

Is the Mass a Sacrifice?

Once for All, Made Present: the Reformation's Deepest Liturgical Objection Answered

by Richard Whiting

© 2026 Richard Whiting. All rights reserved. May be reproduced in whole, with attribution. See full notice at the end of this document.

Contents

I. Not Only About Presence

II. The Objection at Full Strength

III. What Trent Actually Said

IV. The Night He Instituted It

V. Hebrews, Read Whole

VI. The Prophecy and the Earliest Witnesses

VII. The Abuses, and What They Prove

Endnotes

For Further Reading

I. Not Only About Presence

The companion essay on the Eucharist asks what is *received* at the altar. This one asks what is *done* there. The Reformation's deepest liturgical objection was never only about presence; it was about sacrifice. The Mass, the Reformers charged, is *offered*—and if Christ was offered "once for all" (Heb. 10:10), a priesthood that keeps offering him insults the finished cross. Calvin called the Mass an abomination on exactly this ground. The objection still stands wherever a Protestant looks at a Catholic altar, and it deserves the fullest answer this site can give.¹

II. The Objection at Full Strength

The letter to the Hebrews is built on a contrast: the Levitical priests stood "daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins," but Christ "offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins" (Heb. 10:11–12). "We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Heb. 10:10); "where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin" (Heb. 10:18).

In Hebrews' own argument, repetition is the mark of an *ineffective* sacrifice. From the cross Christ said, "It is finished" (John 19:30). The Reformers concluded that nothing remains to be offered: the Supper is a gift to be received, Christ's testament, not a work the Church performs toward God—and to convert the meal into an oblation offered by a sacrificing priesthood for the living and the dead inverts its direction and obscures grace, because man again brings something to God.²

The objection adds a historical and a linguistic point. The New Testament never calls the Supper a sacrifice, never calls its ministers priests (*hieries*), and never shows a Christian altar in use; the sacrificial reading, on this account, grew as the Church absorbed pagan and Levitical categories, and reached its abusive climax in the medieval system of votive Masses, stipends, and Masses for the dead—the very corruptions that lit the Reformation.

III. What Trent Actually Said

The Catholic Church agrees with every premise the objection begins from: Christ's sacrifice was offered once, is complete, and can no more be repeated than the Incarnation can. What she denies is that the Mass repeats it—and the denial is not a modern evasion but the Council of Trent's own careful sentence. Trent defines that in the Mass "the victim is one and the same, the same now offering by the ministry of priests, who then offered Himself on the cross, the manner alone of offering being different." One victim, one priest, one sacrifice—Calvary—made present under sacramental signs. The Mass adds nothing to the cross and could not; it *is* the cross, reaching the present the way Christ arranged for it to reach the present. The charge of "re-sacrificing" attacks a doctrine no Catholic council ever taught.³

IV. The Night He Instituted It

The sacrificial language does not begin with medieval theologians. It begins with Jesus, at the table, the night before the cross. "This is my body which is given for you... This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:19–20). *Given; poured out*: this is the vocabulary of offering, spoken in the present tense over a Passover—the sacrifice-meal of Israel, in which the lamb that is slain is the lamb that is eaten, so that the sacrifice is not complete until it is consumed. "Do this in remembrance of me" uses the word *anamnesis*, which in the sacrificial vocabulary of the Greek Old Testament means a memorial-offering presented before God, not a private act of mental recollection.⁴

Paul completes the picture and makes the logic explicit. The cup of blessing and the bread are a *participation* (*koinonia*) in the blood and body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16). And Paul then sets the "table of the Lord" in deliberate parallel with two kinds of altar: those who

ate the sacrifices of Israel "are partners in the altar," and those who eat what is offered to idols become "partners with demons," so that a Christian cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons (1 Cor. 10:18–21). The whole argument works only if the table of the Lord is, like the other two, an *altar*—a place of sacrifice. Nobody reasons that way about a bare memorial.

