

Topic 22: The Eucharist (I)

The Eucharist makes Jesus Christ present. He invites us to accept the salvation that He offers us, and to receive the gift of His Body and Blood as the food of eternal life. Our Lord announced the Eucharist during his public life and instituted this sacrament at the Last Supper. When the Church celebrates this sacrament, she follows the Eucharistic rite carried out by Christ at the Last Supper.

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1. *Sacramental nature of the Holy Eucharist*

The Eucharist is the sacrament which makes present, in the liturgical celebration of the Church, the Person of Jesus Christ (the whole Christ: Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity) and his redemptive sacrifice, in the fullness of the Paschal Mystery of his Passion, Death and Resurrection.

This presence is not static or passive, like that of an object in a given place, but active, because our Lord makes himself present with the dynamism of his saving love. In the Eucharist, He invites us to accept the salvation He offers us and to receive the gift of his Body and Blood as the food of eternal life. Christ thus allows us to enter into communion with Him – with his Person and his Sacrifice –

and into communion with all the members of his Mystical Body, the Church.

Indeed, as the Second Vatican Council affirms, “At the Last Supper, on the night when He was betrayed, our Saviour instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice of His Body and Blood. He did this in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the Cross throughout the centuries until He should come again, and so to entrust to His beloved spouse, the Church, a memorial of His death and resurrection: a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a paschal banquet in which Christ is eaten, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 47).

2. Promise of the Eucharist and its institution

Our Lord foretold the Eucharist during his public life, in the

Synagogue of Capernaum. On this occasion, Jesus spoke to those who had followed him after witnessing the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves, with which He satisfied the multitude (cf. Jn 6:1-13). Jesus took advantage of this sign to reveal his identity and his mission, and to promise the Eucharist: “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world.’ They said to him, ‘Lord, give us this bread always.’ Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life . . . I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh . . . he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my

blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me” (cf. Jn 6:32-57).

Christ instituted this sacrament at the Last Supper. The three synoptic Gospels (cf. Mt 26:17-30; Mk 14:12-26; Lk 22:7-20) and Saint Paul (cf. 1 Cor 11:23-26) have handed down to us the account of this institution. Here is the summary of their narrative given in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the passover lamb had to be sacrificed. So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, ‘Go and prepare the passover meal for us, that we may eat it. . . .’ They went . . . and prepared the Passover. And when the hour came, he sat at table, and the apostles with him. And he said to them, ‘I have earnestly desired to eat this passover with you

before I suffer; for I tell you I shall not eat it again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.' ... And he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And likewise the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup which is poured out for you is the New Covenant in my blood'" (*Catechism*, 1339).

Jesus thus celebrated the Last Supper in the context of the Jewish Passover, but our Lord's Supper contained a radical novelty. At the centre is not the lamb of the Old Passover, but Christ himself, his "very body which he gave up" (offered in sacrifice to the Father, for the sake of humanity) and "the very blood which he 'poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'" (*Catechism*, 1365). We can therefore say that Jesus, rather than celebrating the Old

Passover, announced and realised – by sacramentally anticipating it – the New Passover.

3. Meaning and content of our Lord's command

Jesus' explicit command: "Do this in remembrance of me [as a memorial of me]" (Lk 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24-25) shows the specifically institutional character of the Last Supper. With this command, He asks us to correspond to his gift and to re-present it sacramentally (to do it again, to repeat his presence: the presence of his Body given and his Blood poured out, that is, of his sacrifice for the remission of our sins).

"Do this." In this way, Jesus designated those who can celebrate the Eucharist (the Apostles and their successors in the priesthood), entrusted to them the power to carry out this sacrament, and determined

the fundamental elements of the rite. These elements are the ones that He himself made use of at the Last Supper. Thus, for the celebration of the Eucharist it is necessary to have the presence of the bread and wine, the prayer of thanksgiving and blessing, the consecration of the gifts into the Body and Blood of the Lord, as well as the distribution of and communion with the Blessed Sacrament.

“In remembrance of me [as a memorial of me].” With these words, Christ commanded the Apostles, as well as his successors in the priesthood, to celebrate a new “memorial,” which replaced that of the Old Passover. This memorial rite has a particular efficacy. Not only does it help the believing community to “remember” Christ’s redeeming love, as well as our Lord’s words and gestures at the Last Supper, but also, as a sacrament of the New Law, it

makes objectively present the reality signified: Christ, “our paschal lamb” (1 Cor 5:7), and his redeeming sacrifice.

