

THE THREE SACRAMENTS OF INITIATION

3. THE MOST HOLY SACRIFICE OF THE MASS - *Holy Communion with God, the Saints and the Church*

(The Catechism of the Catholic Church 1322-1419)

Introduction

How can we begin to do justice to the Blessed Eucharist? How could man ever hope to contain within his vocabulary the sheer wonder of what we mean when we consider the sacrament of the altar? That God should adopt to himself the nature of one of his creatures in the Incarnation is extraordinary enough, and blasphemous to many people. But to claim that God so humiliates himself as to become personally present in the inanimate form of human food goes further than any religion has ever gone, claims more for divine love than could ever be expected through human intuition, and more dramatically even than the crucifixion demonstrates the lengths to which God will go to humiliate himself if that will draw his beloved creation back to himself. How could words do justice to the idea that God has made himself so immediate and so accessible to the creatures he made that we can go into a church at any time and be certain of his actual presence in a physical way (even if we are not able to appreciate his actual presence in an invisible, spiritual way at all times and in all places)? Where can we even make a beginning to describe the extraordinary and historically unprecedented way in which Christ has blessed his Church in the abiding nature of his presence in the Blessed Sacrament?

Please be aware that more has been written about this extraordinary sacrament than any other work of the Church, and these books and meditations have been composed since the earliest days of the Church, not just since the Middle Ages. We should remember that even the Sacred Scriptures contain meditations on the Mass (*see 1 Corinthians 5:6-8, 11:17ff., the Letter to the Hebrews, the book of Revelation*) and the writers of the Church have composed books, poems, hymns, meditations, plays, music and even operas on the subject of the Mass. The collected corpus of Catholic thought and work on the Mass would literally take years to look at, and a great deal longer to

digest adequately. This introduction is really no more than a scratching of the surface. The treasures of two millennia and the thoughts, prayers and insights of countless saints throughout the centuries, meditating on the gift of the Mass, are waiting for you!

To begin with, we should ask if the Blessed Sacrament and the doctrine of the Sacrifice of the Mass are innovations of the early Church, or even of the Middle Ages. Some would argue that what we call the Mass today is not what Christ had in mind at the Last Supper and is an invention of the Church. They say that there is no precedent for the Mass and that it abuses both the Old Testament and what Christ himself intended to establish for the Church on the night before he died. You will not be surprised to read and hear that the Catholic Church firmly disputes this - the Mass is the enduring method by which Christ intended that his disciples should draw to themselves the glory, divine power and eternal life which he won for us on the cross nearly 2000 years ago.

More than this, the Mass is the focal point of history – the Old Testament prepared the people of Israel to receive it, and now that it has been instituted, it is *the primal and essential means through which the saving power of Christ's redemptive death and resurrection are applied to us after Baptism.*

In short, the Catholic Church teaches that in the Mass, you and I encounter the crucified, risen and glorified saviour for the purpose of flooding our lives with Christ's life. We are nourished by Christ: and the Mass makes this clearer than any other liturgy or sacrament.

Old Testament Preparation

The Catechism tells us that the Mass is called a sacrifice because it “*completes and surpasses all the sacrifices of the Old Testament.*” (C.C.C. 1330). Through their history, the people of Israel were slowly prepared by God for the gift of Christ, the anointed one (‘messiah’), and for the seven oaths of the New Covenant he would ratify with them, corresponding with the oaths of the old covenants (such as the rainbow, or circumcision). With hindsight and the gift of faith, the early Fathers of the Church identified the episodes of the Old Testament where God laid the foundations for the great oath of the New Covenant - the Mass. The symbolism of these rituals and events is seen to be completed and ratified in the Mass, the great sacrifice of the New Covenant.

1. **Melchizedek's offering of bread and wine (Gen. 14:18):** the purpose of the sacrifice was thanksgiving to the Creator for the gifts of the earth, and to bring down on Abraham the great blessing which would mark him out as the next in the line of father-figures who would lead God's people. Melchizedek offers to God not animal sacrifice (as was customary) but bread and wine (which clearly parallels with the Mass). This incident is directly referred to in the first Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass.
2. **The sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22):** Abraham was asked to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, on Mt. Sion (this is one of the peaks in the mountain range of

Moriah - where Abraham is directed to take Isaac for the sacrifice). Isaac, Abraham's beloved first-born son, carried the wood for his own death up the hill. The sacrifice was averted by an angel at the last minute, and a ram substituted for the son. In Christ's passion, these themes are repeated, with the exception of the substitution - in Christ's death, the son and the lamb are the same person, Christ. The substitution is retained: the lamb does not take the place of the son, but the son/lamb takes the place of the people - Christ dies on our behalf. At Mass, the consecrated host is proclaimed to be the lamb of sacrifice ("*Behold the Lamb of God...*"). Isaac is a "type" of Christ for, as the beloved first-born of the Father, he completes Isaac's sacrifice by offering his life willingly out of love for the Father.

3. **Moses ratifying the Covenant with Israel (Exodus 22:3-8).** The Covenant of Sinai is sealed in the blood of animal sacrifices ("communion sacrifices") half of which is poured on the altar of the sacrifice, and half is cast over the people – "*This' [Moses] said, 'is the blood of the Covenant that the Lord has made with you'.*" The blood of animals, in this case, was merely a symbol of the agreement made between God and Israel - whereas the blood of the true Lamb, Jesus Christ offered on the cross and received from the altar at Mass, (which marks the people as it marked Israel) is the blood which actually creates the New Covenant and seals the New Covenant family, the Church.

4. **The manna and the quails in the desert (Exodus 16, Numbers 11:31-33).** To prevent his people starving to death in the desert after their escape from Egypt, God provides the bread of manna and the meat of quails. Christ himself used these images as prefigurings of his own death which would provide food for his believers - he teaches that while the manna kept Moses and the Israelites alive while they were in the desert, they all did die eventually, whereas those who eat the true bread from heaven will never die: "*I am the living bread which has come down from heaven, so that a man may eat it and not die. I am the living bread that has come down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is my flesh, for the life of the world ... He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in him.*" (Jn. 6:51, 56). Just as the Father provided earthly food to preserve the earthly, mortal, lives of his children in the desert - so he provides heavenly food to underwrite and sustain the supernatural life of his spiritual children who were reborn in Baptism.

