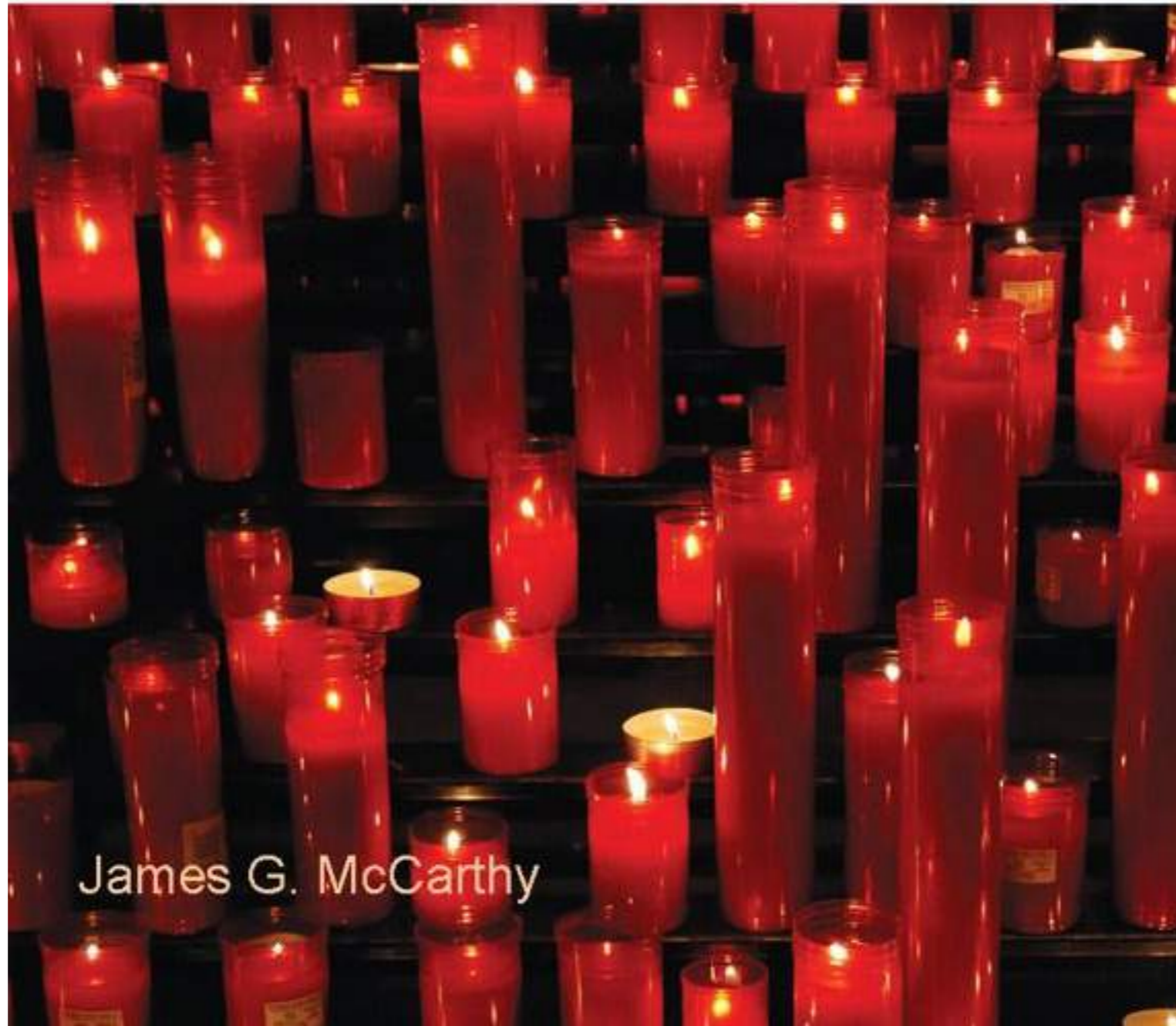


The Mass

From Mystery to Meaning



James G. McCarthy

Early Memories

I centred my white surplice on my shoulders and checked my black cassock's length. I felt like a girl in the long gown, but there could be no turning back. Mass was about to begin, and I was determined to serve as an altar boy. I reviewed my responses one last time.





My reasons for becoming an altar boy went beyond the altar boy picnic in May, the celebrated reward for those who served faithfully. I volunteered because that was what good students did at eleven years of age. I wanted my parents to be proud of me. I wanted God to think well of me. It made me feel righteous, more so than at any time since my First Holy Communion.

Father John approached and stood behind us. “Two minutes, boys.”

The other altar boy, an experienced veteran, amused himself by peering through a thin, mirrored window at the congregation. Now and again he smiled and snickered.

The priest gave the nod. The sacristan opened the heavy door to the altar. We walked out in solemn procession. I pulled the gold chain on the bell above

the doorway. The people stood.

Many years have since passed. The memories are all good: priests and nuns who cared, schoolmates as close as family, sports leagues, May Day festivals to honour the Virgin Mary, First Friday Masses, Confirmation, a first-rate education, graduation days, and a Catholic wedding. Though I am no longer Catholic, I’m grateful for my upbringing.

I left the Church when I was twenty-five. It was a difficult decision, the hardest of my life. Regardless, I still believe much of what I was taught. I believe in God —Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I believe the Apostles’ Creed. I’m just not Catholic with a capital “C.” Today I simply want to be known as a Christian. I steer clear of labels such as Catholic, Protestant, and the like. These divide Christians and deny the truth that all true Christians are united in Christ.

Eternal Life

I left the Catholic Church for two reasons. The first had to do with the Church's teaching on salvation. The Sisters of the Holy Names taught us that in order to get to heaven we had to believe in God, believe the Apostles' Creed, go to Mass, receive the sacraments—especially the Eucharist—love others as ourselves, keep



the Ten Commandments, do good works, pray the rosary, and die with no unconfessed serious sins on our souls. There may have been other things that we were supposed to do, but it doesn't matter; I couldn't even do the things I have listed. I couldn't love my neighbour as myself. I couldn't keep the Ten Commandments, not to God's standards. The truth be known, I couldn't live up to my own standards. The older I got—nineteen, twenty, twenty-one—the worse I became and the more distant I grew from God.

