

## SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY: Class 2

### Sacraments of Initiation: Eucharist

**Glimpses of the Mystery:** How can we begin to describe something which the Second Vatican Council calls "the source and summit of the Christian life" (Lumen Gentium, #11). The full wonder of the Eucharist is far beyond any words or descriptions that we can find. In the Eucharist God enters our lives in a way that is most clearly expressed by the act of eating and drinking. His body and blood pass into our body and blood. There is no other way to describe what happens. There is nothing else we can compare it to. But what does mean? How does it affect us? While there are no adequate explanations, there are stories - stories which give us glimpses of what the Eucharist is.

**A Gift of Inclusion:** It was Easter Sunday morning in New Haven, Connecticut. Most of the people sitting out on the damp grass were huddled under blankets trying to ignore the predawn chill. The priest raised the bread and the cup, "Through Him, with Him, in Him. . . ." Despite the sounds of the birds and the distant rumble of traffic his voice could be heard clearly. The sloping hill acted like a natural amphitheater.

As he prayed the sun cleared the horizon. The voices of those gathered for the sunrise Mass rang out clearly with the words of the "Our Father." Then people were moving forward, ready to receive communion. The priest took the basket filled with consecrated hosts. But he did not walk toward the first person in line. Instead he began the long climb to the top of the hill where a woman sat in a wheelchair. The hill was steep and the priest was no longer young or particularly strong. Furthermore, the wind kept twisting his vestments about his legs, impeding his steps. At least twice he nearly tripped. When he reached the woman in the chair he was breathing hard. He offered her communion with a smile that filled his eyes, "The body of Christ." "Amen."

Those who were close could hear the Easter joy in her voice. The priest began his slow descent. Several people quietly wiped tears from their eyes. Katie could have gone into the neighboring building, taken the elevator to the lower level, and come out near where the altar had been set up for this Mass. That's what she would have done with most other priests. But Father Henri Nouwen had come before six in the

morning to hear, had not waited for her to come down to him. He had made the difficult climb to her. That action may have been the most eloquent sermon on the Eucharist that anyone at Yale University ever heard.

**The Strength to Survive:** In a town in Michigan a retired couple and their adult son knelt side by side in a pew near the back of the Church. "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you. They spoke the words together with the rest of the congregation. Then they stood and began the long, slow walk to the front to receive communion. The son watched his parents walking in front of him. It was amazing really, the fact that they were still together after all these years and after so much pain and misunderstanding.

His father still drank too much. He said it was the Viet Nam war, the memories of horror that he couldn't shake. His mother still thought that life had treated everyone else better than it had treated her. She was angry so much of the time. And when she was angry her tongue wasn't kind. Mom had been sick when his dad came back from the war. Neither of them had been able to help or support the other. Both had felt abandoned and hurt. They'd never really gotten past that. He'd grown up in the middle of all that pain, longing for the day when he could leave home and escape it forever.

He had left and, to a large extent, he did escape. When he talked to them on the phone everyone behaved as if all was well. Living so many miles away, he could almost imagine that it was true. But now they had come to visit; and even though his dad wasn't drinking - wouldn't drink with grandchildren around – the son knew that nothing had really changed. Only a day after they had arrived he found himself looking forward to their leaving.

The occasion that brought them to church was the feast of the Ascension - a holy day of obligation. He and his parents agreed to go together to the evening Mass. Now he watched as each of his parents received the host. Then' it was his turn. He looked at the small wafer resting in his palm - the body of Christ.

"The body of Christ," he repeated the words to himself. This was it. This was what had kept his family together all these years. This was why his parents loved each other through the pain. This is why he could have a healthy family even when he'd come from an unhealthy one. As he walked back to his pew, he watched his

parents kneel side by side and bow their heads in prayer. He felt a flash of love for them. He was glad they had come to this Mass. He knelt beside them and offered his own silent prayer of thanksgiving.

**A Chance for Peace:** In the city of Kigali, Rwanda, a Tutsi man whose father had been brutally murdered by their Hutu neighbors was attending Mass with his family. He had not been in church very many times since his father's death. At first he had been in hiding and then he had been too bitter. His heart was filled with hate for the Hutus who had killed a man who had helped them more than once when they were in need. His heart was filled with anger at God who had let a man who had dedicated his life to prayer and peace die. But on this day his mother asked him to come and so he had.

During the homily, the priest spoke about the Eucharist. "When we eat it we become the body of Christ. We are united to everyone else who ever has or ever will eat this same holy food. We are even united to the Hutus who have hurt us and the Hutus who we have hurt. No army will ever make peace possible. But this food will."

The Tutsi man reflected on those words. He did not go forward to receive communion with the rest of his family. But as the last person in the communion line passed him, he stepped in behind. As he walked back to join his family, they could see hope in his eyes for the first time in two years.

**A Treasure Beyond Compare:** On the feast of St. Nicholas in 1273, Dominican priest and theologian St. Thomas Aquinas said Mass. As he prayed the eucharistic prayer something happened which profoundly affected him. When the Mass was over he refused to write or dictate anything for the book he was writing. At the time, St. Thomas was working on the Third Part of the *Summa Theologiae*, one of the most complete theological works ever written. He was working on the section on Penance. Nonetheless, he put away all of his writing materials.

