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## TWO

### *Given for You*

#### THE STORY OF SACRIFICE

**T**HE PHRASE in the Mass that knocked me out was the "Lamb of God," because I knew that this Lamb was Jesus Christ Himself.

No one has to tell you that. Perhaps you've sung or recited the words a thousand times: "Lamb of God, You take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us." Just as many times you've seen the priest elevate the broken Host and proclaim, "This is the Lamb of God . . ." The Lamb is Jesus. This is not news; it's the kind of fact we gloss over. Jesus is many things, after all: He is Lord, God, Savior, Messiah, King, Priest, Prophet . . . and Lamb.

Yet, if we were really thinking, we wouldn't gloss over that last title. Look again at that list: Lord, God, Savior, Messiah, King, Priest, Prophet—and Lamb. One of these things is not like the others. The first seven are titles with

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which we could comfortably address a God-Man. They're titles with dignity, implying wisdom, power, and social status. But Lamb? Again, I ask you to divest yourself of two thousand years of accumulated symbolic meaning. Pretend for a moment that you've never sung the "Lamb of God."

#### ON THE LAMB

The title, then, seems almost comical in its inappropriateness. Lambs don't usually rank high on lists of most-admired animals. They're not particularly strong, clever, quick, or handsome. Other animals would seem more worthy. We can easily imagine Jesus, for example, as the Lion of Judah (Rev 5:5). Lions are kingly; they're strong and agile; nobody messes with the king of beasts. But the Lion of Judah makes only a cameo appearance in the Book of Revelation. Meanwhile, the Lamb dominates, appearing no less than twenty-eight times. The Lamb rules, occupying heaven's throne (Rev 22:3). It is the Lamb Who leads an army of hundreds of thousands of men and angels, striking fear in the hearts of the wicked. (Rev 6:15-16). This last image, of the fierce and frightening Lamb, is almost too incongruous to imagine with a straight face.

Yet for John, this matter of the Lamb is serious. The titles "Lamb" and "Lamb of God" are applied to Jesus almost exclusively in the books of the New Testament that are attributed to John: the Fourth Gospel and the Book of Revelation. Though other New Testament books (see

Acts 8:32-35; 1 Pet 1:19) say that Jesus is *like* a lamb in certain respects, only John dares to *call* Jesus "the Lamb," (see Jn 1:36 and throughout the Apocalypse).

We know that the Lamb is central to both the Mass and the Book of Revelation. And we know *Who* the Lamb is. However, if we want to experience the Mass as heaven on earth, we need to know more. We need to know *what* the Lamb is, and *why* we call Him "Lamb." To find out, we have to go back in time, almost to the very beginning.

#### WELL BREAD

To ancient Israel, the lamb was identified with sacrifice, and sacrifice is one of the most primal forms of worship. As early as the second generation described in Genesis, we find, in the story of Cain and Abel, the first recorded example of a sacrificial offering. "Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions" (Gen 4:3-4). In due time, we encounter similar burnt offerings from Noah (Gen 8:20-21), Abraham (Gen 15:8-10; 22:13), Jacob (Gen 46:1), and others. In Genesis, the patriarchs were forever building altars, and altars served primarily as places of sacrifice. In addition to burnt offerings, the ancients sometimes poured "libations," or sacrificial offerings of wine.

Of the sacrifices in Genesis, two deserve our most careful attention: that of Melchizedek (Gen 14:18-20) and that of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22.

Melchizedek appears as the first priest mentioned in the Bible, and many Christians (following the Letter to

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the Hebrews 7:1-17) have seen him as a foreshadowing of Jesus Christ. Melchizedek was both priest and king, an odd combination in the Old Testament, but one that would later be applied to Jesus. Genesis describes Melchizedek as king of Salem, a land that would later become "Jerusalem," meaning "City of Peace" (see Ps 76:2). Jesus would arise one day as king of the heavenly Jerusalem and, again like Melchizedek, "Prince of Peace." Finally, Melchizedek's sacrifice was extraordinary in that it involved no animals. He offered bread and wine, as Jesus would at the Last Supper, when He instituted the Eucharist. Melchizedek's sacrifice ended with a blessing upon Abraham.