I started reading the Bible when I was twenty-three. From it I learned that God wasn't who I had thought him to



"What is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" (Psalm 8:4)

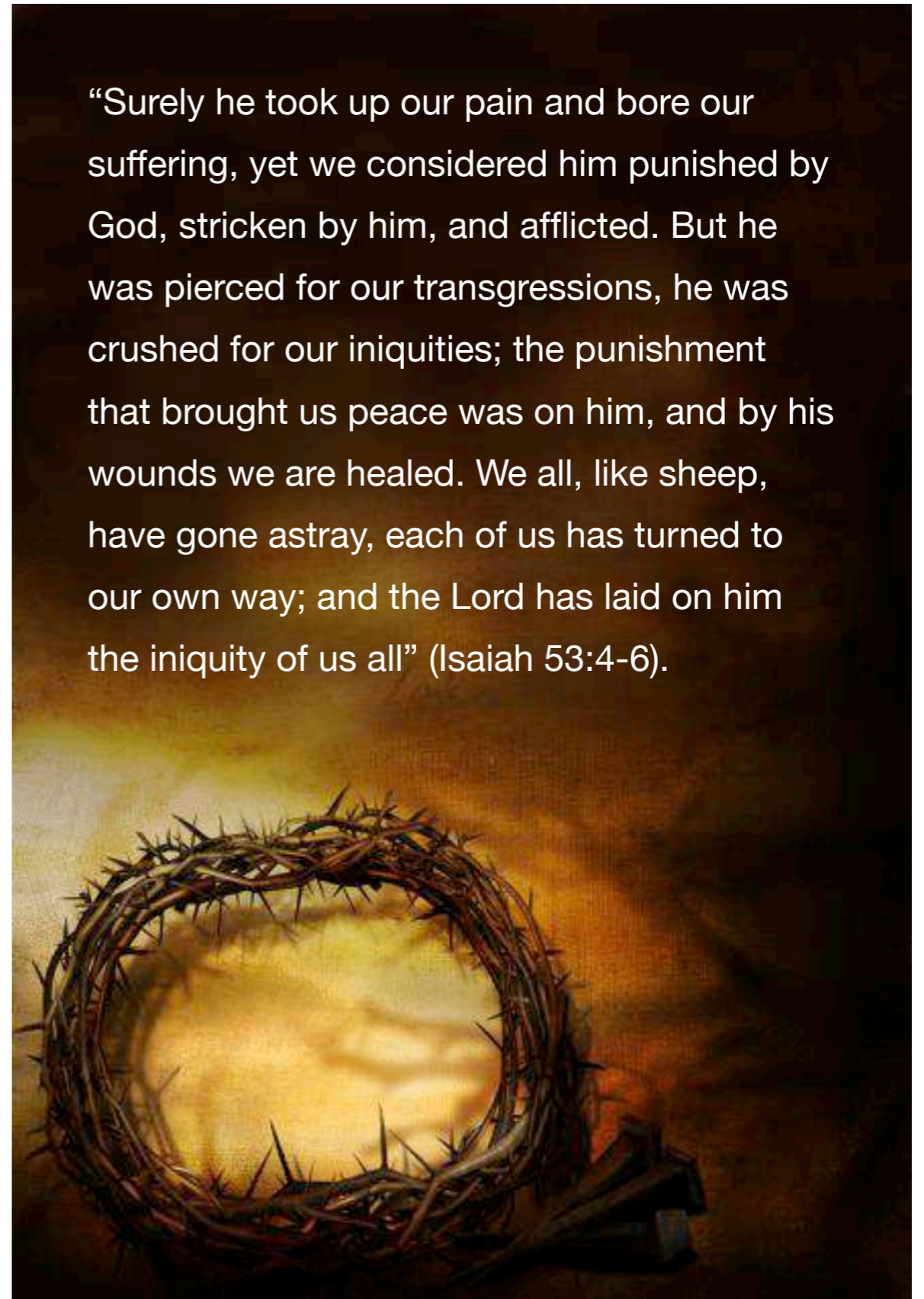
really hurts him. Because he loves us, he wants us to

be. I had pictured him as a stern and judgmental bully. He was distant and aloof, like a relative in a foreign country whom I had never met. He was hard to please, angry much of the time, cold and exacting, someone to be feared. Contrary to my conception of him, I discovered in the Bible that God is kind and patient. He is humble, gentle, and selfless. He is warm and approachable, much like the heavenly Father we hope is up in heaven watching over us. He is quick to forgive those who repent. He is gracious and merciful. If he makes a promise, he keeps it. He is an extrovert, yet sensitive and vulnerable, such that when we choose sin over obedience to him it

make good decisions. He is interested in the details of our lives. He is the Almighty, who spoke and the universe came into being, our Creator. It is right that we should honour and obey him. Nevertheless, he respects our independence. If we don't want him to be part of our lives, he lets us go our way. He doesn't push himself on us. He is honourable and noble in all things. He is also righteous and will judge sinners. He is not to be trifled with.

I also learned from the Scriptures that salvation is not based on what we do to get to heaven but on what Jesus has done for us on the cross. Peter writes, "Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Peter 3:18). Jesus said that he came "to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Shortly after I began reading the Bible, I came across the fifty-third chapter of the book of Isaiah. Written 700 years before Jesus lived, it contains twelve predictions of the coming Messiah. These convinced me that the Bible was an inspired book, for no one could have known what Isaiah knew without God's help.

"Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:4-6).





I never knew that the Father had laid the guilt of our iniquity on his Son and that he punished him in our stead. The Sisters of the Holy Names taught me that Jesus died on the cross as a sacrifice for sins, but I never heard the part about him dying as our substitute and taking the punishment that was rightly ours. Maybe they taught us that. I don't recall.

