

WELL, WHAT IS THE MASS?

Daniel A Lord S. J.

IT took the two of them almost ten minutes to get from their pew in the side aisle back to the little village rectory. And it was a matter of only a few hundred feet.

“Weren’t you lucky to have that sprained ankle as an alibi?” whispered Helen Webb as she helped Ford Osborne through the dusk of the wintry morning towards the open door at the back of the church. “You could remain seated during the entire time; your injured foot was a good excuse.”

Ford Osborne, leaning heavily on her arm to prevent all possible strain on his ankle, grinned happily.

“Always wear a sprained ankle when you’re going to a Catholic church,” he whispered, “and you’re excused for not doing what the rest of the folk there do.”

“I felt like a fool,” Helen said, guiding him round a thick Gothic column. “Did you understand anything of what Father Hall was doing?”

“Not a doggone thing. I thought his clothes were good-looking, but emphatically out of date. The Latin went right *over* my head, even when I could hear it—which wasn’t often. And most of the time he seemed to be puttering around and mumbling into his beard.”

“He hasn’t got a beard to mumble into,” Helen rebuked him sternly; “*and* I’m sure he wasn’t puttering.”

“Looked like puttering to me.”

Lakeside in Winter.

They were now in the crisp, open air. The little town of Lakeside was still in the happy enchantment of winter, and duos and trios and groups, carrying skis under arms or over shoulders, and cars, with skis sticking out of open windows, were moving towards the hills. Ford Osborne looked down dolefully at his ankle.

“And to think that three days ago I was as light and free as any of them!”

“As a skier, my lad,” his heartless companion announced. “All you need is skill, endurance, and about three years’ practice.”

“You’re no floating snowflake yourself,” he answered, brutally.

“Careful,” she warned, pulling her arm away. “One more crack, and you’ll have to walk without your living crutch.”

“Come back,” he pleaded. “I’ll keep the cracks until I’m able to navigate alone.”

And, as they were moving with processional slowness across the snow-covered lawn to the rectory, Father Hall opened the door and shouted encouragement.

Skiing is King.

Lakeside had boomed since skiing had come into fashion. Once on a time it had been a summer resort only, and from mid-September to late May Fr. Hall had lived the delightful life of a literary hermit. But the advent of skiing and the introduction of winter holidays had cut short his privacy; Lakeside was overrun with sportsmen and sportswomen—among them his young pagan friends, Helen Webb and Ford Osborne. They had arrived a week before. Three days after their arrival Ford had discovered that even a rapidly moving ski won’t go through a hidden stump; and, while Helen continued to indulge in the winter sports, Ford sat in an easy chair and groaned.

Hence Fr. Hall’s invitation to the two to take breakfast with him; hence their ready acceptance; hence the arrival at the appointed time—to find that, because of an unexpected, early-morning sick call, Fr. Hall had been obliged to postpone his Mass; hence the presence of Helen and Ford at Mass; hence the painful trek from the little church under the now bare, snow-encased trees to the little rectory, where breakfast and Fr. Hall’s ancient, but kindly and reliable housekeeper were waiting for them.

Breakfast, Ho!

They installed Ford in an easy chair that had been rolled up to the breakfast table. Fr. Hall said grace rapidly, and the two ducked their heads in what they considered the approved fashion. Platters of sausage and scrapple, and buckwheat cakes appeared.

“A farm-hand breakfast,” said Fr. Hall, cheerfully, piling the food on their plates. For himself he took only one cake and a single link of homemade sausage. Maple syrup flowed from the jug in a golden-brown stream. And the two young people applied their hearty appetites to the work of destruction.

“Ankle better this morning?” asked the priest.

“Oh, practically well. I’ll be doing the big apple by to-morrow evening.” Clearly Ford’s optimistic spirits had been enkindled by the breakfast before *him*.

“Imagine,” scoffed Helen, “a big six-footer like that getting tossed into the air by a two-foot stump!”

“Yeh? Well, if I had the grip that stump had—”

“Father, you should have seen that lad fly through the air with the greatest of ease. Talk about the man on the flying—”

“Let’s talk about something agreeable; something that will present me more pleasantly,” broke in the victim, with a groan. He forked half a sausage, and mopped it around in maple syrup. “Tell the good Father, my fine lassie, that I’m expecting to collaborate on a play with George Kaufman.”

“Oh yes, Father! George Kaufman read Ford’s play, and he said he liked the title. That’s the collaboration: title by Ford Osborne; play by George Kaufman.”

Fr. Hall smiled and thought that perhaps he should change the conversation

Regrets.

Then, recalling that he had kept his two young friends waiting, he cut in with belated regrets.

“Sorry I had to keep you waiting so long for breakfast. You were nice, though, to stop in for my Mass.”