One of the other Dominicans asked him if he were really going to give up on this great work that he was doing, work which would enlighten all people and bring glory to God. Thomas replied, "All that I have written seems to me like straw compared with what has now been revealed to me." Yes, the Eucharist is the

source and summit of the Christian life. The rest of this chapter reveals more about the meaning of the Eucharist.

**What Is the Eucharist?** The Eucharist is the "center and culmination of the entire life of the Christian community" (Christus Dominus, #30). All that we are and all that we strive to be as Christians can be found in the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the heart and soul of our lives as Christians. As St. Irenaeus wrote: "Our way of thinking is attuned to the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn confirms our way of thinking." When a person participates in Eucharist and receives communion, he or she is entering the innermost life of the Church. This is why the Church calls the Eucharist the sacrament which completes Christian initiation (CCC, 1322).

A Catholic is baptized and confirmed only once. But he or she participates in Eucharist many times. Baptism and Confirmation make us participants in Christ's Paschal mystery. Each time the Church celebrates the Eucharist we enter these events once again. Through the Eucharist we recommit ourselves to our Baptism at every stage and every moment of our lives. We experience the life of God within us at Eucharist.

If we understand a Christian to be someone who is part of the body of Christ, then we can see that it takes a lifetime to become Christian. It takes a lifetime for our actions to be in conformity with Christ. Each time we receive the body and blood of Christ we are reminded that we have not yet reached our goal; we are also brought one step closer to it. Each time we receive communion we were pulled into a more intimate union with Christ. Over the course of a lifetime the Eucharist initiates us into the life of the Trinity, until at last we are ready to share it completely in the kingdom of heaven.

The Eucharist reshapes our relationship with the Trinity because of what it is. The Eucharist is a blessing. In the Eucharist we experience God's absolute transcendence, that is the quality of God that lies beyond our » normal perception. Through the Eucharist we acknowledge and accept that transcendence which Adam and Eve wanted to ignore or escape.

The Eucharist is a renewal of the covenant between God and his people; through the Eucharist God writes his law on our hearts. The Eucharist is the presence of Christ who promised to be with us always. The Eucharist is the perfect sacrifice

which continually restores and energizes our relationship with God. The Eucharist is a meal which nourishes and sustains us and which provides us with an opportunity for fellowship and intimate sharing. The Eucharist is heaven on earth. Now, let us examine each of these parts of the eucharist more closely.

**The Eucharist Is a Blessing:** A blessing is a divine and life-giving action by God the Father. The blessings of liturgy are also a gift of God the Father to us. We respond to these blessings by responding to his grace. Christ, seated at the right hand of the Father, pours out the blessings of the Holy Spirit in the sacraments - most especially in the Eucharist.

A blessing is also a human act. We return thanks and adoration to God the Father for all that he has done. The Father blesses us by giving us life. We bless the Father by surrendering that life to him, as his son Jesus did. When we surrender our lives to God, the Holy Spirit is at work in us to enable us to praise and trust the Father in all situations. We believe in and accept his love for us and we love him in return.

Prayers of blessing are the most ancient and basic form of Jewish prayer and they are central to the liturgy. Prayers of blessing recall all that God has done. They marvel at an infinite God who cares enough to be involved in the day to day lives of human beings. In the liturgy of the Eucharist the Church praises and thanks the Father for all the wonders of creation. The Church recalls and gives thanks for the fact that even when we fail to appreciate what the Father has given us, even when we try to destroy it, God keeps on loving us and giving us more. We praise and thank the Father for offering us chance after chance to apologize and begin again. We also praise and thank the Father through Christ and in the Holy Spirit for his constant love and his constant efforts to help us experience that love more completely. The word eucharist means "thanksgiving."

In the Eucharist we proclaim the things that God has done, and in particular the things that God has done for us in Christ, and we are caught up in those things. When the Israelites commemorated Passover, they proclaimed God's greatness in freeing them from slavery and leading them to the Promised Land. As they proclaimed what God had done, they were caught up in that action. They became the people whom God had saved. They were the people to whom the Promised Land was given. They were not just people who knew what God had done for someone

else; they were people for whom God had done everything that is good. A Jewish writer described Passover as "the festival of all times, in which the past deliverance blends with the future redemption in an eternal today." In the Passover celebration the time of liberation is now.

In the Eucharist, we offer a blessing just as Christ did through the gifts of his life, death, and resurrection. On the night before he died, Jesus anticipated his own passion and death and interpreted them in the terms of the Jewish Passover and its sacrifice. At the same time he gave the Eucharist to his followers as a means of remembering and actually making his passion and death present to them. Jesus made the Eucharist the new Passover. As the Catechism teaches:

By celebrating the Last Supper with his apostles in the course of the Passover meal, Jesus -gave the Jewish Passover its definitive meaning. Jesus' passing over to his Father by his death and Resurrection, the new Passover, is anticipated in the Supper and celebrated in the Eucharist, which fulfills the Jewish Passover and anticipates the final Passover of the Church in the glory , of the kingdom (1340).

When the Church celebrates the eucharist it blesses God for these great events of salvation: from creation to the Exodus, to the death and resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit, to the second coming of Christ and the establishment of a new heaven and a new earth. As the Church proclaims these events, it is caught up in them. In Eucharist, God redeems us from sin and leads us to freedom. The Holy Spirit moves in our lives. In the Eucharist we are caught up in the new creation in which all tears are wiped away. In other words, when the Church celebrates the Eucharist, the entire Body of Christ - its head and its body - praises God for the life and salvation which he has given. And we experience that life and salvation in the present moment. In the Eucharist the time of liberation, the time of redemption, and the time of the new creation are all now.