It was my own fault that I didn't understand that Christ died for me. I had had twelve years of religious instruction, eight with the Sisters and four with the Jesuit Fathers. I had plenty of opportunities to discuss salvation with my teachers, but I never did. I also had a copy of the New Testament. A family friend gave it to me for my First Communion. I still have it. It is bound in red leather. It has gilded edges with red and green ribbons to serve as bookmarks. In the opening pages, there is an excerpt from an encyclical letter written by

Pope Benedict XV, who died in 1922. In it the Pope promises to "never desist from urging the faithful to read daily the Gospels, the Acts, and the Epistles, so as to gather thence food for their souls." He quotes Saint Jerome, who said, "Ignorance of the Bible means ignorance of Christ." Pope Benedict concludes his exhortation, writing, "Our one desire for all the Church's children is that, being saturated with the Bible, they may arrive at the all-surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ." Unfortunately, I never heeded the Pope's advice. The New Testament sat idle on my bookshelf for sixteen years. As a result, I didn't know that God had promised eternal life to all who repented and placed their trust in Jesus to save them.

The Bible teaches: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal

life” (John 3:16).

“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31).

“If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved” (Romans 10:9-10).

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Romans 10:13).



Ironically, some of the clearest verses on salvation are in the first four chapters of Paul’s Letter to the Romans. You would think that as a Roman Catholic I

would have read at least that portion of the New Testament, but I didn’t. Eternal life, as far as I was concerned, was an earned reward. I didn’t know that the Bible teaches the opposite.

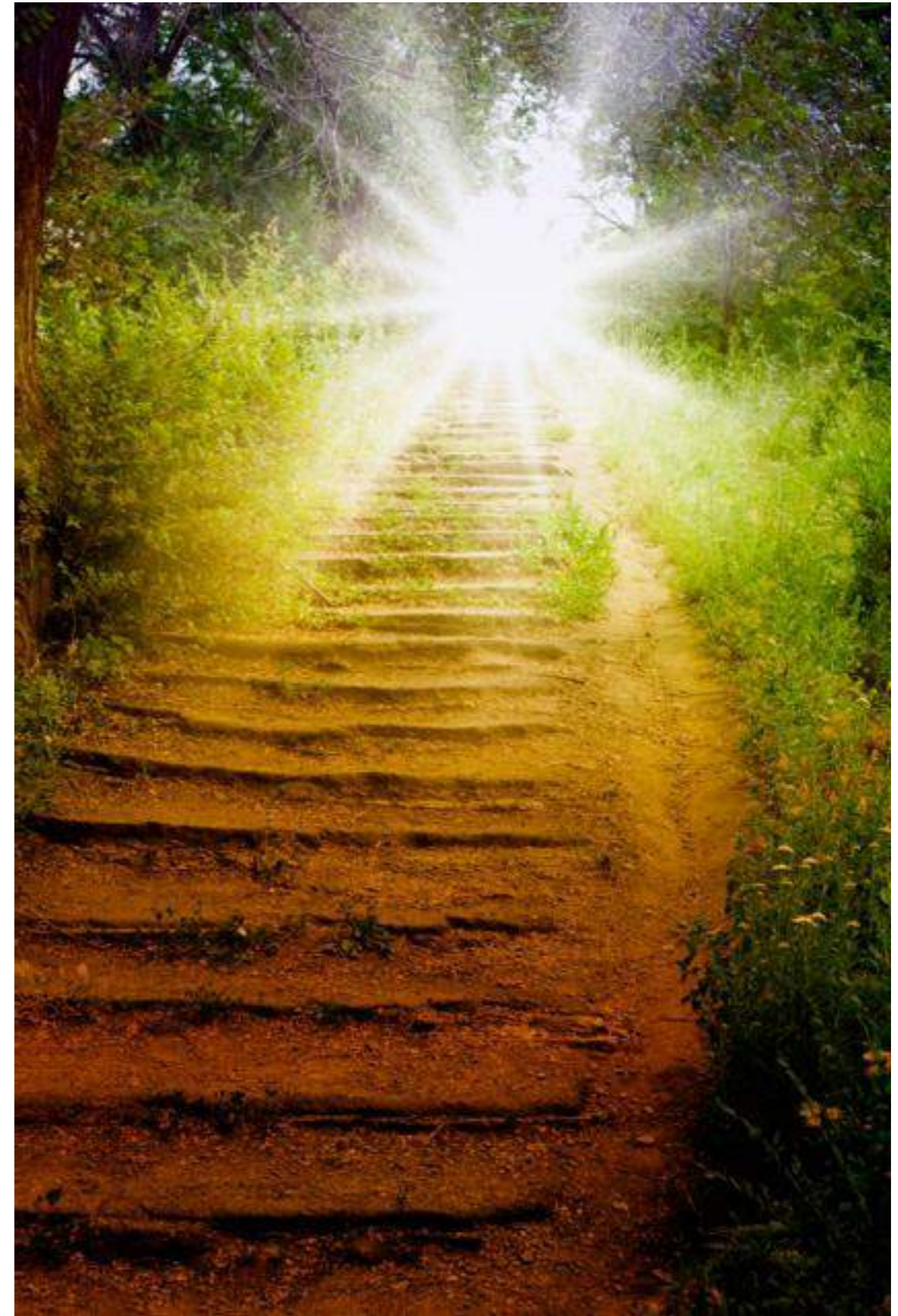
“For it is by grace you have

been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

I didn't know that eternal life was a free gift from God. To receive it, I needed to repent of my sins—that is, turn from evil and tell God that I was willing to live life his way—and place my trust in Christ to save me. Jesus taught, “Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15).

I didn't read the Bible because I didn't think that an ordinary person like me could understand it. I didn't know that it contained promises from God that anyone could read, understand, and claim for his own. For example, Jesus said, “Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24). Here the Lord promises eternal life to anyone who heeds his message and trusts in him. That person, says Christ, won't even have to show up at the final judgment. He or she passes from death to life.



Chapter 3

Worshiping God

The other reason I left the Catholic Church was the Mass. For years I attended faithfully, but I didn't understand the Sacrament of the Eucharist or the Sacrifice of the Mass. Don't get me wrong; the Sisters did a great job teaching us, but





they had an impossible task for the Mass is a mystery. Nobody understands it, and I think I know why: *It is based on a misunderstanding.* Let me explain.

