

**“This is my Body. This is my Blood.”**

Maundy Thursday is the birthday of the Catholic priesthood. In fact, Pope John Paul II used to write a Letter to Priests each year on Maundy Thursday in which he addressed theological, devotional, and pastoral matters that directly touched upon the life and vocation of Catholic priests throughout the world.

At the Last Supper Our Lord ordained His first priests on the same occasion as He Himself offered the very first Mass. In that Upper Room, for the first time – and it took a while for the Apostles to appreciate exactly what it was that they had just witnessed and participated in – the miracle of transubstantiation took place, and the Bread and Wine were solemnly consecrated and became the living flesh, the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Our Lord Jesus Christ. This was no mere symbol. The bread and wine did not represent the Body and Blood of Christ. Indeed, the bread and wine ceased to exist, and what Our Lord placed before His Apostles was His own flesh and blood in sacramental form.

The very next day Our Lord would offer Himself on the Cross as the perfect sacrifice to God the Father to atone for our sins. At the moment of His death, the gates of heaven were opened and a there followed a tremendous – indeed, an extravagant – outpouring of grace, sufficient – indeed more than sufficient – to redeem the whole world. However, it would appear to the untrained eye that only those who stood beneath the Cross at that moment would benefit from such an outpouring. Yet in His wisdom, God had found a way to enable everyone else – all of us, for example, who would not be born for another two thousand years – to benefit from this great outpouring of grace and to be washed clean of sin through this act of divine forgiveness.

The Mass acts as a sort of window or portal whereby everyone who is at Mass (whether or not they actually go to Holy Communion) is drawn into God's eternal presence, a sort of timeless space, and is made present at the foot of the Cross alongside Our Blessed Lady and St John. In other words, the Mass is the continuation in time of a one-off event that happened outside of time as it were.

And for this to happen, Our Lord ordained His first priests, who in turn passed on that priesthood to the next generation. This sacred priesthood enables those who are ordained to participate sacramentally in Christ's priesthood so that they can offer exactly the same sacrifice today as Christ Himself offered on Calvary two millennia ago. By doing this, Catholic priests accomplish two things every time they say Mass: first, they draw the people at the Mass into this eternal presence of God – this timeless space – and second, they pour forth into our lives today the countless graces that Christ first poured out all those years ago on Golgotha.

This works because of the miracle of transubstantiation whereby God makes use of bread and wine, transforming it into something quite different – the Body and Blood of His Son – so that a living sacrifice can be offered up to the living God, and *this* instead of a merely symbolic gift that would otherwise have no life, no form, and no meaning, and which would, therefore, accomplish no act of forgiveness or redemption.

The priest is ordained, then, to become another Christ, an *alter Christus*. When he is ordained his soul is changed and, as it were, re-shaped or reconfigured so that he can do at the altar what Christ did on the Cross. The man who becomes a priest may be a great saint or a ghastly rogue. Most of them are probably somewhere in between, good men who are trying their best but who, in fact, are sinners like everyone else. But that's one of the beauties of the Catholic priesthood: although each priest has a responsibility to become holy and to become a saint, the Mass and the Sacraments still work even if he is not. If the Masses and

Sacraments of *only* those priests who were saints worked then most of God's people would be waiting a long time before they could get to a valid Mass or have their sins absolved!

But what is most beautiful about the priesthood is that God calls ordinary young men to share in His work of redemption and salvation. God calls ordinary teenagers to think about that call, and He consecrates ordinary men to the priesthood so that others can receive forgiveness for their sins and the grace of the Sacraments. Ordinary men can help to sanctify other people's souls and lead them to heaven.

The Mass intention this evening is for Vocations to the Priesthood. We pray that God may raise up from amongst the boys and men of this parish new priests, good priests, holy priests, who can sanctify souls and help people get to heaven. Perhaps tomorrow's priest might even come from your own family, a son or a grandson maybe? The Church begs Catholic parents to be generous in nurturing such vocations from within their own families. And in the meantime, it is the duty of all Catholics to keep ever in our prayers those who are already being called by God to serve at His altar.

O Lord, grant us priests.

O Lord, grant us holy priests.

O Lord, grant us many holy priests.