This does not mean' that every time the Eucharist is offered we are conscious of these events. Nor does it mean that we always come away from the Eucharist feeling liberated, redeemed, energized, » renewed, or anything else. What it does mean is that each time we take part in the Eucharist we are shaped in some way by the saving events in which we have participated. We are shaped by them because we are part of a Church which is shaped by them.

We are also shaped by them because they become part of our experience whether we are conscious of it or not. Even if we are completely oblivious to the saving events which we become a part of through the Eucharist, they still affect our relationship to the world. They still give us new options in life.

God the Father has done great things for his people through Christ and in the Holy Spirit. He has abundantly blessed them. When we participate in the Church's celebration of the Eucharist we proclaim those great things and give thanks and praise to the Father. We return blessing to him. As we proclaim and give thanks to God, he allows us to participate in the events which we are proclaiming. We are thereby blessed.

**The Eucharist Is a Memorial:** When Jesus gave the Eucharist to his apostles, he used the words "do this in\* memory of me." Taken in the context of the Old Testament, the word "memory" encompasses the whole relationship between God and his people. According to this understanding, if you gave people something to do "in memory of" an event, you were giving them a way of making that event part of their own experience. People who remember God's works of salvation are people who experience God's blessing and respond by doing God's will. The memory is an essential part of both experiencing the blessing and responding to it.

The prophets and religious leaders of the Old Testament were constantly trying to help the people remember God's actions so that the people would be faithful to him. More often than not, however, their words were ignored. The people learned what God had done for the Israelites of Moses' time. They knew what God had done for King-David. But they did not believe that those events had been done for them, too. The book of Kings tells how time after time the Israelites abandoned God and accepted some of the pagan practices and pagan gods of their neighbors. The Israelites failed to remember the covenant. They turned away from it and felt the consequences of this inattentiveness.

Through the prophets, the Israelites were told of a new covenant which God would establish with them. This new covenant is one which the prophets explained would be "written in the hearts" of the people so that they will never be able to forget it completely. God imprints the great events of salvation history upon our memories

even as the voice of a mother is imprinted upon the memory of her child before that child is born.

The Eucharist is the means by which God imprints these events on our memories. When Jesus took the cup at the Last Supper, he said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you." Jesus' body and blood are the new covenant which the prophets foretold. When God establishes the new covenant through the Eucharist, it is truly written on our hearts.

**Understanding Covenant:** A covenant is a binding agreement between two parties. This agreement may be between two equals, or a superior and an inferior. A covenant may oblige both parties to keep it, or only one. The biblical understanding of covenant begins in the Old Testament (testament means "covenant") and is rooted in God's unconditional love for his people. Over and over, despite Israel's repeated infidelity, God promised to shower his mercy and love. He promised to do so by:

- agreeing to continue life on earth (Noah; Gn 9:8-17);
- creating a special people and blessing them with land (Abraham; Gn 15-17);
- rescuing Israel from slavery and making them a holy nation (Moses; Ex 6:7);
- sending Israel a king and promising a Messiah (David; 2 Sm 7:14);
- writing his law on their hearts (Jer 31:33-34).

In the New Testament, Christ established a new and eternal covenant through his own sacrificial death and Resurrection. By giving us his Son, the Father faithfully and lovingly kept his covenant with us from now through eternity. The New Covenant is a law of love, grace, and freedom. Jesus, the supreme sign of God's love for us, draws us into his Body, showers us with gifts, relates to us as individuals, and invites us to share in his love by serving others.

**The Eucharist Is the Presence of God Within and Among Us:** One of the main truths that the Israelites recognized about their relationship with God was that he was present within and among the community. This presence was part of the essence of being God's chosen people. When the Temple was built in Jerusalem, God promised to be present there forever. But when the people of Israel were unfaithful to him, God allowed Israel to be overrun. He allowed the people to be dispersed throughout the world to places where they were far from God's presence.

Through the prophets God made it clear that once he established the new covenant he would be present to his people wherever they were and forever. As the prophet Ezekiel says: "I will make with them a covenant of peace; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them, and I will multiply them, and put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling shall be with them, I will be their God, and they shall be my people (Ez 31:26-21).

In the Eucharist God fulfills this pledge of a new covenant and makes his dwelling with us. Jesus is present in many ways in the celebration of the Eucharist: "He is present in the community which is gathered in his name. He is present in the Scripture which is his word. He is present in the person of the priest. And he is present in a unique way in the bread and wine which become his body and blood."

The manner of Christ's presence in the eucharistic species (the bread and wine) is unique. This presence is called "real presence" because it is presence in the fullest sense. As the Council of Trent taught, in the consecrated bread and wine "the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained" (DS, 1651).

To better understand the presence of Christ in the Eucharistic species, it is necessary to understand what the Church teaches about the change that occurs in the species of bread and wine. It is during the consecration that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ while maintaining the appearance of bread and wine. The consecration occurs during the eucharistic prayer when the priest says and does what Christ said and did at the Last Supper. We express our faith in the real presence of Christ under the species of bread and wine at the time of consecration. The priest bows or genuflects as a sign of adoration. The assembly respectfully kneels in silence.

