

THE EUCHARIST: Source and Summit of the Christian Life (C 1322-1419, USC Ch. 17)

Writing to Christian converts in Corinth around 60 AD, St. Paul describes the institution of the Eucharist in this way:

I received from the Lord what I handed on to you, namely, that the Lord Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed took bread and after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper, he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." Every time, when you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes! (1Cor 11:23-26)

Reception of the Eucharist completes our initiation into the Church. Vatican Council II called the Eucharist the "source and summit" of the Christian life and the "center of the Christian community." Through the Eucharist, the Church unites herself to Christ in offering God the Father perfect worship, and through the Eucharist we receive heavenly food and drink to help us live like Christ.

In this article, we will look at:

- Biblical Roots of the Sacrament
- The Eucharist as a Holy Meal and as a Sacrificial Meal
- 'Real' Presence of Christ in the Eucharist
- Fruits of the Eucharist
- Five Behaviors that Help Us to be Active Participants in the Mass

Biblical Roots (C 1333-1344, USC p.215)

The *U.S. Catechism* (p.215) states: "The use of bread and wine in worship is already found in the early history of God's people. In the Old Testament, bread and wine are seen as gifts from God, to whom praise and thanks are given in return for these blessings and for other manifestations of his care and grace. The story of the priest Melchizedek's offering a sacrifice of bread and wine for Abraham's victory is an example of this (Gn 14:18). The harvest of new lambs was also a time for the sacrifice of a lamb to show gratitude to God for the new flock and its contribution to the well-being of the family and tribe."

These ancient rituals were given a historical meaning when God delivered the Israelites from the slavery of Egypt. They celebrated their Passover from slavery to freedom with a Passover meal which always involved a young lamb usually called a Paschal lamb. (See Ex 12:1-

14 for a detailed account of the Passover Meal.) At the time of their deliverance or Passover from Egypt, God commanded the Israelites to celebrate each year their freedom with a Passover Meal. During the meal, the father of the family told the story of his people's deliverance by God. As they celebrated a historical event, it had a new dimension. They believed that the God who delivered their ancestors continued to deliver them year after year (Deut 26:5-11).

During their celebration of the Passover Meal, each Israelite family shared the lamb that had been slain or sacrificed and the bread over which a blessing had been proclaimed. They also drank from a cup of wine over which a similar blessing had been proclaimed.

Institution of the Eucharist (C 1337-1340, USC p. 216)

When Jesus instituted the Eucharist, he gave a final meaning to the blessing of the bread and the wine, the sacrifice of the Lamb, and the Passover celebration. Jesus showed himself to be the High Priest of the New Covenant, the Paschal Lamb who was slain. He offered himself as the perfect sacrifice to the Father. During his Last Supper which took place in the context of the annual Passover meal, Jesus changed bread and wine into his Body and Blood, given now as an offering for the salvation of all people (USC p.216).

"Do this in memory of me." Towards the end of his Last Supper with his apostles, Jesus said: "Do this in memory of me," thereby commanding them and their successors to repeat his actions and words, his Eucharistic celebration, "until he comes." From the earliest times, the Church has remained faithful to the Lord's command—a practice that has continued for 2,000 years.

Pause: What are your earliest memories of attending and participating in the Mass?

The Eucharist as a Sacrificial Meal (C 1356-1372, USC p.220)

Catholics speak of the Eucharist as both a *meal* and a *sacrifice*, or as a sacrificial meal.

The Mass as a Holy Meal. It is easy enough to see the Mass as a meal. After all, the Last Supper was, among other things, a sacred meal between Jesus and his Apostles. All the paintings of this event show Jesus sitting around a dinner table with his Apostles sharing in the Passover meal.

The meal aspect of the Eucharist points to its communal dimension. We gather together as a community of disciples and not as isolated individuals. *Together* we sing, pray, listen to God speak to us, and together we come forth to receive the Body and Blood of Christ. In the Mass, we participate in a sacred banquet with Christ our Savior.

The Eucharist is also seen by our Church as a *covenant meal*. Just as the Passover meal celebrated Israel's covenant agreement with God, so does our participation in the Eucharist celebrate our covenant agreement with Jesus. In and through the Eucharist, we renew and rededicate ourselves to Christ and we receive the divine strength to be faithful to our covenant with him.

The Eucharist as a Sacrifice (C 1362-1372, USC p. 220) Catholics believe that the Mass is a *sacrificial* meal. As we examine the words of institution or consecration recited at each Mass, we clearly notice their *sacrificial* language. They speak about "a body that was broken" and about "blood that poured out" for the forgiveness of sins. For Jesus, the reality of what was to happen the next day on Calvary was a part of the meal that he was celebrating with his Apostles. They were participating in a sacrificial meal, a meal that was clearly linked and made present in the sacrifice that Jesus was to make the next day on Calvary. When the early Christians gathered to celebrate the Eucharist, they were aware that Jesus, the *slain Lamb of God* (Rev. 5:12), and also their *risen brother*, was in their midst.

