

HOLY EUCHARIST: JESUS CHRIST WITH US

The sacrament of Holy Eucharist is the third sacrament of initiation, the sacrament in which the Christian participates with the entire community in the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

The Church calls the Eucharist “the source and summit of the Christian life,” for through the Eucharist we share in the Divine life uniting ourselves with Christ who makes us sharers in his Body and Blood. *The Eucharist, then, is Jesus Christ.*

The Second Vatican Council declared that, “It is through the Eucharist that the Church continually lives and grows...Every gathering around the altar...is a sign of that charity and the unity of the Mystical Body, without which there can be no salvation.”

Christ is present in several ways in the Eucharistic celebration. First, He is always present in the body of the faithful gathered in His name. [Mt 18:20] He is present, too, in His Word, for it is He who speaks when the Scriptures are read in the Church. In the Eucharistic sacrifice He is present in the person of the priest, the minister of the Eucharist. And above all, He is present in a most unique way – *the Real Presence* -- under the species of the Eucharist: Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity, whole and entire, substantially and permanently.

MEANING AND INSTITUTION OF THE EUCHARIST

Eucharist, from the Greek, *eucharistos*, means “thanksgiving.” It is called this because it is essentially an action of thanksgiving to God for His works of creation, redemption and sanctification.

Jesus instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper with the Apostles, the night before He died. The Last Supper, then, was the first mass, with Jesus as priest. The Apostles, to whom Jesus gave authority to act in His name and to celebrate the Eucharist in His memory -- *Do this in remembrance of me.* -- continued the celebration after His death and resurrection.

In the Eucharist Jesus used bread and wine as the sacramental signs, which became His body and blood. These are fitting signs, gifts of the Creator, “work of human hands,” “fruit of the earth and the vine.”

We see the signs of bread and wine prefigured in the Old Testament. The king-priest Melchizedek [Gen 14:18] made an offering of bread and wine as a blessing for Abraham. For the Passover, God specifies the eating of unleavened bread as part of the ritual and the sprinkling of the blood of the lamb as a sign to save the Israelites from death. In the same way, God provided manna, bread from heaven, to save the Chosen People from starvation in the desert.

“During the meal he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ‘Take this,’ he said, ‘this is my body.’ He likewise took a cup, gave thanks and passed it to them, and they all drank from it. He said to them, ‘This is my blood, the blood of the covenant, to be poured out on behalf of many.’ [Mk 14:22-24]

“During the meal Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to his disciples. ‘Take this and eat it,’ he said, ‘this is my body.’ Then he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them. ‘All of you must drink from it,’ he said, ‘for this is my blood, the blood of the covenant, to be poured out in behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins.’ [Mt 26:26-28]

“Then, taking bread and giving thanks, he broke it and gave it to them saying, ‘This is my body to be given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. He did the same with the cup after eating, saying as he did so, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you.’” [Lk 22:19-20]

“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 of my blood. Do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ [1 Cor 11:23-25]

Fittingly, Jesus chose to fulfill His promise by instituting the Eucharist on the day of unleavened bread, during the Passover meal with His Apostles. In doing so, He gives new and definitive meaning to the Passover. It becomes a celebration of His own passing over to the Father through His death and resurrection, and the anticipation of the Church's final Passover in the glory of God's Kingdom.

Like His Old Testament predecessors, Jesus, too, anticipated the Eucharist throughout His public ministry. At his first public miracle He changed water into wine. When he multiplied the loaves and fishes, he blessed the bread, broke it, and distributed it to the multitudes, thereby prefiguring the gift of His body and blood.

All three synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), as well as St. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, describe the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper.

John's Gospel tells of Jesus' introduction of the mystery of the Eucharist to His disciples and its effect on those who could not accept the teaching. [See John 6]

This teaching, that Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist, caused many of His disciples to leave Him. Although they did not yet understand Jesus' words, the Apostles remained because, as Peter said, "You have the words of eternal life." Jesus' words would become clear to them only after the Last Supper and the subsequent reception of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

THE MASS

We see the Eucharist celebrated and held in special esteem in the earliest descriptions of life in the Church. The Acts of the Apostles speaks often of Christian worship focusing on the "breaking of the bread," and St. Paul stresses the centrality of the Eucharist in the worship of the early Church.

Throughout early Christianity we see evidence of the Church centering its worship on the Eucharist. The Church Fathers, as early as the second century, describe the Eucharistic celebration or Mass. Their descriptions of the liturgy are in all essentials identical to the liturgy we celebrate today.

