

All of us are aware of the presence of evil in the world. But as Christians, we are also aware that we have a God who is not passive in the face of evil, but does something about it. The challenge for us though as Catholics is to remember this truth, and to allow God's love to transform us so that we can in turn transform the world rather than sit on the sidelines. And throughout our 2000 year history as a Church, we've celebrated Mass where two worlds come together; heaven and earth; and seen through the Mass how this encounter changes people in so many ways, responding to evil with not just words but actions.

A man whose life was a testament to this was a parish priest who gave his life while celebrating Mass just a few years ago. But his whole life was a true testament to living out what he celebrated every day in the holy Mass.

Between November 2015 and July 2016, France was rocked by a series of terrorist attacks. The most deadly involved the murder of 130 people in Paris by jihadist suicide-bombers and gunmen on the night of November 15, 2015. Eight months later, 86 people died when a jihadist drove a truck down Nice's famous Promenade des Anglais.

For many people inside and outside France, however, the incident they remember most vividly from that terrible time was the killing of an 85 year-old Catholic priest by two jihadists at the end of Mass in L'Église Saint-Étienne in the Norman town of Saint-Étienne-du-Rouvray on July 26, 2016.

After entering the church armed with knives, Adel Kermiche and Abdel Malik Petitjean subjected Father Jacques Hamel, three nuns and two lay people to an anti-Christian tirade, shouting in French "You, the Christians, we will do away with you!". They then forced Father Hamel to his knees before the altar and cut his throat while yelling "Allahu akbar!"

The emotional shockwave throughout France was so great that even hardened secularists expressed their horror that a priest had been cut down during Mass. Gone was the secularism usually employed by many French politicians whenever speaking about religion. Somehow Father Hamel's murder had struck at France's soul.

But who was Fr. Jacques Hamel? How did he live his 58 years of priesthood before his life suddenly came to an end in the summer of 2016?

Who was the otherwise unknown country “curé” now described by some as twenty-first century Europe’s first Christian martyr?

The answer is that his was a life lived out in service to those entrusted to his care long before his violent death. Of becoming if you will what it is he offered at Mass.

Born in 1930 in the town of Darnétal, his roots were firmly working-class. That translated into considerable economic challenges.

His early family life also wasn’t all that stable. His parents divorced when he was young. This was a time in which divorce carried a powerful social stigma in Catholic and secular France. His younger sister Roselyne recalls how other children were told to avoid contact with them. When Hamel was ordained a priest in 1958, his mother Jeanne hid herself behind a church pillar.

Jeanne Hamel his mother made a living as a weaver. It was barely enough to provide for basic needs. Economic adversity didn’t prevent her, however,

from regularly cleaning her local parish church or preparing meals for the nuns who lived opposite their house.

The accepting character of Jeanne's witness plainly left its mark on her son, Jacques.

He was known as very faithful to the Church, even when he'd be challenged by changes such as those at Vatican II; as the priest who he was filling in for the day of his death said when the Magisterium decreed something, that was enough for Fr. Hamel. He was also known as a timid man.

Physical ailments compounded his early struggles. He had wanted to be a missionary. His health struggles, however, ruled that out.

He did have a particular devotion to Blessed Charles de Foucauld—the aristocratic army officer and explorer who, after losing his way a bit in life, had a profound conversion, became a priest, and lived among the Tuareg people in southern Algeria. Foucauld was shot dead by Muslim bandits in 1916. Later in life, Hamel spoke often of the beheading in 1996, most likely

by the Groupe Islamique Armé, of the Cistercian monks of Tibhirine in Algeria who were immortalized by the 2010 film *Of Gods and Men*.

That he might meet a similar fate didn't apparently cross Hamel's mind. Yet he was deeply conscious of the power of evil and people's capacity to inflict suffering on each other. Like most young Frenchmen in the 1950s, Hamel spent time as an army conscript in French Algeria. There he witnessed the sheer savagery of the Algerian War on more than one occasion. It left a deep impression on Hamel, especially after he narrowly missed being gunned down by Algerian nationalists.

Man's capacity for evil wasn't something which preoccupied Fr. Hamel. But Fr. Hamel firmly believed that Satan is alive and roaming the earth. The night before his death, Hamel told some family members that those who invoked the name of God to engage in terrorism like that witnessed in Paris and Nice were "men without souls, nor faith, nor law."

Such reflections never turned, however, into personal enmity towards those of other faiths. For all the deep theological differences between Christianity and Islam, Hamel enjoyed good relations with local Muslims. The same

goes for non-believers. Saint-Étienne-du-Rouvray's Communist mayor wept in public when announcing Fr. Hamel's murder to the world.