At the Last Supper, the Lord took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body” (Matthew 26:26). Likewise, he took wine, gave thanks, and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:27-28). With these words, says the Catholic Church, Christ turned the bread into his body and the wine into his blood. Herein lies the problem. I think the Church misunderstood the Lord. They thought he was speaking in plain language, when in fact he was speaking in figurative language.

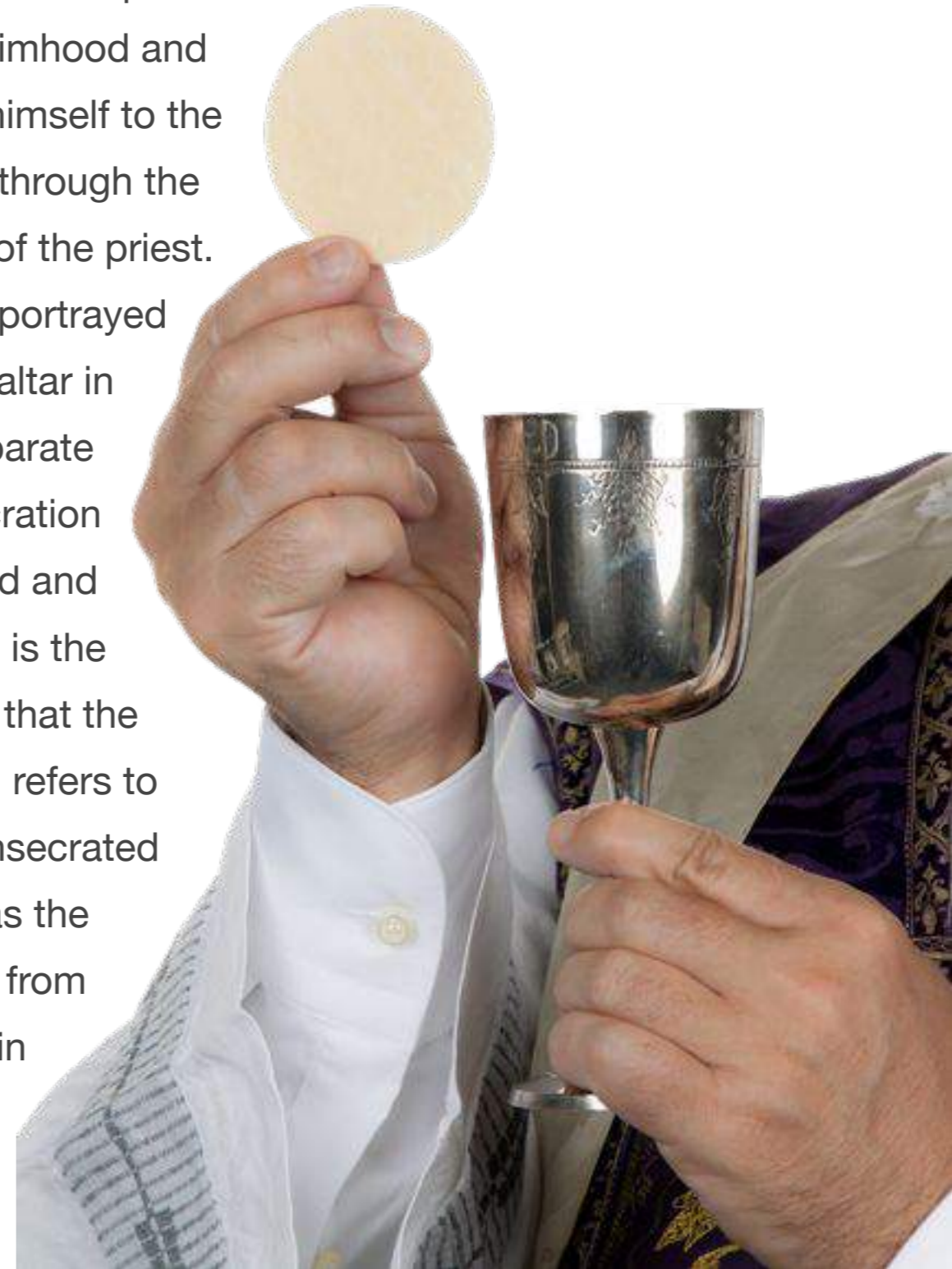
Plain language is intended to be understood in a straightforward manner. For example, if I were to say, “It’s raining hard,” I would be speaking plainly. My intended meaning would be that rain is coming down with great power and intensity.

The Church says that we should take Christ’s

words at the Last Supper as plain language. When he said, “This is my body. . . . This is my blood” (Matthew 26:26-28), he was identifying the bread as his body and the wine as his blood. According to the Church, when during the Mass the priest repeats Jesus’ words, a miracle takes place. The bread becomes Christ’s body. The wine becomes his blood. The inner essences of bread and wine change, such that they become Christ’s actual body and blood. They still look like bread and wine, but they are not. They are Christ. The Church refers to this phenomenon as *transubstantiation*. It is a mystery, says the Church, with no parallel in science or nature. Catholics must accept it by faith.

The Church says that the bread and wine change into the body and blood of Christ so that he can be present on the altar and worshiped with supreme adoration. Those receiving Communion take Christ’s body and blood into their bodies. This connection with Christ is essential for spiritual life, central to Catholic experience, and important for salvation.

The Church teaches that the Sacrifice of the Mass is more than a commemoration of Christ’s crucifixion; it *is* Christ’s crucifixion. This also is a mystery. On the altar, Jesus is present in his victimhood and offers himself to the Father through the hands of the priest. This is portrayed on the altar in the separate consecration of bread and wine. It is the reason that the Church refers to the consecrated wafer as the “host,” from the Latin *hostia*,



meaning *victim*.

The Mass, says the Church, is a real sacrifice, but an “unbloody” one. At each Mass, Christ is immolated or offered as a victim. That is why the Sacrifice of the Mass is performed on an altar, a place of sacrifice. The



Mass makes satisfaction for the sins of the living and the dead. The Second Vatican Council affirmed this, stating that at each Mass “the work of our redemption

is carried out.” This is why priests commonly say the Mass for someone who is dead. It is believed that the Mass speeds the person’s release from purgatory.

