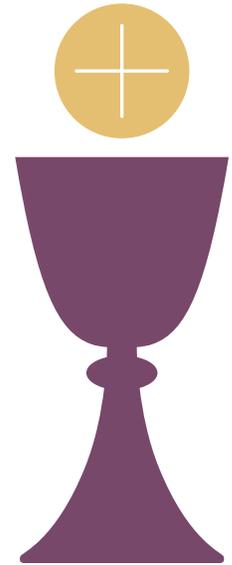


Who are the Eucharistic Saints?



Eucharistic saints. Who might they be? Are they the Apostles, with whom Jesus shared bread and wine at the Last Supper? Are they the ones whose feet he washed, and who heard him say, on the very night before he died: “Do this in memory of me”?

Perhaps eucharistic saints must also include the earliest missionaries, who in the power of the Spirit built up communities of faith. Eucharist was the center of the life of these communities. They gathered on Sunday for “the breaking of the bread” (Acts 2:42). Keeping alive the memory of what Jesus did, they rejoiced in his presence as Risen Lord and waited in hope for his future coming. They stand at the beginning of our eucharistic tradition.

IN TIME OF PERSECUTION

But surely there are more. Are eucharistic saints the martyrs, like St. Ignatius of Antioch (d. 170), who saw themselves and their own terrible fate lifted up by the Eucharist? Condemned to death for his Christian belief, Ignatius was taken in chains from Syria to Rome to be executed by being thrown to the wild beasts in the arena. On his way, he wrote: “I am God’s wheat, and I am being ground by the teeth of wild beasts to make a pure loaf for Christ.”

PROTECTED AND PROTECTING

Perhaps eucharistic saints are those who defended the Eucharist with their lives, as St. Tarcisus did. This twelve-year old altar boy lived in Rome during the Valerian persecution (3rd century). On his way to bring the Eucharist to Christians in prison, he was stopped by a gang of boys who demanded to see what he was carrying. He wouldn’t hand it over. Infuriated, their rage turned into violence, and Tarcisus was killed—protecting the holy Eucharist.

Or, on the other hand, they may be the saints whom the Eucharist protected, like St. Clare of Assisi (1194-1253). When mercenary soldiers invaded Assisi and came to sack her convent, Clare rose from her sickbed, took a monstrance with the Blessed Sacrament in it, and held it up before them. They turned and ran.

PRAISE AND ADORATION

Are they the saints who composed hymns to the Eucharist, as did St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-74)? Here is a verse of one that is still sung today, translated by the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins:

Godhead here in hiding, whom I do adore,
Masked by these bare shadows, shape and nothing more,
See, Lord, at thy service low lies here a heart
Lost, all lost in wonder at the God thou art.

Perhaps they are the saints who spent hours in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, like St. Pascal Baylon (1570-1592). A lay Franciscan brother in Spain, he chose to live in poverty. Pascal would often spend the whole night in ecstatic prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. He is the patron saint of Eucharistic Congresses.

COME AND RECEIVE

Are eucharistic saints the men and women who founded religious communities devoted to the Eucharist, as St.

Peter Julian Eymard (1811-1868) did in nineteenth-century France? He established the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament to reach out to the unchurched and to prepare the faithful to approach Eucharist worthily.

Are they pastors and popes, such as Pope St. Pius X (1835-1914), whose decisions encouraged eucharistic participation? Pius lowered the age of First Communion to seven, because he had confidence in the faith of young children. He also urged all the faithful to receive Communion frequently—not only once a year or a few times a year, as had been their custom. Because of him, many Catholics in the twentieth century returned to the ancient practice of receiving Communion every Sunday.

MINISTRY AND MISSION

Maybe eucharistic saints are those for whom Eucharist was central to mission, such as Blessed Teresa of Calcutta (1910-1997). Her care for the poorest of the poor was constant and passionate. Where did her energy come from? She and her sisters, the Missionaries of Charity, found strength in the Eucharist. “In each of our lives Jesus comes as the Bread of Life,” Mother Teresa wrote, “to be eaten, to be consumed by us. This is how He loves us. Then Jesus comes in our human life as the hungry one, the other, hoping to be fed with the Bread of our life, our hearts by loving, and our hands by serving.”