The term that the Church uses for this change from bread and wine to the body and blood of Christ is transubstantiation. Transubstantiation is a concept that has its roots in Greek philosophy, specifically in Aristotle's physics. Aristotle taught that every object could be defined by its substance and its accidents. The accidents were those things which could be perceived by human senses. The substance was what gave an object its true identity and formed its relationship to the world.

Following the consecration, the accidents of the bread and wine - those things which we can perceive - remain unchanged, but the substance - the true identity of the bread and wine, and their relationship to the world - has changed completely. What was once bread and wine is now Christ and relates to the world as Christ. Those who treat the consecrated elements as bread and wine are being disrespectful whether they mean to be or not. Those who look beyond the bread and wine and recognize and respond to the presence of Christ in the elements perceive and respect the one who is really there.

When we eat and drink the consecrated bread and wine it changes us in a way that is unlike any other food. This is because the nourishment which the Eucharist gives us is the nourishment of Christ himself. When we eat ordinary food, it is incorporated into our bodies and we are changed because of its presence. When we eat and drink the Eucharist, Christ is incorporated into our bodies and we are changed because of his presence. (It is important to understand that the bread and wine become Christ, but Christ is not restricted in them.) There is an old saying, "you are what you eat." This is true in a very profound way in the Eucharist. We eat the body of Christ in order to become the body of Christ. If we are the body of Christ, then God is in our midst forever.

The Eucharistic presence of Christ endures as long as the Eucharistic species exist. Christ is wholly and entirely present in each of the parts (bread and wine). That is why the broken bread does not divide Christ. Nor does reception of only ' the Eucharistic bread or the Eucharistic wine somehow mean one has received only part of Christ. Also, the Church has always maintained the practice of venerating the consecrated hosts in solemn adoration outside of Mass, both communally and individually. The tabernacle is the place where the consecrated hosts are kept, and it should always be constructed and placed in a way that emphasizes the real presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament.

**Tracing the Meaning of Sacrifice:** Sacrifice was a central concept for Jews of Jesus' time. In fact, sacrifice was the highest form of worship. Through their sacrifices, the people expressed their deepest feelings of gratitude for their unique relationship with God. They sacrificed objects of value to God as a sign of their desire to offer themselves to God. the giving of an animal or of the finest produce from the harvest was understood as giving of one's very self.

This gift-giving was what was really important in the Jewish understanding of sacrifice. The fact that the sacrifice was destroyed—usually burnt—was secondary. The intent was not to destroy something, but to give it to God. The altar within the Temple was understood as a symbol of the divine. When a gift was brought in contact with the altar it was a symbol that ownership had been transferred to God.

The more solemn the sacrifice, the more precious the gift that was brought. For the most solemn sacrifices people brought animals. The blood of the animal was seen as the most sacred part of the offering. When the blood of a sacrificial animal was poured on the altar, the life that had come from God was being returned to God. The rest of the offering was burnt so that its smoke would rise to heaven, to the throne of God. When the sacrifice was an apology for sin, the destruction of the thing that was offered served a second purpose as well. The fact that its owner could no longer use or benefit from it was seen as a form of compensation for the sin. As both a gift and a form of compensation offered for an offense, a sacrifice was understood to restore or strengthen the relationship between God and those who offered the sacrifice with sincere hearts.

When the prophet Isaiah spoke of the Suffering Servant he used the language of sacrifice. He described the Suffering Servant as giving "his life as an offering for sin" (Is 53:10). Isaiah said that the sins of the people had created a gulf between them and God (see Is 59:2, New Jerusalem translation). This gulf kept growing no matter how many sacrifices were offered because human gifts to God are always incomplete. We always hold something of ourselves back. Each time the people of Israel offered a sacrifice to God they held something back, therefore their relationship with God was not fully restored. There was a distance between them and God which grew greater with each sin and each imperfect sacrifice. Only a perfect sacrifice, a life truly given with nothing held back, could restore the broken relationship completely.

All four of the gospels report that Jesus used the Passover to institute the Eucharist, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And, after the meal, "This cup is the New Covenant in my Blood, that will be poured out for you" (Lk 22:19-20). It was through this action that Christ gave the Passover its ultimate meaning and anticipated the final Passover of the Church in the glory of his kingdom.

In the Eucharist, we both remember and proclaim the great works God has done for us. The events of our salvation become present and actual. In the Eucharist, Christ is now carrying out his sacrifice of the cross. The Eucharist is a sacrifice because in it Christ gives us the very body he gave up on the cross, and the very blood which he "poured out for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:28)

The sacrifice of Christ on the cross and the sacrifice of Eucharist are one single sacrifice, as the Council of Trent taught: "the victim is one and the same: the same now offers through the ministry of priests, who then offered himself on the cross, on the manner of offering is different."

Jesus continues to offer the sacrifice of himself in the bread and wine each time the Eucharist is offered by bishops and priests ordained in the sacrament of Holy Orders. Each Eucharist is not a new sacrifice. Rather, each Eucharist is the presence in our midst of the one eternal sacrifice which Jesus made on the cross more than two thousand years ago. As the Catechism explains: "In order to leave them a pledge of this love, in order to never depart from his own and make them sharers in his Passover, he instituted as the Eucharist as the memorial of his death and Resurrection, and commanded his apostles to celebrate it until his return; "thereby he constituted them priests of the New Testament" (1337).

