Part 7: The Catholic Understanding of Worship

I would like to reflect on the Catholic understanding of worship and how it differs from most Protestant denominations. Protestants have been known to criticize the Catholic celebration of the Eucharist as being nothing more than an "empty ritual," which they have abandoned in favor of "heart worship." Furthermore, they reject the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist, believing Catholics repeat Christ's death on the cross at every celebration of the Eucharist. They see Christ's sacrifice on the cross as a one-time event that is unrepeatable. Catholics agree with that, though they see the Mass as a re-presenting, or bringing forward from the past to the present, the one, unrepeatable sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Finally, there is an assumption that God has not specified how he is to be worshipped. Catholics would disagree.

As mentioned above, beginning with the Reformation and extending into the present, Protestants, in general, have criticized the Catholic celebration of the Eucharist as being an "empty ritual," which they have abandoned in favor of "heart worship." The Catholic Church emphasizes the importance of the priesthood of the faithful (laity) who are to offer their hearts, together with the priest, to God during Mass.[1] Both Catholics and Protestants agree on the importance of "heart worship." However, Protestants and Catholics differ in their understanding of what constitutes true worship.

The word "worship" originates from the Old English word "weorthscipe." Weorth" means worth or value, and "scipe" means "ship" or "condition." The word initially referred to giving worth or value to something. It eventually evolved to mean the act of showing reverence or devotion to a deity.[2] In Christianity, worship is fundamentally about giving God what He is owed, recognizing His worth, and responding appropriately.

So what is God worth, or what is God worthy of receiving from us? Well, we might give God praise. Psalm 145 says, "Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised. His Greatness is unsearchable." Protestant worship takes good things we already do, like giving praise, and gives the best of those good things to God, or as the title of Baptist author Oswald Chambers' 1924 devotional puts it, "My Utmost for His Highest."

Catholic and Orthodox liturgies give God not just the highest or the best of what we possess or can do, such as offering praise. To offer God our highest or best tribute will necessitate offering a sacrifice. All cultures around the world recognize the deep desire in human beings to offer what they love as an act of love to God. These sacrifices have involved food, money, animals, or, sadly, even human beings. Christianity teaches that all of our worship is sacrificial in some way. As St. Paul says in Romans 12:1, "I appeal to you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."[3]

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[1] God's pronouncement that Israel is to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation is now applied to all Christians. "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation." (1 Peter 2.) In our context, *all baptized are called to offer their hearts to God* while only the ordained priests, acting "in the person of Christ," are empowered to offer the Lamb of God, along with their hearts, during the Eucharist. Go to The Marist Way and Mary, Icon of the Holy Spirit, *"Part 9: The Priesthood of the Faithful."*

[2] Podcast, *What is the Etymology of Worship?* Go to https://wikietymology.com/w/etymology-of-worship/.

[3] Horn, Trent, The Protestant Worship Problem, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lfXY4zZGTVw.

However, in the celebration of the Eucharist, the priest leads the faithful in worship that offers or sacrifices to God what is worthy of God. Remember, worship means to give to God what is worthy of Him who is infinite being itself. We offer God the Father the same offering God the Son made to him in atonement for the sins of the world on the cross at Calvary. That is what Catholics are doing when they celebrate the Eucharist.[4]

You can see the differences between how Protestants and Catholics worship by examining their respective liturgical practices and church architecture. When entering a Catholic church, one will immediately see an altar at the center of the sanctuary, with the pulpit or ambo located near the altar and the presider's chair behind or to the side of the altar. During the celebration of the Mass, priests wear priestly vestments, candles are lit, and incense may be used. That way of worshipping is more closely aligned with how the Jews worshipped, which centered on offering animal sacrifices before the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D.

Catholics understand the Eucharist as the one, perfect sacrifice of Christ on Calvary, which is brought forward to the present and offered to the Father, but in an unbloody manner and under the appearance of bread and wine that has been changed into Christ's body and blood. Here, the Risen Christ is both priest and victim. The priest, by his ordination, is empowered to act in the person of Christ, who is also the head of the Church. This act of sacrifice is the highest form of sacrifice because the perfect sacrifice, Christ himself, is being offered to his and our heavenly Father. We give God what God gave us himself in the form of bread and wine, as Jesus taught us to do. That is the only thing we finite creatures can give to God that honors God's infinite worth.[5]

While there are variations of worship among Protestant denominations, the presiding minister typically wears an academic robe. That is because a Protestant service focuses on preaching and teaching God's word. Notice that the preacher and the pulpit are the center of attention. This more closely models the Jewish synagogue, where the focus is on reading and teaching the Torah and other Jewish texts and includes a sermon given by a Rabbi.

Let me observe that, with the focus on the preacher, their skill as an orator takes center stage in a typical Protestant worship service. In the celebration of the Eucharist, the focus is on the priest, who represents Christ, the High Priest and Head of His mystical body, the Church, and who acts in the person of Christ, changing bread and wine into His Body and Blood. The priest's personality should disappear into his role, allowing him to represent Christ in the way I just described. From a Marist perspective, a priest should be hidden and unknown, meaning that he should recede into the background so that Christ comes to the foreground.