Our Protestant brothers and sisters deny the sacrificial dimension of the Mass, often quoting Heb 9:25-26, which states that "Christ does not have to offer himself again and again, like the high priest going into the sanctuary year after year with the blood that is not his own, or else he would have had to suffer over and over again since the world began."

When Catholics state that the Mass is a sacrifice, we are *not* saying that Jesus is being sacrificed again and again. Rather we are saying that Christ's sacrifice is being *re-presented* (made present), *prolonged* or *continued* in time in a way that we will never fully comprehend. There are millions of masses but only *one* single sacrifice of Christ. The *Catechism* states: "The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are the one single sacrifice." It is the same victim (Christ), the same priest (Christ now works through the ministry of the priest). In the Mass, the same Christ who offered himself once in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross is contained and offered in an unbloody manner (C 1367).

"If our eyes could see what is really happening at any Mass, we would see Christ at the altar and among us, leading us and drawing us all into himself. Then, with him, we would ascend to the Father's presence. We would also see the Holy Spirit within each of us, uniting us, inspiring our offering. We would see the Father giving us in return his Son, Jesus Christ, the best gift God can give mortal beings, and we would see ourselves being drawn into an indescribable union with divinity." (Christ Among Us p. 248)

Pause: *What struck you most about what we just read?*

The Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist (C 1373-1377, USC p. 223)

At Mass, Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is present in the proclamation of the Word, in the gathered assembly, in the presider, but above all and in a wholly unique manner, in the Eucharist. The presence of Christ in the bread and wine is called 'real,' not to exclude other types of presence which are also 'real,' but to emphasize that the presence of Christ in the bread and wine is a presence in the fullest sense; it is a *substantial* presence (C 1373-1374).

In the sacred species of bread and wine, Christ comes to us in the fullest possible expression and communication of his love. "Since the Middle Ages, the change of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ has been called "transubstantiation." This means that the substance of the bread and wine is changed into the substance of the Body and Blood of Christ. The appearances of bread and wine remain (color, shape, weight, chemical composition), but the underlying reality—that is, the substance—is now the Body and Blood of Christ" (USC p.223). What looks like and tastes like bread and wine is now filled or taken over with the presence of our divine Savior. An early Father of the Church, St. John Damascene, writes: "*If anyone wishes to know how the bread is changed into the body of Christ at Mass, I will tell him. The Holy Spirit overshadows the priest and acts on him as he acted on the Blessed Virgin Mary, when the angel Gabriel visited her.*" During the Eucharist Prayer of the Mass, the priest prays: "*Let your Spirit come upon these gifts to make them holy so that they may become the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" The bread and wine remain changed until consumed.

Pause: *It is said that many Catholics no longer believe that Christ is truly present in the bread and wine at Eucharist. Has this aspect of Catholic belief ever been a challenge for you? What might help us to grow in our appreciation of Christ's presence in the Eucharist?*

As we saw in the previous article on the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, each sacrament has what the Church calls an *essential or central sign*. In Baptism, the *essential sign* is water. In Confirmation, it is the laying on of hands and the anointing with chrism. In the Eucharist, the essential or central signs are the wheat bread and wine on which the blessing of the Holy Spirit is invoked by the priest. Then the priest speaks the words that Jesus uttered at the Last Supper: “*This is my body which will be given up for you...this is the cup of my blood.*”

Finally, it is good to note that this presence of Christ in the Eucharist is not a passive one; rather it is a *dynamic presence*. In the Eucharist, Jesus is reaching out to us, meeting us, seeking to draw us closer to him and fill us up with his life and love. In the celebration of the Eucharist, we too should be reaching out to Christ, opening our hearts to him. The more we try to be aware of Christ and what he is doing for us, and the more we try to give ourselves to him as we meet him in the Eucharist, the more intimate will be our union with him, the greater will be the love and grace we will receive, and the more we will be transformed into him by this experience.

Grace Effects of Receiving Christ in the Eucharist (C 1391-1405, USC p. 224)

The *Catechism* lists several effects or spiritual benefits that come to us when we participate in the Eucharist. Four of these are:

- Holy Communion deepens our relationship with Christ (C 1391).
- Holy Communion separates us from sin and helps us to do battle with the forces of evil (C 1393).
- Holy Communion deepens our relationship with our Church family (C 1396).
- Holy Communion commits us to caring for the poor (C 1397).

Of course, all of the sacraments presuppose that the recipient has been converted to Christ and has some understanding of the sacraments and receives them with faith. There is nothing magical about the sacraments. We don’t just come and grace is automatically poured into our souls.

In the *Constitution on the Liturgy*, a Vatican II document, the bishops state: “*In order that the sacred liturgy may produce its full effect, it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that their thoughts match their words, and that they cooperate with divine grace lest they receive it in vain*” (11).