5. **Elijah's meal to strengthen him for the journey to Horeb, God's mountain (1 Kings 19:4-8).** Fleeing from the wrath of Jezebel because he had slaughtered her pagan priests of the idol Baal, Elijah is roused from sleep in the desert by an angel who feeds him "*'or the journey will be too long for you.'* So he got up and ate and drank, and strengthened by that food he walked for forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God." The early Church Fathers saw in this an image of the Bread of Life (Holy Communion) the essential food provided by God for the journey of the Christian life. The sacrament of the Mass is the essential food for our spiritual lives as we walk the pilgrimage of faith through this life towards the heavenly home where we shall see God face to face. Holy Communion is often referred to in Christian writings as 'the Bread of Angels' (a reference to this episode),

and as ‘viaticum’ (Latin for ‘food for the journey’) when given to the dying, about to make their final journey to God.

6. **The Temple sacrifices in Jerusalem.** These are referred to throughout the Sacred Scriptures, especially in Exodus and Leviticus. Jews would take sacrificial animals, often lambs, to the Temple as a purificatory offering. Through the blood of the sacrificed animal, the covenant of Moses was renewed, the sinner prayed for forgiveness and hoped for deeper communion with God. Once a year, on the day of Atonement, the High Priest offered sacrifice for the sins of all the people, taking the blood of a sacrificed lamb into the Temple in place of the blood of the people. The sacrifice was symbolic only - it could not actually take away sins, as St. Paul pointed out many times in his letters. Yet, it prepared the people to understand what would happen when the Lamb who was without sin offered his life on the altar of the cross - and therefore how to interpret the gift of the Last Supper: this is the blood of the true Lamb, no longer a symbol but the one and only sin offering which could actually remove sin. For a masterly contrast between the sacrifices of the Old and the New Covenants, see the Letter to the Hebrews. As the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews says – the cross is the only sacrifice for sins that is effective and so if we chose to separate ourselves from the “meeting together” (which is New Testament language for the prayer services of the disciples, chief of which was the breaking of bread – the Mass) then we are refusing to accept the making-present of the power of the cross which frees us from sin. SO – there is no sacrifice for sin for the one who chooses to turn away from the Mass, because the Mass is Calvary made present: *“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, **not neglecting to meet together**, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth (i.e., if we refuse to stay away from the meeting together of the community), there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.”* (Hebrews 10:23-26) – the emphasis and parenthesis is my own.

Passover/Passion/Mass

The most profound preparation for the gift of the Mass was the annual celebration of Passover. Christ himself chose the Passover and its rituals to explain the significance of his own death and resurrection, and it is in the whole context of Passover itself that he institutes the Mass. The Last Supper, celebrated the night before he died on the cross, was a Passover meal and thus the Mass is connected in Christ's eyes with the whole meaning of the Passover ritual.

The Passover was the annual sacrifice/meal celebration of the delivery of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. In the time of Jacob (Genesis 37-50), there was a great famine throughout Israel - Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy grain, only to discover that his eleventh son, Joseph, had become the regent in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh and was responsible for all grain distribution. To cut a long story short, Joseph invited his eleven brothers and his aged father, Jacob, to join him in Egypt and

there to be safe from the famine. They settled, in some luxury, in Egypt and their numbers grew. The twelve sons each founded a tribe of their own (the twelve tribes of Israel - each one numbering thousands of people). Some time after Joseph's death, a new Pharaoh rose in Egypt who decided it was time to recover the wealth of Egypt from the Israelites. He enslaved the people, forcing them to work on his building projects. In this context God called Moses to liberate the people from bondage. When Pharaoh refused to release his slaves, God unleashed the great plagues on the land, each time preserving the people of Israel from their effects. The final plague was the greatest and the most symbolic: Israel was regarded by God as his first-born son whom Pharaoh had enslaved, and so God threatens to destroy all the first-born if this first-born nation is not permitted to leave:

- *“You will say to Pharaoh, ‘This is what the Lord God says: Israel is my first-born son. I ordered you to let my first-born son go to offer me worship. You refuse to let him go. So be it! I shall put your first-born to death’.” (Exodus 4:22-23)*

The final plague is the death of the first-born: not just the first-born children (from the lowest maidservant's child to Pharaoh's son himself) but also the first born of *all* creatures - cattle, horses, dogs etc. Israel was to be preserved from the Angel of Death as he went to “pass over” the land. Each family would take a male lamb, one year old, unblemished by spot and without any deformity or broken bone. It would be sacrificed, its blood daubed on the lintel of the household, then its carcass roasted and then eaten by all the family. Each household that fulfilled this ritual was protected from the plague of the death of the first-born: Pharaoh was finally induced to release Israel and Moses led the people into freedom. Each year they were to celebrate the occasion of their deliverance by way of the same sacred sacrifice-meal. *It was no mere remembrance but a way of bringing into the present day the saving-power or delivering-effect of this action of God. It made a present reality of what would otherwise be simply an historical event.*

All this is used by Christ at the Last Supper. Just as God gave to Moses a visible sign of the covenant he swore by which that covenant could be renewed in each generation and the saving-power of the Passover released; so Christ also establishes a visible sign of the New Covenant he ratifies from the cross by which every generation can enter into the victory he won over sin and death – the Mass. In celebrating the new meal-sacrifice of the Mass, God makes a present reality of the historical event of the death and resurrection of Christ. The Mass is the Passover of the New Covenant: through it, we are sunk deeply into the power of the saving death of Christ - the victory which he won is, through the Mass, applied to you and me, just as the delivering from slavery which God achieved through Moses is applied to those in the Old Testament who celebrate the Passover. The same saving-event is made powerfully present in the lives of the participants.