EUCHARISTIC SAINTS TODAY

Finally, yes, there must be “eucharistic saints” living today. They may bring Communion to the sick, or prepare children for first Eucharist, or serve as special ministers of the Eucharist, or perform some other service. They are the ones who embody charity, the hallmark of Eucharist. Although the Church has not proclaimed them to be saints (worthy of universal devotion), their faith in Christ and the Eucharist shines brightly.

Down through the ages, men and women have gathered at the altar of God to remember and celebrate what Jesus has done. The term communion of saints, *communio sanctorum*, means not only the people whom the Church has canonized as saints, but all those who are united in the sharing of “holy things”: most especially, the Eucharist. The saints are those who have witnessed to Christ among us, full of thankfulness and praise. We all are eucharistic saints, “God’s holy ones,” when we faithfully participate in the sacred mysteries of Christ’s dying and rising—through the Eucharist.

REFLECT

What does the Eucharist mean in my life? Do I have a deep reverence for the presence of Christ in the Eucharist? Do I feel that my participation in the Eucharist connects me with others in the communion of saints?

ACT

This Lent, make an effort to attend Mass more frequently, or to spend some time in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. From even a small investment of time you can reap a big reward.

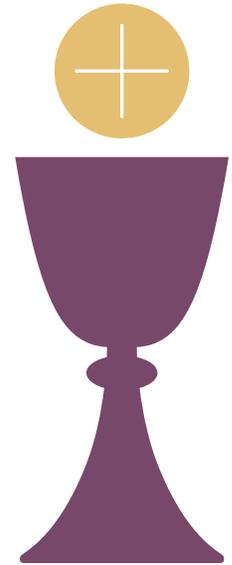
PRAY

Apostles and evangelists, pray for us! Holy martyrs and witnesses to Christ, pray for us! Saints who shaped the Church and changed the world—pray for us!

AUTHOR ■ Rita Ferrone is an award-winning writer and speaker in the areas of liturgy, catechesis, and renewal in the Roman Catholic Church.

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Eucharist, Anchor of My Prayer Life



Prayer, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us, is the “vital and personal relationship with the living and true God” (2558). Prayer can happen anywhere, and at any time. In the celebration of the Eucharist, however, we pray in an incomparable way.

JESUS TEACHES US TO PRAY

Jesus modeled prayer. Throughout his earthly life, his intimate and loving relationship with God the Father could be seen by how he prayed. His disciples witnessed him praising and thanking God and calling upon “Abba,” his heavenly Father, for help. Frequently he took time to go to “a lonely place” and pray. He also went to the synagogue and the Temple, and shared in the prayerful rituals of the Jewish people.

Jesus formed his followers in the way of prayer. He urged them to be persistent in prayer and to avoid showing off their piety to gain recognition from others. He taught them that humility is essential to prayer. They were to use few words, but pray from the heart. When his disciples asked him, “Teach us to pray,” Jesus gave them the Lord’s Prayer—the touchstone of all Christian prayer.

Before his Passion and death, Jesus spent the night in intense prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. From the Cross, he cried out in the words of Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” These words of prayer from the Scriptures carried his anguish to God at the moment of his greatest pain and desolation.

After the Resurrection, the two disciples at Emmaus recognized Jesus as he “said the blessing” and broke the bread. Through this simple ritual of blessing the food they were about to eat, they knew him as the Risen Christ.

What does the example and teaching of Jesus on prayer show us about Eucharist?

THREE LESSONS FOR OUR PRAYER

First of all, *Eucharist cannot be the sum total of our prayer*. Just as Jesus went to “a lonely place” to pray, and recommended that his disciples spend time praying “in secret,” so we must continue to find time, outside of Mass, for personal prayer. In moments of immense suffering and times of great joy, passionate prayer may arise spontaneously. At other times, habits of prayer help us to remain attuned to God’s nearness and care for us.

