

The Mass: A Thrilling Adventure

I am going to talk to you about the Mass. It is a subject which I have not previously included in the many which I have discussed at congresses, reunions or on other occasions. So perhaps it is time to do it, all the more so as it is so seldom treated in a simple way. Even the experts seem overawed by the intricacies of theology and hold off from it. But as the mighty Mass is the last thing on earth about which we should be silent I am going to be the fool who rushes in where angels fear the tread.

My approach may seem to be a little round-about, but in reality not so. I properly put the horse before the cart. The Mass is the culmination or growth out of certain things. This setting must be presented first if the Mass is to be understood.

The Mass sacramentally reproduces the Passion and death of Our Saviour. Here we are faced with a profound mystery: *Mysterium Fidei*. While there is no question of Jesus dying again in the Mass in the physical sense,

neither is there any question of a mere symbolism after the fashion that the immolation of the ordinary paschal lamb was a type of the future Sacrifice of Christ. Calvary and the Mass are one and the same sacrifice (1 Cor 11: 26).

The sublime narration of the New Testament nears its climax on Holy Thursday in the Last Supper. This later is described by the four Evangelists, but Our Lord's moving discourse to the disciples is only given by St John. All the accounts begin with the betrayal by Judas. Obviously an importance is attached to it. We are caused to wonder as to this. Of course it has its place inasmuch as it, so to speak, sparked off the tragic events which followed. But there seems to be more at stake than that. Such a major stressing of the false apostle's part denotes that it possesses a highly mystical significance and that Judas and his sin enter in as something strictly necessary.

One might think: why? Because humanly-speaking that betrayal need not have taken place at all. The hostility of the priests and scribes towards Our Lord had been boiling up. In such circumstances there is always some event to cause an explosion. Could not Judas' treachery have been in that accidental category? No, it is made too prominent in the Four Gospels to be only that. Even very important items are often chronicled by one Evangelist only whereas all of them emphasise Judas' role as a primary circumstance.

Firstly, Judas is shown as conspiring with the priests and the scribes, this episode being introduced by the dread statement that Satan had entered into Judas. Then in the Last Supper itself, there is a further stressing of his action as if it belonged to the essence of the mystery. Jesus alarms his disciples by announcing that not all of them are clean; that one of them is about to betray him. He

follows up this by telling St John that the traitor would be the one to whom he, Jesus, would give bread. And this he gave forthwith to Judas, upon which we are again told expressly that Satan entered into Judas. The phrase is repeated by the Four Evangelists and St Thomas Aquinas interprets it as meaning that Judas had now finally given himself into the power of Satan.

Judas said to Jesus: 'Is it I, rabbi?' And Jesus replied: 'Thou hast said it.' That exchange between Jesus and the faithless one was private so that the others did not notice. But the narrative goes on to say that Judas went out quickly and that now it was night.

I repeat: Surely there is a profound significance in this process of Judas giving himself to the devil and thus becoming part of the process by which the plan of Redemption was effected. In it are we not looking at a repetition of what took place in Eden in the original Fall, which the Messiah is now about to repair? Then Satan likewise besieged Adam and Eve and succeeded in gaining possession of them so that in them the human race collapsed. The very part which the devil took then, he renews by taking possession of Judas. But with this radical difference that it now becomes part of the process of the divine mercy whereby the new Adam and the new Eve reverse the Fall in precise detail. Then Satan initiates things. Here again he is shown in that capacity. He was an essential part of the tragedy, so he is now made an essential part of the restoration. That is what I would venture to read into that strange scriptural insistence on Judas as the tool of Satan. It has been made plain that Satan, who was the instrument in the original Fall, has now by his own malice become the instrument of his own undoing: Satan inaugurates the Redemption; Judas is the wretched instrument which he used for this.

And after that, Jesus took bread and wine and blessed them, using the words which we hear invoked over the same elements in the Holy Mass. It is by those sacred words that he institutes the Mass and with it the Catholic priesthood with power to perpetuate the same act.