The Mass in the New Testament

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke record the Last Supper. The Gospel of John does not record the same events (*“Take this, all of you and eat it. This is my body” etc.*) but instead gives us Christ's own homily on the Mass - his words at the feeding

of the 5000, which only make sense in the light of the Mass – see *Chapter 6* of his Gospel. In addition, St. Paul records the story of the Last Supper in *1 Corinthians. 11*. Finally, the Book of Revelation has much to say about the significance of the Mass in terms of its supernatural effects and meaning. Briefly, we'll look at these:

1. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and the Letter to the Corinthians

These tell very much the same story:

1. Interrupting the flow of the Passover meal, Christ takes the unleavened bread (a reminder of the haste in which the first Passover was eaten, before they left Egypt) and states that it is his body.
2. He takes the third cup of wine (out of four cups in the Passover ritual), the cup of Blessing as it was called, and states that it is the cup of his blood, that his blood seals the New Covenant and that this blood will be poured out for the forgiveness of sins.
3. Finally he commands the apostles to “*do this as a memorial of me.*” (Lk. 22:19).

St. Paul teaches that treating the meal-sacrifice unworthily is identical to treating Christ unworthily - since it is truly the Christ whom they are receiving whenever they celebrate the sacrifice (*1 Cor. 11:26-29*). Equally, he teaches that the bond of communion is one that forges the unity of the Church. It is because we profess the same faith that we share the same heavenly food, and eating it together visibly expresses the unity of our faith. The one Body of Christ, the Church, is formed and nourished because she is fed on the one Body of Christ - the Mass. Receiving Christ in the Mass is the cause of the unity of the Church and it shows the unity of the Church. The action of all of us receiving from the same priest is a powerful way of expressing ‘we are of one mind and one heart in the faith’. This is the ancient faith of the Church, and is very strongly stated by St. Ignatius of Antioch in his letters (dated c.107 A.D.). Those who are not of one mind and heart with us in the faith are not able to share with us in receiving the Body of Christ because they are not fully with us in the Body of Christ, the Church.

2. The Real Presence - John 6 & 1 Cor. 5

Is this a Catholic invention? We believe that when Christ said “*This is my Body*” and “*This is my Blood*” he spoke no lie - it truly became his Body and Blood because of the force of the words he spoke. We believe he was not speaking metaphorically or with poetic license but with the authoritative power of God behind his words. Does that sound strange? It shouldn't do, bearing in mind that the Gospels are full of other occasions when his word alone was sufficient to transform and change.

We say he is truly God (and truly man) and that by the power of his word he transforms our material world - when he commanded spirits to leave the bodies of those they inhabited, his word was effective and transformative: they left. When he

commanded that the sick be healed, they were healed - by the power of the word Christ spoke. No one claims that Christ was speaking in images and metaphors when he commanded the paralytic *"I order you: get up, pick up your stretcher and go off home"* (Mk. 2:11). His word, when spoken in command, is authoritative - it raises the dead *"Lazarus, here! Come out!"* (Jn. 11:43), *"Young man, I tell you to get up!"* (Lk. 7:14), *"Little girl, get up!"* (Lk. 8:54). Why should we suddenly think that now, at the last supper, when he is preparing for his own death, he should confuse his disciples by suddenly starting to speak figuratively when he refers to the bread as *"my Body"*? How could we possibly know when to take him at his word and when to decide he is using metaphors if he changes between them all the time? When God commands, his word becomes reality - this is the lesson of the first chapter of the first book of the Bible *"Let there be light, & there was light."* (Gen. 1:3). When God says that something is, then it happens and is so.

Did the writers of the Scriptures think so - or is this a later teaching of the Church that has no real basis in the Scriptures? It is embedded in the Gospels and in St. Paul - it is inescapable, unless one is determined to avoid the clear inference of the texts. St. John especially shows that Jesus gave *every* indication that his words *"This is my Body"* were to be taken at their face value. More than that, Christ placed immense value on this teaching being accepted by his disciples and at every opportunity he not only restated his teaching but consistently reinforced it, leaving us in no doubt as to his absolute commitment to the meaning of what he was saying. This is especially clear in the great "Bread of Life" discourse in St. John's Gospel:

- *John. 6: 1-56.* This is too long to quote at length but there are some critical passages. Having fed the 5000 with bread and fish, just as Moses fed Israel with manna in the desert, Jesus Christ teaches that this feeding is only a sign - the day will come when God will feed his people with bread which gives eternal life. *"Anyone who eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world."* (Jn. 6:51). The people object because they understand Christ to have said that he will give them his flesh to eat (i.e., they take Christ at his literal word). Not only does Christ not correct them, which he could easily have done by saying that he only meant it figuratively, but more than that - he goes on to confirm that their literalistic interpretation is based in truth because he subsequently states the same message no fewer than *four more times*, each time getting more explicit and hammering the point home:

1. *"I tell you solemnly,"* (this means Christ is swearing an oath) *"if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you will not have life within you."* (53)
2. *"Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life, and I shall raise him up on the last day."* (54)
3. *"For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink."* (55)
4. *"He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in him."* (56)

- Given that the people have already objected to his physical language is it really possible that Christ could have let them continue to be so horrified if he had actually only meant these words in a metaphorical sense? Does not the fact that Christ deliberately chooses to underscore the very aspect of his teaching that is arousing disbelief and confusion point to the fact that he wants it understood that he stands by what he has said and that he will not pretend that it is was only an image or metaphor? If not, is Christ not culpably misleading in not correcting the interpretation of his hearers? After all, he corrects Nicodemus when, in John Chapter 3, he interprets Christ's words about being born again in a very literal sense – Christ replies by showing that Nicodemus has misunderstood by being so literal in his interpretation. If this was also the case here, why does Christ not point it out? And is it reasonable to suppose that he simply decides not to tell them how wrong they are – he, who a few chapters later will call himself “*the Way, the **Truth** and the Life*”? The only reasonable explanation is that Christ does not correct them because they are not wrong – just scandalised at the nature of the truth.
- John. 6: 59-68.* Christ goes further than before. This very physical language simply does not bear the possibility of being treated as just an image. If it were meant by Christ as a metaphor, why did he not clarify it when the people took him literally? Furthermore, the very force of his language and the unmistakable nature of his teaching drives many of his disciples to abandon him: they complain (v52 - they ask in effect ‘is he seriously telling us to eat His flesh?’) and Christ confirms their interpretation that he is serious by swearing an oath (“*I tell you solemnly*”) and the 4-fold repetition of his teaching. When they object violently to his literal language (“*This is intolerable language*” v60) Christ **again** confirms that they have understood him correctly and that he truly means what he says: he does this by saying that these words “*are spirit and they are life*” (implication - reject them and you reject life: you die! v63). After this, many disciples (who have followed him to this point), leave Christ never to return (v66). *If Christ only meant these words as a metaphor, not as literal truth, why did he not go after them to bring them back, clarify the mistake and make it clear that he was just exaggerating for effect?* Not only does he let them go, tacitly confirming again that they truly had understood him properly, but he then turns on the Apostles and challenges them to make up their minds too – “*What about you, do you want to go away too?*” (v67). Christ is doing everything in his power to ensure that those who stay with him do so under no misapprehensions – they must eat his flesh and drink his blood: any uncertainty here is enough for him to suggest that they leave him. We must make several points here: Christ deliberately uses very physical language and not just once but over and over again (eat, drink – the words are more truly translated as ‘chew’ and ‘swallow’), so it is no mistake on his part but a conscious intention to teach them that he would give them his life in a very physical way for them to receive through eating. ALSO - if this causes scandal to some, we should not be surprised since it absolutely horrified Christ's own listeners. ALSO - it is so important a teaching that Christ would rather lose those of his number who could not accept it than water it down, make it more politically correct, pretend it was just a metaphor. FINALLY - Christ doesn't just let people go who can't accept it: he turns on those who remain and impels them to make a positive choice to stay as

