because there is something in our life that precludes full communion.

I remember a community leader in El Salvador who did not receive communion at Mass once and I asked what was wrong in private. "I

did not have my wedding garment on,” he replied very biblically. In such cases, participating in the Mass, even if only with a spiritual communion, is still an important moment of prayer in which the Church unites herself with Jesus Christ’s saving action on the cross.

My experience of ministry has convinced me some make spiritual communions at Mass that are much more meritorious than some sacramental ones.

The second idea has to do with the fact that the priest’s sacrifice is different somehow from that of the laity. It is the same sacrifice, and it is Christ’s, but only the priest can offer the Mass and his participation is thus essential.

This is recognized in assigning an “intention” to the Mass. It has been speculated that the root of the custom of giving a stipend to the priest who is offering the sacrifice has to do with the fact that some members of the early Christian community would take turns providing the bread and wine used in the Eucharist.

The honorary “hosts” thus participated especially in the prayer of the community and saw this as of particular benefit. This benefit was later defined in terms of a particular intention, in present practice almost always associated with prayer for the deceased.

Offering a Mass for an intention is a way to secure a spiritual good. It is a hallmark of Catholicity. Even Henry VIII, who went into schism, left money for perpetual Masses for his soul.

There is a famous story by Honore Balzac, “The Atheist’s Mass” in which the curious action of a prominent Paris physician, an unbeliever, who goes yearly to a low Mass offered at Saint Sulpice is analyzed. The story reveals that the physician, who owed his professional career to a poor laborer who helped him with his studies, honored the latter’s memory each year with a Mass. The

workingman had believed, and so the physician secretly but faithfully had a Mass offered for the soul of his benefactor on the anniversary of the man's death.

Recently I read "My Mortal Enemy," a short novel by Willa Cather, a Baptist-turned-Episcopalian who was nevertheless fascinated by Catholicism. In it a fallen away Catholic, who has become desperately poor, reveals to her relative that she has money hidden from her husband to use for having Masses said after her death. The gold coins were not for any material expenses, only spiritual ones.

Like in the example of Balzac, sometimes we see more clearly what our faith means through the eyes of people who do not share it.

But the sacrifice is not just the Church's or the priest's but of each member. It would be useful to ask each Catholic, what is your relationship to the sacrifice? That is what the new language highlights, too. Your sacrifice – in what does it consist?

This reminds me of one of the most harrowing tales of the Old Testament, the sacrifice of Isaac.

Abraham is taking his beloved son up the mountain to offer him to God. The boy notices that something is missing. He is carrying the wood (like Jesus carried the cross up another mountain) but there is no animal to sacrifice. Abraham, whose heart must have been breaking, says, "God will provide the sacrifice."

God provides us at Mass with the sacrifice, His own Son. But he asks of us an interior sacrifice so that we can worship Him completely. It is a woeful spirituality that is dependent on the homily or the music of the Mass, the flowers or the interior decorating – however important all these may be – to make the worship meaningful.

If someone is bored at Mass, what is he or she offering to the Lord? If you came to offer yourself to the Lord in communion with the greatest sacrifice of all time – that of Jesus on the cross – how can you say, “I didn’t get anything out of it”? Maybe you did not put anything in, is what I would be tempted to say.

Don’t forget that the Mass is your sacrifice, too. “My sacrifice and yours” can help us in our distraction to really and personally encounter the Lord in the Eucharist.

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