



Boston Catholic Journal

www.boston-catholic-journal.com
editor@boston-catholic-journal.com

THE MOST HOLY SACRIFICE OF THE MASS:

A Primer for Clueless Catholics

Part VIII

What the Mass is NOT

By now we should have acquired a fairly clear idea of what the Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass principally *IS*.

It is no less important for us first be clear about *what the Mass is NOT*, for a good deal of what the Mass *is* will become much more clear if we understand what the Mass is *not*.

Most Catholics have lost, or no longer have remembrance of, the most central aspects of the Mass – and the fault, largely, is not their own. It is the result of a systemic failure in Catechesis over the past 30 years. Bishops – *whose principal duty, above all others, as "teachers of the faith"* – appear to have forgotten, or have simply relinquished, this vital responsibility, relegating it to others as something of a lesser issue, failing to see that the "larger" issues at hand ... are a *direct result* of this failure.

Having been pawned off to – and eagerly seized by – increasingly "progressive" *committees* who articulated it in terms of social and political issues current or correct at the time, the concept itself of "doctrine and dogma" came into disrepute, such that the words themselves became terms of reproach, tantamount to expletives. In fact, "doctrine and dogma" became the antithesis to "enlightened experiment", which, disdaining *certainties* as somehow regressive, came to repudiate them – however dismal and detrimental the results have clearly been. Unwilling to accept our own complicity in the matter, we are too eager to blame our teachers for our ignorance. They, too, unfortunately, acquired little in the way of authentic doctrine from their own predecessors who themselves were largely ignorant of the Deposit of the Faith ... or disagreed with much of it.

As a consequence, we know little of our Faith, and therefore even less of the momentous event that occurs each day at our Altars.

While this may appear an unkind assessment, it is sadly borne out by the appalling lack of knowledge of even the **most elementary** aspects of the Catholic Faith by our own children. From First Penance to Confirmation they are "processed", grade by grade, to "Confirming" that of which they know nothing because they have been taught nothing.

This absence of what authentically constitutes Catholic doctrine has **created a vacuum in the Mass**. We celebrate it and really do not know why. Most often we appear, really, to be celebrating *ourselves*.

The True, the Untrue, and the Absurd

In this vacuum, it will come as a something of a surprise that certain things practiced – or left undone – things that have become part and parcel of our experience at Mass – really have no place there. This *can* be a stinging realization. No one likes being told that they behave badly or without understanding, that what they have long practiced and what has been long condoned and even encouraged, is wrong.

In this respect we all lack humility.

We do not like being "wrong".

Nevertheless, it remains the case that some things **are** true and others **are not** – however this vies with or offends our largely democratically evolved sensitivities that would hold the true to be what best suits the most or the many, or, perhaps better yet, what is least offensive to them. This notion pleases us.

No one is wrong. In fact, *nothing* is wrong. And if nothing is wrong, nothing, *eo ipso*, is intrinsically right. We have the best of all possible worlds.

Truth, absurdity, contradiction – all are concomitant, but ultimately lesser issues.

We wish to get along. And we do so by "going along".

In fact, the most certain formula for contention, for *not* "getting along", is to insist that $2+2=4$ and not another number of our choosing. Our *insistence* that the sum of this simple equation is 4, and *cannot* be 5, is surprisingly fraught with deep implications, for it **means** that the world is not arbitrary – at least the world of numbers, and with the world of numbers, the world of matter as susceptible to quantification of any meaningful sort. If we pay for two apples and receive one, we are not indifferent to it.

But there is an inherent tyranny in equations of this sort, and, in fact, in any physical phenomena construed in terms of "laws", in other words, as sequences or configurations that do, because they cannot, admit of exceptions. We are both constrained and confined by them. People do not like mathematics, not because it is abstruse, but because it admits of definitive and unequivocal solutions. There are *correct* and there are *incorrect* answers. This infuriates us. All our imaginative and creative rendering, coupled with the totality of our good will, can, and often does, yield wrong answers. There is no latitude. We cannot fake the right answer. And that burns us.

It provokes us because it violates our freedom. It constrains our will. Do you doubt it?

State something categorically ... and a hand will immediately rise to challenge it. We esteem this. It is part and parcel of our democratic patrimony and our allegiance to it even at the cost of reason. The *will to dissent*, has, in the West, come to verge upon the pathological such that the *unwillingness* to dissent has come to acquire a pathology of its own: "What?", we are asked incredulously, "You do not question? What is wrong with you?"

If we are honest, however, we will admit that often our challenge has little to do with a genuine questioning at all, but is an expression of a contention with our will which we perceive threatened by being deprived of its freedom to choose otherwise. Dostoyevsky, in his famous "Notes from Underground", stated it more succinctly: "To me, 2 plus 2 making four is sheer insolence".

Would that Moon were Green Cheese

However much it may pique us, however undemocratic or incorrect it may be, it nevertheless remains that some things **are** the case, and some things are not; some things **are** right and some things are wrong – that some things are true and some things are not – irrespective of their pleasing or displeasing us. We cannot make them other than they are simply because they do not comply with our will or conform to our sensitivities. However much we *will* a triangle to have four sides, it will remain, withal, a three-sided figure. There is, in short, an ontological intolerance that is indifferent to our desiderations.

... and if there is one thing that we will *not* tolerate, it is intolerance ...

Absurdity may perplex us, but it does not offend us. *Truth offends us*. It vies with our will and is not amenable to it ... especially when it does not accord with our will.

So what does that have to do with the Moon as green cheese and the Mass as the Sacrifice on Calvary? It is a prologue to some things that are, and some things that are not, despite our wishing them to be otherwise.

Let us look at some of these things in the way of the **Mass** and what it is **NOT** (in order to understand what it really **is**):

THE MASS IS NOT:

- Entertainment
- A social
- A musical
- A comedy
- A talent show
- A talkathon
- *Your gift to God* in an act of personal munificence and sacrifice.
- A parade of personalities.
- A liturgical laboratory
- A mere *remembrance* of something done long ago
- A mere ritual, albeit a very ancient one
- Optional

There are, of course, many other things that the Mass is **not**. These are merely the more salient among them, for they are, very likely, what we encounter most often before, during, and after Mass, in the trivializing of the most momentous act in history – that unfolds before us.

It is true that we cannot fully comprehend what the the Mass **is** ...

We can, however, clearly grasp what it is not ... even if we would have it otherwise.

What we have learned today:

The Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is *the occasion of the greatest reverence*. It is Holy Ground.

END

copyright © 2004 - 2007 Boston Catholic Journal