opposed to staying by default, by not having the courage to go at once. Christ sees the reality of his presence as the Bread of Life, the flesh and blood that he gives us to eat and drink, as being of absolutely *paramount* importance and *essential to our lives as his disciples*. It is the *sine qua non* of the Christian. One who denies that this is truly Christ's body and blood is, in the terms of this passage, no disciple of Christ at all. And don't forget - this is all Christ's teaching, not just my opinion!

- ***1 Cor. 5:7-8 "Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed for us; therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with the old leaven of malice and wickedness but with unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."*** This is Passover-ritual language, when the Jews made the event of the liberation from Egypt present by celebrating the Passover sacrifice-meal. Celebrating the feast put them within the saving power of God as shown in Egypt. BUT here the Passover, slain and eaten, is no lamb but ***Christ***. How was the Passover feast celebrated? The family would all eat the lamb (without it, the first-born would have died). It was not enough, in Moses' time, that it is sacrificed and its blood daubed on the lintel: it had to be eaten or the ritual was not complete and the first-born of the household would die. Celebrating the feast means you have to ***eat the lamb***. SO - when St. Paul calls Christ "*our Passover*" who has been sacrificed for us (as the Passover lamb was), and then says "*therefore let us celebrate the feast*", meaning the new Passover meal-sacrifice, what can he mean other than ***'Christ, the new Lamb of the new Covenant Passover, has been sacrificed on the cross, therefore we must complete the new Passover ritual by eating the Lamb - Christ himself'***?
- Remember, this letter was written about 20 years *after* Christ was crucified, resurrected and ascended into heaven. He has not been seen for all that time. How could the Christian communities "*celebrate the feast*" unless the new Lamb, Christ himself, was actually present in a form in which he could be consumed? He refers to "unleavened bread" - drawing deliberately on the imagery of Mass and assuming, without need to explain or justify, that we understand perfectly that when they gather to "*do this in memory of me*", the Church is celebrating the new Passover, eating the new lamb in the form of consecrated unleavened bread. Unless you understand this and presume a belief in the very real presence of Christ in the Mass, his command to "*celebrate the feast*" is utterly meaningless.

As Catholics, we believe that at Mass the priest takes the place of Christ at the Last Supper and so whatever Christ did, is done through the priest at Mass. Another way of saying this is that at Mass, it is Christ, working through the priest, who offers the sacrifice: it is Christ who says, "*This is my Body*" and thus it truly is so and the bread becomes Christ's Body. While its outward appearance does not change, and while the host does not alter in any way detectable to the senses (i.e., if we examined it through a microscope, weighed it, reduced it to its constituent atoms etc.,) nevertheless, its *substance* (that which it is, its *being* which stands below the material layer of existence) is totally transformed into the whole person of Jesus Christ, the God-man, the Lord of the Universe and we receive Christ in his wholeness - Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity.

Some argue that we have made all this up and just projected it back into the Gospels: that St. John never meant any of this, and it is only because we are so obsessed with the Real Presence that we see references to it where there are actually none. All this is an example of medieval wishful thinking and bad Scripture analysis. They argue that in the early Church this belief was not present – they did not believe that the host was actually transformed just because a priest spoke words over it.

Those who argue this do so with less knowledge of history than they have of Sacred Scripture. The writings of the earliest Fathers of the Church are packed with the most explicit examples of total faith in the Real Presence of Christ in the Mass. Ignatius of Antioch, Origen, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Epiphanius, Cyprian of Carthage, Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nazianzen, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Jerome, Ambrose, Ephraem, Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria, - all these and many others make clear reference to the fact that belief in the reality of Christ's presence in the consecrated host and chalice during Mass was *universal, unopposed* and *apostolic in origin* and thus no later invention. St. Ignatius of Antioch, for example, martyred in 107 A.D. (so he had lived at the time of the Apostles and in the generation directly after Christ), wrote to the Church in Smyrna warning them to separate from any who denied the doctrine of the real presence:

- *"They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the Flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

He wrote to the Church in Philadelphia on the issue of maintaining unity as one Church and he roots this in *the celebration of the Mass*. They must not celebrate the Mass in small groups but as a single community, offering only one Mass together united around their clergy:

- *"Be careful to observe only one Eucharist; for there is only one Flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ and one cup of union with his Blood, one altar of sacrifice, as there is one Bishop with the Presbyters and my fellow-servants, the Deacons."*

As the last word on this matter, let me quote St. Justin of Rome, martyred for the faith in c.155 A.D. at a time when Christians were hated for many reasons one of which was for suspected *cannibalism* since they spoke of eating the body and drinking the blood of a certain man at their secret ceremonies. He wrote an explanation of the Church's belief, dated c. 140 A.D. (i.e., during the lifetime of Christians who had known the Apostles and, as children, had heard first-hand what Christ taught - so would have objected violently and irrefutably if Justin had invented these teachings and then pretended that they had come from the Apostles). In his Apologia, St. Justin describes what happens in the rite of Mass (readings, homily, collection, prayers, account of the Last Supper, communion etc.). Then he adds his words of explanation:

- *"This food we call Eucharist, which no one is allowed to share except the one who believes our teaching is true, and has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins ... For we do not receive these as common bread and common drink; but just as Jesus Christ our Saviour, having been made flesh by the word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we learned that **the food over which thanks** (in Greek,*

*‘eucharistein’ from which we get the word ‘eucharist’) has been given by the prayer of the word which comes from him, and by which our blood and flesh are nourished through a change (the Greek word means ‘a complete transformation’), is the **Flesh and Blood of the same incarnate Jesus.**” (Please note: the words in brackets are mine, as is the emphasising of the second half of the quotation)*

By the middle of the second century it was fully established and needed no great defence or show of how reasonable it was - Justin records it matter of factly: as a result of thanks being offered (‘eucharistein’) over the bread and wine by the one who presides (the priest), the bread and wine are substantially transformed and are no longer common bread and wine. They have become “*the food we call Eucharist ... the Flesh and Blood of the same incarnate Jesus.*” The doctrine of the real change of the bread and wine into the Real Presence of Jesus Christ is not an invention of the Middle Ages or the superstitious West: it is unmistakably present and clearly proclaimed as universally accepted Christian dogma from the end of the first century A.D.

3. The Book of Revelation

This is too great a subject to cover properly or do justice to in the space we have here. The Book of Revelation is one of the most difficult books of the Bible, packed with bizarre imagery, strange symbols, weird beasts, blood-curdling descriptions of plagues, punishments and battles. It is a mystery to most scholars today because they have lost the main interpretative key that makes sense of the whole book. It is not principally about foretelling the end of the world or terrifying its readers into submissive and servile obedience. All the great Fathers of the Early Church almost without exception understood the principal way to unlock the book of Revelation: *the liturgy of the Mass*. Revelation is one long description of the supernatural drama which takes place when the Mass is offered.

1. **Liturgical clothes and objects:** the book speaks of incense, candles, palms being carried as a sign of victory and kingship, an altar, a scroll which is read to the assembled people, cups or chalices of wine, a Lamb standing on the altar looking as though it had been slain. There is speak of the hidden manna (the consecrated host). The major characters are dressed in solemn liturgical garb - the elders who prostrate themselves wear the sacrificial vestments of Levites as used only for Temple sacrifice, Christ himself is seen by John in the garments of the High Priest. Where do you usually (or even *ever*) see these things usually displayed or used but at Mass?
2. **Liturgical language:** the book is crammed with language which is only ever heard in the celebration of the Mass – “Alleluia”, “Amen”, “the Lamb of God”, “Holy, Holy, Holy”, “Blessed is he who is invited to the wedding-feast (or supper) of the Lamb”. We have the call to penitence, the Gloria, the invitation to “Lift up your hearts.” All these are phrases and prayers drawn directly from the worship we find in the Mass.
3. **Liturgical action:** we have prostrations before the presence of God (as used to be frequent in the early Church during Mass and is still done in the Orthodox

communities in Greece and Russia), the sign of the cross. We find antiphonal chanting, processions, celibate men leading the worship, readings from Sacred Scripture. Reminiscent of what you see and hear at Mass?

4. **Liturgical scenes:** whole scenes of the book of Revelation are set in the context of worship. The vision itself is given to John on the island of Patmos “on the Lord’s day”, meaning Sunday, the day of the resurrection when it was the universal practice of the disciples to meet for “the breaking of bread” i.e., the Mass (we know this from the Acts of the Apostles – the Mass was celebrated on Sunday because this was the celebration of the Resurrection of Christ). He is “in the Spirit”, a reference to Baptism and to being a member of the Body of Christ, the Church - both of which are defined and celebrated par excellence in the Mass. He sees Christ robed for priestly sacrifice standing in the middle of seven lamp stands (ch. 1; the Temple in Jerusalem contained the Minora, the famous seven-branched candlestick). The scene broadens to a great congregation led by twenty-four ‘elders’ (the Greek for elder is ‘presbuteros’, from which we get our English word ‘priest’): they lead the worship of countless millions of saints. They sing praise of God and intercede with him for the protection of the righteous on earth who are being persecuted. This all points to a liturgical celebration - above all, the Mass. It tells us something critical about the Mass - it is more than just the celebration of communion between God and me. The Mass has a cast of millions - the Triune God, the nine choirs of angels, the untold multitude of saints in heaven - all these are involved in the celebration of the Mass: “*And I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, ‘Worthy is the lamb who was slain ... etc.,’ And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein, saying ‘To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might for ever and ever.’ And the four living creatures said ‘Amen!’ and the elders fell down and worshipped.*” (Rev. 5:11-13) After the 144,000 are sealed with the sign of the cross and given eternal life, John sees how many are redeemed behind them; “*After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb!’*” (Rev. 7:9-10). “*And the twenty four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshipped God who is seated on the throne, saying ‘Amen, Alleluia!’ ... Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunder peals, crying ‘Alleluia! For the Lord, our God the Almighty reigns’.*” (Rev. 19:4,6). The assembly of the faithful on earth at Mass is a small shadow of the assembly of the faithful in heaven, all doing the same thing – joining with Christ to offer his perfect sacrifice to the Father. Only at Mass do we do this, as described in Revelation.
5. **Liturgical structure of the whole book:** Revelation closely mirrors the structure of the Mass - penitential rite, liturgy of the word (the Scriptures are proclaimed from the ‘Book of Life’ as it was called in the early Church),

liturgy of the Eucharist (the gifts are consecrated and Christ made present) and liturgy of Holy Communion (we receive Christ himself). Revelation has all these elements: penitential rite (chs 1-3, the sins of the seven churches are recalled and they are urged to repentance), liturgy of the word (chs 4-10 where the scroll, on which are written the names of the just who will be given eternal life is taken by the Lamb, opened and read), liturgy of the Eucharist (chs 11-18, where the gifts to be offered to God are purified and made holy - these are the lives of the persecuted disciples whose purification is completed by their trials and who become holy by their endurance), liturgy of Holy Communion (chs 19-22, where the final union of God with his people is consummated, the Lamb is joined in a form of marriage to his spotless bride, the Church, and where God dwells in perfect unity with the redeemed in the new and heavenly Jerusalem). As in the Mass, other elements are present - the prayers of intercession, the veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the intercession of the saints and angels.