“Quite all right, Father,” said Ford, realising that the extra half-hour made this delectable breakfast just that much more delectable.

“And I was interested in your Mass,” said Helen.

“Were *you*?” The priest was pleased, but a little sceptical. People, he found, as a rule, were simply stumped by Mass the first time they attended it.

But Helen was frank, and she admitted what Father suspected had been the case.

“Interested, Father; but, I must confess, completely baffled. The only appreciation Ford got out of it was your clothes—he thought they were very good-looking.”

What Did It Mean?

“Stunning,” said the young man; “simply stunning. I feel very sorry for the Protestant minister, who has only shiny broadcloth to offer in competition with a priest’s clothes—like those you wore.”

“The vestments?” Fr. Hall smiled. “They are beautiful, aren’t they? I guess priests are the only men in the world who wear good-looking clothes any more.”

“I suppose,” murmured Helen, “they mean something. But it all sounded so unintelligible. Ford said the Latin went right over his head—”

“Not a bad place to go. Right over his head and up to heaven, I hope,” said the priest, softly.

“And he even said that you seemed to be doing a lot of—was fumbling the word, Ford?” Helen was being cruel. She knew she was putting her fiancé on the spot.

“Aw, Helen!” he protested. “What I meant, Father, was that so much of the time I couldn’t get the point of what you were doing.”

“It all seemed—”

“Pointless?” suggested the priest

Pointless.

They breathed a sigh of relief. Pointless was exactly the word. They nodded in rapid agreement.

“What’s more,” said Ford, “Helen and I happen to go around with quite a number of Catholics. They dragged us to Mass one Sunday morning, after an all-night party, and when I demanded to know what it was all about, could they explain it? They could not. They mumbled vaguely about the Last Supper and the unbloody—yes, that was the word. I thought it a little shocking, like undamn or doggone in reverse English— Sacrifice of Calvary.”

“I remember. They sounded as if they didn’t want to explain,” supplemented Helen. “So we just let the whole thing drop.”

Mental Apology.

Fr. Hall made mental apology for the Catholic who has a chance to explain his religion and muffs that chance by reciting formulas, and then quickly changing the subject.

“Yes,” he said, “I can imagine that they didn’t give you much satisfaction.”

“Honestly,” said Helen, “I was convinced they themselves didn’t know what the Mass was all about.”

“I’m sure Phil Carney didn’t. He slept through the whole thing.”

Again Fr. Hall mentally apologised for the scandal that is too often given by indifferent and lazy Catholics. Aloud he said:

“A good many Catholics couldn’t give a first-rate explanation, I’m afraid—any more than most Americans could explain very clearly how a radio actually works. They use the radio, but they don’t understand it any too well.

“But this much is worthy of note: Catholics, even when they are not too well informed about the details, realise that in the Mass they have something tremendously important. That is why Catholics have always fought so hard against those who have tried to take the Mass away from them. The history of the Protestant Reformation is largely a story of the new religion’s efforts to destroy the Mass, and the Catholic’s efforts and determination to save the Mass. We like to say, ‘It’s the Mass that matters,’ and, believing it, we struggle with all our force—and always have struggled—to keep in the world the Mass that matters.”

Nothing Like It?

Ford took a hot cake from the plate that had just been borne triumphantly from the kitchen. Then, on second thought, he took two.

“Delicious!” he said, by way of unnecessary apology. And then, turning again to the conversation, “I’ll say this much for the Mass: it’s unlike anything else the world has ever seen.”

Fr. Hall leaned back in his chair and pulled out his pipe and tobacco pouch. His coffee cup steamed with fresh, black coffee. His own slight breakfast was completed. He looked at his two young friends affectionately. “Strange!” he thought. The Mass has been going on for nineteen hundred years; it continues to be said in every civilised and barbarous country in the world; it is being offered in a hundred churches in every large city; and it is still such a complete mystery to the majority of men.

“The sacred mysteries. . . .” His mind played with the phrase which the early Christians had applied to the Mass. Mysteries they were; mysteries they remained. And he smiled inwardly as he recalled the story of the early Romans: how, becoming confused about the whole idea, the early Romans had wondered whether the Christians weren’t really sacrificing human beings when they gathered for their Mass in the catacombs.

Entirely Wrong.

“Yes” Ford repeated, considering that the sentence admirably expressed his case, “the Mass is unlike anything else the

world has ever seen."

That was sufficiently vague, he thought, triumphantly. Fr. Hall could take it as a compliment if he wished.

Fr. Hall took it as something else—a point of departure and a sign of contradiction.

"Oddly enough, that's where you are entirely wrong. The Mass is not unlike anything else the world has ever seen. It is exactly like that most solemn act that was performed by the best-known Personality that the world has ever seen."

"Christ?" suggested Helen.