4. Liturgical celebration of the Eucharist

The Church, obedient to our Lord’s command, promptly celebrated the Eucharist in Jerusalem (Acts 2:42-48), in Troas (cf. Acts 20:7-11), in Corinth (cf. 1 Cor 10:14,21; 1 Cor 11:20-34), and in all the places where Christianity arrived. “It was above all on ‘the first day of the week,’ Sunday, the day of Jesus’ resurrection, that the Christians met ‘to break bread’ (Acts 20:7). From that time on down to our own day the celebration of the Eucharist has been continued so that today we encounter it everywhere in the Church with the same fundamental structure” (*Catechism*, 1343).

When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, faithful to the command of Jesus and guided by the “Spirit of truth” (Jn 16:13), who is the Holy Spirit, she does nothing other than follow the Eucharistic rite carried out by our Lord at the Last Supper. The essential elements of the Eucharistic celebration in the Church’s life cannot be other than those of the original Eucharist, namely: a) the assembly of Christ’s disciples, convoked by Him and gathered around Him; and b) the carrying out of the new memorial rite.

a) The Eucharistic assembly

From the beginning of the Church’s life, the Christian assembly that celebrates the Eucharist has been hierarchically structured: it typically consists of the bishop or a priest (who presides in a priestly manner over the Eucharistic celebration and acts in the person of Christ, Head of

the Church), the deacon, other ministers and the faithful, all united by the bond of faith and baptism. All the members of this assembly are called to participate consciously, devoutly and actively in the Eucharistic liturgy, each according to their proper role: the priest celebrant, the lectors, the deacon, those who present the gifts, the minister of communion, and the whole people, whose “Amen” manifests their real participation (cf. *Catechism*, 1348). Therefore, each person should fulfil his or her own function, without confusion between the ministerial priesthood, the common priesthood of the faithful, and the ministry of the deacon and other possible ministers.

The role of the ministerial priesthood in the celebration of the Eucharist is essential. Only the validly ordained priest can consecrate the Holy Eucharist, pronouncing *in persona*

Christi (“in the person of Christ,” that is, in specific sacramental identification with the eternal High Priest, Jesus Christ) the words of consecration (cf. *Catechism*, 1369). No Christian community is capable of providing for itself an ordained minister. “This minister is a gift which the assembly *receives through episcopal succession going back to the Apostles*. It is the Bishop who, through the Sacrament of Holy Orders, makes a new presbyter by conferring upon him the power to consecrate the Eucharist.”^[1]

b) Parts of the celebration

Since the Church’s origin, the celebration of the Eucharist has developed in two great moments, which together form one single act of worship: the “Liturgy of the Word” (which includes the proclamation and the hearing/reception of the Word of God), and

the “Eucharistic Liturgy” (comprising the offering of the bread and wine, the anaphora or Eucharistic prayer – with the words of consecration – and communion). These two main parts are circumscribed by the rites of introduction and conclusion (cf. *Catechism*, 1349-1355). No one may take away or add by their own desire anything that has been established by the Church in the Liturgy of the Holy Mass.

The essential and necessary elements for the sacramental sign of the Eucharist are, on the one hand, bread of wheat flour^[2] and the wine of grapes;^[3] and, on the other hand, the words of consecration, which the priest celebrant pronounces *in persona Christi*, in the context of the “Eucharistic Prayer.” By virtue of our Lord’s words and the power of the Holy Spirit, the bread and wine become efficacious signs, with fullness of being and not only of

meaning, of the presence of Christ's Body given up and his Blood that has been shed, that is, of his Person and his redemptive sacrifice (cf. *Catechism*, 1333 and 1375).

5. *Real Eucharistic Presence*

In the celebration of the Eucharist, the Person of Christ – the incarnate Word, who was crucified, died and rose again for the salvation of the world – is made present in a unique, supernatural, and mysterious form of presence. The foundation of this doctrine is found in the very institution of the Eucharist, when Jesus identified the gifts He offered with his Body and Blood (“this is my Body..., this is my Blood...”), that is, with his physical body which is inseparably united to the Word, and therefore with his entire Person.

Certainly, Christ Jesus is present in many ways in his Church: in his Word, in the common prayer of

disciples (cf. Mt 18:20), in the poor, the sick, the imprisoned (cf. Mt 25:31-46), in the sacraments, and especially in the person of the ordained minister. But, *above all*, he is present in the Eucharistic species (cf. *Catechism*, 1373).