SO - what do we have? St. John wants us to see the Mass with more than human eyes, and to see the liturgy of the Mass as a supernatural reality that is cosmic in significance. What we do on a Sunday is deliberately presented as a pale imitation of what he shows us is taking place for all time in heaven. Here, it is the Lamb who leads the celebration, standing on the throne (4:6). All the imagery is that of sacrifice, drawn from Temple rites of sacrifice (incense, the seven-branched candlestick, sacrificial vestments, an altar, a Lamb which is the quintessential animal of sacrifice for the Jews since Passover in Egypt, poured cups of wine as libations etc.) so the meaning is clear – Christ is perpetually offering a sacrifice to the Father in heaven, and the Mass is the way God has given us so that we can take part in the giving of that sacrifice with Christ, as his Body on earth.

The Mass as Sacrifice

This is a uniquely Catholic doctrine. Only Catholics believe that the Mass is truly a sacrifice. At the reformation, this was perhaps the most hotly contested belief and the most furiously rejected doctrine: every Protestant denomination founded at that time and since then has resolutely denied that the Mass is a sacrifice. For it to be a sacrifice, Christ's own body and blood must become actually present so that it may be offered to God - and of course nearly every Protestant denomination denies that this is done. They appeal to the letter to the Hebrews 9:11-14 where the writer states that Christ died on the cross “*once and for all*” - and so there is no repetition of the sacrifice but it was a complete, perfect and absolutely finished sacrifice. It is over.

As Catholics we do not see it this way. ‘Once and for all’ does not have to mean ‘over and done with’, finished in the sense of brought to its final conclusion. After all, a good husband might say he married his wife ‘once and for all’ - he means that his marriage is irrevocable, his word is enduring and that the covenant he made with her is lasting, not to be repeated but *is an enduring reality in the sense that it does not end*. We could say that Christ has ascended into heaven and has been made Lord of all creation ‘once and for all’ – his lordship is described this way to convey its unending duration and effect. We use that phrase ‘once and for all’ in a similar way with reference to Christ’s sacrifice on the cross - it is complete and does not need

supplementing or adding to; but it is also everlasting - it is a sacrifice that endures and has no ending.

Christ has *always* been giving himself to his Father - from before creation, Christ was eternally being begotten by the Father and eternally giving back to the Father everything he had received because such is his love for his Father. When he became man, he carried on doing the same thing, only in a human manner. The cross is the most explicit way he did it - *but not the only way*. He gave his life fully and down to the last drop to his Father in a physical way on the cross just as he had always given his life to the Father fully. He continues to do so *after* his resurrection and ascension.

Christ is outside time since he is God. His actions reach beyond time because as God he spans time and overarches it. Whatever he accomplished during his human lifetime on earth is more than an historical event – it is timeless because he, as God, is timeless in endurance and significance. The crucifixion is as real and new today as it was in 33 A.D. because to God, 1000 years are but the blink of an eye. Hebrews has this image of Christ entering the great Temple of Heaven, where God is worshipped by all creation, as our great High Priest. While on earth the human high priest entered the Holy of Holies (God's throne room on earth) with the blood of calves, bulls and goats which are powerless to make us holy, NOW we have a High Priest in the true Temple who enters the Father's presence with the only offering which brings us forgiveness and new life: Christ's own blood, offered on the cross. But this isn't done in a moment of time (and then is over) because God doesn't occupy time like us – being outside time, what he does has no beginning and no end: it is always and eternally in the present moment. SO, Christ's sacrifice of his life on the cross is an eternal moment, a never-ending reality, not over and finished but always in the present and so always powerful, just as his kingship over creation is always in the present and always powerful.

Ask yourself: was the crucifixion a 'once and for all' event in the sense that once Christ did it, it was over and finished - so he sat down for the rest of time and just basked in the glory? Of course not – that would limit heaven to the passage of time. NO - there is no time in heaven, and so no event is over and ended. Christ carries on offering his life to the Father in heaven in an unchanging and timeless way - ever-presenting his sacrificed life to the Father for us. He is eternally offering his life to God. PLEASE NOTE – I am *not* saying that he is being crucified over and over again for all eternity, only that Christ does now what he has always done – given his life to the Father. The only difference is that since the incarnation in Bethlehem, he does this in a human way as well as in a divine way: he offers his crucified life to the Father as a gift of his love. The crucifixion is truly over – but the offering of that death on the cross is *never over* because Christ gives all he is to his Father, and that includes his human life and human death, for all time. Christ is *still* giving that life and death to his Father as a gift of love even though since then he has been glorified and ascended to heaven – yet he continuously gives the Father his life, death and resurrection on our behalf for the forgiveness of our sins.

This is, I believe, the true understanding of *Hebrews 9:11-14*, where Christ enters the court of heaven offering his sacrifice of the cross to the Father for us. From the moment of the crucifixion until the end of time, Christ offers *in an unending present moment* the gift of his saving death to his Father. Thus, when St. John looks into the

vision of heaven that he is given in the Book of Revelation, he sees this once-and-eternally-offered sacrifice taking place in that very moment, as it is offered in each and every moment:

- *“And I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals; and I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, ‘Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?’ And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, and I wept much that no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. Then one of the elders said to me, ‘Weep not; lo, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.’ **And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain...**” (Rev. 5:1-6)*

Note that he sees a **Lamb** - the animal of sacrifice in Israel. Note also that the Lamb is the title that St. John (the author of Revelation) records in his *Gospel* that Christ was given by St. John the Baptist at the very start of his ministry when he was baptised in the Jordan. CHRIST is the Lamb of sacrifice in St. John's Gospel. Here, Christ is depicted as the one who has been sacrificed (*“as though it had been slain”*) i.e., bearing the wounds of its death upon it. So Christ is shown as the sacrificial animal, standing on the altar, the place of sacrifice, and bearing the visible marks of his death - the image is of the offering that the High Priest offered to God in the Temple. This is a scene of Christ (who we know is the High Priest, who is making the offering to the Father), who is offering *his own life and death* to God: we know this because the Lamb on the altar is alive - he is “standing” and he is the lion who “has conquered”. SO we have a sacrificed Christ who is raised to life, offering his sacrificed life to God at the very moment that John sees him in the vision. In other words – Christ is perpetually offering this life to the Father; and now, through his vision, John is being given the chance to join in with the offering.