"Correct," agreed the priest "And Christ led up to that particularly solemn and significant act by a special series of miracles. It is interesting to see how Christ, the teacher, prepared the way for the actions of Christ, the priest You recall that one of His first acts was to turn water into wine.

"I always considered it such a charming miracle," said Helen. "And so thoughtful. Imagine that poor wedding couple's embarrassment if they'd run out of wine."

"And in the desert Christ performed another charming miracle," continued Fr. Hall. "He multiplied the bread, turning five loaves into enough to feed five thousand people."

"I'm sure," said Ford, with an attempt at elaborate compliment, "that it was hospitality like that that set the standard for the hospitality of His followers. Maybe that explains our host and his gracious hospitality at breakfast."

Things More Precious.

"It explains," said Fr. Hall, "the fact that Christ was getting ready for something far more important. He changed water into wine to prepare the minds of His followers for the act by which He was to change wine into something vastly more precious. He multiplied bread, showing His power over it, in anticipation of the day when He would multiply bread without limit, super-substantial bread that was to feed all the faithful."

"Then He promised the people that He would give them bread from heaven. He was promising to fulfil all the figures of the Old Law. The Jews had had manna, bread from heaven. Christ was going to give them the fulfilment of that bread of the Old Law, only it was to be a far more precious bread than the bread their fathers ate in the desert. For their fathers ate manna in the desert and were dead."

He paused. Helen looked puzzled. She really was interested, and her inquiring mind was annoyed by things that she did not understand. And this puzzling Mass. ...

"But what was the solemn action that was like the Mass?" she asked.

"Obviously the Last Supper."

"Oh!" said Ford, largely. "Da Vinci's picture immortalised that."

"Not nearly so much," replied Fr. Hall, smiling, "as does the Mass. He lit the pipe which he had been filling and tamping mechanically. "If you remember at all the account of the Last Supper—"

"Rather vaguely," murmured Ford.

"It was a series of actions," continued Fr. Hall; "some of them preliminary, some of them essential to the Supper, some of them following the Supper. The essential actions were few. First of all, the Supper itself was the famous Jewish Paschal Supper, during which the head of the family offered the Paschal lamb to God; and then the whole family partook of this lamb, together with the unleavened bread and the wine. Christ, of course, could not have chosen a more suitable time to do what He was going to do. John the Baptist—surely you remember the incident?—had called Him the Lamb of God. Christ and His disciples had just offered the sacrifice of the Paschal lamb, and they had eaten it down to the last slivers. Now that the symbolic rite was finished, Christ was going to give them Himself, the true Lamb of God."

"So He performed a series of simple actions. To His Father He offered bread and wine. He consecrated the bread and the wine with the clearest possible words. Over the bread He said, simply: 'This is My Body.' Over the wine He said: 'This is My Blood.' And then He gave Himself, the true Lamb of God, what at noon on the next day, would be offered up on the altar of the Cross, to His disciples in Holy Communion."

Three Simple Parts.

“In other words, Christ made the offertory of the bread and wine; He made the consecration of the bread and the wine into His Body and Blood; He gave Himself to His friends in Holy Communion.”

“And, whether the Mass is merely the simple Requiem Mass, which is the shortest Mass, or whether it is the elaborate Pontifical High Mass, which lasts for an hour or more, the Catholic knows that the absolute essentials of the Mass are the offering of the bread and the wine, the consecration of the bread and the wine into Christ’s Body and Blood, and the Communion. What Christ did at the Last Supper the priest imitates and repeats in each Mass.”

Ford Osborne, listening to, and looking at, Fr. Hall, felt like a man tricked. His eyes flashed indignantly. He honestly believed that the smart priest was putting one over on him. And, knowing that the priest liked honest objections, he shot out his rebuttal with energy.

“Wait a Minute!”

“Hey, wait a minute! A simple man—and Christ was certainly a simple Man—sits down to a simple dinner. He performs a series of very simple actions with bread and wine. And you’re telling me that the total of these simple actions is the same as the elaborate thing that I saw you perform this morning—the same as the still more elaborate thing I saw performed by a Bishop and three priests and a church full of altar boys the time I covered the Catholic mayor’s funeral for the ‘Times’? Excuse me, Father, if I say, ‘No savvy.’”

Fr. Hall laughed, as he always laughed when his friends made a good point or left him a wide opening. He could see their difficulty, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Helen vigorously encouraging her belligerent young associate. And, even though Fr. Hall knew that this was a stock difficulty, he was glad to have it brought out.

Essential and Added.

“Don’t get mixed up,” he said. “Don’t confuse the things which are essential to the Mass with the things which the Church has added because she wanted the Mass to be as beautiful and as solemn as possible.

“And the essentials? The offertory of bread and wine, the consecration of the bread and wine into Our Lord’s Body and Blood, and the Communion.”