Hamel's ability to form connections with people with whom he disagreed was emblematic of his whole way of being a priest. His sheer "ordinariness" helped him to enter into his parishioners' everyday lives in unspectacular rural and provincial settings.

As one of his fellow priests related, Hamel wasn't at all charismatic. He was clumsy and occasionally cantankerous. He rarely said much at diocesan clergy meetings. Nonetheless, Hamel had "the genius of being fully present, without making waves, [and] he knew how to gauge the temperature of the people who had been entrusted to him." Even in those tense situations with which every priest is familiar, Hamel was very adaptable, making sure that he listened to what was being said. Many bright and personable clergy struggle their entire lives to acquire those qualities.

Above all, though, Fr. Hamel was unusually focused on fulfilling the most fundamental tasks of any priest. Every week, Hamel took his time to

handwrite not just his Sunday homilies but also homilies for the countless baptisms, marriages, and funerals at which he presided. About 500 of these notes, which Hamel composed with the Scriptures open before him, have been found.

His homilies reflect a determination to convey the Gospel in clear, simple and fresh ways. To all who would listen, Hamel's constant refrain was that everyone's vocation was holiness. "Don't be afraid," he often proclaimed, "of sanctity!"

This meticulousness about performing any priest's most important responsibilities to the best of his ability extended into the rest of Hamel's life. His family often remarked that nothing could distract him from reading his breviary at the prescribed times each day, no matter how distracting the surroundings.

Such thoroughness meant that Hamel saw himself as perpetually on call. Whether it was hearing the confessions of the dying in hospitals, visiting the elderly and sick, or helping troubled individuals who knocked at the

door asking for money, Hamel always responded. He simply didn't know, another priest told Isnard, "how to say no."

Even after Hamel stepped down from his position as parish priest at the official retirement age of 75, it wasn't uncommon for Hamel to preside at several funerals a week, not to mention many baptisms and marriages.

When asked why he didn't slow down, Hamel gave the same reply: "I made a vow of obedience and I will go on to the end."

The most important part of Hamel's life was the Mass. Its importance to him was such that the normally-reserved Hamel made it known that he didn't appreciate any indication that Mass wasn't being taken seriously. Bad choral music visibly frustrated him. He firmly believed that the Eucharist was Christ's Body and Blood and wouldn't hide his annoyance whenever the host was treated casually.

The seriousness with which Hamel treated Mass was central to his constant effort to live in God's presence, day after day, no matter the situation in which he found himself. It was central to what he understood every priest's calling to be: an alter Christus. As Roselyne Hamel says:

The older he aged, the more he was transformed at the moment of the consecration of the Eucharist . . . and the more he aged, the more it was the Passion of Christ that he lived.

On that warm July day, Jacques Hamel was called to live out his own Passion. His biographer relates that Hamel's affectionate nickname among the clergy of the archdiocese of Rouen was "le mouton" [the sheep]. And the sheep's last words before he was slaughtered by jihadists were "Va-t en, Satan!"

That's a standard French rendering of the words in Matthew's Gospel's 4:10: "Away from me, Satan!" And you can be sure that Hamel knew by heart the rest of this verse. This records Christ telling the Devil, "For it is written: 'Worship the Lord Your God, and serve Him only!'"

In the last seconds of his life in this world, Father Hamel recalled the words of power spoken by Christ in the face of the Evil One. Perishing as he did, literally in the shadow of a cross and before the altar, le mouton shed his blood in imitatione Christi.

The shy, often awkward man whose killing shook France died in a way familiar to those missionaries whose ranks Hamel had wanted to join as a young man. But he also perished in a manner which paralleled Christ's death as the Lamb of God who takes away our sins.

We'll hopefully see him formally canonized as a saint for the ordinary, the unglamorous, the unseen, and the truly humble who pass unknown among us every single day but whose holiness illuminates the world.

His story is one in a long line of people who have given their lives for the sake of the Eucharist, but also been completely transformed by what they received. So what about us?

The sad truth is many Catholics don't fully believe in what we call the "Real Presence" of Jesus in the Eucharist. But this is why we call Mass a Mass; not a service or a meeting. We hear the Word of God; we sing songs; we pray; but we also receive Jesus Himself. Jesus institutes the Eucharist, but He also tells us to do this in remembrance of Him. Jesus says in John 6:53-54, "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man

and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.” In the Old Testament, animal sacrifice was common; the animal offered as a sacrifice to God because blood contained life in it. Animals were offered in the Jewish temple; symbolically a scapegoat was sent into the desert to die each year at Yom Kippur bearing the sins of the people. Blood is sprinkled on the people by Moses in the first reading as a way of showing this exchange of life between God and humanity.