After that unique supper, Jesus accompanied the 11 disciples to the Mount of Olives where he told them of his impending arrest; thence to the Garden of Gethsemane taking with him Peter, James and John to be witnesses of what was to follow. Retiring from them a stone's-throw, he entered into his agony which was of such an extreme nature that he, the strong and perfect man, the headline of patient, brave suffering, the model of martyrs, is forced to cry out to his Eternal Father those poignant words: 'Father, if it be possible, remove this chalice from me. Yet not my will but thine be done.' And his sweat became as drops of blood running down upon the ground. The explanation of this extreme ordeal given to us by the Church is that he, the innocent one, had formally assumed the sins of the whole world, and that the contemplation was such that it surpassed even his power to bear, so that the angel had to come to his side to strengthen him.

When that passed, he rose from his prayer and awakened the disciples of whom it is pathetically said that they were sleeping quite overcome with sorrow. And then that summit of betrayal arrives in the shape of the chief priests and captains of the Temple and the elders, led by Satan in the person of Judas. And there is the ultimate horror of the kiss which formed the sign and which has become proverbial to designate the deepest depths of treason, and which echoes throughout all time as symbolic of unsurpassable outrage.

They seized Jesus and led him to the high priest's house where they mocked him and beat him. The gospel says that they kept striking his face and reviling him. For how long? Apparently this devil-instigated performance went on all night, for the account says that when day broke they brought him into the Sanhedrim and began their savage interrogation as to who he really was.

They secured his admission that he was the Son of God, whereupon he is taken off to Pilot and accused, because the power of putting him to death is reserved to the Roman authority.

There follows the confrontation between Pilot and Jesus by which the governor is impressed to the depths of his nature, so much so that he determines that he will not ally himself with the proceedings. He tries to release Jesus, first through recourse to Herod, and then by seeking to satisfy the hatred of the accusers by the shocking scourging of the victim, followed by the crowning with thorns and arraying of Jesus in the mock symbols of monarchy.

Finally Pilot unavailingly offers the people the privilege of freeing Jesus according to the special privilege of the Passover. But as St Luke says, the mob persisted with loud cries demanding that Jesus would be crucified. That clamour prevailed. Pilot delivered Jesus to their will and he was led away to execution. And when they came to the place called Golgotha or the Skull, they crucified him there, and two other malefactors with him.

How afflicting it is to read that expression of the Scriptures: 'Two other malefactors!' But that was really the position. As Isaiah had prophesied seven hundred years previously, 'Jesus has delivered his soul unto death and is reputed with the wicked, and he has borne the sins of many' (Is 53:12).

Our beloved Lord has so united himself to us and so has steeped himself in our sins that he has veritably become sin. The Lamb of God has assumed that burden and is now about to be immolated in order to take away the sins of the world.

The three hours of torment on the cross ensues, punctuated by those utterances which we call the Seven Words. Perhaps the most significant is that one which Jesus spoke to his mother standing at the foot of the Cross: 'Woman,' he said, 'behold in the disciple your son,' bridging in that phrase the great gap of years since kindred words were delivered to the serpent by Almighty God: 'I will set enmities between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed. She shall crush your head' (Gn 3:15).

Now has come the fulfilment of that promise. Mary is the prophesied woman. Her seed is the Messiah who speaks and is about to die, and who will in that dying crush the serpent and turn the world's sorrow into joy. St John, now hailed as her son, is truly so by the union of the Mystical Body.

After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished said: 'It is consummated' and gave up his spirit (Lk 19:30).

Of that the Mass is the living memorial. But how disregarded can it be! How seldom one hears it urged upon people other than as a Sunday obligation! Even when it does receive attention, its wonders are inadequately disclosed. Sometimes the vestments and the sacred vessels are discussed in minute detail as if they were the things that mattered. Of course they are important because they are the trappings of the great ceremony. But they are only trappings, much in the same category as the clothes we

wear. It is the central idea or essence of the Mass that I am discussing.

Today there are many who are trying to tone down on the Eucharist on which the Mass depends. The idea at work is to propitiate Protestantism, to devise a formula which they would accept. That must obviously mean that we have to give away to some extent so as to meet them. But how can we abandon one inch of ground in regard to the Eucharist? It is either the Real Presence of Jesus or it ceases to be that.