**The Eucharist is the Perfect Sacrifice:** Sacrifice comes from a Latin word that means "to make holy" or "to do something holy." Holiness refers to sharing in God's life and love. But only God can make us holy. Only God has the power to share his divine life with us.

The Eucharist is one way God makes us holy and shares his life with us. The Eucharist is a sacrifice instituted by the Lord at the Last Supper. It re-presents (makes present) Christ's sacrifice on the cross. The shedding of Christ's blood on the cross was the supreme sign of his love for us. In re-presenting the sacrifice of the cross, the Mass is the action that makes us holy and pleasing to God.

The Eucharist is a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving for the work of creation. The eucharistic sacrifice thanks God for all he has accomplished through creation, redemption, and sanctification. The Eucharist also praises God in the name of all creation. This sacrifice of praise can only be made through Christ. Christ unites us to his praise and to his intercession so that the sacrifice of praise to the Father is

offered through Christ and with him, and through the work of the Holy Spirit is accepted in Christ. The Eucharist also makes Christ's sacrifice on the cross present, memorializing it and applying its fruits to the members of the Church. The same Christ who died for our sins is the one who continues to offer the Eucharist in an unbloody manner.

**A Sacrifice of the Church:** As the sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are now one single sacrifice. Christ intended for this to be so. As the Council of Trent taught, "Because his priesthood was not to end with his death, at the Last Supper... he wanted to leave... the Church a visible sacrifice (as the nature of man demands) by which the bloody sacrifice which he was to accomplish once for all on the cross would be re-presented, its memory perpetuated until the end of the world, and its salutary power be applied to the forgiveness of the sins we daily commit (DS, 1743).

The Eucharist is also the sacrifice of the entire Church. In the Eucharist, our praise, sufferings, prayer, and work are united with Christ and his total offering so that they take on new meaning and value. The Eucharist makes it possible for all generations of Christians to be united with his offering.

The whole Church is really united with the sacrifice of Christ. That is why the Eucharistic prayer always contains an aspect of intercession. We pray for:

- the Pope, who is a sign and servant of the Church's universal unity;
- the bishop, who is responsible for the Eucharist in his diocese, even when a priest is the presider;
- priests and deacons - the clergy - are remembered with their bishop;
- the faithful, especially the dead, are remembered.

Through the ministry of the priest the spiritual sacrifice of the entire Church is united with the sacrifice of Christ, which is "offered through the priests' hands in the name of the whole Church in an unbloody and sacramental manner until the Lord himself comes" {Presbyterorum ordinis 2 § 4). '

Also, Christ's sacrificial offering is made for those already in heaven. The Church offers the Eucharist in communion with Mary and all the saints. The eucharistic sacrifice is also for the faithful who have died but who are not wholly purified.

Prior to her death, St. Monica asked her son, St. Augustine, not to worry about where her body would be buried. Rather, she only wanted him to pray for her at Mass. She said to him, "Put this body anywhere! Don't trouble yourselves about it! I simply ask you to remember me at the Lord's altar wherever you are." The Church offers the sacrifice of the Mass for all so that the light and peace of Christ might fully embrace them.

**The Eucharist Is a Sacred Family Meal - The Lord's Supper:** The Mass is both a sacrifice and "the sacred banquet of communion with the Lord's body and blood" (CCC, 1382). The altar itself represents the two aspects of the same mystery: it is both an altar of sacrifice and the table of the Lord.

Jesus instituted the Eucharist in the context of a Jewish ritual meal. Because of its context within a meal, the Eucharist is both a sacrament of self-giving love and sacrifice, and also a sacrament of fellowship and of mutual exchange. When we examine all of the dynamics of people eating together we gain a better understanding of the meaning of the Eucharist.

Every Jewish meal in Jesus' time was a religious event which began and ended with a grace. The grace before meals involved a ritual with bread and a short prayer blessing the Creator. The grace after meals involved a ritual with wine and a prayer of blessing, thanksgiving, and petition. The Jewish people of Jesus' day saw their dependence upon food as a reminder of their dependence upon God. In the meal they recognized that they had been blessed. They then returned a blessing to God and were in turn blessed again. As they blessed God, God's life-giving love descended upon their table and upon their lives.

In the early Church the Eucharist was accompanied by a larger shared meal. In his first letter to the Corinthians (11:17-22), St. Paul chastised the community because the rich were sharing the Eucharist with the poor, but not sharing the rest of their food. If they were willing to share the body and blood of Christ, the most delicious and most nourishing food in the world, how could they not share everything else? If they were unwilling to share everything else it would seem that they had not really recognized the Eucharist for what it was. Their selfishness was making a mockery of their faith. The Church today must ask the same questions that Paul

asked the Corinthians. How well do we understand the requirements that Eucharist calls us to in serving the needs of others?

**The Eucharist Is a Holy Communion:** In the early Church the Eucharist and the unity of the Christian community were understood as two parts of the same mystery. When he wrote to the Corinthians, Paul easily shifted between writing about the body of Christ as community and the body of Christ as Eucharist (see 1 Cor 11:17-33 and 12:12 ff). In the Didache we find this same connection in the prayer spoken by the priest over the bread: “Even as this broken bread was scattered over the hill, and was gathered together becoming one, so let your Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom (Didache, Chapter 14). And Jesus himself said, 'If you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift (Mt 5:23-24).

