

# The Mass and the Common Priesthood of the Baptized

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## Mass and the Common Priesthood of the Baptized

The Catholic Mass and the Eucharistic fruit we celebrate are the source and summit of our Faith as Catholics<sup>1</sup>. Here heaven and earth touch and God's faithful are able to unite together with the profound mysteries of Christ and His Church. Yet so many Catholics do not attend Mass on a regular basis and many that frequent mass do not seem to understand the profound significance of the Eucharistic Celebration. As a whole, the Catholic world does not fully appreciate this Sacred Service.

Many Catholics just do not adequately understand the true significance of the Mass, nor how to really participate. The Second Vatican Council called for Liturgical reform and in some ways the reform was misunderstood. While the visible changes of the Mass were easy enough for the faithful to learn, it is common for Catholics to not really appreciate the *Novus Ordo* reform because too often we fail to understand the profound reasons for the reform. In this paper we will investigate the Second Vatican Council's wish for the laity to be engaged in the Mass, by virtue of their common priesthood.

**The Mass Reform:** The careful reforms of the Mass were to make the mystery of the Mass more understandable and include the faithful as a critical part of the celebration. "The rite of the Mass is to be revised in such a way that the intrinsic nature and purpose of its several parts, as well as the connection between them, may be more clearly manifested, and that devout and active participation by the faithful may be more easily

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<sup>1</sup> *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 10, *Vatican Council II*, Volume 1, *The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*, General Editor Austin Flannery, O.P., Costello Publishing Co., Nothport, New York, 2004 (All Vatican II references taken from this edition.)

achieved.”<sup>2</sup> The intent of Vatican II was not to remove the sense of mystery. Rather Vatican II wanted to make the liturgical mysteries come alive and be lived by the faithful. For this to happen, the celebration of the mysteries needed to be more understandable.

A wide range of reforms were called for to engage the faithful including “acclamations, responses, psalms, antiphons, hymns, as well as by actions, gestures and bodily attitudes.”<sup>3</sup> These reforms have helped many feel more included in the celebration. Prior to these reforms, the faithful may have been tempted to see themselves more as spectators of the Mass rather than as participants. In fact, it was common for the faithful to be praying the Rosary or some other devotion, while the priest was saying Mass.

**Engage the Common Priesthood of the Faithful:** The purpose of including the faithful in the Liturgy went far beyond just trying to make them feel more included. The Council wished to give fresh attention to the doctrine of the common priesthood of the laity. “Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy, and to which the Christian people, ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people’ (1 Pet. 2:9) have a right and obligation by reason of their baptism.”<sup>4</sup> This is so important that the Council adds, “the full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else, for it is the

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<sup>2</sup> *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 50

<sup>3</sup> *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 30

<sup>4</sup> *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 14

primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit.”<sup>5</sup>

What is meant by the quote from 1 Peter 2:9 that we are “a royal priesthood” in connection with the call for “full, conscious, and active” participation during the Mass? 1 Peter 2:9 is a reference back to Exodus 19:6. God said to Moses on Mount Sinai, “and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Here God expressed his plan for all the children of Israel to be a type of priest. This somewhat developed into a common priesthood of all Israelites and a separate ministerial priesthood of the Levites. The common Israelite would give to the Levite priest the substance to be sacrificed. The New Covenant has fulfilled what the Old Covenant pre-figured, as we have the common priesthood of all the Laity that provides the ministerial priesthood of the ordained the substance to offer up in the sacrifice of the Mass.

There is a connection between the common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood, though they are different. While they are essentially different and “not only in degree”, they are still “ordered one to another” and share in their own way in the “one priesthood of Christ... The faithful indeed, by virtue of their royal priesthood, participate in the offering of the Eucharist.”<sup>6</sup> It should also be stressed that the common priesthood is dependent upon the ministerial priesthood and can not consecrate the Eucharist.

So Vatican II intended the doctrine of the royal or common priesthood to manifest itself within the reformed Eucharistic liturgy. But how is this done and what is its connection with giving full, conscious, and active participation?

