

## The Church Cumbbersome? Stifling?

The phrase “organized religion” gets used in public discourse with a disdain completely out of proportion to the meaning of the words “organized” and “religion.” Religion is, simply, a system of beliefs and forms of worship to a deity.

Organization is a system of order and a structure of governance. Therefore, “organized religion” is a structured community with an order of worship and a system of beliefs.

What this phrase has come to mean in our modern world is something which is stifling to the human spirit or to a real spirituality. Organized religion is, in the eyes of many, too bureaucratic, rule-bound and doctrinaire. When someone utters the phrase it is almost as if they are saying, “*Oh! That is so medieval!*”

As a result, many have been convinced to abandon the old forms and to live by a “free-form” spirituality of their own making or to join a Christian community which provides the illusion of a more free-form worship and doctrinal system. It follows that, if it has such qualities, then it is more personal and more meaningful.

Over the past three weeks we have been reflecting on, what Bible scholars call, the Bread of Life Discourse from Chapter 6 of the Gospel of John. This is a key area of the Gospel which, in combination with the Last Supper Discourses, is so affirmative of our Catholic mode of Sunday Worship, the Eucharist/the Mass.

Consider that true worship of God, from a traditional Judeo/Christian perspective, requires sacrifice. A sacrificial victim stands in the place of sinners and also as an offering of the community from the bounty they have received from God. Hence, Israel offered unblemished lambs and bulls as well as the first-fruits of the harvest as sin offerings, in thanksgiving, and for other reasons.

When we consider the words of our Lord at the Last Supper in combination with the Bread of Life Discourse of John 6 and, with some knowledge of Old Testament prophecy, we acquire an understanding that Jesus did not merely do away with the need for all those animal and plant

sacrifices by his death on the Cross. In the process, he also provided the final and ultimate sacrifice for us to offer as our worship every Sunday.

The Letter to the Hebrews of the New Testament speaks of the ancient animal sacrifices as mere foreshadows of what Christ would accomplish by the shedding of his blood. As the Son of God, he is equal in dignity to the Father. Therefore, his sacrifice truly measures up to God in a way impossible to any number of earthly creatures or things. His sacrifice is the offering of his body “once for all” and by this we have been consecrated to God, (Heb. 10:10).



Every Christian will agree on the foregoing, but where we depart from others is in the sense that the “once-for-all” sacrifice of Jesus is, somehow, stuck way back in history as a thing to be remembered and cherished, rather than the gift of an actual Sacrifice we can make to our Heavenly Father in our own worship. Cross-referenced with Jesus’ command to the disciples to “*do this in memory of me,*” with respect to the New Passover of his Body and Blood, we discern something profound: **Jesus has left us the perfect worship!** Mass/Eucharist is perfect worship of God! We could do no better! No matter how good our prayer and praise and music and lighting, nothing can match the gift of the Unbloody Sacrifice of Jesus on the Altar, rendered to Our Father in Heaven and returned to us as the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation.

But you find it repetitive and overly formal and stifling of your own personal spirituality. So what? In the first instance, it isn’t about you or me or Joe down the street: We worship the Lord of All Creation on His own terms, through the Once-for-all sacrifice of his only begotten Son.

Study these words. Remember them. Proclaim them!