The Eucharist is the sign and source of our unity. If there is anything which interferes in a significant way with that unity, it should be dealt with before we share the Eucharist. If it is not, we will be receiving the Eucharist unworthily. If there are obstacles to unity which we have no intention of removing, the pledge of unity which we make in the Eucharist will be a lie. Note that this is the reason the Catholic Church does not welcome non-Catholics to share the Eucharist with us except in very unusual circumstances. Until we are ready and able to heal the divisions between our denominations we will not be ready to share the sacrament of unity with one another.

In the early Church the Eucharist was seen as the most significant sign of the unity of the Christian community. Each Sunday, all of the Christians in a particular region would gather together for a single celebration of the Eucharist, presided at by the bishop. As the number of Christians under the care of each bishop grew, there was a need for more eucharistic services. These were presided over by priests who were understood as the bishop's surrogates.

As a sign that these separate celebrations were all part of the one celebration presided over by the bishop, the bishop would send a piece of the consecrated bread from the Mass at which he presided to each of the other churches within »

his region. The piece of eucharistic bread was dropped into the chalice. The Church continues this practice today as a sign of unity and a reminder of this ancient ceremony. It is also a reminder of the unity of the entire Church. The naming of the pope and the local bishop during the eucharistic prayer is also a sign of the unity of the universal Church.

Through the Eucharist we are united with those who have already -joined Christ in heaven. The naming of the communion of saints in the eucharistic prayer is a reminder of this. When we eat the body and blood of Christ we are given a share in the intimate communion of the Trinity. Through the Eucharist, as through the gift of the Holy Spirit, Jesus fulfills the promise which he made to his disciples when he said, "On that day you will realize that I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you" (Jn 14:20).

**The Eucharist Is Heaven on Earth:** The Church calls the Eucharist a foretaste of the heavenly banquet (see CCC, 1090). In a sense it is the hors d'oeuvres before the main course. Just as hors d'oeuvres are small tastes intended to whet our appetite for the main course and sustain us until it comes, so the Eucharist is a small taste intended to whet our appetite for, and sustain us until, the feast of heaven. When we share in the Eucharist we participate in the heavenly banquet at which Christ is presiding. However, our participation is not yet the full participation of heaven. In the Eucharist we must experience the banquet through the signs of bread and wine. In heaven we will experience the banquet directly. y

Jesus used images of feasts—particularly of a wedding feast—when he spoke about the kingdom of God. Regarding the Eucharist, Jesus said, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life" (Jn 6:54). Eternal life is a future concept, something that belongs with heaven. But Jesus speaks in the present tense. The one who participates in the Eucharist already has eternal life. In the Eucharist the future and the present are the same. In the Eucharist God's great feast has begun.

Old Testament biblical tradition also used the image of a meal to talk about the day when the Messiah would come in triumph. The words of the prophet Isaiah expressed this most clearly when he described what would happen in the messianic age: "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will provide for all peoples a feast of rich

food and choice wines, juicy, rich food and pure, choice wines. On this mountain he will destroy the veil that veils all peoples, the web that is woven over all nations; he will destroy death forever (Is 25:6-7).

**Historical Development of the Liturgy of the Eucharist:** The ritual Jewish meal of Jesus' time was a model for the Eucharist. For example, the prayer which is spoken over the bread at a Jewish ritual meal is: "Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, you who have brought bread forth from the earth." Much of Jesus' ministry in the Gospels took place in the context of a meal where this blessing would have been offered. This blessing is the origin of the prayer which the priest speaks over the bread during the offertory: "Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made. It will become for us the bread of life."

When the early Christian community celebrated the Eucharist, they did what Jesus did at the Last Supper. According to all of the New Testament accounts of the Eucharist Jesus followed the basic format of the Jewish meal:

- taking the bread
- speaking the prayer of blessing
- breaking the bread
- distributing the bread to those who were gathered
- taking the cup
- offering the prayer of blessing
- sharing the cup with those who were present

All subsequent liturgies were built around these seven actions.

Justin Martyr (ca. AD 155) wrote the first surviving outline of the Mass. It began with a liturgy of the Word, the sharing of readings from the memoirs of the apostles (New Testament) or the writings of the prophets (Old Testament). These readings, which at times were quite lengthy, were followed by a sermon. After the sermon everyone stood for the prayers of the faithful. The prayers were followed by the kiss of peace. Then the people brought forward the bread and wine (and water on the occasion of baptism) which they had brought from home. The presider (bishop or priest) accepted these gifts and offered prayers of thanksgiving "at some length." When he finished praying the congregation gave their assent by

saying, "Amen," the Hebrew for "so be it." The deacons were then called forward to distribute the consecrated elements to all who were present. Justin makes it clear that the bread and wine were no longer "common bread or common drink." He writes, "just as our Savior Jesus Christ. . . took flesh and blood for our salvation, so too we have been taught that the food over which thanks have been given by a word of prayer which is from him . . . is both the flesh and blood of that incarnate Jesus (Justin Martyr, First Apology).

Many of the prayers which we use today at Eucharist date back to the time of Justin Martyr. The introductory dialogue of the liturgy of the Eucharist (e.g., "The Lord be with you. And also with you. Lift up your hearts. We lift them up to the Lord ...") is all found in Justin's account.