Luther was one of those who interfered with the doctrine of the Eucharist. His definition substituted for Transubstantiation what he called Consubstantiation. But the prefix 'trans' denotes a change of substance. 'Con,' which means 'with,' denotes that there has been no change of substance and means that Our Lord somehow comes to us alone with the bread and wine whose substance is not changed. Moreover his coming depends on the faith of the recipient at the moment of communion. As he is not present in the elements, there can be no adoration of them and therefore no reservation. It is a case of the Real Absence of Jesus. There is no parity or approximation there to the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist.

Formulae which seek to bridge that gap or to disguise its existence are but devices aimed at deceiving either one side or both. It is a transaction equivalent to putting paper across a hole to hide it.

Consubstantiation is more like what we call a Spiritual Communion, but Consubstantiation is far removed from the Eucharist.

The Council of Trent was emphatic in its condemnation of Luther's formula. It did not represent the Eucharist. The

modern tendency towards that error would deprive us of the Eucharist and of the Mass, our most precious heritage.

The Mass is the divine expedient which obliterates the distance and the two thousand years which separate us from the event of the Crucifixion. It places Calvary in our midst: or if you like – transports to the moment and spot of the actual Sacrifice of Our Lord. Through the Mass we take part in the reality; we are present there along with his mother, St John and the others. It is no symbolism, no mere pious idea such as Consubstantiation would offer.

All Masses meet in Calvary just as the rays of the sun find their centre in the radiant sun: so that when Our Lord hung on the Cross, his eyes rested on all who would attend the Masses which would ever be said.

The Mass is the fullness of the Sacrifice of Christ. There is the difference that at Mass we do not see the underlying reality. If we could, we would be rent with sorrow, such as could kill us. Today our faith substitutes our eyes and our ears, but the merit which comes through the medium of faith is the greater.

As a help towards comprehending that finite mystery of the Mass I propose television. Of course it is a weak image inasmuch as it only projects into our homes a copy of what occurs in the place of origin. It does not actually station the persons before us. But the Mass reaches the celestial height of setting the drama itself before us in its utmost completeness, though without its sight and sound, for an essential idea of the Mass is that it be an exercise in faith. Between it and us is a veil which the senses do not penetrate, but never, never let routine prevent us from trying to pierce that veil without thought.

Strange to say, the venerable prayers of the Mass tend to distract one a little from the hidden reality. If

during the Mass we could keep our mind concentrated on that reality, it would be wise to put aside the prayer books and let the drama absorb us utterly. That would be a justification for the old-time use of the Rosary at Mass. It enables the mind to devote itself to what is there happening to Jesus and Mary; and that is the centre point.

Possibly by reason of the popular devotion of the Three Hours' Agony on Good Friday, it is commonly thought that the Mass comprises from the time of the nailing of the Victim to the Cross on to the moment of his death. But there is more in the Sacrifice of Christ than his dying. That Sacrifice was enacted precisely according to the ritual of the Old Law. Of that ritual Our Lord had to fulfil every detail because that sacrifice looked forward to it and prefigured it. He said he had come to fulfil it. Therefore his fulfilment would be perfect, descending into detail which no thinking of ours can probe.

The special efficacy of that old sacrifice lay in the fact that one day the Redeemer would incorporate it into his own pure sacrifice. He would reproduce every item of it and thus unite it to himself and to his own sacrifice. In that way did the *old* participate in the merit of the *new* for those Jews who reposed their faith in the old sacrifice originated by Abraham which looked forward to the Redemptive Sacrifice.

One will be struck by the fact that the liturgy of the Mass is chiefly drawn from the Last Supper and we must understand why. One explanation is that the Last Supper is an anticipation or pre-staging of Calvary, just as the Mass is a prolongation or post-staging. This idea would present us with, so to speak, a three-storied house; the stories being the last Supper, Calvary and the Mass. It is

the one house; we would be in it whether we are at the Last Supper, Calvary, or at today's Mass.