“Well,” exclaimed Ford, triumphantly, “why don’t you have just that?”

“Sometimes we do. Recently a Catholic priest went in disguise into Russia. He said Mass in just that way—he was dressed in ordinary clothes; he stood at an ordinary table; he offered up bread and wine; he consecrated the bread and the wine immediately; and he consumed the bread and the wine in Communion. That was a complete Mass. Perhaps if you had seen it you would have said at once: ‘Why, that’s exactly like the Last Supper.’ But—”

“Yes, that’s what interests me,” interrupted Ford. “Why, oh why, the but?”

“For several reasons. If you’ll read St. John’s account of the Last Supper, you’ll find that the three essentials—the Offertory, the Consecration, and the Communion—are all there; but you’ll find, in addition, that Christ Himself surrounded that Supper with a number of things. He preceded the Supper with a profound act of humility. He carefully washed Himself, and then He washed the feet of His disciples. He prayed at great length. In a great act of divine prayer He seemed to look over the whole world. He talked to His disciples about God and about their own destiny. The essentials of the Last Supper were made part of an elaborate prayer and sermon, and act of service and of worship.

Lovely Setting.

“So, in the course of the centuries, the Church has placed the three jewel-like essentials of the Last Supper—which are the three essentials of the Mass—in a setting that portrays the setting with which Christ on Holy Thursday surrounded them. The priest begins the Mass with an act of humiliation, confessing his sins at the foot of the altar. Like Christ, the priest washes his hands. Like Christ, he prays, and those prayers are marvellously inclusive prayers that sweep out over the whole world. Like Christ, he uses this occasion for a series of instructions—by the reading of parts of the Old

Testament, the priest calls upon the ancient Jewish prophets and teachers; by the reading of sections of the Gospels, he asks the evangelists to speak to him; he reads portions of the epistles of Peter and of Paul, and of those others who were close to Christ. The Old Law and the New Law are brought together in the Mass, and all the world participates in the prayers that the priest offers. Christ set the example which the priest follows."

"Beyond that, however, the Church realised that in the Mass she possessed something so precious as to deserve being surrounded with all possible beauty. Mass said by an army chaplain in the mud of a trench, with an altar improvised from boxes of canned goods; a Mass said, perhaps, hurriedly, in anticipation of an attack from the enemy, is Mass quite as much as is the Mass said by a Bishop in the magnificent Notre Dame of Chartres. But wherever and whenever it is possible to do so, the Church wants to surround the glorious Last Supper with every conceivable beauty. Necessary? Certainly not. Natural? Well, I hope so."

Calling All Art.

"So the Church summons all the resources of art. She asks great musicians to write and to play and to sing for the Mass. She makes use of the beauty of costume; and in the vestments you admired this morning is not merely refinement of line, but historic association, which runs through twenty centuries of Christian tradition. From the Old Law the Church borrows the ancient custom of the burning of incense. Out of the catacombs, she brings the candles. To assist the priest who is offering the Mass, she appoints deacon and sub-deacon and a retinue of attendants, each having a special function that blends into the making of what has been frequently called the world's most beautiful and dignified dance. The Mass could be as simple as the offering of bread and wine. In essence the Mass will always be just that simple. But when men love or prize something dearly they want to surround it with beauty and solemnity and grace and the finest tributes of the arts."

"Not the Simple Christ."

Ford Osborne's lip was curling perceptibly. Out of his wide reading rose echoes of the sneers of those who have taunted the Church for the beauty of her ritual. And their taunts seemed most plausible to him.

"I wonder," he said—and he could not quite keep the sarcasm out of his voice— "what the simple Christ would have thought of all that. It seems to me that the Carpenter of Nazareth would have felt rather out of place in such elaborate surroundings."

Fr. Hall didn't resent the scarcely disguised sneer. It did not even surprise him. What always did surprise him was the obtuseness of human beings who did not want to understand; and he knew that Ford was steeped in the writings of men who had this very unwillingness to see and appreciate.

Why Not He?

"I think," said Fr. Hall, "that Christ would have understood it—just as He understood the impulse that seized the people on that first Palm Sunday. You remember that, don't you? They pulled down palm branches. They threw their cloaks in His path. They shouted and cried out and sang His praise. He accepted it all quietly and gratefully, loving the enthusiasm that inspired their demonstration. And then the Pharisees came running up, ordering Him to stop the nonsense. You recall that He didn't stop the 'nonsense.' He understood and sided entirely with the people's desire to show Him in every possible way their loyalty and love."

"We don't associate Christ the Carpenter with rich perfumes either. But when the man who was later to betray Him demanded that He rebuke Mary Magdalene because she poured perfume on His feet, Christ rebuked the future traitor and praised the woman."