#### MORIAH CARRY

Abraham himself would revisit the site of Salem, some years later, when God called upon him to make an ultimate sacrifice. In Genesis 22, God tells Abraham: "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains" (v. 2). Israelite tradition, recorded in the 2 Chronicles 3:1, identifies Moriah with the future Temple site in Jerusalem. There Abraham traveled with Isaac, who carried upon his back the wood for the sacrifice (Gen 22:6). When Isaac asked where was the victim, Abraham replied, "God will provide Himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son" (v. 8). In the end, the angel of God did stay Abraham's hand from sacrificing his son and provided a ram to be sacrificed.

In this story, Israel would discern God's covenant

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oath to make Abraham's descendants a mighty nation: "By myself I have sworn . . . because you . . . have not withheld your son . . . I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven . . . and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves" (Gen 22:16-17). That was God's IOU to Abraham; it would also turn out to be Israel's life-insurance policy. In the desert of Sinai, when the chosen people earned death by worshipping the golden calf, Moses invoked God's covenant oath to Abraham in order to save them from divine wrath (see Ex 32:13-14).

Christians would later look upon the story of Abraham and Isaac as a profound allegory for the sacrifice of Jesus upon the cross. The similarities were many. First, Jesus, like Isaac, was a faithful father's only beloved son. Again like Isaac, Jesus carried uphill the wood for His own sacrifice, which would be consummated on a hill in Jerusalem. In fact, the site where Jesus died, Calvary, was one of the hillocks on Moriah's range. Moreover, the very first line of the New Testament identifies Jesus with Isaac as "the son of Abraham" (Mt 1:1). To Christian readers, even Abraham's words proved prophetic. Recall that there was no punctuation in the Hebrew original, and consider an alternate reading of verse 8: "God will provide Himself, the Lamb, for a burnt offering." The Lamb foreshadowed, of course, was Jesus Christ, God Himself—"that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the gentiles" (Gal 3:14; see also Gn 22:16-18).

#### ANIMAL MAGNETISM

By the time of Israel's enslavement in Egypt, it is clear that sacrifice occupies an essential and central part of Israel's religion. Pharaoh's overseers taunt that the Israelites' frequent sacrifices are merely an excuse for avoiding work (see Ex 5:17). Later, when Moses makes his appeal to Pharaoh, chief among his demands is the Israelites' right to offer sacrifice to God (see Ex 10:25).

What did all these offerings mean? Animal sacrifice meant many things to the ancient Israelites.

- It was a recognition of God's sovereignty over creation: "The earth is the Lord's" (Ps 24:1). Man acknowledged this fact by giving back to God what is ultimately His. Thus, sacrifice praised God from Whom all blessings flow.
- A sacrifice could be an act of thanks. Creation is given to man as a gift, but what return can man make to God (see Ps 116:1:2)? We can only give back what we ourselves have received.
- Sometimes, sacrifice served as a way of solemnly sealing an agreement or oath, a covenant before God (see Gen 21:22-32).
- Sacrifice could also be an act of renunciation and sorrow for sins. The person offering sacrifice recognized that his sins deserved death; he offered the animal's life in place of his own.

## COUNTING SHEEP

But the pivotal sacrifice in Israel's history was the Passover, which precipitated the Israelites' flight from Egypt. It was at the Passover that God instructed each Israelite family to take an unblemished lamb without broken bones, kill it, and sprinkle its blood on the doorpost. That night, the Israelites were to eat the lamb. If they did, their firstborn would be spared. If they didn't, their firstborn would die in the night, along with all the firstborn in their flocks (see Ex 12:1-23). The sacrificial lamb died as a ransom, in place of the firstborn of the household. The Passover, then, was an act of redemption, a "buying back."

Yet God did not merely *rescue* the firstborn sons of Israel; He also consecrated them as a "kingdom of priests, a holy nation" (Ex 19:6)—a nation He called His own "firstborn son" (Ex 4:22).

The Lord told the Israelites, then, to commemorate the Passover every year, and He even gave them the words they should use to explain the ritual to future generations: "When your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?' you shall say, 'It is the sacrifice of the Lord's Passover, for He passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when He slew the Egyptians'" (Ex 12:26-27).