Nevertheless, Jesus also treasured ritual prayer, communal prayer. Regular ritual prayer was part of the very fabric of his life, as it continues to be part of ours as Catholics. In the Eucharist we remember what Jesus said and did at a ritual meal—the Last Supper. Thus, second: *private personal prayer is no substitute for liturgy*. Sometimes one hears people say “I can pray at home. Why should I go to Mass?” Such an attitude finds no basis in the life of Jesus. Indeed, we encounter Jesus, as Risen Lord, when we break the bread of Eucharist.

Third, the prayerful approach to Eucharist is one of *heartfelt humility as we enter into the presence of God*. The movements of prayer found in the Mass—praising and adoring God, praying for our own needs or the needs of others, offering

thanks, or responding with gratitude after receiving Holy Communion—flow most freely when they are prayed with a humble heart.

PRAYER AS GIFT

St. Paul urged the community of believers to “pray constantly” and pointed to the action of the Holy Spirit, who enables us to pray. When we cannot pray, or do not know how to pray, the Spirit intercedes for us (see Romans 8:26-27). Such confidence in God’s initiative and God’s empowering role in our prayer has enabled Christians through the centuries to regard prayer as a gift. Even as we practice disciplines of prayer and strive to be constant and faithful in prayer, we know this would be useless if God did not desire a relationship with us first.

“The wonder of prayer is revealed beside the well where we come seeking water: there, Christ comes to meet every human being. It is he who first seeks us and asks us for a drink. Jesus thirsts; his asking arises from the depth of God’s desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God’s thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2560).

EUCHARIST, THE SACRAMENT OF CHRIST’S PRESENCE

The Eucharist is the great liturgical prayer of the Church. Within the celebration, the sacrament of Christ’s presence, offered and received in Holy Communion, can have a profound effect on our whole life of prayer.

What happens when we receive Holy Communion? On the physical level we have eaten a bit of bread and taken a sip of wine from a common cup. Yet in faith we believe something more profound has taken place: the Risen Christ comes to us. The living and true God has given himself to us. God has taken the initiative. When we receive the Eucharist in faith, we respond to that initiative, saying yes: “Amen.”

The Eucharist anchors us each week, or even daily if that is our practice, in what is most important in life: our relationship with the Risen Lord. He continually seeks us. Despite our sins, he longs to “enter our house” and dwell with us. It says in the Book of Revelation: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, [then] I will enter his house and dine with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3:20). And when we leave Mass strengthened in faith, we have confidence that the Spirit of the Risen Lord, whom we have encountered in the Eucharist, will continue to guide and strengthen us each day of the week.

REFLECT

What moment in the liturgy do you find most prayerful? When you say “Amen” to the body and blood of Christ, what does that mean to you?

ACT

Take a few moments to pray before and after Mass. By preparing to celebrate Eucharist, we allow the celebration to blossom. After Mass, take a moment to be thankful for the ways you have experienced Christ’s presence in the liturgy.

PRAY

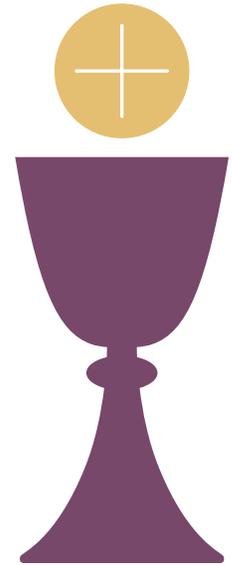
Loving God, thank you for giving us the Eucharist to anchor all our prayer in the gift of Jesus. Open my heart to a deeper relationship with him. Help us, through the Holy Spirit, to experience your nearness and say “Amen” to the life you alone can give.