I should add that Protestants are nearly unanimous in rejecting the sacrificial nature of the Mass. As mentioned earlier, worship has always been associated with sacrifice. Since this key component of what constitutes worship is omitted, some have raised the question about the appropriateness of calling

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[4] Ibid.

[5] I want to quickly add that Catholic theology is clear that while honor and respect can be given to Mary and the Saints and other creatures, sacrifice is another kind of worship, and this can only be given to God. In the fourth century, Saint Epiphanius condemned the Coliridian heretics who offered sacrificial cakes to Mary, because sacrifice can only be given to God. https://www.magisterium.com/search/adbe3512-fc35-43d7-9c9e-4468033ace9c.

Protestant services worship services or if they should be called something else. I should remind us of what was said earlier about all Christian worship in some way being sacrificial, referencing Rom. 12:1. For our purposes, it is helpful to recognize the differences between Protestants and Catholics regarding what constitutes true worship and let others with more expertise wrestle with that and other related questions.

There is another question deserving consideration: Does it matter to God how we worship Him? The Catholic position is yes, it does. In John 4:23, Jesus says, "But the hour is coming, and is now here when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth, and indeed the Father seeks such people to worship him." Joe Heshmeyer, Catholic apologist and contributor to *Catholic Answers.com,* observes, "Notice that language of worshiping in spirit and truth, the truth there matters. It is not liturgical relativism. In other words, you can't just say, 'This is what makes me feel close to God.' This is how I like to worship. Because in all of those things, who's the center of worship? It's no longer God; it's now you and your preferences. So that would be the first thing I think we need to make clear. Whatever the right way to worship God is, there is such a thing as a right way to worship God."[6]

Finally, I would like to address one last issue where the thinking of Protestants and Catholics diverges. Generally, the Mass appears less engaging compared to Protestant worship services. They are seemingly livelier, emotionally satisfying, and spiritually uplifting due to the quality of the preaching as well as the congregation's active participation in singing. There is a reason for that.

In general, a defining characteristic of Protestant worship is the individual's personal religious experience. In other words, Protestants emphasize the individual's direct experience of God without any intermediaries. That is based on the Protestant principle of the "priesthood of all believers," which asserts that there is no need for a ministerial priesthood. To support this position, they will cite 1 Peter 2:5,9, "…like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ… But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

The centrality of one's personal religious experience of God is expressed in Protestantism through personal interpretation of Scripture, personal testimony, emotional engagement with music designed to evoke feelings of personal devotion, and individual conversion experiences.[7]

The Catholic celebration of the Eucharist is not focused on evoking a religious experience in the worshipper. That can happen, but it is a byproduct of having offered oneself with Christ to the Father,

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[6] For a more thorough treatment of this question from the Catholic perspective, go to: Heshmeyer, Joseph, Catholic Answers, *This is not worship*, https://www.catholic.com/audio/sp/do-protestant-really-worship-god.

[7] *Baptist and non-denominational evangelical churches* stress personal conversion experiences and altar calls. *Methodist churches* emphasize personal holiness and "heart religion." *Presbyterian and Reformed churches* emphasize theological understanding alongside personal faith. *Lutheran churches* retain Luther's emphasis on "faith alone" that creates space for personal religious experience but within a more structured setting. *Anglican/Episcopal Tradition* blend Catholic liturgical elements with Protestant theology. Personal experience is important but expressed through structured liturgy and communal worship rather than spontaneous expressions. Otter AI generated, 06/04/2025, How Protestant Denominations Differ in Their Emphasis on Personal Experience in Worship?

having received the Body and Blood of Christ, and being in Holy Communion with Him. The Eucharist seeks to draw worshippers into a deeper relationship with Christ and with one another, revitalize their faith, and send them out to live the Gospel. The emotional response will vary with each person, but if nothing else, they may leave feeling more hopeful and committed to glorifying the Lord with their lives.

Catholics who participate in a Protestant worship service will acknowledge the effective preaching of the pastor, as well as the vitality and enthusiasm of the worshipping community, expressed in their singing, the conviction with which their responses are made, and the warm, genuinely friendly hospitality. We Catholics can undoubtedly learn from their example. Yet, Catholics will also say that it wasn't the same as the Mass. They missed not having received the Body and Blood of Christ and being in Holy Communion with him. That was the difference maker.

Marist School will celebrate school Masses usually on important feast days. I realize that our students, who represent various Protestant denominations, may find the Mass a bit confusing. I thought it would be helpful to highlight the different understanding of worship that differentiates Catholics and Protestants.

We share a common baptism in Christ. That can serve as a rod and a staff to steady us as we traverse the road that will reunite us as one visible church, as Christ prayed for the night before He died. "I pray not only for them but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me." (John 17:20-21)

Amen.