THIS is what we believe we are doing in the Mass - it is Christ who is perpetually and eternally offering his life to God. Christ is the High Priest making the offering and even though the death that he offers is one that he suffered nearly 2000 years ago, he is offering it without end (***not over and over again***). In this way, the Mass is to us what the vision was to St. John: it is the means whereby we can be involved in that offering for a time. *We are not re-offering Christ's life, or repeating his death* as if the death on Calvary was not enough in itself but had to be done over and over again - we are liturgically involving ourselves in the heavenly liturgy whereby Christ eternally offers that life to the Father. The consequence of the offering: God releases within us all the graces and blessings that Christ's death has won for us. Like the celebration of the Passover, in which the Jews released the power of liberation which was manifested in the Exodus from slavery through the means of the liturgy of the annual Passover sacrifice-meal and that power becomes a present day reality for the people to benefit from, so through the liturgy of the Mass, we are becoming involved in the eternal worship of God in heaven, unleashing on us and the world the full might of the redemption which Christ has achieved through his death and resurrection – *“the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered”* (Rev. 5:5)

The Church and the Mass

Just a couple of points here. Because the Mass is the breaking through of the power of the cross and resurrection into our lives through the vehicle of a ritual, it is in effect, the Gospel come to life. No other action of the Church can be so shattering in its effects on a supernatural level as the worship of God through the Mass, since we believe that the very saving actions of Christ become actually present to us sacramentally for us to receive. Certain obvious consequences flow from this:

1. We *worship* this sacrament - because the bread and wine become truly the Body and Blood of Christ. It is the only sacrament that is not just the work of Christ but also actually IS CHRIST. When John saw Christ in his vision at the start of Revelation, his reaction is to worship him: he falls down prostrate before him. This is the very presence of the Lord of lords and the King of kings, through whom all things were made and who achieved our salvation at the price of his blood. We should have no less a spiritual reaction when we come into the presence of our eucharistic Lord: our celebration of the Mass is the worship of Christ made present under the forms of bread and wine.
2. Exposition and Benediction: the ancient practice of the Church has been to spend time in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. People say why go into a Church to pray when you can pray anywhere. This is true to a point - but conversely, why choose to be absent from the court of heaven when you are trying in prayer to raise your heart and mind to heaven? If you had personal access to the Prime Minister on a daily basis and the time to bring him any of your thoughts for implementation whenever you so wished, would you choose to pass this privilege up on the grounds that you could always make contact with him by letter?
3. Care, faith, attention and devotion: this is the very presence of the Saviour of the world. If Christ was scathing about the Pharisees who could not see that he was the Son of God, how will Christ respond to us, who recognise that he is God and that he is personally present, but who receive him in the Mass in a half-hearted, slovenly or absent-minded way? St. Paul reminds us that since we have been given such a privileged access to Christ, so more is expected of us when we are truly before him: *“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the Body and Blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgement upon himself.”* (1 Cor. 11:27-28) The Mass is not magical - we need to be properly prepared, duly disposed and willing to accept Christ our Saviour with love, reverence and faith.
4. The Sunday Obligation: as Catholics we are bound to participate in the Mass each Sunday, according to the ancient tradition of the Church, going back to the time of the Apostles. This is not simply an exhortation that is voluntary: it is a binding requirement of the faith. It is this important because of what the Mass truly is: our re-immersion in the saving power of Christ's victory over sin and death. This is our faith. Not to celebrate it with the Church is not to believe in its saving power. Remember Hebrews – for those who chose not to join with the assembly in their prayer (the weekly Mass) there can be no

sacrifice for sin (because they have chosen not to participate in the only sacrifice for sin which exists – the death of Christ on the cross, made available to us through the Mass).

5. Receiving Holy Communion: as in the time of St. Justin, the Church may only administer Communion to those whose faith is one with ours. This means that intercommunion with other Christian communities is not possible. For Catholics, the requirement of the Church is that we receive Communion at least once a year (around the time of Easter) - yet the urgent exhortation of the Church is that we receive at every possible opportunity. These may be limited: if we are in a state of serious sin, we must go to sacramental Confession, receive absolution and make a firm resolution before God to amend our lives, before receiving Holy Communion.
6. The Eucharistic fast: all Catholics over the age of 8 and under 60 are bound to fast for one hour before receiving Holy Communion. This means eating and drinking nothing except water and medicines. We need to be prepared internally and spiritually to receive him: this requires recollection, thought and prayer. It also requires separation for a moment from the actions of everyday life and a re-focus on the supernatural character of the action we are about to perform together. Remember the scenes in Revelation: the incense, angels, saints, altar etc. - we are about to join in that superabundant ritual.

In Summary

Above and beyond this, we should consider that the reserved sacrament in the tabernacle is not the Mass itself but the *consequence of the Mass*: the sacrament of the Mass is all of this - and more besides.

The Mass is not simply the actual presence of our God in the form of bread and wine (as if this would not be enough): it is the means above all and beyond all personal prayer and private spiritual experiences which has been fashioned and designed by God for our use through which human beings of all times and in every place may appropriate to themselves all the power and triumph achieved by Christ over those two greatest threats to humanity - sin and death - because it is the means beyond any other in which human beings may share today in the wonder of the Paschal mystery (the passion, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ). By receiving Christ, we receive all he has received and achieved: each time we receive Holy Communion, we become a part of the Paschal events which we read solemnly on Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, at the Easter Vigil, and on Easter Sunday.