Another way of looking at Jesus’ words at the Last Supper is in their figurative sense. Figurative language usually describes something by comparing it with something else. For example, if I were to say, “It’s raining cats and dogs,” I would be saying that it is raining hard. Figurative language can take the form of a simile, metaphor, idiom, or other figure of speech.

Many Christians interpret Jesus’ words at the Last Supper in their figurative sense. As they see it, when Jesus said, “This is my body,” he was saying that the bread *represented* his body. When he said, “This is my blood,” he was saying that the wine *represented* his blood. When Jesus told his disciples, “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19), he was instructing them to use bread and wine as emblems of his body and blood to remember him. An emblem is a symbolic representation of

something, usually something that it resembles. Bread is soft and pliable, much like flesh. Wine is a red liquid that resembles blood.

We should always try to make sense of a passage by interpreting it as plain language. Only if the plain sense doesn't make sense should we consider the figurative sense. An exception to this principle would be a text that is introduced as figurative language. For example, Jesus' story about the wheat and the tares is introduced with the words, "Jesus told them another parable" (Matthew 13:24). From this we know that the passage that follows is a parable, a story with symbolic meaning. Since Jesus does not introduce his words at the Last Supper



about the bread and wine with such an introduction, we should first consider their plain sense.

Significantly, though the Catholic Church follows this principle and takes Jesus' words as plain language, it readily admits that the interpretation that results doesn't make sense. It is a mystery, a "mystical reality," whose meaning is apparent neither to the senses nor the intellect. No one can explain it, not even the Church. This being the case, it would seem reasonable to consider the figurative sense of Jesus' words.

The English verb "is" — as in, "This is my body" — is a form of the verb *to be*. It has three meanings. First, it is used to express existence: *I think,*

therefore I am. Second, it is used to talk about something that occurs: *Christmas is on Sunday this year.* Third, it connects a subject to that which is said about it: *God is love.* This third use of the verb can communicate that two things are to be identified together or that the second represents the first. For example, a young man showing his new car to his family might gesture toward it and proudly announce, “This is my car.” Here he would be using the verb “is” to *identify* the vehicle before them as his car. He would be using plain



language. That same young man later that day might have the sad task of explaining to his father how he had wrecked his new car. Arranging plates and utensils on the dinner table to represent the accident scene, he might pick up a spoon and say, “This is my car.” Here he would be using the verb to communicate that the spoon *represents* his car. He would be using figurative language.

I think Jesus intended his words at the Last Supper to be understood as figurative language. He was saying that the bread and wine represented his body and blood. He was asking his disciples to use bread and wine to remember him, that is, to call to mind what he had done for them and to give thanks to his holy name. The result is a simple form of worship that makes sense.

The figurative interpretation of Jesus’ words at the Last Supper is supported by the fact that Jesus often used figurative language when teaching. The Gospel According to John, for example, contains a record of seven figurative statements that Jesus

made about himself. Each uses the same verb translated “is” in the original Greek text of Jesus’ words, “This is my body.” The Lord said:

- “I am the bread of life” (John 6:48).
- “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12).
- “I am the gate” (John 10:9).
- “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11).
- “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25).
- “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6).
- “I am the true vine” (John 15:1).

Each of these is a figurative statement. Jesus spoke the last two the night of the Last Supper in the Upper Room. At other times, the Lord referred to his body as a temple (John 2:19). He spoke of new life as living water (John 4:10), his disciples as salt (Matthew 5:13), and the Pharisees’ teaching as leaven (Matthew 16:6). John’s account of Jesus’ teaching at the Last Supper as recorded in the Gospel of John, chapters 13 to 17, reveals that he used figurative speech throughout the evening. Jesus referred to the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood” (1

Corinthians 11:25). The cup was not the covenant but representative of it. The passage continues: “For



whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26). We are not to drink the “cup” are we? Of course not. Jesus is referring figuratively to the wine inside the cup. Note also that Jesus refers to the

substance eaten as “this bread,” not as a host or as his body. In the Gospel of Mark, after Jesus said, “This is my blood,” he referred to the substance as the “fruit of the vine” (Mark 14:25), that is, wine. He wouldn’t have done that if he wanted us to believe that the bread and wine had changed and had become his body and blood.

The figurative interpretation of Jesus’ words makes sense; the plain interpretation does not. The plain interpretation results in a form of worship in which Christians adore a bread wafer as if it were God. Is this not idolatry? Some might answer, *It is not idolatry because the object adored is God.* I understand this viewpoint, but the same argument can be used to justify all forms of idol worship, for the dividing line between the idol and the deity represented by the idol is never distinct.

God will not inhabit an object or become an object and ask us to worship it, for he cannot contradict himself.

- The Ten Commandments state: “You shall not make



for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God” (Exodus 20:4-5). Here God prohibits the worship of objects, even those said to represent him. The command rules out the worship of “an image in the form of anything in heaven.” The Eucharist is an image of Christ in heaven. As defined by the Catholic Church, it is the Son of God under the appearances of bread and wine.

- When Moses was on Mount Sinai, the Jewish people constructed a calf of molten gold. Aaron, the high priest, declared, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt” (Exodus 32:4, NAS). Though the image was meant to direct worship toward God, it angered God for it misrepresented his true spiritual nature and divine attributes. No object can truly represent him. For this reason, he does not want us to have objects of worship.
- God solemnly vowed never to present himself in an inanimate object that we might worship him thereby. “I am the Lord, that is my name; I will not give my glory to another, nor my



- praise to graven images” (Isaiah 42:8, NAS). The next time you receive Communion look at the host. It is a graven image. Engraved into it is a cross, a lamb, rays of light, the letters IHS, or a combination of these. God has told us that he will never give his glory to such an image.
- Jesus taught, “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24, NAS). To worship God “in spirit,” we must connect with him on the spiritual level, his spirit and our spirits interacting. Making the focus of our worship physical objects, such as bread and wine, detracts from this. It is not an aid to true worship; it is a distraction.