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Easter Every Sunday

*"What wonderful times we shared." "Hurry up, you're late!"
 "Time stood still." "I'm counting the days 'til the kids come home."
 "Will tomorrow never come?" "I know my days are numbered."
 "She's watching the clock." "Relax—we have all the time in the world!"*



Human life exists in time. Each person's life unfolds over time, made up of a finite number of days, weeks, months, and years. Yet all time is not the same. There are moments when we are impatient and eager for time to pass. On other occasions time seems to "stand still": the moment is full of serenity, complete and whole. In daily life we may struggle to manage time, organize time, keep up with the passage of time, and use time wisely. Yet there are also occasions when time seems to be pure gift. Time is the subject of some of our deepest anxieties and regrets, but also the vessel of our joys, promises, and hopes.

ETERNITY, CREATION, AND TIME

To be human is to live in time, but also to long for eternity. Built into our very nature is the capacity to know that our contingent, time-bound life is not all there is. God is eternal; he exists outside of time. To be in relationship with God is therefore to touch eternity. Faith changes the landscape of our imagination, allowing us to discover time in new ways—not as a mere procession of days, but as a gift of our Creator.

In the story of creation, from the Book of Genesis, we read that day and night take shape under God's guiding hand. When the biblical account says, "Evening came, and morning followed," this refrain is not simply a statement of fact. It stands as witness to the beauty and order that God has ordained for our world. As day after day unfolds, and the world comes into being, "God saw that it was good."

It is not surprising, therefore, that believers understand and perceive time in light of faith. The patterns by which we organize and live out our time are not merely functional or practical, but express a faith-filled perspective on the meaning of life.

THE ORIGINS OF SUNDAY

Christians inherited from their Jewish forebears a seven-day week, corresponding to the seven days described in the creation story in the Bible (Genesis 1:1–2:1). What the early Church brought to this experience of time, however, was a striking new element: the resurrection of Jesus. Christ was raised from the dead on "the first day of the week"—Sunday. So, whereas the Jewish people centered their week on Saturday, the day on which God rested, in the Christian week Sunday became the high point, because of the Resurrection. Sunday was—and remains—our weekly celebration of Easter.

For the Fathers of the Church, Sunday also had a mystical significance. It was "the eighth day," pointing to the future fulfillment of all God's promises at the end of time. Knowing that God created light on the first day of creation, they noted the fact that Jesus was raised from the dead on the "day of light." On Sunday, in this mystical view, creation and redemption met. Hope of future glory filled the hearts of the faithful. They touched eternity.

A RENEWAL OF SUNDAY

Blessed John Paul II explored the rich theological meaning of Sunday in his apostolic letter *On Keeping the Lord's Day Holy* (1998). He offered pastoral guidance to strengthen our experience of Sunday—with the celebration of Eucharist at its heart. In this letter, he called for Sunday to be renewed in the lives of the faithful as a “day of joy, rest, and solidarity.”

Sunday is the day the whole Church comes together for the eucharistic assembly. It is a day of joy, when we are more than ever aware that the Risen Lord is in our midst. “The festive character of Sunday Eucharist expresses the joy that Christ communicates to his Church through the gift of the Spirit,” John Paul wrote, “Joy is precisely one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (cf. Romans 14:17; Galatians 5:22)” (56).

In the rhythm of work and rest, Sunday also plays an essential role. “Rest is something sacred, because it is a way for men and women to withdraw from the sometimes excessively demanding cycle of earthly tasks in order to renew an awareness that everything is the work of God” (65).

Finally, Sunday is a day for works of mercy, love, and service. Sharing what we have with the very poor has been part of Christianity from the beginning, as John Paul explained: “Far from trying to create a narrow ‘gift’ mentality, [St.] Paul calls rather for a demanding culture of sharing, to be lived not only among the members of the community itself, but also in society as a whole” (70).

To keep the Lord's Day holy is to honor basic Christian values: worship of God is central, while care for ourselves and solidarity with others complete the picture.

SUNDAY MASS

Eucharist may be celebrated on other days too, of course. Yet the unique qualities of Sunday make it the premier setting for celebrating the Eucharist (Saturday evening

Mass is included as part of Sunday, in the Church's calendar). Eucharist, in turn, imparts to Sunday its deepest significance. Christ is risen. He is in our midst.