Entering the Promised Land, the Israelites continued their daily sacrifices to God, now guided by the many prescriptions of the Law, which we see enumerated in

Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. (See, for example, Lev 7-9; Num 28; Dt 16.)

## ALTARED STATE: JERUSALEM AS ROYAL CAPITAL

With the establishment of the Temple at Jerusalem around 960 B.C., Israel offered its daily sacrifices to Almighty God in a majestic setting. Each day, the priests sacrificed two lambs, one in the morning and one in the evening, to atone for the sins of the nation. Those were the essential sacrifices; but, throughout the day, the smoke rose from many other, private offerings. Goats, bulls, turtledoves, pigeons, and rams were offered on the huge bronze altar that stood in the open air at the entrance to the inner court of the Temple. The "Holy Place" of the Temple was just beyond that altar, and the "Holy of Holies"—the dwelling place of God—was farther still. The "altar of incense" stood immediately before the Holy of Holies. Only priests were permitted into the inner court of the Temple; only the high priest was permitted in the Holy of Holies, and even he could enter only briefly, and only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. For even the high priest was a sinner and thus unworthy to abide in God's presence.

The Jerusalem Temple brought together all the strains of sacrifice that had gone before. Built on the site where Melchizedek had offered bread and wine, and where Abraham had offered his son, and where God had sworn His oath to save all nations, the Temple served as the enduring place of offerings, principal of which was

identical with that most ancient sacrifice of Abel: the lamb.

For the great day of sacrifice remained the feast of Passover, when as many as two and a half million pilgrims thronged Jerusalem, coming from the far corners of the known world. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus records that, on Passover in the year A.D. 70—only months before the Romans destroyed the Temple, and some forty years after Jesus' ascension—the priests offered more than a quarter of a million lambs on the Temple's altar—256,500, to be precise.

#### INSIDE AND OUT

Was all of this sacrifice merely empty ritual? No, although the burnt offering, by itself, was clearly not enough. God demanded an *interior* sacrifice as well. The psalmist declared that "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit" (Ps 51:17). The prophet Hosea spoke for God, saying, "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings" (Hos 6:6).

Yet the obligation to offer sacrifice remained. We know that Jesus observed the Jewish laws regarding sacrifice. He celebrated the Passover every year in Jerusalem; and presumably He ate the sacrificed lamb, first with His family and later with His Apostles. After all, it wasn't optional. Consuming the lamb was the only way a faithful Jew could renew his covenant with God, and Jesus was a faithful Jew.

But Passover had more than an ordinary importance

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in Jesus' life; it was central to His mission, a definitive moment. Jesus *is* the Lamb. When Jesus stood before Pilate, John notes that "it was the day of preparation of the Passover; it was about the sixth hour" (19:14). John knew that the sixth hour was when the priests were beginning to slaughter the Passover lambs. This, then, is the moment of the sacrifice of the Lamb of God.

Next, John recounts that none of Jesus' bones were broken on the cross, "that the Scripture might be fulfilled" (19:36). Which Scripture was that? Exodus 12:46, which stipulates that the Passover lamb must have no broken bones. We see, then, that the Lamb of God, like the Passover lamb, is a worthy offering: a perfect fulfillment.

In the same passage, John relates that the onlookers served Jesus sour wine from a sponge on a hyssop branch (see Jn 19:29; Ex 12:22). Hyssop was the branch prescribed by the Law for the Passover sprinkling of the lamb's blood. Thus, this simple action marked the fulfillment of the new and perfect redemption. And Jesus cried out, "It is finished."

Finally, in speaking of Jesus' garment at the time of the crucifixion, John uses the precise term for the vestments the high priest wore when he offered sacrifices such as the Passover lamb.

#### VICTIM'S RITES

What can we conclude from this? John makes it clear to us that, *in the new and definitive Passover sacrifice, Jesus is both priest and victim*. This is confirmed in the other three Gospels' accounts of the Last Supper, where Jesus clearly

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uses the priestly language of sacrifice and libations, even as He describes Himself as the victim. "This is My body which is given for you. . . . This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood" (Lk 22:19-20).