"In fact, I'm very sure that Christ fully understands that when human beings love anything deeply they want to fuss over it. And, if they hold something precious, they want to encrust it with gold and diamonds; they want to house it in marble and bronze; they want to surround it with the finest products of their art."

Like Lincoln.

“Not long ago I stopped to look at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. You’ve seen it, of course—that magnificent Grecian temple, in the centre of which is a glorious marble statue of Lincoln; a tremendous lagoon before him, and gardens and shrubbery all around him. You might be justified in wondering how Lincoln, the rail-splitter, would feel in a Greek temple. But, on the basis of what I’ve read about Lincoln. I’d say that he would be deeply touched. It’s true that for himself he chose simplicity; but he would be happy—and deep in his heart he would be proud—that his fellow-citizens loved him with such gratitude that they built this magnificent monument to his memory, and enshrined him there because they regarded him as someone very dear and precious; someone to be venerated.”

“And I know that Christ is at least as understanding as Lincoln was. Don’t you agree?”

Ford Thinks.

A pot of fresh coffee had magically appeared from the kitchen. Contrary to his usual custom, Ford poured a third cup for himself. At a suggesting gesture from Fr. Hall, he added a little hot coffee to Helen’s cooling coffee. He lit Helen’s cigarette and his own, and then, abstractedly holding the handle of his cup, moved the cup slowly round and round in the saucer. He was beginning to see the reasonableness of what Fr. Hall was saying. Now, with his fine visual memory that was one of his outstanding endowments, he could recall the “essentials.” From out of so much that he had not understood he could remember the priest consecrating the bread and the wine, a solemnity and a holiness that were unmistakable. He could remember, too, the priest consuming the bread and the wine, and then giving the bread to those who knelt at the altar rail.

Yes; the essentials of the Last Supper were clearly there. And it was entirely natural to surround these essentials with actions that imitated the actions of Christ at the Last Supper, and that added beauty to the ceremony.

Chalice of Antioch.

His mind suddenly flashed back to the famous Chalice of Antioch, which he had seen at the Chicago Century of Progress Exposition. He recalled how the guide had explained the cup. It was supposed to be the original chalice which Christ and His disciples had used at the Last Supper. The chalice itself, the guide explained, was a very simple thing of crystal. But, because men had considered it to be so precious, they had clothed it with the magnificent outer cup, which was now its elaborate shell—precious metal, which the finest metal craftsmen had skilfully hammered into a thing of exquisite beauty and symbolism.

At the heart of this glorious piece of art the original cup still remained, simple and plain, and fresh from the hands of the Saviour. But, because that simple thing was so precious, those who loved it and cherished it had surrounded it with precious metal and the loveliness of art and symbolism.

At the core of the Mass—the simple actions with bread and wine; actions first performed by the hands of Christ.

Around the core—the beauty of art and ritual, of golden chalice and elaborate vestments; beauty placed there by the men who had so loved the core, the simple actions, that they had enshrined those actions in what they regarded as most beautiful, most significant of their love and of their reverence.

But Still—

Ford shook himself suddenly. Almost, he thought, suddenly cynical, he was becoming an apologist for the Catholic Church. And then, with a second stab of cynicism, he wondered how it happened that one could so easily become an apologist for the Catholic Church. Was it that the Church had more reasonableness on her side than he and his fellows dreamed?

Almost angrily, he threw off this yielding mood. He frankly resented it. Most of all he resented the fact that he was finding himself on the side of the priest. So, to recall his antagonism, he picked the other phrase that had been tossed him by his not-too-intelligent Catholic friends.

“Just what’s this about the unbloody Sacrifice of Calvary?” he demanded, and he followed this query with a generous sip of the strong coffee. Helen watched him with apperceptive eyes. She knew he was impressed by what Fr. Hall had said. And she knew that he was fighting against being impressed.

“The unbloody Sacrifice . . .” echoed the priest. “That’s been a stumbling block to many people. But, really, it’s not too difficult, and, essentially, it’s very beautiful.”

“Unbloody? Bloody?” Ford deliberately pretended to shudder. “Beautiful? I doubt it.”

Sacrifice is a Gift.

Fr. Hall was shrewd enough to know that when people begin to fight most viciously they may be closest to conviction. So he felt no resentment at this apparent rudeness.

“It’s all rather easily understood once you get clearly the idea of sacrifice,” Fr. Hall explained. “A sacrifice is simply a gift that is offered as completely as possible to someone—in the strict sense, to God. But I can make sacrifices for others than God. A man sacrifices his life for his country when he fights and dies in the cause of that country’s safety. Or he may sacrifice his fortune, as many patriots do in time of war. A lover makes sacrifices for the girl he loves. Let’s say he is none too well off financially. He ‘sacrifices,’ let’s say, his lunches in order that he may have enough money on Saturday night to give his girl an orchid or a large and expensive box of French candy. And he is very proud of the fact that he ‘gave up smoking.’ in order to give his sweetheart a really fine engagement ring.”