For people today who lead busy and often stress-filled lives, Sunday can be a true gift. Participation in Sunday Mass, to celebrate the Lord's Day, calls us back to an awareness of God, of salvation in Christ, and of the eternal horizon of our faith.

REFLECT

Take an inventory of things you typically do on Sunday. What are the high points? Low points? What could make this day more truly a “day of light” for you?

ACT

Put more joy into your Sunday. Choose one action that brings you joy and treat yourself to it on Sunday. Could that action be one of sharing?

PRAY

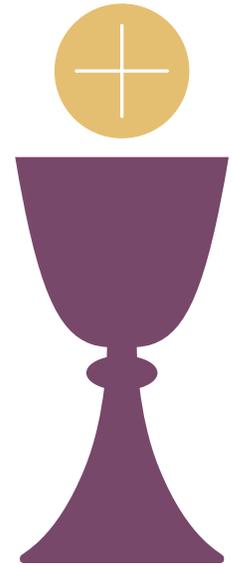
O God of Creation, thank you for the gift of time. Help me to cherish the rhythms of my life, and to honor you through all of them. Keep me ever mindful of the resurrection of your Son, who illumines our days and draws us into his own, wonderful life.

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The Chance of a Lifetime

When someone has good news for us, what might we expect? A bonus? Some unexpected benefit? The chance of a lifetime? The Good News of Jesus Christ is all three of those things rolled into one: a wonderful gift; something good beyond our dreams, freely given; the chance of a lifetime for eternal happiness. Why, then, are we so shy about proclaiming it?



STUCK IN THE SALT SHAKER

We are sent out to evangelize: to proclaim the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ. The Gospel says we are the “salt of the earth.” Our calling makes us a lively, flavorful ingredient that will bring out the best in the world around us. The Good News is ours to share. But often enough we hesitate. We are salt... but we get stuck in the salt shaker.

There are various reasons for this. Here are a few common ones, along with some reasons why they shouldn't hold us back.

It's not how I was raised. True enough, some of us were brought to church as babes in arms, by stern silent parents and grandparents who believed that if we died before the water was poured we'd go to limbo. Earlier generations expected stability, tradition. You inherited your religion like you inherit being Irish, or Italian, or Polish, or Mexican. Everybody was something. You were Catholic.

Think about it, though. A lot has changed since that time. Religion is no longer a given, harnessed by generations reaching back to time immemorial. The number of unchurched and those not subscribing to any religion is fast-growing. Many are searching for faith. We need more than ever to reach out, witness, and invite.

I don't want to look like a holy roller. One of the effects of the privatization of religion is that some people consider

it bad taste to talk about faith at all. Anyone who wants to share what they believe, in this sort of mindset, is suspected of being a fanatic, abnormal.

But is this really the case? Religion is interesting. Faith is a plus in life. In general, people who have a faith community live longer, are more healthy, and are happier than those who don't. Why wouldn't you want to talk about it? Perhaps at one point in your life you were buttonholed by someone who tried to convert you, and you've sworn never to do this to someone else. Fine. But be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit will give you the right words to share your faith, in a genuine, convincing way. You might be surprised how long the conversation goes on, and how much interest there is in what you have to say.

It feels risky. Almost all of us carry around some anxiety about sharing something as personal as our faith. Suppose I share this precious part of my life with my non-believing friend or co-worker, or with a family member who no longer practices, and they reject it. Aren't they rejecting me also? Suppose they make fun of me, or ask me a question I can't answer. Will I look like a fool?

Truth to tell, there's always the possibility that sharing the Good News will not result in the outcomes we want—at least not immediately. We have no control over how people will respond. But we have to trust that God will be there to help us.

Sharing the Good News requires us to step out in faith and take a risk. But the risk is small compared to the potential gains. It's unlikely that you will make a fool of yourself. But suppose you do. Better a fool for Christ than tasteless salt in a salt shaker!

WITNESS AND INVITATION

To share the Good News is an act of faith. Yet proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ does not have to be overwhelming. It can happen quite naturally, through life witness and invitation.