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<sup>5</sup> ibid

<sup>6</sup> ibid

In order for the laity to be capable of giving this whole-hearted participation, several critical elements must first be present in their lives: The first is accomplished by calling the laity to a deeper conversion.<sup>7</sup> Next, “in order that the liturgy may be able to produce its full effects it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that their minds be attuned to their voices, and that they cooperate with heavenly grace lest they receive it in vain.”<sup>8</sup> Finally, the laity cannot limit their spiritual lives solely to the liturgy. They are called to pray with others, pray privately, and to pray always “without ceasing.”<sup>9</sup> Praying just at Sunday Mass is not enough. Unless we strive in our relationship with Christ throughout the week, we cannot adequately understand how to apply our role as common priests on Sunday morning.

By living a life of conversion and prayer and coming to Mass with the proper dispositions, the faithful are primed to give their full, conscious, and real participation. This is done partially by paying attention to the rite and prayers, praying, singing, responding, worshipping Christ in the Eucharist, and receiving communion “with devotion and full collaboration.”<sup>10</sup> For many, this is as far as their understanding goes. While this is good, it is not exclusively what God has in store for us. What begins as laity participation is called to be an exercise of the common priesthood.

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<sup>7</sup> *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 9

<sup>8</sup> *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 11

<sup>9</sup> *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 12

<sup>10</sup> *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 48

The laity, being “dedicated as they are to Christ and anointed by the Holy Spirit” are invited to offer up all aspects of their lives as spiritual offerings in union with the offering of the Mass:

For all their works, prayers and apostolic undertakings, family and married life, daily work, relaxation of mind and body, if they are accomplished in the Spirit—indeed even the hardships of life if patiently borne— all these become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (cf. Pet. 2:5). In the celebration of the Eucharist these may most fittingly be offered to the Father along with the body of the Lord. And so worshipping everywhere by their holy actions, the laity consecrate the world itself to God.<sup>11</sup>

Pope Benedict 16<sup>th</sup> referred to the laity’s ability of make spiritual offerings in a presentation to a Wednesday Audience. “The Eucharist is the summit of the whole Christian life because the faithful bring to it all their prayers and good works, their joys and sufferings. These modest offerings are united to the perfect sacrifice of Christ and are thus completely sanctified and lifted up to God in an act of perfect worship which brings the faithful into the divine intimacy.”<sup>12</sup>

In the Sacred Liturgy, the Presentation of the Gifts is key to understanding the liturgical role the laity has as common priests. When the gifts are brought up to the altar, “it is both meaningful and desirable that the faithful should bring up the bread and wine.”<sup>13</sup> The *General Instruction* goes on to add that in “former times” the faithful would “provide from their own homes the bread and wine” and “the ritual of carrying them up to the altar is still meaningful and of spiritual value.” In the Traditional Latin Mass, there is no laity involvement with the bringing up of the gifts. This simple ritual

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<sup>11</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 34

<sup>12</sup> Pope Benedict 16<sup>th</sup>, Wednesday Audience, April 8, 2006, from [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)

<sup>13</sup> *General Instruction on the Roman Missal*, 49

had been part of the Mass in earlier times and the Council was calling for it to be reinstated.

In years past the laity made the communion bread and wine at home and brought it to the priest. In today's typical American service, the Presentation of the Gifts just involves bringing up the bread and wine, and often the collection money. It may be tempting to view the Preparation of the Gifts as just an easy way to involve parishioners. Certainly it is an easy way for parishioner involvement, but the meaning is much deeper. The gifts represent the spiritual offerings of the faithful. This is why the Council wished the laity to bring them up, so the role of the common priesthood would be more recognizable in the Liturgy. In teaching on Presentation of the Gifts, Pope Benedict 16th says that this:

humble and simple gesture is actually very significant: in the bread and wine that be bring to the altar, all creation is taken up by Christ the Redeemer to be transformed and presented to the Father. In this way we also bring to the altar all the pain and suffering of the world, in the certainty that everything has value in God's eyes... It enables us to appreciate how God invites man to participate in bringing to fulfillment his handiwork, and in so doing, give human labour its authentic meaning, since, through the celebration of the Eucharist, it is united to the redemptive sacrifice of Christ.<sup>14</sup>

After the gifts are received and the initial prayers are said over the gifts, the priest (currently) says, "Pray, brethren, that our sacrifice may be acceptable to God..." This is perhaps not the best translation of the Latin. The Latin does not say "our", rather it says, "*meum ac vestrum*," which literally means "mine and yours". The new *Roman Missal, Third Edition* has a better translation of "Pray, brethren, that my sacrifice and yours may

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<sup>14</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 47, from [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)

be acceptable.”<sup>15</sup> The distinction made here is very important and the new translation better represents that there are different sacrifices being made here. There is the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, being offered by the priest and also the spiritual sacrifices of the laity, represented by the gifts. The laity respond with, “May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands...” The sacrifice at the hands of the priest are the gifts, which represent the offering of the faithful. This somewhat echoes Genesis 4 where the offering of Able was acceptable to God but Cain’s offering was not. When the faithful respond, “May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands...” they are asking God to find their own personal sacrifices acceptable.