Pause: One of the implications of partaking in the Eucharist is that it calls us to be Eucharist for others. What are some ways that you can live the Eucharist by being Eucharist for others?

Five Behaviors that Help Us to be Active Participants at Mass

The *Constitution on the Liturgy* states that “full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered above all else” (14). It also states that “Pastors of souls must realize... that it is their duty to ensure that the faithful take part in the Mass knowingly, actively and fruitfully” (11). The following are five behaviors to develop for all who wish to be active participants in the Mass.

Behavior #1—Hospitality. Everyone enjoys coming to a place where there is a spirit of welcome and hospitality. A spirit of hospitality does not mean a lot of chatter before Mass. Rather, it calls for an attitude that says to those around us: “I am glad to see you.” A simple “good morning” or a smile communicates a spirit of hospitality. We help the presence of Christ in the assembly to come alive when we are hospitable to those around us at Mass.

Behavior #2—Participating in the Sung Prayer of the Church. Prior to his conversion to Christianity, St. Augustine used to come and sit in the back of the Church while the Mass was going on. Concerning the singing, Augustine wrote:

How I wept, deeply moved by your hymns, songs, and the voices that echoed through your Church! What emotion I experienced in them! Those sounds flowed into my ears, distilling the truth in my heart. A feeling of devotion surged within me, and tears streamed down my face —tears that did me good. (C 1157)

Augustine’s words speak to the power of music and song to touch hearts. An important part of active participation in the Mass is joining in the “*sung prayer*.” Ideally, at Mass we don’t just sing the songs, but we *pray* the songs. We do this by paying attention to the text of the song and making an effort to lift our minds and hearts to God during our singing.

Behavior #3—Active Listening. During the proclamation of the readings and the homily, we are especially called to listen attentively. This demands a real effort on our part. It is so easy to allow our minds to be distracted.

Behavior #4—Spirit of Generosity. The following are four ways that we can allow a spirit of generosity to impact the way we participate in the Eucharist.

- Getting to Church on time and remaining until the end of the final song
- Giving of ourselves to the songs and prayers of the Mass
- Giving of our financial resources to the Church during the collection
- Bringing food for the poor—if your parish has such a project

Behavior #5—Spirit of Thanksgiving. At each Mass we participate in, we come primarily to *give* of ourselves and not to receive. Though of course, in our giving, we will receive. When we come to Mass with a “what’s in it for me” attitude, we are bringing a consumerist mentality into the house of God.

Our Behavior at Mass is Contagious. It is important to remember that our behavior at Mass is contagious. When we are *hospitable* to those around us at Mass—*sing* enthusiastically, *pray* devoutly, *listen* attentively to the readings and homily, place our *money offering* in the basket, receive the Body and Blood of Christ with *love* and *faith*, move with a sense of *reverence* that reflects awareness that we are on holy ground—we demonstrate that we are participating in something very important, and our good example may impact those around us more than we can ever imagine. On the other hand, when we miss Mass for no good reason, we give a poor example to our family and others. When we come rushing into Mass, show no hospitality to those around us, behave in a distracted and uninvolved manner, and leave early, we diminish the whole worship atmosphere. We communicate to others that “the Mass is not important, I’m bored and not mentally here.”

Pause: Which of the above mentioned behaviors are you strong and weak at when it comes to actively participating in the Mass?

Why Non-Catholic Christians are not Invited to Participate at our Eucharistic Table (C 1398-1401). This is a painful issue for Catholics and non-Catholics—especially where there is a mixed religion marriage. The “lack of unity in matters of faith” is one key reason our Church does not invite other Christians to participate in Holy Communion.

For Catholics, the Eucharist is, among other things, a celebration of our *unity in matters of belief* (e.g. the Trinity; Jesus as God and man; the scriptures as the

inspired word of God; the necessity of faith in Jesus for salvation; the seven sacraments; the pope as the successor of Peter; devotion to Mary and the Saints). With the above named beliefs, Catholics share a “partial communion” with other Christians. We hold *some* of the same beliefs, but not all. For as long as the differences and disunity in matters of faith exist, it would not be appropriate to share the same table. This painful disunity should motivate all Christians to pray and work towards full communion in matters of belief.

Pause: What are your thoughts and feelings about the Church’s stance on not inviting non-Catholic-Christians to the Eucharist?

Suggested Action

Look at the five behaviors that lead to active participation in the Mass. Choose one you are weak at and work at it. Remember that participation in the Eucharist calls us to *be Eucharist* for hurting people around us.

Meditation

Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done in every conceivable human circumstance for every conceivable human need, from infancy and before it, to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacles of earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth. Men have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a country Church...for the famine of a whole province or for the soul of a dear lover...and best of all, week by week, and month by month, on a hundred thousand Sundays, faithfully, unflinchingly, across all the parishes of Christendom, priest and people continue to work together in order to carry out this command, “Do this in Memory of me.”
(Don Gregory Dix, O.S.B.)

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