“In the one case, the patriot gives—or sacrifices—his life or his fortune for his country—in fact, to his country. In the other case, the lover gives the girl candy, flowers, a ring; and what he gives becomes precious because it has cost him a sacrifice—it has cost him the renunciation of something he liked and wanted for himself.

And to God.

“Now the briefest possible explanation is this: Man has always wanted to give God something worthy of Him. We believers have always realised that God has been wonderfully good to us. We have always known that we owed Him a great deal. What’s more, we have loved Him as our Father, our Saviour, our greatest Benefactor, and our dearest Friend. Hence, in all times and in all races, and in every form of religion, men have given something to God. And the gift was valuable if it was a sacrifice—that is, if it cost the giver something, and if it was something that the giver himself liked and enjoyed and wanted for himself.”

“So men gave God the first lamb of their flock. Or they gave Him wine that they poured out at the banquet. Or, if they were pagans, they flung a ring into the sea. To make it impossible for them to take that gift back, they completely destroyed it. That complete destruction you’ve heard about under the name holocaust, the ‘complete destruction; entire burning.’

Power Over Life.

“Beyond that, however, the idea of sacrifice has always in true religion been connected with God’s exclusive power over human life. God gave human life. God alone has the right to take human life. God is the Supreme Master of human destiny, and human beings have always wanted to acknowledge that fact

“That is why in most sacrifices connected with religion, there has always been the destruction of life—the lamb was killed, the ox’s throat was slit, the fruits of the field were burned. And, by the destruction of these things, men as much as said to God: ‘God, You alone are the Master of life. We offer You this life as an acknowledgment of the fact that You alone can take back our lives and the lives of our fellow men.’

“Now, one last point: Society has always felt that a criminal who is guilty of a capital crime can offer society full reparation for his crime only by the sacrifice of his life. He must die to expiate his offence.

What Worthy?

“Now, man had never possessed anything that was really worthy to be offered as a gift to God. When he gave God a lamb or a ring or flowers or the first fruits of the fields, he realised that what he gave was pitifully small and inadequate. He longed (and the greater the saint, the greater was his longing) for a gift that would be truly worthy of the gracious God, who had poured out His benefits upon the world.

“Christ died upon the Cross. As He died, He offered Himself in sacrifice to His Father. He poured out His Blood, as a patriot might pour out his blood for his country. He took the place of us, the sinners, and, through the sacrifice of His life, He atoned for our crimes. He, the eldest brother, guiltless, took the place of us, His younger, guilty brothers and sisters. And that Sacrifice of His is what we Christians call the Bloody Sacrifice of the Cross. I’m explaining it very briefly, because just now I want to show the connection of this Sacrifice with the Mass.”

Sacrifice Goes On.

Osborne nodded. He had heard the explanation of the Sacrifice of Christ upon the Cross, and, while he did not pretend to accept it, he saw, at least, something of its meaning and the part It played in the Christian concept of sin and atonement and an adequate gift by man to God.

The priest continued.

“Now, Christ died only once. But He knew that in the heart of man there would always be the desire to give something worthy to God. Christ realised that sacrifices must go on.”

“Just a minute!” said Osborne, lifting a warning finger. “I think I’ve got you cornered. Forgive the devil for quoting Scripture, but didn’t the prophet, clearly speaking to Christ, say: ‘Sacrifices and oblations thou didst not desire’?”

Osborne leaned back, trying to hide his smug satisfaction. It wasn’t often, he thought, with a side glance at Helen, that a pagan was able to knock down a priest with a quotation from the priest’s own holy-book.

“Go on,” said the priest.

“Go on, what?” demanded Osborne.

“You didn’t finish that quotation. ‘Sacrifices and oblations thou didst not desire.

Then, said I. .’”

Osborne flushed. The rhythm of a phrase recurred in his brain, but the word wouldn’t come to his tongue.

“I’m stuck,” he said, looking a little flustered.

Christ Came.

“‘Sacrifices and oblations thou didst not desire. . . . Then said I: Behold I come.’ That’s precisely the point. Because the sacrifices and oblations of the Old Law were inadequate, the New Law was to provide an adequate sacrifice, which was to be Christ Himself. Christ was to be that real Sacrifice. That’s why John the Baptist called Him the Lamb of God. That’s why St. Paul spoke of Him as the High Priest and the Sacrifice. And that’s why..”

Fr. Hall paused.

“Really the connection between the Sacrifice of the Cross and the Sacrifice of the Mass is not too difficult to see,” he continued. “In fact, it’s inevitably, highly logical. Listening?”

Helen was sufficiently interested to dare to be flippant.

