

Devotion to the Precious Blood and Heavenly Sacrifice of Christ

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Throughout the universal Church, Catholics during the month of July offer special devotions to the Precious Blood of Our Lord. This has always been a wonderful and much-needed time for Catholics to contemplate the mysteries of our redemption through the shed blood of the God-Man, Jesus Christ. While Protestants believe that the offering of Christ's blood is an historical event limited to the Cross of Calvary, Scripture teaches something quite different. Namely, that Christ, as Mediator of the New Covenant, continues to offer His blood sacrifice to the Father in heaven to propitiate the Father's wrath against our sins. Let us look at some of these passages in Scripture.

First, St. Paul in his letter to the Hebrews repeatedly describes Jesus as our "high priest" in heaven.¹ Second, Scripture teaches us that the principal duty of a priest is to *offer sacrifice*. St. Paul specifically says, "for every high priest...is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins" (Heb 5:1). St. Paul further says, "For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices" (Heb 8:3). St. Paul then ties these truths together, in the very same verse, when he says about Jesus: "hence it is necessary for this priest *also to have something to offer*."

To our non-Catholic friends, we must emphasize the following: Even though Jesus offered His body once-for-all on the cross of Calvary, St. Paul says it is necessary for Jesus to also have "something to offer" in heaven. Because Jesus is our High Priest in heaven, this necessary offering must be a "sacrifice for sins," for according to St. Paul that is what priests offer. We cannot separate Christ's sacrifice from His priesthood since Christ is a priest only by virtue of His sacrifice. That Scripture says Jesus must offer a sacrifice for sins in heaven poses an immediate problem for Protestant theology which views Jesus' atoning work on the cross as completed.

Because Jesus shed His blood once on Calvary and suffers no more, the manner in which He presents this same blood sacrifice to the Father in heaven is a mystery indeed. However, the book of Hebrews sheds light on the reality of this mystery. St. Paul says that Jesus "entered once for all into the Holy Place, *taking* not the blood of goats and calves *but his own blood*, thus securing an eternal redemption" (Heb 9:12). Why does St. Paul emphasize that Jesus takes His blood into heaven? To emphasize that Jesus' blood is being presented in heaven *as a sacrifice*.

St. Paul does this by setting up a comparison between the Old Testament priests who sacrificed animals, and Jesus Christ who sacrificed Himself. Just as the Old Testament priests would take the blood of these animals into the earthly sanctuary, Jesus takes His blood into the "heavenly sanctuary."² Further, just as God would see the shed blood of the animals and be temporarily appeased, He now sees the shed blood of His Son and is perfectly appeased. To maintain parity between St. Paul's explanation of the Old Covenant versus New Covenant

¹ See Heb 4:14; 8:1-2; 9:11-12; Heb 10:21-22; see also Heb 2:17; 3:1.

² See Heb 8:2; 9:12; 10:19.

sacrificial system, we must conclude that *both* the animal blood on earth and Jesus' blood in heaven is being described in the context of sacrifice.

St. Paul supports this conclusion in the next two verses when he says, "For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God."³ Again, we look at these verses in equilibrium.

St. Paul describes how the blood of animals was sprinkled in sacrifice on the people in the Old Covenant, and how the blood of Christ is likewise applied to the people of the New Covenant. Specifically, St. Paul is describing the *ongoing* application of Christ's *ongoing* blood sacrifice in heaven which purifies the consciences of believers. This purification is described in the *present tense* because Christ's blood *presently offered* is bringing about the purification.⁴ Through the perpetual offering of Christ's blood in heaven, the Father is propitiated, our sins are expiated, and we can "serve the living God" with a pure conscience. This is something that the Old Covenant sacrifices could not do (see Heb 9:9).

The New Covenant "sacrifices"

St. Paul makes an even more dramatic comparison between the Old Covenant sacrifices and Jesus' heavenly sacrifice in the next few verses. Paul describes how Moses ratified the first covenant by sprinkling the people and the liturgical elements with the blood of the animals⁵ while saying, "This is the blood of the covenant which God commanded you" (Heb 9:20). (It is no surprise that Jesus used the same words when He offered His blood in sacrifice at the Last Supper.)