The uniqueness of the Eucharistic presence of Christ lies in the fact that the Blessed Sacrament truly, really and substantially contains the Body and Blood together with the Soul and Divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ, true God and perfect Man, the same who was born of the Virgin Mary, died on the Cross and is now seated in heaven at the right hand of the Father. "This presence is called 'real' – by which is not intended to exclude the other types of presence as if they could not be 'real' too, but because it is presence in the fullest sense: that is to say, it is a *substantial* presence by which Christ, God and man, makes himself wholly and entirely

present” (Pope St. Paul VI, cited *Catechism*, 1374).

The term *substantial* serves to indicate the consistency of Christ’s personal presence in the Eucharist. The Eucharist is not simply a “figure,” capable of “signifying” and leading the mind to think of Christ, who would be present in reality elsewhere, in Heaven. Nor is this sacrament merely a “sign,” by means of which the saving power – grace – which comes from Christ is offered to us. The Eucharist is, in contrast, the objective presence of the being-in-itself (the substance) of the Body and Blood of Christ. That is, this sacrament contains the presence of Christ’s entire Humanity – inseparably united to the Divinity by hypostatic union – although veiled by the “species” or appearances of bread and wine.

Therefore, the presence of the true Body and Blood of Christ in this sacrament, as St. Thomas Aquinas says, “cannot be apprehended by the senses, but only by faith, which relies on divine authority” (cited in *Catechism*, 1381).

The manner of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist is a marvellous mystery. According to the Catholic faith, Jesus Christ is present, whole and entire, with his glorified body, in each of the Eucharistic species. Our Lord is also present whole and entire in each of the parts resulting from the division of the sacramental species, so that the breaking of the bread does not divide Christ (cf. *Catechism*, 1377).^[4] This is a unique form of presence, because it is invisible and intangible; it is also permanent in the sense that, once the consecration has taken place, it lasts for as long as the Eucharistic species remain.

6. *Transubstantiation*

The true, real and substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist requires an extraordinary, supernatural and unique transformation of the substance of the bread and wine. Such a transformation has its foundation in our Lord's own words: "Take, eat; this is my body... Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant" (Mt 26:26-28). Indeed, these words become a reality only if the bread and wine cease to be bread and wine and become the Body and Blood of Christ, because it is impossible that one and the same thing can simultaneously be two different beings: bread and the Body of Christ; wine and the Blood of Christ.

On this point, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: "The Council of Trent summarizes the

Catholic faith by declaring: ‘Because Christ our Redeemer said that it was truly his body that he was offering under the species of bread, it has always been the conviction of the Church of God, and this holy Council now declares again, that by the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called transubstantiation” (no. 1376). However, the appearances of the bread and wine, that is, the “Eucharistic species,” remain unchanged.

Although the senses truly grasp the appearances of bread and wine, the light of faith allows us to know that what is really contained, beneath the veil of the Eucharistic species, is the

substance of the Body and Blood of the Lord. Thanks to the permanence of the sacramental species of the bread, we can affirm that the Body of Christ – his entire Person – is really present on the altar, in the ciborium, and in the tabernacle.

Basic bibliography

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1322-1355.

Recommended reading

Saint John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (17 April 2003).

Pope Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis* (22 February 2007).

Pope Francis, *Catechesis on the Holy Mass* (General Audiences, November 2017 – April 2018).

Saint Josemaría Escrivá, Homily *The Eucharist, mystery of faith and love*, in *Christ Is Passing By*, 83-94; Homily *On the Feast of Corpus Christi*, *ibid.*, 150-161.

^[1] St John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 29.

^[2] Cf. Roman Missal, *Institutio generalis*, 320. In the Latin rite the bread must be unleavened, i.e. not fermented; cf. *ibid.*

^[3] Cf. Roman Missal, *Institutio generalis*, 319. In the Latin Church a

little water is added to the wine; cf. *ibid.* The words that the priest says when adding water to the wine show the meaning of this rite: “By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity” (Roman Missal, Offertory). For the Fathers of the Church, this rite also signifies the union of the Church with Christ in the Eucharistic sacrifice; cf. 63,13: Cf. St. Cyprian, *Ep.* 63, 13:

Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 3, 711.

^[4] For this reason, “communion under the species of bread alone makes it possible to receive all the fruit of Eucharistic grace” (*Catechism*, 1390).

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