But what does Jesus do? He is far greater than any animal. He offers Himself; God giving Himself to us all out of love. As we are told in the second reading from Hebrews: “When Christ came as high priest of the good things that have come to be, passing through the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made by hands, that is, not belonging to this creation, he entered once for all into the sanctuary, not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.” His sacrifice on the Cross gives us the Eucharist, and the Eucharist is not just a symbol like the sprinkled blood in the Old Testament

but the actual Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ. As such, this brings us closer to Christ, but it's also meant to effect a change within us.

As for that first part, thinking of what God does for us, it's again and again important to remember how much God loves us. Sometimes life beats us up, or like Fr. Hamel's mother Jeanne, we can have undue shame about something due to how society looks at it, or how family or others can be so quick to judge seeing the splinter in our eye but not the wooden beam in their own. With our Lord, we don't have to hide behind a pillar as she did at her sons ordination or behind the shrubs like Adam and Eve. In a well known icon of Jesus going into hell to pull out Adam and welcome him to heaven, this is the response of our God to evil - to liberate and set us free. So hopefully we, too, can be set free, and remember when we come up for Communion, Jesus is meeting us where we are at. The Eucharist brings us God's love and removes sin as well.

But with that, we also need to make sure we never take the Eucharist for granted. Much went into First Communion when we were younger. But sometimes we don't think about the importance of the encounter with our Lord as much as we should. To be fair, sometimes we have a lot on our

mind at Mass. But when we take the time to reflect on the encounter, it gives us a chance to look at the fruits the Eucharist can bring to us.

Within ourselves, the Eucharist brings healing. In Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus says “come to me and I will give you rest.” The Eucharist is also food for our journey. Saint Paul says “Put on the mind of Christ” and then says “You have the mind of Christ.” After receiving Communion we have a clearer mind for going into battle against evil in the day or week ahead. We’ll still face temptations, but the Eucharist gives us greater strength to fight them.

Jesus also gives us energy. Fr. Hamel was a busy man, as his friend said “he couldn’t say no” so he was working tirelessly to help others. We face the busyness of family life, of work, of volunteering. What fuel is to a car, Eucharist is to the soul so we can face our homework, our household chores, our family obligations and do them with a good attitude.

The Eucharist is also healing for us to give us power and strength to face the struggles of life we are going through. Jesus helps us to bear our cross. This is Jesus being faithful to His promise that we heard at least week’s Mass: “I am with you always” in Matthew 28:20 and “I will not leave you

orphans” in John 14:18. Life is a journey, and we do not travel it alone.

Jesus is our companion when the road is smooth but also when it is rocky and when we go through the dark valley.

And with respect to others, it’s also worth looking at how does the Eucharist impact how I relate to other people? Consider how Fr. Hamel lived peacefully with others and was a man of peace, having Muslim friends and atheist friends. The Eucharist should bring about a transformation within us. Think of Saint Paul in Galatians 2:20, “I live no longer I, but Christ lives in me.” If Jesus is loving, truthful, generous, merciful, self-sacrificing and obedient to the Father, the Eucharist helps us to do these things too. To return to Fr. Hamel he trusted in the guidance of the Church; how about us or are we stubborn and fancy ourselves to be the pope or one who determines moral teaching? How about generosity? Are we generous with our time and helping others? How about communion with the community? Communion places a person in fellowship with others in the family of God. How do we look at others in the parish or in our family or place of work? How do we look at those of a different race or culture or religion? Fr. Hamel’s daily encounter with Jesus helped increase his solidarity with

others. The Eucharist helps us to see others less through the clouded vision of original sin but as Jesus does.

Earlier this week, the Archbishop announced that in our archdiocese, Mass will become obligatory again starting July 1. Even with that there are of course exceptions; one need not go of course if ill, if helping tend to sick people in the family, if they are in a vulnerable health position where they are at a risk to be around others. Hopefully though we aren't going to Mass out of some sense of guilt. The reason we come to Mass is because while you can hear the music, the readings, the preaching all online, we as Catholics don't have Mass while multitasking or virtually. There is no way to receive Communion through a TV or computer. Much like during the pandemic we often communicated over a phone or computer, it was a sorry substitute for being physically present with our loved ones. We get so much from a conversation in someone's presence; a hug; telling a joke and sharing a laugh, and so much of this we do as families over a meal. It's much better to look someone in the eye and break bread and hear about their day, their joys and struggles and highs and lows than to send a text message. And at every Mass, much like when He walked this earth, Jesus is intimately with you and me as individuals, giving us His love. May that

love fill our hearts and souls and transform us, and, like Fr. Hamel, inspire us to transform the world and one another.