Those who live their faith with sincerity and joy already give the most important witness: life witness. By their simple and unaffected commitment to whatever is good and true in the world around them, by their joy and fellowship with other believers, by their confidence in the promises of Christ and in a truth that transcends their present struggles, they offer an example of faith for all to see. Life witness is the cornerstone of proclaiming the Good News, because it gives flesh to the message of Christianity. An example is worth a thousand words.

Example alone, however, is not enough. Witness of life must be complemented by the invitation to "come and see" what Jesus Christ and his Kingdom are all about.

How do we invite others to discover faith in Jesus Christ for themselves? It may be easier than you think. Here are some suggestions:

- Invite someone to come with you to a church event and talk with them about it
- Share something in your faith that brings you joy; if it is good news to you, it may be good news to someone else
- Listen actively; respect the other person's freedom and journey

- Speak about Jesus and the Church from within your own experience
- Pray for the person whom you wish to reach

Any believer can witness and invite. It doesn't take advanced training or special skills. Neither does it require a life of perfect sanctity. Ordinary, fallible, imperfect people can do this. The witness we bring is not to ourselves, but to Jesus Christ, who loves us. And that is very good news.

REFLECT

Who are the people in my life who have no church home or who have drifted away from active participation in the Church? Do I understand and identify with their questions and longings? How can I be a bridge for them?

ACT

Decide on one concrete step you can take this week to reach out to someone with the Good News. Seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to help you.

PRAY

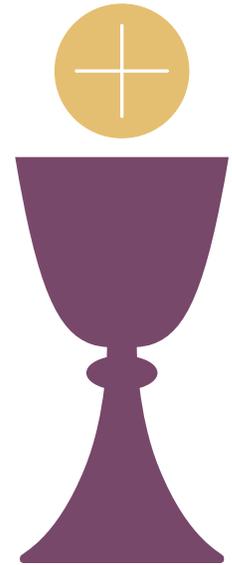
Holy Spirit, fill me with so much joy in my faith that I will want to share it with others. Give me the words to speak, the listening heart, and the courage I need to reflect your love. Let me be your witness today!

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Becoming Bread for Others

“What the early Christians thus did at the altar of God, in the central act of Christian worship, they also lived out in their daily lives. They understood fully that the common action of worship was to be the inspiration of all of their actions.



They knew well that their common giving of themselves to God and to the brethren of Christ was in fact a solemn promise made to God that they would live their lives in this same love of God and of God’s children, their brethren in Christ, throughout all the day. Unless they did that, their action before God’s altar would be at best lip-service, a lie before God” (*Orate Fratres*, Vol. XIV, February 1940, p. 156).

Thus wrote Dom Virgil Michel, OSB, one of the pioneers of the Liturgical Movement in the United States. His reflections on the liturgy—its origins and present meaning—emphasized the Mystical Body of Christ, which is a way to define and understand the Church. The unity of the Mystical Body, he believed, calls all Catholics to the practice of justice. The poor and the oppressed are not in some different category of persons, but are part of that same Body of Christ that the privileged and prosperous share. The Mystical Body of Christ, experienced in the liturgy, made justice and respect for the human person imperative for the faithful. Engagement with the liturgy, he taught, is the necessary path to transformation, leading to a more just and peaceful society.

Servant of God Dorothy Day was one of the noteworthy people persuaded by Virgil Michel’s vision. Co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, Day had long been influenced by Benedictine spirituality, which prized prayer and work and unified them in the practices of daily life. Under the influence of Virgil Michel, she grasped the role of liturgy in building a just society. The Catholic

Worker movement, founded in 1933, with its coffee lines, hospitality houses, and farm cooperatives, may seem a surprising venue for liturgical piety, yet a strong alliance formed there. Catholic Worker houses in St. Louis, Detroit, New York, and more, incorporated Scripture, the Divine Office, and Eucharist into their daily routine.