1. Christ shatters death: so we share in that by receiving him.
2. He overcomes the disobedience of Adam by submitting to the will of the Father in going to his death by his free choice (see the Gospel of John to hear this point of obedience willingly offered to the Father repeated often) - thus he supplants Adam as the foundation of the human race, re-creating humanity in a new relationship with the Father. This new character is derived from its founding member: in Adam that character was disobedience and a loss of

original grace but in Christ that character is overcome, the original grace is restored, we are restored to sonship with God. If the imagery of Adam seems archaic and out of date, read the Exsultet which is read or sung at the Easter Vigil as the Church's solemn most formal proclamation of the resurrection and its implications for us: it hinges on the paralleling of Adam and Christ - what the first lost, the second has restored and improved on.

This is the sum total of the whole of the Christian mystery, and it focuses on the Mass. The Church, in its most solemn voice clearly proclaims that the Mass summarises and perfectly expresses the core of the message of Christ. ***Everything that Christ is and achieves is made available to us in the supreme mystery of the Sacrament of the Mass***, and for this reason, the Second Vatican Council describes the Mass as “*the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed*” and “*the fount from which all her power flows*” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium, 1963, n10*).

Nothing the Church has received or possesses is given equal veneration with the Mass, because in the sacrifice of the Mass mankind comes face to face with God himself, receives in a human way the life of God, is reconciled with the Father, is united with the Son by receiving the host, is joined in new and deeper unity with the Church of which we are already members and is given a foretaste of the heavenly wedding feast which is the way paradise is described in the book of Revelation. St. Thomas Aquinas described the Mass in this way:

"O Sacred banquet,
in which Christ is consumed:
the reality of His passion is brought to us,
the soul is over-filled with grace,
and a pledge of future glory is given to us."

1. Thus, the Mass is truly a meal (“sacred banquet”) - but a sacred one, ordained by Christ and therefore unlike any earthly meal.
2. The reality of Christ's presence is absolutely affirmed (“Christ is consumed”).
3. This is only possible because the Mass is a making-present in this time of the saving-event of the passion on Calvary, as the Passover was a making-present of Moses' liberation of the people from slavery in Egypt (“the reality of his passion is brought to us”).
4. The immediate effect of receiving the sacrament is the infusion of grace - God gives his life to us, filling us with divine power and glory in so far as we are willing to accept it and co-operate with it. This is an “over-filling” - God is never miserly with his gifts or out-done in generosity, and so the Father more than restores the grace we have lost through our sins.
5. Finally, “a pledge of future glory is given to us” - a reminder that the Mass, as with all the sacraments - as well as being a present reality is also a pointer to a final fulfilment which is heaven. All the sacraments are the first-fruits of the gifts of Heaven: they are foretastes of the joys and blessings which are

promised to us and they incline us to long with greater desire for the final consummation of all things, when God will bring the glory of his perfection to all creation and feed all his children with his divine life to the full.

St. Thomas Aquinas' prayer summarises the Mass with clarity and precision.

We, as Catholics, worship the Blessed Sacrament because we take seriously Christ's words "*This is my Body / This is my Blood.*" Worship is reserved exclusively for God Himself - and the sacrament of the Mass is God personally present. We call it a sacrifice because through the Mass, we are inserted as the Church into the actual Paschal Mystery of Christ's redeeming passion and death: when we receive the host or the chalice we receive the whole of the Christ-person whose nature and mission is most fully expressed on the cross and in the resurrection. For this reason, each of the Eucharistic prayers makes explicit reference to these seminal acts directly after the Consecration. It is not a new sacrifice, or the sacrifice of Calvary repeated - as many protestant reformers thought the Church was teaching. It is the same and single sacrifice of the Cross, made present through a sacred rite so that we in the twenty-first century may personally unite ourselves to it - so that we may receive personally the infinite benefits which flow from it.

There is so much available on the Mass that I don't know where to begin for recommended reading, but:

- Any of the Last Supper accounts in the Sacred Scriptures, together with John ch. 6, the discourse on the Bread of Life.
- *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1322-1419. This is a long section of the Catechism, but in my opinion it is one of its best - clear, focused, penetrating, wide-ranging and deeply authoritative. After the Sacred Scriptures this is always the second source we turn to if we truly wish to hear the Church's faith. If you want to know the mind of the Church on the Mass, come to the Catechism!
- *This is my Body* by Fr. Ian Petit O.S.B. This is really a children's book, but has the advantage of presenting the Mass in an uncomplicated manner.
- *The Eucharistic Memorial* and *The Mystery of the Eucharist*, both by Fr. Max Thurian, who converted from Calvinism as sub-prior of the community at Taize. A brilliant theologian, Fr. Max Thurian delves much deeper than Fr. Petit but still explains his insights with great clarity and simplicity.
- *Sacrosanctum Concilium* - the Constitution of the Second Vatican Council on the Liturgy, esp. paras. 5-13.
- Almost any of the works of the great Fathers of the Church contain sections on the Mass, from the first Christians like St. Ignatius of Antioch (✠ c.107 A.D.), St. Justin Martyr (✠ c.150 A.D.) to the great thinkers of today, such as Pope John Paul II. If you get the chance, read some of these - they will give you a wonderful appreciation of the antiquity of our veneration of the Blessed

Sacrament, and of the depth of insight that has constantly rejuvenated our adoration of Christ in this Sacrament.

*Please remember: the Mass is first and foremost a prayer before it is ever a subject for study, and its real heart can never be penetrated until we pray the Mass with the deepest devotion and veneration. Even if you don't get much time to read about the Mass, its very purpose is frustrated and rendered meaningless for us if we never seriously give ourselves over to **praying** the Mass. It only becomes 'boring' when we have ceased to be a praying participant and become an expectant spectator, waiting to be entertained or to be fed spirituality as if by drip. What we get out of the Mass, in terms of spiritual consolation, a sense of prayer, encouragement for the pilgrimage of the Christian life, grace, increase in holiness etc., is in direct proportion to what we put into the Mass through prayer, persistence, love for Christ in his Church.*

Pray the Mass, and the Mass will become a dear and precious part of you. Meditate on the Blessed Eucharist, through Benediction and private prayer before the Tabernacle, and you will become more eucharistic.

Fr Guy de Gaynesford