



EUCCHARIST

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“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

"The bread and the wine of the Eucharist before the holy invocation of the adorable Trinity were simple bread and wine, but the invocation having been made, the bread becomes the body of Christ and the wine the blood of Christ"

-St. Cyril of Jerusalem (c.350), *Catechetical Lectures* 19:7

Source and Summit of Christian Life

According to the Catechism, “The Eucharist is "the source and summit of the Christian life." "The other sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate, are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented toward it. For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Passover (CCC 1324).

Our whole life as Catholics is oriented towards worthy and fruitful reception of the Eucharist, and this life begins with the Eucharist as well. It is the source of all grace.

According to the Catechism, the Eucharist is:

- ❖ The source and fountain of grace
- ❖ The cause of our communion with the Church
- ❖ The culmination of God’s saving actions in the world
- ❖ The anticipation of and participation in the heavenly liturgy

St. Irenaeus said, “Our way of thinking is attuned to the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn confirms our way of thinking.”

Names for the Eucharist

The Eucharist goes by many names, each revealing a different aspect of this most wonderful sacrament.

1. Eucharist- From the Greek *Eucharisein*, which means “thanksgiving,” and expresses our gratitude to God for creation, redemption and sanctification.

2. Lord's Supper- Because of its connection to the Last Supper, in which Jesus instituted both this sacrament and the sacrament of the priesthood. It also anticipates the wedding Feast of the Lamb at the end of time in the heavenly Jerusalem.
3. Breaking of the Bread- This was the first name for the sacrament of the Eucharist used by the early Christians and denotes its connection with the ancient Jewish rite of Passover. It is in the breaking of the bread that the disciples recognize Him after His Resurrection.
4. The Divine Liturgy- A common name in Eastern Catholic Churches. This name reminds us that the Church's whole liturgy finds its center and most intense expression in the celebration of this sacrament.
5. Holy Communion- Because by this sacrament we unite ourselves to Christ and to our brothers and sisters in the Church, which is His Body.
6. Sacred Mysteries- An expression of the wondrous marvel of the transformation of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Our Lord upon the altar.
7. Holy Mass- Because the liturgy in which the mystery of salvation is accomplished concludes with the sending forth (Latin: *missa*) of the faithful to fulfill God's will in their daily lives.
8. Most Blessed Sacrament: The Eucharist is the Sacrament of sacraments. The Eucharistic species reserved in the tabernacle is known by the same name.
9. Holy Sacrifice- This is the essential name for the Eucharist: before anything else, the Eucharist is a sacrifice in which Christ is truly offered.

Form and Matter

For a valid Eucharistic celebration, the proper form and matter are needed. The matter is wheat bread and grape wine (mingled with water). The form of the sacrament is the words of institution given by Christ at the Last Supper:

*Take this, all of you, and eat it:
this is my body which will be given up for you.
Take this, all of you, and drink from it:
this is the cup of my blood,
the blood of the new and everlasting covenant.
It will be shed for you and for many
so that sins may be forgiven.
Do this in memory of me.*

The essential form consists in the phrases "This is my Body" and "This is..my Blood," as taught by the Council of Trent

Proper Minister

The proper minister of this sacrament is a man who has been ordained either to the degree of the priesthood or the episcopacy. Members of the diaconate are not able to consecrate the Eucharist, as the institution of the Eucharist is connected especially with the priesthood.¹

How is the Eucharist a sacrifice?

Christ was sacrificed once in time upon the cross in Jerusalem. But the Eucharist is the means by which that one sacrifice and its fruits are perpetuated throughout time. In the sacrament of the Eucharist, Christ offers Himself to the Father in an unbloody manner. The sacrifice of the Cross and the sacrifice of the Mass are the same: there is only one sacrifice. One happened once in time in a bloody manner, and one happens every time the Mass is offered in an unbloody manner. But the sacrifice is the same, and in both cases Christ is both the priest and the victim being sacrificed.

But what is the Eucharist exactly?

As with other sacraments, this reality is brought about by means sacramental signs and certain prayers. When this sacrament is brought about, the Church teaches that the substance of the bread and wine are entirely changed into the substance of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, in such a way that they are changed whole and entire, with all their parts, so that no bread or wine remains upon the altar after the change. Christ is truly present upon the altar offering Himself to the Father for the remission of sins.

In what way is Christ present?

This presence is called the *Real Presence*. Christ's presence in the sacrament is true and physical: His body, blood, soul and divinity. This Presence is the reason for many Catholic devotional and liturgical practices connected to the Sanctuary of the Church. It is the reason why we genuflect when entering or leaving (a bend of the knee acknowledging Christ's presence), why certain decorum is appropriate (or inappropriate) for the Liturgy, why some women choose to veil their heads, why the altar is kissed (as the place of sacrifice). So important is Christ's presence in this sacrament that almost all of what the Catholic Church does and believes is incomprehensible without it.

In stressing this Real Presence, we must understand it to be opposed to any purely symbolic or spiritual understanding of Christ's presence. When Christ is present in the sacrament, He is present in such a way that he who handles the consecrated host is said to be handling God.

Christ's presence is also full and entire in every particle of the Sacred Host and every drop of the Precious Blood. This is the reason why it is not necessary to receive from the chalice as well to receive the Body and Blood. He who receives even the smallest fragment of a consecrated host receives the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ.