THE CHURCH’S SOCIAL MISSION AND YOU

Beginning in the nineteenth century, with Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *On Capital and Labor*, popes and bishops have given voice to the teaching of the Church on social mission in the modern world. The resulting body of teaching, called Catholic social teaching, has brought the light of the Gospel into focus on the harsh and continuing problems of modern life. Industrialization, urbanization, changes in the means of production and the distribution of this world’s goods, as well as the horrors of modern warfare, have required a thoughtful and disciplined response.

Catholic social teaching makes it clear that personal charity alone is not sufficient to the task we must embrace to build God’s Kingdom as followers of Christ. The members of Christ’s Body must also be committed to the transformation of unjust structures of society, so that the common good is fostered in all realms of life. All people share in the responsibility for helping their neighbor attain the necessities of life. As Catholics, we are also responsible for arranging our common life so that it corresponds, as much as possible, to Christ’s teachings of mercy and love.

It follows, therefore, that believers must work together to promote the common good. Widespread problems require the faith-filled response of individuals, but they also require organized, communal efforts. Rarely can we find the strength to tackle social problems alone—be they in our neighborhood, workplace, family, or wider community. Yet, as a community, we can truly become bread for others.

As individuals search their consciences, and pay attention to the needs around them, they are also called to band together to address these needs. At times, we may push aside the issues of the day, because they seem complicated and overwhelming. What gives us courage, however, is Eucharist.

EUCHARIST AND THE SOCIAL MISSION OF THE CHURCH

What we find in the Eucharist is the strength of connection—through our faith and through the life of Christ, given to us in the sacrament. The Eucharist fortifies us for the work of bringing gospel values to the world in which we live. Parish communities, dioceses, agencies, and movements can be the vehicle for working together to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, build respect for all human life, and promote the common good.

The Eucharist gives us a rich witness, through sign and symbol, of what it means to be the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, empowered for mission. As we gather at one table, eat of one bread, and drink from a common cup, our unity—our oneness in Christ—is powerfully symbolized. As we exchange the sign of peace, we are renewed in solidarity, which empowers us to be bridge-builders and healers. As we are sent forth from the celebration, we are reminded that Christ established the Church with a mission to bring about God's Kingdom. It is a mission that we must undertake together—all of us—day by day, as the Spirit of God works among us and within us to bring about a civilization of love.

REFLECT

Where do I hear a specific call to bring gospel values to my world? How am I responding to that call? Do I find myself making excuses, or putting off to tomorrow the actions I may be called to take today? Or do I embrace my part of the Church's social mission eagerly and readily?

ACT

Choose one action that will contribute to the Church's social mission, and do it this coming week. Whether it is volunteering an hour of service, sharing material possessions, or giving your know-how and skills to make the world a better place, do it in a spirit of gratitude and joy—the spirit of Eucharist.

PRAY

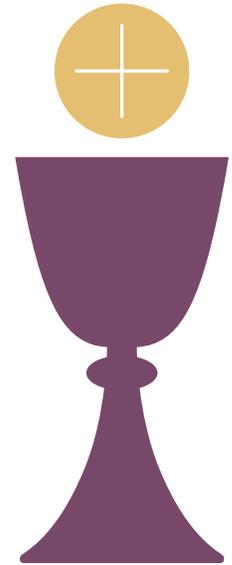
Lord Jesus, you taught us to seek your face in the lowest and the least among us. Help us to see the needs of our brothers and sisters with the same love and passion with which you see them. Give us strength together, through the Eucharist, to become peace-makers and bridge-builders, to be your hands and your heart in our world.

AUTHOR ■ Rita Ferrone is an award-winning writer and speaker in the areas of liturgy, catechesis, and renewal in the Roman Catholic Church.

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Eucharist, a Taste of Eternal Life

There is no subject so painful and difficult to comprehend as the subject of death. And there is no more honest and sensitive church statement about this subject than the one offered by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) in the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*:



“It is in regard to death that man’s condition is most shrouded in doubt. Man is tormented not only by pain and by the gradual breaking-up of his body but also, and even more, by the dread of forever ceasing to be. But a deep instinct leads him rightly to shrink from and to reject the utter ruin and total loss of his personality. Because he bears in himself the seed of eternity, which cannot be reduced to mere matter, he rebels against death. All the aids made available by technology, however useful they may be, cannot set his anguished mind at rest. They may prolong his life-span; but this does not satisfy his heartfelt longing, one that can never be stifled, for a life to come” (18).