The Church's interpretation of Jesus' words results not only in the adoration of an object as divine but also in a form of worship that denies the sufficiency and perfection of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. As he died, the Lord proclaimed, "It is finished" (John 19:30). His work of salvation was done, complete, perfect. "He bowed his head and gave up his spirit" (John 19:30). The Bible says, "Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin" (Hebrews 10:18, NAS). Why then is there a need for the ongoing Sacrifice of the Mass with some 120 million being offered each year? Shouldn't Christians be celebrating Christ's finished work? Shouldn't we be exalting him in his glory enthroned in heaven, rather than offering him in his victimhood on an altar?

Our worship should be expressive of our faith. If we believe that Christ died for us, rose again, and is ascended on high, never to die again, then we should celebrate that in our worship. If, on the other hand, we believe that priests must perform the Sacrifice of the

Mass to carry out our redemption, that this helps poor souls in purgatory escape the cleansing fires, then the



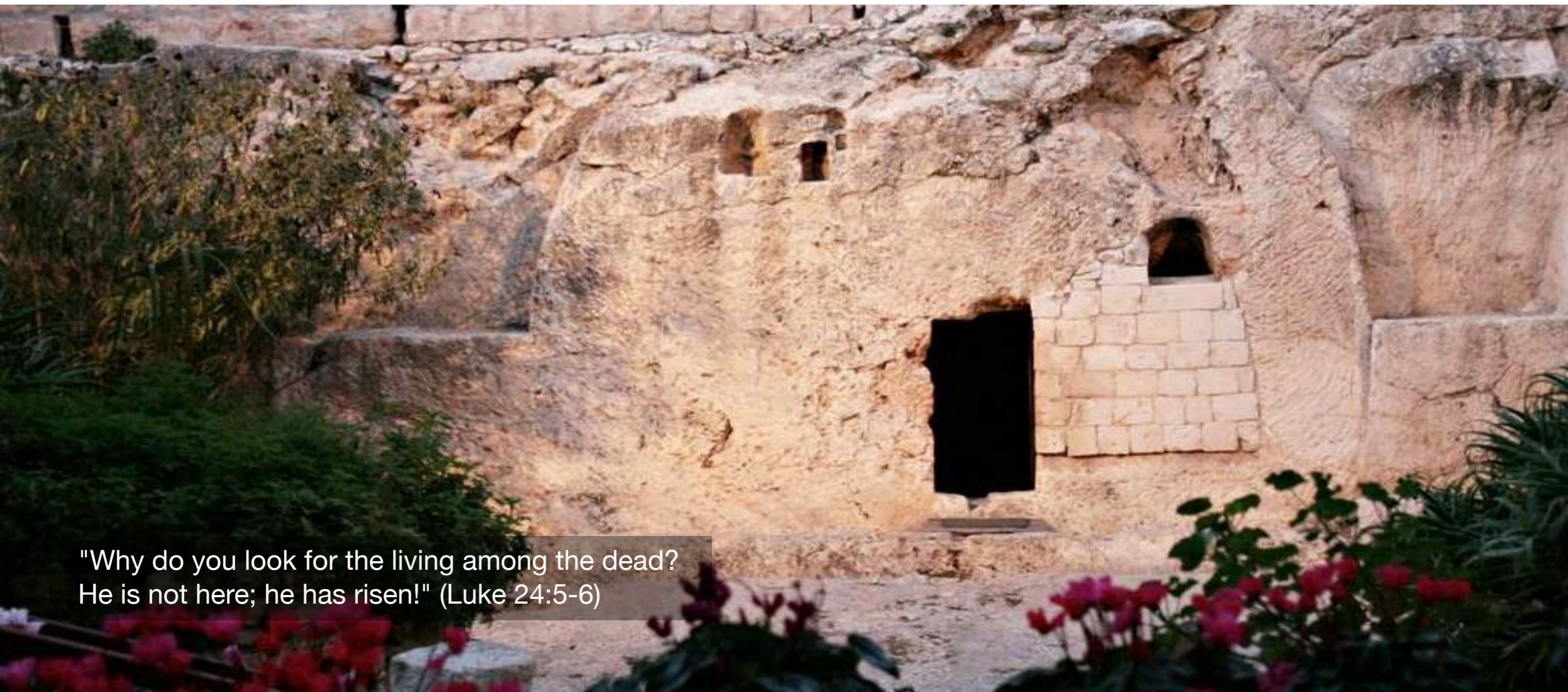
Mass is the appropriate form of worship.

I believe the sacrifice is over. Jesus said, "It is finished" (John 19:30). That is good enough for me. I

testify to this belief each Sunday in my worship. “For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him” (Romans 6:9). My worship is an expression of this belief.

Context is the key to a correct interpretation. This means that in order to interpret a statement correctly,

we must understand it in the setting in which it was made. The biblical accounts of the Last Supper are recorded in Matthew 26:17-30, Mark 14:12-25, Luke 22:7-38, John 13:1-17:26, and 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. These provide the background for the correct interpretation of Jesus’ words about the bread and wine.



"Why do you look for the living among the dead?
He is not here; he has risen!" (Luke 24:5-6)

Jesus' Teaching in Galilee

As strange as it may sound, the Catholic Church does not base its interpretation of Jesus' words at the Last Supper on the context of the Last Supper. Instead, it looks to an event that occurred earlier in Galilee. It is recorded in John 6:22-71.

Mountain River, Galilee, Israel



There Jesus has an extended discussion with a group of Jewish men, most of whom were unbelieving. It occurred in the synagogue in Capernaum at Passover time, one year before the Last Supper. According to the Catholic Church, on that occasion Jesus promised to give the Church a heavenly food. He said, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world” (John 6:51). The bread that Christ promised to give, says the Church, is the Eucharist. It would be essential for spiritual life. This is what Jesus meant, says the Church, when he said:

“Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day” (John 6:53-54).