Then St. Paul writes something that should be striking to our non-Catholic friends. He compares the Old Covenant sacrifices with the sacrifice of Christ by referring to the New Covenant sacrifice as "sacrifices," *in the plural form*. St. Paul says:

Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves *with better sacrifices than these*. For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf (Heb 9:22-24).⁶

Let's examine these verses. Because God willed to be appeased through bloodshed to forgive sin, St. Paul explains that both the Old and New Covenants have a "shedding of blood"

³ Heb 9:13-14. The purification or cleansing (from the Greek, *katharizo*) is occurring in the present tense.

⁴ See also Heb 7:25; 8:6; 10:19, 29; 12:24; and 13:21 which connect the ongoing priestly work of Christ with its ongoing effects.

⁵ Heb 9:18-19, 21.

⁶ There are no textual variants for the word "sacrifices" in the Greek manuscripts; thus, Protestants cannot deny that Paul refers to New Covenant "sacrifices," in the plural.

requirement. St. Paul first describes the rite of purification with blood under the Old Covenant (v.22), and then the same blood purification rite in the New Covenant (v.23). In connection with this shedding of blood, St. Paul says that those in the New Covenant are purified with better *sacrifices* than those in the Old Covenant.⁷

There is only *one* New Covenant blood sacrifice which purifies us and forgives our sins. That is the sacrifice of Jesus on Calvary. Therefore, St. Paul reveals that Christ's Calvary sacrifice has a plural dimension to it. This plural dimension of Christ's sacrifice is fulfilled *only in the context of its sacramental re-presentation in heaven and on earth in the Holy Mass*. This is the pure, single sacrifice that is continually offered from sunrise to sunset around the world in the Eucharist as was prophesied by Jeremiah and Malachi.

St. Paul makes this connection between Christ's sacrifice in heaven and the Eucharistic sacrifice on earth in a number of verses in his letter to the Hebrews. Before St. Paul reveals Christ's "sacrifices" in heaven, he says that Jesus "is the mediator of a new covenant" (Heb 9:15). In the context of Jesus' mediation of the covenant, St. Paul describes how Jesus takes His blood into heaven to forgive sin. The only time Jesus uses the phrase "New Covenant" is when He instituted the Eucharist. Jesus said, "this cup is the new covenant in my blood,"⁸ and "this is the blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."⁹ The use of the terms "new covenant," "blood," and "forgiveness of sin" in Hebrews 9 appear together in Scripture in only one other place: *in the accounts of Jesus instituting the Holy Eucharist*.

This connects the "sacrifices" of Hebrews with the Eucharistic sacrifice of the Gospels. When we couple the fact that Christ's heavenly priesthood is modeled after that of Melchizedek who offered bread and wine, we conclude that the "sacrifices" occurring in the heavenly sanctuary are the same "sacrifices" occurring in the Holy Mass. Jesus mandated that these "sacrifices" occur on earth in the Mass when He commanded His apostles at the Last Supper to "do this in memory of me."¹⁰ The "sacrifices" of Hebrews 9:23 refer to the one sacrifice of the Mass, which is offered in a plurality of locations through the world from sunrise to sunset as revealed in Malachi 1:11. We will look at Part II of this feature in a later edition of CFN.

Excerpt modified from John Salza's best-selling book, *The Biblical Basis for the Eucharist* (Our Sunday Visitor). To order, go to www.ScriptureCatholic.com.

⁷ The "copies of the heavenly things" in verse 23 refer to the people of the Old Covenant, as well as the tent, the book and the liturgical vessels that they used. The "heavenly things" in the same verse refer to the people of the New Covenant, the citizens of heaven (Eph 2:19). The focus in both usages is the "people," since the "shedding of blood" is for the forgiveness of the people's sins.

⁸ Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25. See also Mt 26:28; Mk 14:24; Heb 9:20.

⁹ Mt 26:28; Mk 14:24; See also Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25. See also Heb 9:20.

¹⁰ See Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24-25.