

# THE MASS

Our Catholic Faith has many Mysteries which we shall never fully understand and are not meant to, but on which we contemplate with awe and wonder like Mary, the Mother of God, who we are told, “Pondered these things in her heart”. Perhaps the greatest Mystery of all, though, is trying to answer the question, “Why does God love us so much?” Why does He love humanity which sometimes forgets Him, turns its back on Him, refuses to believe Him, mocks Him and sometimes even hates Him? Why does God, who has no beginning or end, who is Uncreated, who needs no one and no thing outside of Himself, who has made the Universe and holds everything in its place, why does He love a mere creature made from the dust of the earth, and a sinful, disobedient creature at that, so much that He sent His only Son down from the majesty, splendour and security of heaven into this limited world, knowing full well we would treat Him so shamefully and finally crucify Him? A fact God knew, even before He made us. As we ponder on this Mystery of God’s love for us sinners it will inevitably lead us to love, cherish and value the Mass and the priesthood, because every Mass presents to us God’s definitive act of love which He made on Calvary for the whole world.

In our quest, then, to try to understand this inexplicable love of Almighty God for each one of us, it is essential that we reflect on the crucified Lord and to relive what Jesus Christ, the Son of God, did and experienced on the Cross for us. We have no finer tool to do this than the Mass because at every Mass that very same act of perfect, Divine, passionate, sacrificial love, made once and for all for the whole world, takes place on the altar, albeit in an un-bloody way, so that all peoples, in all places and in all ages may be reminded of what Christ did for them (“do this in memory of Me”), may be present during this definitive act of love by God for us, and may draw strength from His love. However, we also need to reflect on the bloodiness of Christ’s Crucifixion, because it was through His broken, human Body that He won forgiveness of our sins, reconciliation with the Father and the potential to enter heaven one day.

It is reckoned that crucifixion is the most painful form of execution devised, originating, we think, from Persia and used by the Romans to kill slaves, the worst kind of criminals and as a deterrent against anyone wanting to dispute the power of Rome. Evident from the Holy Shroud of Turin and verified by doctors, nails were driven through the wrists and feet of the victim pinning them to a wooden cross, this was then raised to the vertical and the victim left to die through the trauma of pain, loss of blood, thirst and, finally, suffocation: when someone is suspended by their arms, it is virtually impossible to breathe because the diaphragm cannot be raised to draw air into the lungs, that is why a step was provided under the victim’s feet so that they could relieve the tension on their arms, though of course this meant pushing down with feet spiked with a nail and being able to breathe again only prolonged the agony of this slow death: the legs of the two thieves crucified with Jesus were broken so that they could no longer push down to help respiration and so would die before the Sabbath began. Another aspect of crucifixion was to humiliate the victim by stripping them completely naked. Christ we know had already been scourged with whips which had torn flesh from His back, His buttocks and His legs, He had been beaten by His fellow Jews and the Roman soldiers, the Shroud indicates a broken nose, His eyes would be half closed from the punches and slaps He had received and now He experienced amongst the jeering, insults and spitting of the crowds the added pain of crucifixion, with flies constantly feeding in the hot sun on a His blood and sweat, experiencing cramp in His legs which He could not relieve, and in the trauma of such pain and fear, we might wonder whether the victim had full control over their bladder and bowels, “So disfigured did He look that He seemed no longer human.” Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI has contended that Jesus suffered in this way on the Cross for six hours and not the traditional three hours which has hitherto been accepted.

Because of His love for us Christ was willing to endure whatever suffering and humiliation it took, even death itself, to win our hearts. He predicted, “When I am lifted up, I will draw all men to Myself”,

for He knows our hearts will always be restless until they rest in Him. The Cross is the definitive proof of God's love for us, which is why Saint Paul would only preach about Christ, Crucified.