If one looks at the context of these verses, however, a different interpretation presents itself. John 6 begins with the miraculous feeding of five thousand

people at the Sea of Galilee (John 6:1-14). The next day a group of Jewish men who had witnessed the miracle came to Capernaum looking for Jesus (John 6:22-25). Jesus confronted them, telling them that they were following him for the wrong reasons. “Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill” (John 6:26). Jesus had something better to offer them. “Do not work for food that spoils,” he told them, “but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God



the Father has placed his seal of approval” (John 6:27). Here Jesus introduces a metaphor into the discussion. Since these men wanted another free meal, Jesus described his offer in terms of food, not



Ruins of the ancient synagogue of Capernaum on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee.

ordinary nourishment, but “food that endures to eternal life” (John 6:27). The men assumed that they would need to do some great virtuous act to earn this enduring food. They asked, “What must we do to do

the works God requires?” (John 6:28). Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent” (John 6:29). What they needed to do was to place their trust in Jesus as the one sent from

God. The men replied with a challenge. “What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do?” (John 6:30).

Their response makes two things clear. First, they understood that Jesus was asking them to believe that he was the Messiah for whom the Jews had been waiting. Second, they did not believe that he was the Messiah.

Although they had witnessed a remarkable miracle the previous day, they wanted more proof, another sign.

They even went so far as to suggest that Jesus bring down manna from heaven (John 6:31).

Once again, Jesus tied his response to their words. These Jewish men knew that manna had been



“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people” (Matthew 4:23).

essential to Israel’s physical survival in the wilderness. Since Jesus was trying to get them to understand that he was essential to their spiritual survival, he replied, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:35). In other words, those who put their trust in Jesus would be spiritually satisfied forever. As the discussion intensified, the Lord pressed his analogy. “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world” (John 6:51). Here Jesus foretells his death on the cross. He will give his life for the sins of the world.

When Jesus promised, “Whoever eats this bread will live forever” (John 6:51), he was not speaking of literal bread, but was teaching that he himself was the source of eternal life. Sinners needed to trust him to be saved. He stated this truth in plain language, saying, “Very truly I tell you, the one who believes has eternal life” (John 6:47). He also stated this truth in figurative

language, saying, “I am the bread of life” (John 6:48). This plain and figurative expression of the same truth can also be seen in the similar construction of John 6:40 and John 6:54, as the table below demonstrates.

Stated in Plain Language John 6:40	Stated in Figurative Language John 6:54
For my Father’s will is that	
everyone who	Whoever
looks to the Son	eats my flesh
and	and
believes in him	drinks my blood
shall have eternal life,	has eternal life,
and	and
I will raise them up	I will raise them up
at the last day.	at the last day.

These two verses contain elements of parallelism, the chief feature of Hebrew poetry. Unlike Western poetry in which there is often a correspondence of sound in the final syllables of words, Hebrew poetry

“rhymes” with ideas. The second line corresponds to the first line, restating it in different but equivalent terms. We see a hint of this in John 6:40. “Looks to the Son” corresponds with “believes in him.” We see it also in John 6:54. “Eats my flesh” corresponds with “drinks my blood.” Notice that the two actions of John 6:40, “looks” and “believes,” have the same result as the two actions of John 6:54, “eats” and “drinks.” Each results in the reception of “eternal life” and the promise that Jesus “will raise them up at the last day.”

What does this mean for us? It means that Jesus does not list four requirements that we must meet in order to have eternal life—“looks,” “believes,” “eats,” and “drinks.” He lists one and states it in four ways. Failing to see this, the Catholic Church teaches that it is not enough to believe in Christ for salvation; we must also partake of the sacrament of the Eucharist. We must believe and eat.

The Church insists that its interpretation is correct and points to the fact that Jesus’ listeners thought that he was speaking about eating his actual flesh. They




Jesus said: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24).

grumbled amongst themselves and asked, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (John 6:52). They said, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” (John 6:60). Since Jesus did not correct them on this crucial point, says the Church, it is clear that they understood him correctly.

There is some merit to this argument. It is true that many of Jesus’ listeners thought that he was asking them to eat his flesh. This does not prove, however, that they understood him correctly. People, including Christ’s disciples, regularly misunderstood him. Often

it was because they thought that he was using plain language when in fact he was using figurative language. For example, when Jesus referred to his crucifixion and resurrection, saying, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (John 2:19), the ruling Jews thought that he was talking about the temple in Jerusalem. When he spoke of spiritual rebirth, saying, “No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again” (John 3:3), Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, was dumbfounded. “How can someone be born when they are old?”



Mt. Arbel, Israel, looking toward Capernaum on the distant shore of the Sea of Galilee. Migdal, the traditional birthplace of Mary Magdalene, is in the foreground.

Nicodemus asked. ‘Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!’” (John 3:4).

When Jesus referred to false teaching as the “the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matthew

16:6), his disciples thought that he was scolding them for not bringing bread on their journey.

When he spoke of new life as “living water” (John 4:10),

the woman with whom he was speaking asked to see his bucket.

The claim that Jesus made no attempt in

John 6:22-71 to correct his listeners’ interpretation is inaccurate. John writes:

“Aware that his disciples were grumbling about

this, Jesus said to them, ‘Does this offend you? Then what if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they are full

of the Spirit and life” (John 6:61-63).

Many disciples deserted Jesus that day. When they did, he turned to his twelve Apostles and said, “You do not want to leave too, do you?” (John 6:67).

Peter was the first to reply. “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words

of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:68-69). At least Peter understood that eternal life was through



believing in Christ.

Though Jesus refers to bread in John 6, we should not read the Last Supper into this chapter. The two events are distinct. Jesus' teaching in Capernaum's synagogue as recorded in John 6 took place in the spring of 29 AD. He was speaking to unbelieving Jews. Jesus' topic was eternal life. He used bread to illustrate that he was the one sent from the Father, the source of life (John 6:32-35), and the Saviour of the world (John 6:51). His purpose was to illustrate the need for all to place their faith in him for salvation.

The Last Supper occurred



in the spring of 30 AD. Jesus was in Jerusalem in the Upper Room with his true disciples. Judas had left the room. Jesus used bread to represent his body and wine to represent his blood. His purpose was to institute a memorial meal by which his disciples might honour him by calling to mind what he would do for them on the cross the next day.