In the Old Testament, the people provided the priest with the substance of the sacrifice. For example, one could pick a lamb from his flock and bring it to the temple for sacrifice. The priest would receive the offering and sacrifice it on behalf of the one offering it. With the Mass we have something similar. The laity are called to offer the substance of the sacrifice. They are to present the priest with the gifts of our spiritual sacrifices.

Symbolized by the gifts, the laity give to the priest their very selves, all their efforts, sacrifices, and prayers. The priest then takes our imperfect sacrifices, transforms them and unites them with the perfect sacrifice of Christ. Thus the imperfect sacrifices of the faithful are sanctified and perfected. What is offered as natural becomes supernatural. What begins as a human effort becomes a Divine effort. As Archbishop Chaput of Denver explains:

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<sup>15</sup> *Roman Missal, Third Edition*, taken from [www.usccb.org/romanmissal](http://www.usccb.org/romanmissal)

The act of presenting the gifts allows each of us to make an offering of ourselves, in our own gifts and limitations, so that we may be transformed like the bread and wine... The prayers acknowledge that elements of the earth, made into bread and wine by ‘the work of human hands,’ are imperfect, but we ask that they be taken up into the perfect praise of Christ. This part of the Mass is another invitation for us to offer our lives in a sacrifice of praise to God. Here the common priesthood actively engages in the sacrifice taking place.<sup>16</sup>

It is critical for Catholics to understand this point. When the faithful consciously unite their own sacrifices with the Sacrifice of the Mass, our works, efforts, and sufferings take on a whole new realm of effectiveness, power, and meaning. In a world so often hopeless, the faithful can loose hope. Yet in the priestly action of uniting our efforts with the Christ’s Sacrifice, the efforts are multiplied. “Through the ministry of priests the spiritual sacrifice of the faithful is completed in union with the sacrifice of Christ the only mediator, which in the Eucharist is offered through the priest’s hands in the name of the whole Church.”<sup>17</sup> The little one can give is made to be more. Great hope can be found in this practice.

Consider the Gospel account of the multiplication of the loaves and fish as a pre-figuration of the Eucharist. Christ received the modest gift of five loaves and two fish, gave thanks (*eucharistesas*), and multiplied it so as to feed the Five Thousand. (John 6) As common priests, the faithful give to Christ the loaves and fish (our works, prayers, and sacrifices), Christ then multiplies our offering and gives them real power. By understanding and applying this concept, the prayers of Christians can be perfected,

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<sup>16</sup> Archbishop Chaput of Denver, *Denver Catholic Registry*, Dec. 4, 2002

<sup>17</sup> *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2

united with Christ, and in a way literally turned into Christ. This is what Vatican II had in mind when it invited the laity to give full, conscious, and active participation!

What begins with our gift to Christ then becomes Christ's gift to us. After the offering of the faithful is transformed into something far superior (the body and blood of Christ), Christ then gives the transformed gift back to the faithful as a gift of himself to further transform and sanctify the faithful. This empowers the faithful to be all the more effective in living as a Christian and sanctifying the world. This may be one way to explain why Catholics believe that our works have a role in our Salvation: Christ sanctifies our imperfect works and makes our works whole and capable of greatness they could never have on their own.

The offering of the faithful should not stop at just offering to God their works. They are called to offer their very selves to God as a living sacrifice. Christ's faithful "should give thanks to God. Offering the immaculate victim, not only through the hands of the priest but also together with him, they should learn to offer themselves."<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere the council states, "Therefore all the disciples of Christ, persevering in prayer and praising God (cf. Acts 2:42-47), should present themselves as a sacrifice, living, holy and pleasing to God (cf. Rom. 12:1)"<sup>19</sup> Christ offers Himself up in the Sacrifice of the Mass, and the faithful are invited to do so as well.