God can do no more to show how much He loves us. Every Mass is this very selfsame act of love; so, if we turn away from the Mass, we turn away from the Cross and so turn our backs on His love, we turn away from Him who alone gives us the means to love as He loves, because in and through the Mass He gives us Himself; when we turn away from the Mass, we turn away from the only means of maturity and human fulfilment, which is to behave like Him in whose image and likeness we have been made. In His passion and death, Jesus Christ held nothing back for our sakes, He didn't count the number of lashes and punches, He didn't measure the steps from Jerusalem to Calvary, He didn't count the minutes while He hung on the Cross, He shed every last drop of blood in His body, every last bead of sweat, for us as individuals, with your name and my name on His dying lips. The Crucifixion of Jesus Christ is the only perfect act of love our world will ever see, for this was God as well as man, unconditionally laying down His life for us.

When we make the effort to come to Mass yes, we come to worship and praise God, but we also come to Calvary, to stand at the foot of the Cross, to thank Him for what He has done for us and to tell Him we are sorry for causing Him such pain through our sins. We may be distracted by babies crying, we may not like the singing, we may not like how the priest speaks or what he has to say, we may not like the church building, but when we come to Mass we come to be present with Jesus Christ on Calvary, it is a unique, Divine activity, irreplaceable and with no equal; it is not a prolonged prayer meeting, or a sing-along, or a prologue to a cup of tea and a chinwag afterward.

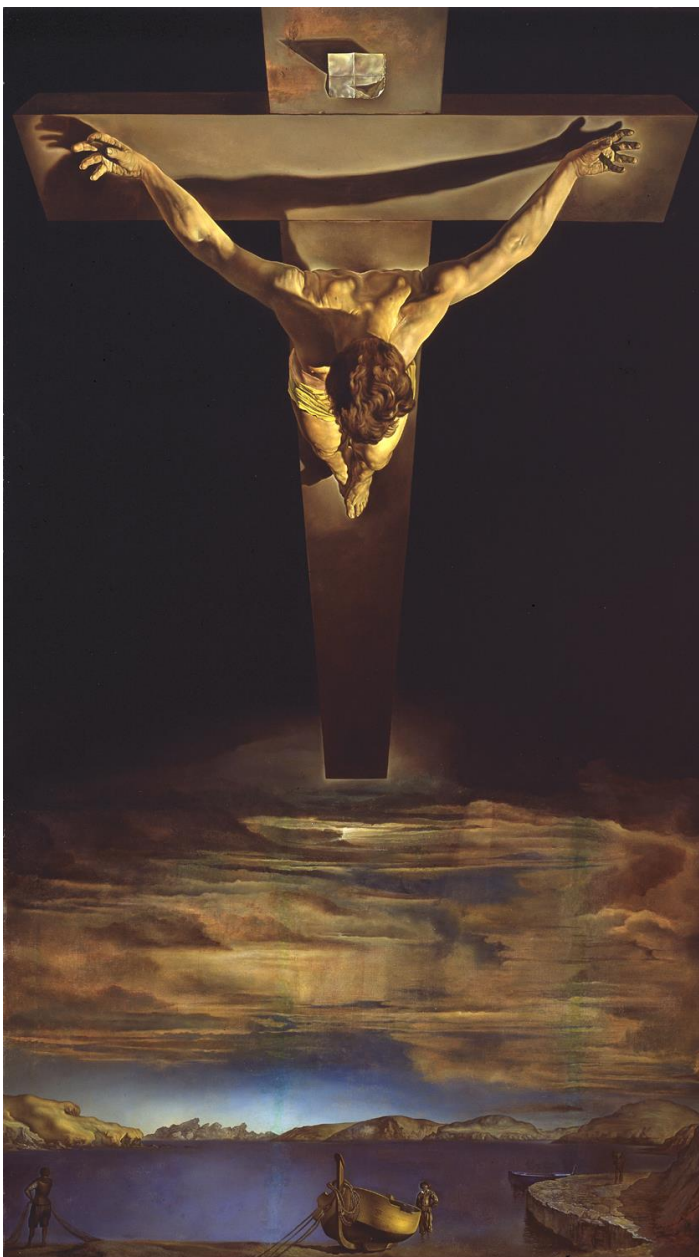
Now, we know that what Jesus Christ did on Calvary was not the conclusion of what He had come to do on earth, because three days later He kept His promise, He walked out of the tomb, body and soul, not as a ghost or as a wishful figment of imagination on the part of His disciples: "Touch Me ..., give Me something to eat ..., look, here are My hands and feet, the marks of crucifixion still on them ..., put your hand into the wound in My side," said Jesus to His incredulous disciples. Through His Resurrection on Easter Sunday, Jesus Christ, our God and our Brother, conquered for us our last enemy, death. He now lives forever, as can we, if we sincerely try to follow His Way of unconditional, perfect love all through life, love for His Father in heaven, love for His neighbour here on earth. At every Mass we celebrate the death of Jesus, but we also celebrate His Resurrection, and it is His Risen, life-giving Body that we receive in Holy Communion, His Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity, the whole Christ, really and truly present under the appearances of bread and wine, which enables us to share in His life and so to love as He loves, as He said, "If you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His Blood, you will not have life in you." You will not have My life in you which alone will help you to live and love as I do.