There is no justification for linking these two events, Capernaum in 29 AD and the Last Supper in 30 AD, so as to use the context of one to interpret the other. Their locations, times, topics, and audiences are different.

Chapter 5

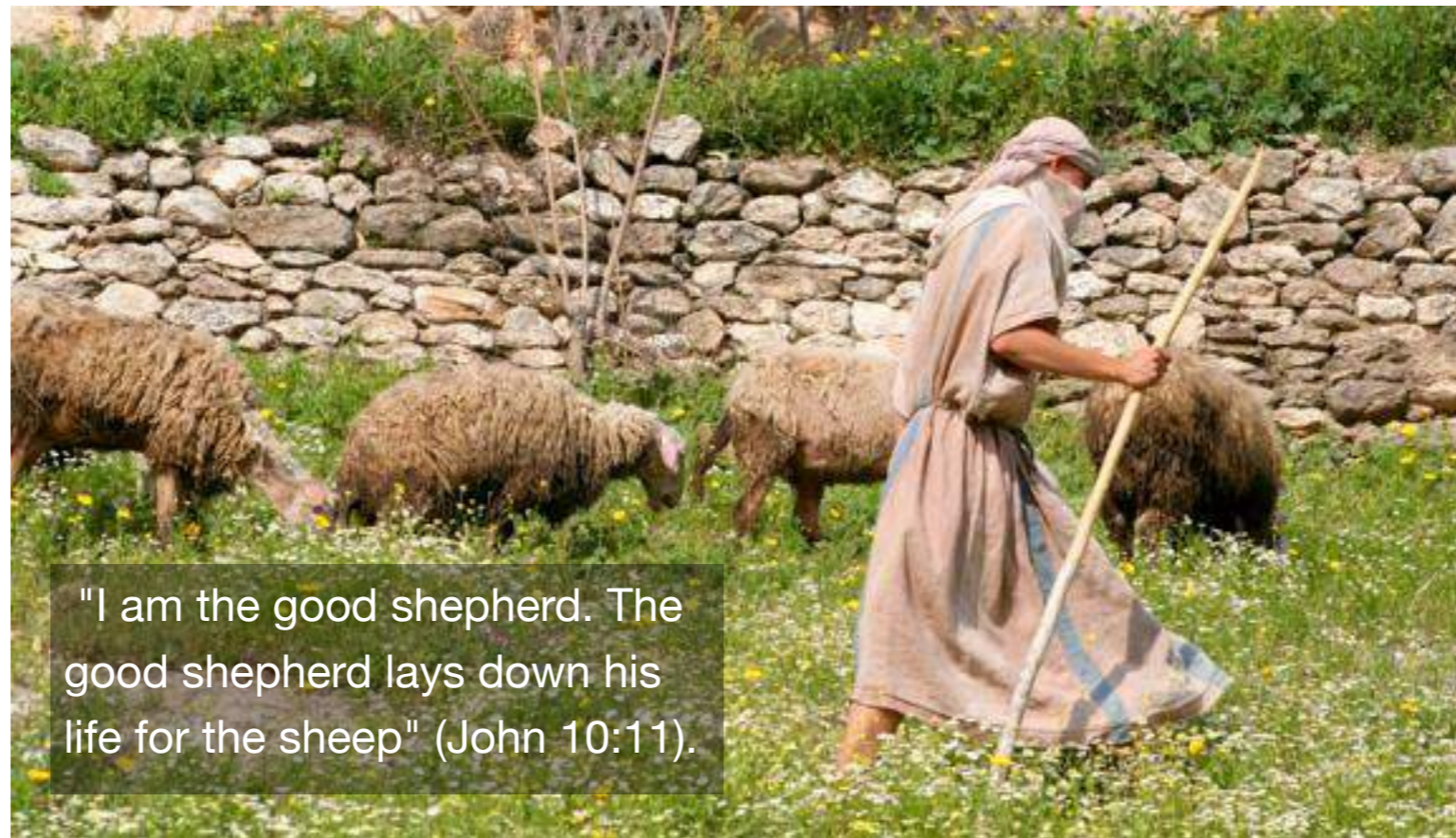
“Do this in remembrance of me.”

Some may think that the figurative interpretation of Jesus' words at the Last Supper would result in a form of worship that is too commonplace to be meaningful. The bread is just bread. The wine is just wine. Yet, those who have experienced such worship know it to be profound. Possibly it is something that must be experienced to be appreciated.



I remember the first time some friends invited me to join them to remember Christ with bread and wine. I was still a Catholic, so I agreed to attend but only to observe.

We sat in a circle, some sixty adults and a few children. A loaf of bread and a cup of wine were on a small table in the centre of the group. Someone introduced a hymn and the group lifted up their voices in heartfelt worship. A man stood and thanked God for saving him. An elderly gentleman read John's account of Jesus' crucifixion. He read it slowly and thoughtfully. Another man stood and spoke with affection about God's grace in saving us. The meeting continued in



this manner, one person and then another praising God. It drew me back to Calvary, where Christ had been crucified. I found myself thanking the Father for

sending his Son to die for me.

At first I felt uncomfortable seeing several men take the role that the priest alone held at Mass. Yet, it all seemed natural and glorifying to God. The Apostle Peter told the early Christians that they

were all priests. "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). Could this be what Peter had meant?

My eyes went to the table. How different from an altar, a place of sacrifice. A table is where we spend time with family and friends. It's where we enjoy meals together. How fitting for Christians to gather in spiritual communion with God around a table, even as Christ had done with his disciples at the Last Supper.

The meeting continued in this manner for forty minutes. There was no written liturgy to direct those who spoke. Apparently, each person was looking to the Holy Spirit to guide the worship.



One man gave thanks for the loaf and broke it.

The group passed the bread one to another, each taking a portion, then bowing in silent adoration. Another person gave thanks for the wine and passed it also among the group.

The worship was meaningful

and elegant in its simplicity. It convinced me that this was the fulfilment of the Lord's request on the night when he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19).



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