¹ The teaching of the reservation of the priesthood to men alone will be discussed in the class on the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

The Signs of Bread and Wine

Bread and wine are important symbols in salvation history. The Catechism says: “In the Old Covenant bread and wine were offered in sacrifice among the first fruits of the earth as a sign of grateful acknowledgment to the Creator. But they also received a new significance in the context of the Exodus: the unleavened bread that Israel eats every year at Passover commemorates the haste of the departure that liberated them from Egypt; the remembrance of the manna in the desert will always recall to Israel that it lives by the bread of the Word of God; their daily bread is the fruit of the promised land, the pledge of God's faithfulness to his promises. The "cup of blessing" at the end of the Jewish Passover meal adds to the festive joy of wine an eschatological dimension: the messianic expectation of the rebuilding of Jerusalem. When Jesus instituted the Eucharist, he gave a new and definitive meaning to the blessing of the bread and the cup.

The miracles of the multiplication of the loaves, when the Lord says the blessing, breaks and distributes the loaves through his disciples to feed the multitude, prefigure the superabundance of this unique bread of his Eucharist. The sign of water turned into wine at Cana already announces the Hour of Jesus' glorification. It makes manifest the fulfillment of the wedding feast in the Father's kingdom, where the faithful will drink the new wine that has become the Blood of Christ.

The first announcement of the Eucharist divided the disciples, just as the announcement of the Passion scandalized them: "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" The Eucharist and the Cross are stumbling blocks. It is the same mystery and it never ceases to be an occasion of division. "Will you also go away?" he Lord's question echoes through the ages, as a loving invitation to discover that only he has "the words of eternal life" and that to receive in faith the gift of his Eucharist is to receive the Lord himself" (1334-1336).

The Institution of the Eucharist

The giving of the Sacrament of the Eucharist is narrated in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke as well as in the writings of St. Paul. Though St. John does not report the narrative of the institution, he relates for us the words of Jesus to the Jews of Capernaum, in which Christ states that He Himself is the bread come down from heaven, the true manna which gives eternal life. This is known as the “Bread of Life” discourse and is found in John 6.

The Sacramental Sacrifice: Thanksgiving, Memorial, Presence

We must consider this Eucharist in three different aspects: as thanksgiving a praise to God the *Father*, as a sacrificial memorial of *Christ*, and as the presence of Christ by the power of His word and *Spirit*.

Thanksgiving: The Eucharist is a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving for the work of Creation, in which Creation is presented to the Father through the death and Resurrection of Christ. We thank God for all of His works in creating, redeeming and sanctifying us, all through the work of Christ.

Memorial: Ever since the beginning of the Church, Christians have carried out this Sacramental offering of the Eucharist in obedience to Christ's command on the night of the Last Supper: "Do this in memory of Me." In Scripture, a memorial is not simply a retelling of past events but the mystical proclamation of those events, in which they become in a certain way present and real. When the Church celebrates the Passion of Christ in the Eucharist, the sacrifice of Christ is remembered and made sacramentally present. It is a true sacrifice because it re-presents the sacrifice of Christ and applies its fruits. *The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Mass are but a single sacrifice.*

Presence: As we have mentioned above, in the Eucharist, Christ Himself becomes present among us by the power of the Holy Spirit. His presence is called the Real Presence, not to exclude other types of presence, but to denote presence in its fullest sense. The transformation of regular bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ is given the name *transubstantiation*, which in Latin means "change in substance." The Eucharistic presence of Christ begins at the moment of consecration and endures as long as the Eucharistic species endures.

Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament

"In the liturgy of the Mass we express our faith in the real presence of Christ under the species of bread and wine by, among other ways, genuflecting or bowing deeply as a sign of adoration of the Lord. "The Catholic Church has always offered and still offers to the sacrament of the Eucharist the cult of adoration, not only during Mass, but also outside of it, reserving the consecrated hosts with the utmost care, exposing them to the solemn veneration of the faithful, and carrying them in procession" (CCC 1378).

The Fruits of Holy Communion

- Union with Christ: Reception of the Eucharist augments our union with Christ; hence its name, *Holy Communion*. Intimate union with Christ is the principal fruit of receiving this sacrament. As Christ said, "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him" (John 6:56).
- Separation from Sin: The body of Christ we receive is the same body that was "given up for us." As the Eucharist unites us with Christ, it also separates us from sin, cleansing us from past sins and preserving us from future ones. Just as bodily food restores strength, the Eucharist restores spiritual vitality and strengthens us in charity, a living charity that wipes away venial sins (CCC 1394). It also strengthens us in grace to preserve us from future mortal sins.
- Unity of the Mystical Body: The Eucharist makes the Church. It is through the Eucharist that the faithful are united to God, and through Him to each other. Communion strengthens and deepens incorporation into the Church. The Eucharist is the unity of Christians, and a Christian community can be said to be more or less in communion with the Church depending on whether or not it celebrates a valid and sacramental Eucharist (as do the Eastern Orthodox).

Pledge of Future Glory

“The Church knows that the Lord comes even now in his Eucharist and that he is there in our midst. However, his presence is veiled. Therefore we celebrate the Eucharist "awaiting the blessed hope and the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ," asking "to share in your glory when every tear will be wiped away. On that day we shall see you, our God, as you are. We shall become like you and praise you for ever through Christ our Lord."

There is no surer pledge or dearer sign of this great hope in the new heavens and new earth "in which righteousness dwells," than the Eucharist. Every time this mystery is celebrated, "the work of our redemption is carried on" and we "break the one bread that provides the medicine of immortality, the antidote for death, and the food that makes us live for ever in Jesus Christ" (CCC 1404-1405).

For Further Reading: Pope Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei* (1965); *Catechism of the Catholic Church* § 1322-1419; Matt. 26:26-29; Luke 24:13-35, John 6; 1 Cor. 11:18-32; Scott Hahn, *The Lamb's Supper: The Mass As Heaven On Earth*; Fr. Mitch Pacwa, *Is the Mass a Sacrifice?*; Vinny Flynn, *Seven Secrets of the Eucharist*; Karl Keating, *Catholicism and Fundamentalism*, ch. 19, "The Eucharist."