“Just because we’re both looking into our coffee cups is no indication that we’re crystal gazing,” she answered.

“Fine!” said the priest. “The connection—”

“Just a minute!” interrupted Ford. “You left a ‘that’s why’ unfinished.”

Forever.

“So I did,” agreed the priest. “Sorry. What I started to say was: That’s why the prophets said of Christ that He would be a priest, according to the order of Melchisedech. Melchisedech offered up bread and wine. That was his particular gift

or sacrifice to God. You'll find that mentioned in the account of Abraham's visit to Melchisedech, recorded in the Book of Genesis. That's why the prophets also said that from the rising of the sun to the going down thereof, and among the Gentiles, there would be offered up a clean Sacrifice.

"The Mass is the offering of bread and wine. Christ did this at the Last Supper. He ordered His disciples to do it—the true priesthood of Melchisedech. 'And from the rising of the sun to the going down thereof

The Endless Sacrifice.

Helen's eyes sparkled. She saw the point and caught it quickly.

"I see!" she cried. "If there is any such Sacrifice being offered, it is certainly the Mass."

"Why?" demanded the priest.

"Well. . . well . . . well, it must be the Mass. There is no other sacrifice that is offered from the rising of the sun to the setting, is there?" She put it a little diffidently, but she felt that there was logic in what she said.

The priest nodded.

"It's just that either the prophet foresaw the Mass being always offered as a clean, unbloody Sacrifice, or the prophet saw something that is not happening and that has never happened."

Essentially the Same.

Fr. Hall knocked the cold ashes out of his pipe and on to the plate. He knew that Ford was formulating an objection, and he wanted to give him time. Ford was formulating an objection, and in a moment he fired it, with a pointed finger.

"And you mean, then, that Catholics think the Last Supper and Calvary and the Mass are essentially one and the same thing?"

The priest nodded.

Ford had all he could do to keep from snorting loudly. The idea seemed utterly, preposterously ridiculous.

"So a Man who dies on a Cross, and a Man who offers up bread and wine at a dinner table, and a priest who goes through some imitative gestures at an altar all do essentially the same thing? You ask me to believe that?"

"Rather startling, perhaps; but I do."

"It's a large order," said Helen, quietly.

"Not if you recall that a sacrifice is a gift—and realise that the same gift can be given in various ways. A king can be crowned at the close of a battle, with all the dead lying around him, as William the Conqueror was crowned. He can be crowned while he is sitting on soft cushions and surrounded by his well-dressed and well-fed courtiers. The gift of the crown is essentially the same in each case."

"But in this case—" Ford's voice tapered off. It was too much to believe.

Let's See.

"Let's see what we have in this case. The essence of the Sacrifice of the Cross is Christ's offering of Himself to His heavenly Father; Christ is substituting for us. There's God the Father; there's God the Son. And God the Son as the priest offers Himself to His Father, and He is accepted. The manner of this offering is bloody, for the Blood of Christ is separated from His Body, and His Life is destroyed. Not only is the gift of the Son offered to the Father, but the Life of the Son is destroyed, and thus God's dominion over life is acknowledged. With the death of Christ, man's noblest Representative, the crimes of guilty man are expiated. Clear?"

"Well," said Osborne, slowly.

"Go on," said Helen, insistently.

"You see, this Sacrifice of the Cross is the heart of Christian teaching. All orthodox Christians, whether they are Catholic or Protestant, accept it. It's so unmistakably written into the Gospels and the Epistles that he who does not accept it is not a Christian."

“I understand,” said Helen.

Osborne nodded. “Go on.”

The Same Gift

“Now the essential of this Sacrifice is the gift. Christ made of Himself a gift to His heavenly Father. And Christ did precisely that at the Last Supper. He offered up bread and wine. But He immediately consecrated the bread into His Body and the wine into His Blood. There on the table before Him was a gift worthy of God The Father; the Father was offered the gift of His Divine Son’s Body and Blood. Christ then turned to His disciples and issued His famous command: ‘Do this in commemoration of Me.’ What He had done, the Sacrifice that He had instituted, they were to continue to do. They were to repeat over and over again His Last Supper.

“This His followers did, only they called it the Mass, simply because it was a convenient, short name.

“Now, what was the Last Supper, and what was, and is, the Mass? The offering of a precious gift to God; the offering of the Body and Blood of His Divine Son.

Sacrificial Words.

“We can’t possibly go into all this now, but it is worth noting that all the words Christ used during the course of the Last Supper were sacrificial words: “This is My Body, which shall be given for you. . .

This is My Blood, which shall be shed for you unto the remission of sins.’

“But here is what has always seemed to me to be the most interesting: Christ’s death on the Cross was so complete a sacrifice that the last drop of His Blood was spilled from His dead Body. It was a Sacrifice in which Body and Blood were separated; the last drop of His Blood was shed when the centurion pierced His Sacred Heart.

