

Sin Offering
2nd Sunday of Ordinary Time (A)
(Jn 1:29-34)

When John the Baptist presented Jesus to others as the one they should seek instead of him, he did not explicitly call him Messiah. He did not say to the people, “Behold the Messiah, the Anointed One of God.” John did not say, “Behold, the King, who would reestablish the Kingdom of David.”

Nor did he use any of the other normal and ordinary ways to identify the Messiah, based on various popular prophecies in the Scripture foretelling what he would be like. “Behold, the liberator and savior of the nation... Behold, the miracle worker, the healer of the world’s ills... Behold, the teacher and lawgiver...”

Instead, John identified the Messiah using a more obscure prophecy from the book of Isaiah. John himself was the greatest of all prophets, filled with the Wisdom of God and Understanding of Scripture beyond the regular scribes and Pharisees. He knew that presenting Jesus as a political savior or miracle worker would confuse and mislead the people about how the Messiah would accomplish his mission. And so, in order to clarify the Messiah and his mission, he identified Jesus as “*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*” (Is 53:7).

John the Baptist gave us this title for the Messiah, which is very prominent in the Mass. At the culmination of the Eucharist, when we come to meet the Lord in Holy Communion, the Church fulfills the role of John the Baptist by again presenting Jesus as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” Several times we repeat it in the litany before Holy Communion:

“Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.”

“Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.”

“Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, grant us peace.”

And then the priest repeats again when he presents the Holy Gifts of God for Holy Communion, the Body and Blood of Christ:

“Behold the Lamb of God! Behold him who takes away the sins of the world! Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb.”

This title is important. This is the most important identification of the Messiah, describing who he is and why he came. But it requires some understanding of the Old Testament.

We are no longer very familiar with the worship of the Jews as described in the Old Testament. When we get to those parts of the Bible that describe the Law of Moses and all the minute details of the Temple priesthood, we usually skip over them. But if we are going to understand what John is referring to, we need to have some knowledge of the Temple worship and the priestly sacrifices.

There were two main parts to the Jewish worship, centered in the synagogue, and in the temple.¹ The synagogue was the local congregation, found in every town, village, and community. It was the place where the Scriptures were read and taught, and it was led by a local rabbi. In Christianity, the synagogue worship has become the first half of the Mass, the “Liturgy of the Word.”

The other (more) important part of Jewish worship was found in the temple. And whereas the Jews had thousands of synagogues throughout the world, there was only one temple, located in the Holy City Jerusalem.² Instead of rabbis, temple worship was conducted by ordained priests, who all came from the tribe of Levi. These lived in and around Jerusalem, and were divided into different classes (similar to our bishop-priest-deacon hierarchy), and took turns by lot to perform their priestly ministry.

At the heart of the temple complex, in a courtyard before the Holy of Holies, was the great bronze altar, about 30 x 30 feet in size (2 Chr 4:1), with a fire perpetually burning (Lv 6:13). Only the Levitical priests could approach the altar, with the sacrifices carefully prepared by the Levite-deacons.³ When the (perfectly healthy and unblemished) animal was prepared for sacrifice – according to perfect Levitical standards of cleanliness – its blood was separated out from the flesh, the entrails were removed, and the flesh was cut into appropriate pieces. The blood (i.e., “life”) was then poured by the priest on the altar, while the flesh was offered/burned as a pleasing holocaust to God and raised up in His presence (Lv 1). Depending on the type of sacrifice, the participants and/or Levites could consume the flesh afterward.

There would be different kinds of sacrifice depending on the purpose, utilizing different animals. Sacrifices were offered as individual votives, or for the entire nation. There were daily sacrifices (morning, evening) as well as sacrifices for seasonal and high feast days.

¹ A third important part is the Passover, celebrated neither in the synagogue nor the temple, but in the home.

² Today there is no longer a temple. It was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. Nor is there any longer a Levitical priesthood. Judaism today practices only a fragment of the full Old Testament religion.

³ Worshippers remained outside the sanctuary, a practice incorporated into Catholic churches by distinguishing the sanctuary from the nave using a communion rail; and more strikingly in the Eastern Rites which physically separate the altar by a wall called the *iconostasis*.

In addition to the weekly synagogue service each Sabbath, Jews from all over the world would go to Jerusalem on pilgrimage each year, during a major festival, to participate in the priestly sacrifices and make personal offerings.⁴

One of the most important reasons for offering sacrifice was to make atonement for sin (cf Lv 4:20,31,35), whether personal or communal sin. This is the sin offering (Lv 4-6), and the animal is typically a lamb (Lv 4:32).

It is this sacrifice that John the Baptist is referring to when he calls Jesus the “Lamb of God.” And unlike the sin offerings of the Old Testament which atone for the sins of a nation, Jesus will take away the sins of the whole world!

Jesus is true lamb, innocent, who pays the price of our sins. The Messiah came to die on the Cross. He was slaughtered on the cross, and his blood poured out, at the time of the evening lamb sacrifice in the temple (Nm 28:8).

Jewish worship is fulfilled in the Mass by the “*Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.*” The Mass combines both synagogue and temple worship.⁵ In the Eucharist, the Church and her priests, following in the footsteps of John the Baptist, proclaim Jesus as the “*Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.*”

From the moment of the Consecration, there exists on the altar, not merely symbolically but *really*, the sacrifice of Christ the Lamb, the sacred Flesh and Blood “separated.” When the priest lifts the elements to God the Father in the Great Doxology (“Through him, with him, and in him...”), it is the very same offering of Christ being lifted on the Cross.

The Mass *is* the reality of the sacrifice of Christ, made present in an unbloody manner through sacramental signs. Christ is not of course sacrificed *again* each time we celebrate the Mass – his sacrifice takes/took place once for all time (Hb 10:12). But his sacrifice is *made present*⁶ again every time we celebrate Mass, so that we might participate again in his offering by offering ourselves, and partake again of the fruits of his sacrifice through Holy Communion.

There are many variants of Christianity today, which present Christ in various ways, as healer, savior, teacher, etc. But Christ is found as “Lamb of God” only in the Eucharist, only in the ancient Catholic liturgy.

⁴ We still instinctively and unwittingly preserve some aspects of Jewish Temple worship, and the communal “spirit” of the great Temple festivals, by having a BBQ pit on the church grounds, and holding grand BBQ for important parish festivals.

⁵ Not to mention, the Passover as well.

⁶ The true meaning of the “memorial” – anamnesis -- of the Eucharist: “Do this in memory of me.” We don’t simply “remember” a past historical event, that past event becomes a present reality.

The Catholic Church remains firmly anchored in her OT roots, and for this reason remains the true Church. Most other Christian denominations retain only the “synagogue” portion of the liturgy, but this is not enough. It is only in the Catholic and Apostolic Church founded upon the Eucharist that the exact words of John the Baptist are repeated and literally fulfilled every time we say Mass:

*“Behold the Lamb of God; behold him who takes away the sins of the world.
Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb.”*