*The Apostolic Tradition*, generally believed to have been written by Hippolytus around 215, outlines prayers and an order of worship that are even closer to today's liturgical style. Other eucharistic rites from the third century and early fourth century reflect the same basic structure. The only structural difference between the third century liturgy of the Eucharist and today's is that the liturgy of the third century does not include the Sanctus ("Holy, holy") or the preface (the prayer which precedes the account of Christ's saving work). Both of these prayers entered the liturgy in the fourth century. Although the basic form of the liturgy was the same in most places in the early Church, the specific words of the prayers varied considerably from place to place.

**The Celebration of the Eucharist Today:** The CCC says: "The liturgy of the Eucharist unfolds according to a fundamental structure which has been preserved throughout the centuries down to our own day. It displays two great parts that form a fundamental unity: the gathering, the liturgy of the Word, with readings, homily, and general intercessions, the liturgy of the Eucharist, with the presentation of the bread and wine, the consecratory thanksgiving, and communion. The liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist together form "one single act of worship " the Eucharistic table set for us is the table both of the Word of God and of the Body of the Lord (1346).

**Gathering Rites:** The celebration of Eucharist begins as Christians come together in one place. Christ is at the head of the assembly, and he is the one who presides

over every Eucharistic celebration. The bishop or priest acts in the person of Christ the head, presiding over the assembly, speaking after the readings, receiving the offerings, and saying the Eucharistic Prayer. Because Christ has chosen to act through his apostles and their successors, the presence of a bishop or priest is necessary for a valid eucharistic liturgy.

Once the people, including the priest, have gathered they take some time to prepare themselves to encounter the Lord. With one voice they offer prayers of praise, confession, and repentance. The gathering rites help people move from acting and praying as scattered individuals to acting and praying as a unified community.

**The Liturgy of the Word** follows the gathering rites. During the Liturgy of the Word, God speaks three times and the community responds three times. First we hear the word of God in the Old Testament (or in the book of Acts during the Easter season) and we respond with a psalm. Then we hear the word of God in the epistles. Finally we sing the "Alleluia," hear the word of God in the gospel, and we respond with the prayers of the faithful. Between the gospel and the prayers of the faithful the priest (or deacon) gives a homily. The purpose of the homily is to encourage the assembly to accept the Scripture readings as the Word of God and to put them into practice. The prayers of the faithful are the first step in accepting and acting on what we heard.

**The presentation of the offerings (Offertory)** follows the Liturgy of the Word. The bread and wine which we offer are both the gift of God and the work of human hands that cultivated them. We offer them to God as a sign of our gratitude for creation and as a sign of our desire to offer ourselves. When we bring them forward we are putting them and all that they represent into Christ's hands. He will take them just as he took the bread and wine at the Last Supper, and he will join them to his own sacrifice on the cross so that they will be perfected.

In Jesus' time the Jews had a practice of distributing a "bread of the poor" for the needy in their community. The early Christians continued this practice. When they brought the bread and wine for the Eucharist they also brought food to share with the poor. Beginning in the eleventh century the food was replaced with gifts of money.

**The Eucharistic Prayer** (also called the anaphora) is the heart and summit of the Mass. The eucharistic prayer is the prayer of thanksgiving and consecration. The prayer begins with the preface during which the Church gives thanks to the Father, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit, for all his works: creation, redemption, and sanctification. The preface ends with the Sanctus (Holy, holy . . . ), the unending hymn of praise of the angels and all the Church in heaven.

The epiclesis is the next part of the eucharistic prayer. The Church asks the Father to send the Holy Spirit onto the bread and wine. Through the power of the Spirit the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ and those who receive them become one body and one spirit. The priest holds his hands palms down over the gift of bread and wine. The epiclesis is followed by the institution narrative. During the institution narrative the priest gives Christ his voice and his hands (see *Mediator Dei*, #69). The priest does not act out what Christ did. Instead he allows Christ to act through him. By the power of the words and actions of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ's body and blood—his sacrifice offered on the cross - are made present.

**The anamnesis** follows the narrative of institution. The word "anamnesis" refers to active remembering, bringing the present into intimate contact with the past. During the anamnesis the Church calls to mind Christ's passion, death, and resurrection and his return in glory. The memorial acclamation is part of the anamnesis.

The offering follows next. After the Church recalls - and thereby makes present—what Christ has done, she offers his sacrifice to the Father. This offering is followed by intercessions (prayers) for the pastors of the Church and all the faithful both living and dead. The intercessions are a sign of the unity of the Church throughout the world and of the unity of the Church on earth and in heaven.

The eucharistic prayer concludes with a doxology, a prayer of praise. Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours almighty Father for ever and ever. The congregation responds with the great Amen. This "Amen" is our response to an affirmation of the entire eucharistic prayer..

The last major portion of the liturgy of the eucharist is the communion rite. As the Catechism points out: "The faithful receive "the bread of heaven" and "the cup of salvation," the body and blood of Christ who offered himself "for the life of the world" (1355). Nourished by the body and blood of Christ the congregation is then sent out into the world to be Christ for others.

**The Eucharist Sends Us Into the World:** The word "Mass" comes from the Latin word for dismissal. In a sense, the aim of the Eucharist is to dismiss us, to send us out to be Christ for the world. The Eucharist does for our spiritual selves what ordinary food does for our bodies. It nourishes us and strengthens us so that we can live and so that we can do the other things we want and need to do. The Eucharist accomplishes this by deepening our union with Jesus. As Jesus himself said, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him" (Jn 6:56). When we are united with Jesus we are able to do God's will in the world.