How does this come about at every Mass? Well, only through the words and actions of Jesus Christ, who alone has the power to bring Calvary before us and transform bread and wine into His Body and Blood; but He does this through the actions and words of the Ordained priest. We notice, first of all, that the bread and wine are consecrated separately, a reminder that the Blood of Christ was separated from His Body on the Cross, He truly died; and the priest says over the bread and over the wine, "This is My Body ... My Blood". He does not say "This is the Body of Christ, this is the Blood of Christ." And here we have to accept another great Mystery of our Catholic Faith, namely, that of the Ministerial Priest, for whenever the priest celebrates the Mass or any of the Sacraments, he does so in the Person of Christ; it is Christ who says, "This is My Body ..., My Blood ..." and changes the substance of bread and wine into His Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity, just as it is Jesus Christ who says to the repentant sinner in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, "I absolve you from your sins ..." The Catholic priest, through the Sacrament of Holy Orders, undergoes what is called an "ontological" change, the essence of the man is changed, he becomes *alter Christus*, another Christ, and like Christ, he is a priest forever, "like Melchizedek of old". And as Jesus Christ was both priest and victim, so

is the priest; by the words of consecration, “My Body. My Blood”, the priest and his whole life as a priest is united in a significant way to Christ sacrificing Himself on Calvary for our sakes.

In our Catholic Faith we have to acknowledge that the Mass is the source and summit of the Christian life. We have to acknowledge that coming to Sunday/Saturday Vigil Mass helps to fulfil our keeping of the First and Third Commandments; we have to acknowledge that we all have a grave obligation to come to Sunday/Saturday Vigil Mass every week unless we have a grave reason why we cannot, otherwise we risk committing serious sin. But finally, the efforts we make in coming to Mass every week is the minimum response of gratitude we can make to God’s extravagant love for us, and the least we can do to show our sincerity in wanting to do what His Son has commanded us to do, namely, to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and body and to love our neighbour as He loves our neighbour, that is, without reservation, unconditionally, wholeheartedly, everyone, in all situations, at all times, even to the point of death. Of course, an impossible task to achieve through our own efforts, but that is why Almighty God gave us His Son, Jesus Christ who on the Cross, as truly one of us, has shown us that the impossible can be achieved. Every Mass is Calvary re-presented, every Mass offers us the potential to do the impossible, to love as God intended us to love from the very beginning, before sin inhibited us.

~ Canon Peter Connor OFS



“Almighty God did not spare His own Son but gave Him to redeem us all, disregarding the fact that we, unnaturally thankless, pay no attention, nor consider how much God’s love is shown to us, but forget and neglect to follow the example of our merciful Lord in His great compassion for sinners. Such hard and unresponsive hearts, hearts harder than flint of stone! This great lack of feeling takes us so far from God. How extraordinary it is, a thing to be marvelled at, to realise that He looks down into such utter depths of ingratitude.”

~ Saint John Fisher, Bishop and Martyr (1469-1535)