A great Jesuit writer, Maurice de la Taille, has popularised a different conception which amounts to a two-storied house; the ground-floor being the Sacrifice of Christ extending from the Cenacle to the Cross; the other storey being the Mass. It is much more than a captivating theory of his own. His work, *Mysterium Fidei* quotes for us abundant statements of the great ones of the past who held the same view. Higher than any exalted testimony would be the fact that it was a proposition approved of by the Council of Trent.

Examining the ritual which Jesus fulfilled in his sacrifice, de la Taille contends that it was not discharged on Calvary alone and that we have to go back to preceding stages to supply all the ingredients of a true sacrifice under the Old Law, which is what Our Lord intended to enact precisely. That missing part of the recognised ritual is the oblation or formal offering of the victim to God by the priest. Jesus is both the offering priest and the victim. It is certain that in the pivotal event which would terminate the Old Law and usher in the new sacrifice he would fulfil the stipulated requirements in a manner which could not be questioned.

De la Taille holds that on Calvary there is no utterance of Jesus which can be construed in that sense of a formal offering of himself and he declares that to find it one must go back to the Last Supper. On that occasion Christ Our Lord, in all due form according to the recognised ritual, did make such an oblation of himself to God. He pledged himself to his passion and death for many unto the remission of sins (Mt 26:28). The Sacrifice of Christ began at the Last Supper but the immolation of the victim did not take place then.

Thus offered and bound to sacrifice, the Great Victim gave effect to the oblation by entering immediately afterwards into his passion which was consummated by his death. What was begun in the Cenacle was completed on Calvary, or rather on Easter morning in the glory of the Resurrection.

The Mass contains the Sacrifice of Christ in its full essence and completeness. Therefore, according to the foregoing comprehension of things, we assist at all that dread liturgy when we attend Mass. We are really present at, and part of, all that train of events which I started off by quoting to you from the pages of Holy Writ. I recapitulate them briefly: We mingle with the Twelve Apostles at the Last Supper and receive with them the Body and Blood of the true Paschal Lamb. And then we go with Jesus and the disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane where the most excruciating part of his suffering is submitted to by him and given visible expression in his agony. That is his contemplation of the sins of men which he, the Divine Scapegoat (Lev 16:8-10) had taken on himself. That ordeal ends in his arrest, made more-bitter by Judas' betraying share in it.

Then unrolls all the grievous paraphernalia of ill-treatment: the tormenting by the soldiers, the scourging and crowning with thorns, the trial and sentencing, the Way of the Cross, and the Cross itself. Jesus dies and the world's ransom has been paid.

All that came within the compass of the Sacrifice of Christ. Therefore all of it is comprised and compressed by divine power into the Mass. What a thrilling adventure, therefore, it is to assist at Mass! We enter then into the order of the supremely miraculous. Time and space are set aside and we are back in the world of Jesus and Mary.

We are at that eternal moment designated by God when he told the serpent that his head would be crushed by the woman and her seed. At Mass that crushing is in progress. Jesus is dying on the Cross, and Mary, the woman, stands at the foot of it. Look, all who pass, and see if there is any sorrow like unto that sorrow!

Those exciting contents of the Mass are no affair of meditation only or imagination, but are fact and sheer reality. The sacrifice of Our Lord is not worth more than the Mass, for the two are one and the same. Or to put this in a way which will compel thought: If by an impossibility the two were severed without depriving the Mass of the value which it draws from the original sacrifice, then the Mass by itself would be our sufficient ransom.

It was the Mass which the prophet Malachi, speaking for Almighty God, foretold four hundred years before Christ in these tremendous words: 'From the rising of the sun even to its going down, my name is great among the Gentiles; and in every place there is sacrifice and there is offered in my name a clean oblation. For my name is great among the Gentiles, saith the Lord of Hosts' (Mal 1:11).

And it was to the same Holy Sacrifice of the Mass that St Anthony the Apostle referred when he was about to be crucified like his master: 'Daily do I immolate to Almighty God not the flesh of bulls nor the blood of goats but the Immaculate Lamb of God himself, whose flesh is then partaken of by every believing people. For the Lamb which was sacrificed remains living and entire.'

That amazing and supremely important experience of the Mass is there beckoning to us at practically every hour of the day, pleading for our participation.