Because the Eucharist unites us with Jesus, it separates us from sin. Sin causes and is caused by distance from God. When we were baptized all of our sins were washed away. Any distance between God and us was overcome and we were united with God. Over time, however, our own weakness causes us to drift away from God again, and the farther we drift the greater our tendency to sin.

The Eucharist continually draws us back to God. It fills us with Jesus' own love. By filling us with divine love, the Eucharist wipes away venial sin (CCC, 1394). Venial sins are those sins which weaken our love for God and for one another but which do not rupture or destroy that love. When we open our hearts to the love which is given to us in the Eucharist the weaknesses in our own ability to love are eliminated. The Eucharist also preserves us from future mortal sins - those sins which actually destroy love and break our relationship with God or with God's people. The mortal sins that we do commit need the sacrament of Reconciliation for healing.

The Eucharist sends us out into the world ready to love more completely. What is more, it sends us out not only as loving individuals, but also as a loving community. The Eucharist strengthens the bonds between all who receive and makes it possible for us to demonstrate among ourselves the love which we are to share with the world. The Eucharist makes us one body in Christ. When we rec-

ognize that we are one body, we will care for each other and the world will see what it means to be a disciple of Christ (see Jn 13:35). When we eat and drink the Eucharist without recognizing the body of Christ that we are both eating and becoming. We "eat and drink judgment upon [ourselves]" (1 Cor 11:29).

Finally, the Eucharist sends us out into the world to care for those who are most in need. Because we have received so much in the Eucharist we are expected also to give. As the Didache instructed the early Christians: "Do not hesitate to give, nor complain when you give.. ..Do not turn away from him who is in want; rather, share all things with your brother, and do not say that they are your own. For if you are partakers in that which is immortal, how much more in things which are mortal?" Or as St. John Chrysostom put it: "You dishonor this [Eucharistic] 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" (Chapter 4).

**The Eucharist Requires Preparation:** As with all the sacraments, the Eucharist imparts grace every time it is celebrated and every time it is receive^ This grace can only bear fruit, however, if those who receive it are properly prepared to act upon it and to allow it to shape their lives. In other words, although the Eucharist always gives us the ability to love more deeply and serve more generously, we must choose to use this ability. In order to prepare ourselves to receive the Eucharist we need to take time to reflect upon the current state of our relationship with God. We need to turn to God with love and ask him to fill us with an even deeper love. If we are aware of any mortal sin which we have committed we must receive the sacrament of Reconciliation before receiving communion.

Because we are physical as well as spiritual people, we must prepare for communion physically as well as spiritually. We are called to observe a period of fast before communion in order to allow ourselves to develop a hunger for it. In the United States this fast is one hour. We should also prepare ourselves physically as we would for any other important event. The Church challenges us to pay attention to our gestures, posture, and clothing so that we are saying with our bodies what we wish to be saying with our hearts.

All those who have prepared themselves to receive the body and blood of Christ into their hearts and lives as well as into their body are encouraged to receive communion each time they participate in the Mass. And in fact, Catholics are obliged to participate in the liturgy on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation. They are also required to receive the Eucharist at least once a year, if possible during the Easter season {CCC, 1389}.

**The Eucharist Is the Pledge of Our future Glory:** At the Last Supper, Jesus told his disciples to look forward to the coming glory of God's kingdom. He said: "I shall not drink again the fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God" (Mk 14:25). The Church never forgets this promise of Jesus' whenever Eucharist is celebrated. In prayer, the Church calls for Jesus' coming: a Maranatha which means, "Come, Lord Jesus!" Jesus comes to the Church at Eucharist and is in our midst. However, his presence is veiled. Therefore the Church celebrates the Eucharist while awaiting Jesus' coming. In the Eucharist, we have a foretaste of heaven, and long for eternal life when we will be with the Church, Mary, and all the saints in heaven.

St. Pius X loved the Eucharist and encouraged the frequent reception of Holy Communion. He said, "Holy Communion is the shortest and safest way to heaven. There are others: innocence, but that is for little children-, penance, but we are afraid of it; generous endurance of trials of life, but when they come we weep and ask to be spared. The surest, easiest, shortest way is the Eucharist.

### **Names for the Sacrament:**

- The sacrament of Eucharist is expressed by many different names. It is called Eucharist because it is an action of thanksgiving to God. Each of these other names tells more about its meaning. Some of these names are:
- The Lord's Supper because of its connection with the Last Supper. The Breaking of Bread because Jesus used this ancient Jewish rite at the Last Supper. Also, it was in this action that Jesus' disciples recognized him after his resurrection.
- The Eucharistic assembly because the Eucharist is celebrated with the Church.

- The memorial because it remembers Christ's passion and resurrection. The Holy Sacrifice because it makes present the one sacrifice of Christ and includes the Church's offering.
- The Holy and Divine Liturgy because the Church's entire liturgy is centered in the celebration of this sacrament. In the same sense, it is also called the celebration of the Sacred Mysteries.
- Holy Communion because in this sacrament we united ourselves to Christ.
- Holy Mass because the liturgy concludes with our "sending forth" so that we can fulfill God's will in our daily lives.