Jesus' sacrifice would accomplish what all the blood of millions of sheep and bulls and goats could never do. "For it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins" (Heb 10:4). Even the blood of a quarter of a million lambs could not save the nation of Israel, never mind the world. To atone for offenses against a God Who is all-good, infinite, and eternal, mankind needed a perfect sacrifice: a sacrifice as good and unblemished and boundless as God Himself. And that was Jesus, Who alone could "put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (Heb 9:26).

"Behold the Lamb of God!" (Jn 1:36). Why did Jesus have to be a lamb, and not a stallion or a tiger or a bull? Why does Revelation portray Jesus as a "lamb standing as if slain" (Rev 5:6)? Why must the Mass proclaim Him as the "Lamb of God"? Because only a sacrificial lamb fits the divine pattern of our salvation.

Moreover, Jesus was priest as well as victim, and as priest He could do what no other high priest could do. For the high priest entered "the Holy Place yearly with blood not his own" (Heb 9:25), and even then stayed only briefly before his unworthiness drove him out. But Jesus entered the holiest of holies—heaven—once for all, to offer Himself as our sacrifice. What is more, by Jesus' new Passover, we, too, have been made a kingdom of priests and the Church of the firstborn (see Rev 1:6; Heb 12:23, and compare to Ex 4:22 and 19:6); and with Him

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we enter heaven's sanctuary, whenever we go to Mass. We'll revisit all these images later on, when we see that holiest of holies in the Book of Revelation, with its altar, and its Temple, its incense, and its omnipresent Lamb.

#### DON'T PASS OVER THIS FEAST

But what does this mean to us today? How should we celebrate our Passover? St. Paul gives us a clue: "Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us, therefore celebrate the festival . . . with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Cor 5:7-8). Our Passover lamb, then, is unleavened bread. Our festival is the Mass (see 1 Cor 10:15-21; 11:23-32).

In the clear light of the New Covenant, the Old Covenant sacrifices make sense as preparation for the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ, our royal high priest in the heavenly sanctuary. And it is this one sacrifice we offer, with Jesus, in the Mass. In this light, we see the prayers of the Mass with new clarity.

We offer You His body and blood, the acceptable sacrifice which brings salvation to the whole world. Lord, look upon this sacrifice which You have given to Your Church . . . . (*Eucharistic Prayer IV*).

[F]rom the many gifts You have given us we offer to You, God of glory and majesty, this holy and perfect sacrifice. . . . Look with favor on these offerings and accept them as once You accepted the gifts of Your servant Abel, the sacrifice of Abraham, our father in faith, and the bread

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and wine offered by Your priest Melchizedek. Almighty God, we pray that Your angel may take this sacrifice to -  
Your altar in heaven (*Eucharistic Prayer D*).

It is not enough that Christ bled and died for our sake. Now we have our part to play. As with the Old Covenant, so with the New. If you want to mark your covenant with God, to seal your covenant with God, to renew your covenant with God, *you have to eat the Lamb*—the paschal lamb. Who is our unleavened bread. It begins to sound familiar. "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink His blood, you have no life in you" (Jn 6:54).

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Man's primal need to worship God has always expressed itself in sacrifice: worship that is simultaneously an act of praise, atonement, self-giving, covenant, and thanksgiving (in Greek, *eucharistia*). The various forms of sacrifice have one common, positive meaning: life is surrendered in order to be transformed and shared. So when Jesus spoke of His life as a sacrifice, He tapped into a current running deep in the souls of His Apostles—running deep in the souls of Israelites—running deep in every human soul. In the twentieth century, Mohandas Gandhi, who was a Hindu, called "worship without sacrifice" an absurdity of the modern age. But worship is not so for Catholics. Our supreme act of worship is a supreme act of sacrifice: the Lamb's Supper, the Mass.

Sacrifice is a need of the human heart. But, until Jesus, no sacrifice would suffice. Remember Psalm

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110:12: "How shall I make a return to the Lord for all the good He has done for me?" How, indeed?

God knew all along what our answer would be. "The cup of salvation I will take up, and I will call upon the name of the Lord" (Ps 116:13).