“Now note: At the Last Supper Christ did not take the bread and the wine at the same time and say over both together: ‘This is My Body and Blood.’ No. First, He took the bread and said: ‘This is My Body.’ There was a pause; then He took the wine and said, ‘This is My Blood.’ At that Last Supper there was a mystical separation of His Body and Blood. It was as if the Body had been brought into existence first, and then had come the Blood in a separate consecration. Mystically separated, Christ presented to us a picture of the separation of His Body and Blood on Calvary. That’s why we Catholics say that the Sacrifice of the Mass is performed by the mystic knife of the words of consecration.

Resume.

“Now to give the briefest resume:

“On the Cross, Christ the priest offered sacrifice to His Father.

“In the Last Supper Christ the priest offered sacrifice to His Father.

“On the Cross Christ was the Victim offered up; His Body was broken, and His Blood was shed.

“In the Last Supper Christ was the Victim offered up—the bread became His Body, and the wine became His Blood, which was mystically separated from His Body.

“In each case the priest, Christ, offered Himself to His heavenly Father in reparation for your sins and mine. He offered Himself in order to bring down grace and blessing upon the whole world.”

But the Human Priest.

Again Fr. Hall paused. And again Ford spoke.

“All right, that far. But in the Mass it’s a man that’s doing the offering, a human priest . . . and bread and wine. . .

Fr. Hall looked down at the coals of tobacco that glowed in the bowl of his pipe.

“You would probably be surprised,” he said, “if you knew how humble that man feels when he stands at the altar. He is quite sure that of himself he is absolutely unworthy of the tremendous responsibility that is his. Certainly he has no personal right to offer sacrifice to God. More than that, he knows very clearly that in the Mass, as on the Cross and at the

Last Supper, Christ is the High Priest. He knows, too, that in the Mass, as on the Cross and at the table of the Cenacle, it is Christ Who offers Himself to His heavenly Father. He knows that in the Mass that he is saying it is Christ Who is the victim and the priest.

“But Christ clearly ordered that the Sacrifice be continued. He commanded His followers to do it in commemoration of Him. So, when the priest approaches the altar, he does so in all humility and with every possible sense of unworthiness. But he does it, nonetheless, simply because Christ has ordered him to do so. And at that altar the priest, the quite unworthy representative of Christ, brings down the Body and Blood of the Saviour.

“At the moment of consecration, the priest loses his personality entirely in the personality of Christ, the real High Priest, who is offering the Sacrifice, and he says, not ‘This is the Body and Blood of Christ,’ but ‘This is My Body. . . . This is My Blood.’ It is almost as if the priest had ceased to exist, and Christ were standing in his place.

We Must Go On.

“Certainly we priests would be utterly unworthy of our blessed calling if we failed to continue to offer this glorious Sacrifice: Christ, to God the Father; if we ceased to carry out the command by which Christ ordered Calvary and the Last Supper to be continued for a memory of Him.”

He looked at his young friends and smiled a half-smile.

“So, you see, the Mass is really something very precious and very, important, and yet really quite simple and intelligible. It’s not a mummerly, as the old-time Protestants called it. It’s not a blasphemy. It’s a sincere effort to carry out the command of Christ. It’s not a hodgepodge of senseless gestures; it’s the offering of the perfect gift to God the Father, the offering of the bread and wine that have become the Body and Blood of God’s Blessed Son.” He paused again. Then, “That’s all,” he said.

That’s All.

The three sat silent for a few minutes. Then Helen rose. Fr. Hall followed suit, and the two helped Ford to his feet. They all walked into the hall, Ford limping a little less painfully, Helen sharing with Fr. Hall the burden of wounded masculinity. They stood for a moment in the open doorway of the little rectory, the crisp, cold air speeding up the blood in their faces. Winter vacationers were walking by, their skates or skis or bobsleds in tow.

The three shook hands, and Helen and the limping Ford moved off towards the little boarding house, where (Father had assured them before their arrival) they had pleasant rooms, good food, and a vigilant maiden lady, who answered for perfect chaperonage. Fr. Hall waved at them and then closed the door.

“Well,” asked Helen, harking back to the breakfast-table conversation.

“Well yourself,” replied Ford, leaning heavily on her arm.

“Funny,” said Helen, wrinkling her nose, “to hear him end all that by simply saying, ‘That’s all.’”

Ford paused and looked back over his shoulder at the little church.

“Not funny a bit. If that’s really all, all I know is that that’s plenty.”

And they both walked along in silence.

Nihil Obstat:
F. Moynihan,
Censor Deputatus.

Imprimatur:
✠ D. Mannix,
Archiepiscopus Melbournesis.