The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the liturgy in which the Eucharist is, and always has been, celebrated. Although the Eucharist is a *memorial*, it is not simply a remembrance or recollection of the events of the Last Supper and the sacrifice on Calvary.

It is not a *repetition* of Jesus' redemptive sacrifice. Rather, in a very special way, these events become present and real on the altar. The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are *one single sacrifice*. Jesus, acting through the ministry of the priest, offers Himself in a bloodless sacrifice under the appearances of bread and wine – the same sacrifice He offered on the cross.

"Every time, then, you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes. This means that whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily sins against the body and blood of the Lord. A man should examine himself first; only then should he eat of the bread and drink of the cup. He who eats and drinks without recognizing the body eats and drinks a judgment on himself."
[1 Cor 11:26-29]

"You may judge for yourselves what I am saying. Is not the cup of blessing we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we, many though we are, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf." [1 Cor 10:16-17]

"I myself am the living bread come down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread he shall live forever; the bread I will give is my flesh, for the life of the world." [Jn 6: 51]

"Let me solemnly assure you, if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. He who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has life eternal and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood real drink. The man who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him." [Jn 6: 53-56]

When you participate in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, you are, therefore, quite literally present on Calvary with Mary and John, kneeling at the foot of the cross.

It is Christ, Himself, the eternal High Priest, who acting through the ministry of His validly ordained priests, offers the Eucharistic Sacrifice. And it is Christ, really present under the species of bread and wine, who becomes the offering.

It was to the Apostles – and hence to their successors, the bishops -- that Jesus gave the power to conduct the Eucharistic Sacrifice. The bishop is always responsible for the Eucharist, and when a priest presides he does so in the name of the bishop and the Holy Father, the Pope and Vicar of Christ on earth.

The celebration of the Eucharist is called the *Holy Sacrifice* “because it makes present the one sacrifice of Christ the Savior... [and] since it completes and surpasses all the sacrifices of the Old Covenant” [Catechism 1330].

We also call the Eucharist *Holy Communion* “because by this sacrament we unite ourselves to Christ, who makes us sharers in His Body and Blood to form a single body” [Catechism 1331].

The Eucharist is also a sacrifice of the entire Church, the sacrifice of the entire Body of Christ and all its members. The lives of the faithful, their prayers, sufferings, praise, and works are united with those of Christ and take on a new value. In the Eucharist we are all united with the sacrificial offering of Jesus.

THE GIFT OF THE EUCHARIST

The Eucharist is God’s most special gift to His people. First and foremost it is a sign of His total and everlasting love; for in the Eucharist God gives us the gift of His Son, making Jesus truly present to us and in us.

Eucharist is real food for the soul, and “preserves, increases, and renews the life of grace received at Baptism” [Catechism 1392].

Reception of Eucharist in Holy Communion cleanses us from past venial sins, and through its graces preserves us from future sin. (The forgiveness of mortal sins is proper to the sacrament of Reconciliation.) The more we share in the Eucharist, receiving the living Christ within us, the more difficult it is to break away from Him through mortal sin.

The Eucharist also unites us as members of Christ’s Mystical Body. It strengthens and renews the Church, uniting the faithful to each other, to the Church, and to Christ.

It also helps us recognize the presence of Christ in *all* His people, particularly in the poorest of His brethren. To see Jesus in the poor, the weak, the ill, the persecuted, the homeless, the hungry and thirsty, and the imprisoned takes on new meaning when we realize that, through the Eucharist, Christ is truly present in them.

“Let only that Eucharist be regarded as legitimate, which is celebrated under the bishop or him to whom he has entrusted it.” [St. Ignatius of Antioch – c. 100 AD]

“It is not man that causes the things offered to become the Body and Blood of Christ, but he who was crucified for us, Christ himself. The priest, in the role of Christ, pronounces these words, but their power and grace are God’s. This is my body, he says. This word transforms the things offered.” [St. John Chrysostom c. 400 AD]

“The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” [1 Cor 10:16-17]

“You have tasted the Blood of the Lord, yet you do not recognize your brother... You dishonor this table when you do not judge worthy of sharing your food someone judged worthy to take part in this meal... God freed you from all your sins and invited you here, but you have not become more merciful.” [St. John Chrysostom c. 400 AD]

“The Church and the world have a great need for Eucharistic worship. Jesus awaits us in the sacrament of love. Let us not refuse the time to go to meet Him in adoration, in contemplation full of faith, and open to making amends for the serious offenses and crimes of the world. Let our adoration never cease.” [Pope John Paul II]

References:

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