V. Hebrews, Read Whole

Hebrews, the objection's chosen weapon, is in fact the Catholic's book. Its argument is not that Christ's priesthood ended at Calvary but that, unlike Levi's, it does not end at all: "he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues for ever... he always lives to make intercession" for us (Heb. 7:24–25). He is a minister of the true, heavenly sanctuary, who has entered heaven itself "now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf" (Heb. 9:24). The one sacrifice, offered once in history, is eternally *presented* in heaven—which is why John, given a vision of that sanctuary, sees the Lamb "standing, as though it had been slain" (Rev. 5:6): slain once, standing for ever, the wounds eternally shown to the Father. That is precisely what the Mass claims to be—the earthly face of the Lamb's heavenly presentation.⁵

And what Hebrews actually forbids, the Mass does not do. Hebrews excludes new victims and new deaths: Christ has no need "to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the Holy Place yearly with blood not his own; for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world" (Heb. 9:25–26). No suffering, no new victim, no repetition—those are the marks of the thing Hebrews forbids, and the Mass has none of them. It offers no new death; it makes the one death present. The objection reads "once for all" as "once and then absent"; Hebrews means "once, and therefore eternally sufficient and eternally presented." The difference is the whole question.

VI. The Prophecy and the Earliest Witnesses

Malachi, centuries before, foresaw the worship of the messianic age in frankly sacrificial terms: "from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering" (Mal. 1:11). This is a standing puzzle for any theory on which Christian worship contains no offering at all: a pure offering, in every place, among all the nations—the one thing the Temple's single altar in Jerusalem could never be. And the first Christians read the verse exactly as the Church still reads it. The *Didache*, a document of the first century, calls the Sunday Eucharist "your sacrifice" and quotes Malachi 1:11 to explain it. Justin Martyr, around 150, applies the same verse to the Eucharist twice. Irenaeus, around 180, teaches that the Church offers "the new oblation of the new covenant." The sacrificial understanding is not a medieval accretion; it is the oldest interpretation on record, from the generation that

had known the apostles—the same witnesses this site’s Eucharist page calls upon for the real presence.⁶

VII. The Abuses, and What They Prove

The abuses were real, and no honest Catholic pretends otherwise. The late-medieval traffic in Mass-stipends, the multiplication of hurried private Masses said for money, the treatment of the sacrifice as a commodity to be purchased for the dead—these scandalized Catholic reformers before Luther was born, and the Council of Trent, in the same session that defined the doctrine, legislated sharply against them. But an abuse does not disprove the thing abused, or the Lord’s Supper itself would have been discredited at Corinth, where Paul found it profaned by drunkenness and contempt for the poor (1 Cor. 11:20–22). Paul’s remedy was to correct the abuse and keep the sacrament. Trent did the same. The doctrine stands where it always stood—on the Lord’s sacrificial words at the table, Paul’s altar-logic at Corinth, Hebrews’ ever-living priest, Malachi’s pure offering, and the unbroken testimony of the first liturgical documents. One sacrifice, offered once, never repeated, always present: the Mass does not add to Calvary. It is where Calvary finds you.⁷

Endnotes

1. Hebrews 10:10; John 19:30 (RSV); Calvin, *Institutes* IV.18. Scripture quotations, unless noted, are from the Revised Standard Version.
2. Hebrews 10:10–18; John 19:30 (RSV); Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520).
3. Council of Trent, Session XXII (1562), ch. 2; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§1366–1367.
4. Luke 22:19–20; 1 Corinthians 11:24–26 (RSV); on *anamnesis* in the Greek Old Testament, e.g. Leviticus 24:7 and Numbers 10:10.
5. Hebrews 7:24–25; 9:24–26; Revelation 5:6 (RSV).
6. Malachi 1:11 (RSV); *Didache* 14; Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 41 and 117; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.17–18.
7. Council of Trent, Session XXII, ch. 9 and the decree on abuses in the celebration of Mass; 1 Corinthians 11:20–22 (RSV).

For Further Reading

Council of Trent, Session XXII (1562)—the doctrine and canons on the sacrifice of the Mass. Free online at <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/trent/twenty-second-session.htm>.

The Didache, ch. 14—the first-century Eucharist as the "pure sacrifice" of Malachi. Free online at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0714.htm>.

Against Heresies, Book IV, by St. Irenaeus—the Church's oblation. Free online at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103.htm>.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§1356–1381 on sacrifice and presence.

*

"For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering."

—*Malachi 1:11*

*Ad maiorem Dei gloriam
To the greater glory of God*

Copyright and Distribution

This essay is © 2026 Richard Whiting. All rights reserved. It may be reproduced and distributed freely, in whole and with attribution, for any noncommercial purpose. It may not be sold, altered, or excerpted in ways that misrepresent its argument. Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1946, 1952, and 1971 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of *the Catholic doctrine of the sacrifice of the Mass*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.