

22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, A – September 3, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 975 words

In the Roman Canon – the first Eucharistic prayer – the priest asks God the Father to “bless, acknowledge, and approve” the offering that is on the altar; he then asks God to make it also “spiritual and acceptable”. That part about making our offering “spiritual” relates to today’s second reading, in which our patron, St. Paul, tells us to offer our own “bodies as a living sacrifice”, and that this is our “spiritual worship”. The offering of Christ’s Body and Blood upon the altar constitutes “spiritual worship” that is pleasing to God, and so does our own offering of ourselves. And there is a connection between the two.

Before we delve more deeply into that connection, we should ask the question, What is Mass about? What constitutes active participation in Holy Mass? The answer is important, because it has to do with the “spiritual worship” that our reading and our Eucharistic prayer speak about. But I think if you asked the average Catholic on the street today, “How do we participate actively in Mass?”, answers would vary greatly. Some would say that the greatest form of participating in Holy Mass is to go to communion. Others might respond that it has to do with singing all the hymns and chants and participating meaningfully in the various gestures. Some might say that it’s all of the above. And others might have different responses.

However, none of those answers really arrives at what it means to give God “spiritual worship”. For example, if, one Sunday, I were in the state of mortal sin and hadn’t yet gone to confession, I should not go to communion; but I could still offer God “spiritual worship” – as we’ll understand better moment. Or with externals like hymns and chants and gestures: maybe I don’t know the hymn or chant or the language; maybe I am no longer able to kneel; yet I can still offer God the “spiritual worship” that he desires – again, as we’ll see shortly. And then, a word of encouragement for you parents with young children: maybe the little cherub is really giving you a run for your money today and you are distracted for almost the entire Mass; yet you, too, can still offer God “spiritual worship”.

We must avoid, therefore, reducing our participation in Mass to actions and externals. Is it good to go to Holy Communion? Of course – but only if we are rightly disposed to do so! Is it good to sing the hymns and chants? Of course – even if you have trouble carrying a tune or do not understand the language! Is it good to kneel and participate in the other gestures, to the extent that you can? Of course it is. But St. Paul tells us, “off your bodies as a living sacrifice...to God, your spiritual worship”. Our participation in Holy Mass is truly active and truly centered on what is essential when we have offered ourselves with the Body and Blood of Christ on the altar.

This is why the priest, before saying the offertory prayer, says, “Pray, brethren, that my sacrifice *and yours* may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father”. The procession of the gifts forward is the time when we should also place ourselves and all we wish to offer to God spiritually upon the altar. Up until that point in Mass we have heard and reflected upon the Word of God in the chants and the scriptures; these have been explained, in part, in the homily; perhaps we have even begun to make some resolutions about how we’ll serve God more faithfully going forward. And ideally, we also spent time before Mass thinking about what we would offer to God besides: whatever is going on in our lives, the people we hold dear, the situation in our world, and so forth – in short, whatever has been involved in “taking up [our] cross”, as the Lord said in the gospel. Just as the priest prepares himself in the sacristy to offer the Mass for a specific intention along with the sacrifice of Christ’s Body and Blood upon the altar, so, too, each one of you should think about what it is that you wish to offer to God before Mass begins. And then, at the offertory, place that spiritually upon the altar as well.

This spiritual worship, then, can take place wherever we might go to Holy Mass – even if we don’t understand the language, or the preaching is not inspiring, or there are distractions, or we are not at our physical best. Because we share in the priesthood of Christ through baptism, each one of us is able to offer something to God that is pleasing to him, uniting it with the sacrifice of Christ on the holy altar. Then the priest prays in the same Roman Canon that God’s “holy angel” may bear all that we have offered with Christ’s Body and Blood to his “altar on high in the sight of [his] divine majesty”. And in return, the Lord gives himself to us in Holy Communion; those who are properly disposed and prepared receive him, and those who are not yet prepared may make a spiritual communion instead.

This is the essence of what is happening and what should happen at each Mass we attend – this is our “spiritual worship”. There is much more that needs to be said about what takes place at Mass, and I will attempt to do so in future homilies. For today, though: listen carefully to the Eucharistic Prayer – perhaps even reading along with it in your missalette, thinking about all that it means. And consider throughout this week how to make a better preparation for Mass, so that at the moment of the offertory, you, too, will have placed your sacrifice upon the altar: a pleasing act of spiritual worship.