The Council Fathers affirmed that the longing for eternal life is a deeply human longing, placed in our very nature by God, the Creator. Likewise, the dread of death and struggles surrounding death are something that believers share with all people.

So what can the Church bring to the world, beyond compassionate sharing of our universal human condition? The Council Fathers were likewise very clear: Christians are blessed with a sure and certain hope that death is not the end. Through Divine Revelation we know that God has prepared a glorious destiny for those who love him. We are not meant for death. We are meant for eternal life with God. This future is revealed and made possible through Jesus Christ, our Savior.

HIS PASSION AND DEATH LEAD TO LIFE

Paradoxically, Jesus showed us the way to eternal life by accepting a terrible and humiliating death. The cross was one of the most excruciating forms of public execution practiced in the ancient Roman Empire. Jesus did not stay far away from human pain, redeeming us at a safe distance. Rather, he passed directly through the worst possible physical suffering and spiritual abandonment, giving his life for the sake of us all. And God raised him up.

God’s action in raising Jesus from the dead has had a profound effect on us, even though we may realize it only dimly. Through the Resurrection God’s future has entered into time and history. We can truly touch the promised life and resurrection that waits for us all, by believing in the Risen Lord.

As Lent draws to a close and Holy Week begins, we know the joy of Easter is coming. But we must first walk with Jesus on the road to Calvary. The path to Easter passes through Good Friday. To believe in the truth of the Christian story means honestly facing the inevitability of death. Yet it also means holding fast to the promise of eternal life. Christians through the ages have believed that by dying and rising, Christ has triumphed over death itself. And he shares his victory with us—the gift of eternal life—in the Eucharist.

A LIFE-GIVING MEAL

“Jesus said to them, ‘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’” (John 6:53–56).

In this passage, St. John the Evangelist recounts an astonishing promise. Those who eat the flesh and drink the blood of Jesus will be so firmly united to him that they will share his own life forever. The passage points to Eucharist.

What an awesome gift! These words should cause us to marvel at what we receive through the Eucharist. It is truly the meal that brings us into union with our Savior and gives us his divine life, a life that will never pass away. Today, when we share in the Eucharist, eating the consecrated bread and drinking the consecrated wine, we receive the body and blood of the Risen Christ. We receive the life of Christ, so that we may remain with him always. Our communion with God, through Jesus Christ, is stronger than death.

The words of the Gospel according to John speak powerfully to the individual. Nevertheless, it is important to recall that the message of the Resurrection also has a social character. As theologian Thomas Rausch has observed, “We do not come to heaven alone, but accompanied by others, those we have helped or hindered on the journey to eternal life, whose lives are now intertwined inseparably with our own.” The eucharistic banquet, shared with those in heaven and on earth, is a perfect image of our hope for eternal life. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms, “By the Eucharistic celebration we already unite ourselves with the heavenly liturgy and anticipate eternal life, when God will be all in all” (1326).

REFLECT

How can simple gifts of bread and wine impart a life that never ends? Take time to reflect on the promises of Christ. How can Eucharist be a foretaste of the banquet of heaven? Take time to reflect on the “great reunion” we hope for in the life to come.

ACT

The liturgies of Holy Week can strengthen us in the hope of eternal life. Participate as fully as you can this year. When the Resurrection is announced in the Gospel of Easter, give thanks for the life this brings to *you*.

PRAY

God of hope and joy and resurrection, thank you for the Eucharist. We commit to you all the burdens we carry, all our fears of death and dying. Open your hand, O Lord of Life, and feed us once again.



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JOY
THIS LENT!

The joy of the gospel fills
the hearts and lives of all who
encounter Jesus.

— POPE FRANCIS