Referring to the faithful's self offering, Pope Benedict 16th said, "The purpose of the priestly ministry [ministerial priesthood] is to gather the people of God 'so that all

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<sup>18</sup> *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 48

<sup>19</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 10

who belong to this people, sanctified as they are by the Holy Spirit, may offer themselves as ‘a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God’ (Rom 12:1)’<sup>20</sup>

The Pope then continues with an emphasis on the importance of both the ministerial and common priesthood. He says that according to Vatican II, it is because of the ministerial priesthood that the spiritual sacrifices of the faithful “can achieve their goal.”<sup>21</sup> It is very important to understand that the role of the common priesthood is completely dependent upon the ministerial priesthood. The ministerial priesthood is essential for the sacrifices of the laity to be sanctified. This important doctrine was supposed to be taught to the faithful as standard instruction.<sup>22</sup> Yet it is largely unknown by the laity.

Some may find it surprising that the common priesthood’s connection with mass is not new. The Catechism of the Council of Trent called the common priesthood of the laity the “internal” priesthood of the baptized.<sup>23</sup> The liturgical concept can also be found in the Traditional Latin Mass as well. Even though the Theology was present, the fact that the faithful had such a minimal role in the ritual made it almost impossible for the laity to realize they had any priestly role with the Mass. Here are some quotes in English from the Traditional Latin Mass that imply the common priesthood of the faithful:

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<sup>20</sup> Pope Benedict 16<sup>th</sup>, Wednesday Audience, April 8, 2006, with a quote from *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*

<sup>22</sup> *Instruction on the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery*, 11

<sup>23</sup> *The Catechism of the Council of Trent*. p. 330 “Regarding the internal priesthood, all the faithful are said to be priests, once they have been washed in the saving waters of Baptism. Especially is this name given to the just who have the Spirit of God, and who, by the help of divine grace, have been made living members of the great High-priest, Jesus Christ; for, enlightened by faith which is inflamed by charity, they offer up spiritual sacrifices to God on the altar of their hearts. Among such sacrifices must be reckoned every good and virtuous action done for the glory of God.” Tan Books and Publishers, inc., Rockford, Illinois, 1982

- “We offer unto Thee, O Lord, the chalice of salvation”
- “may our sacrifice so be offered”
- “Accept... this offering which we are making to Thee”
- “Pray brethren, that my Sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God the Father Almighty”<sup>24</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

The Mass reforms of Vatican II were profound in meaning. The Mass was not changed merely to make it more appealing, although this may have been part of it. In the opinion of Archbishop Chaput of Denver, the “changes were designed to actively engage the common priesthood of the faithful in a clear way.”<sup>25</sup>

A quick reflection of the common priesthood can be found when Catholics somewhat jokingly say to each other, “Offer it up!” And just how are we to “Offer it up?” Catholics are called to offer up our sufferings, prayers, good works, and their very selves in the Mass.

The full power of the Mass is largely unknown among the faithful. It is the responsibility of all God’s Children to accept the Father’s gifts and use them as He intended. We are thus called to explore ever deeper the mysteries of the Mass. The Mass the source and summit.<sup>26</sup> From the Mass the faithful receive Christ in the Eucharist and the power be a Christian. To the Mass the faithful bring their sufferings, prayers, good works, and their very selves as a gift to God, for him to transform.

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<sup>24</sup> *Traditional Latin Mass*, Offertory, from [www.traditionalmass.org](http://www.traditionalmass.org)

<sup>25</sup> Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, e-mail exchange Dec. 2, 2008

<sup>26</sup> *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, # 10

The Mass is extremely rich in meaning and is far more than just a gathering of friends to share a bit of bread. It is the awesome offering of the Body and Blood of Christ by the priest. It is also an opportunity for the laity as common priests to make significant spiritual offerings through the priest and thus bring perfection and power to their efforts. This is so wonderful it is almost unbelievable. In an age of “what’s in it for me”, the Mass offers the individual what nothing else can. If the faithful can understand these beautiful teachings of Vatican II and learn how to apply them at Mass, they will never be bored at Mass again! They will be closer to full, active, and conscious participation, and their works will bear unexpected and powerful fruits!

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