

The Eucharist

Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; 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." ~ John 6:53-56

IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN, chapter six contains one of the most explicit teachings on the Eucharist made by Jesus. The chapter begins with a miracle of the multiplication of the loaves, a prefigurement of the Eucharist (see Jn 6:1-14). Immediately following the miracle, because of their lack of understanding, the people intend to make Jesus king. For this reason, Jesus withdraws to the hills (see Jn 6:15). Noticing that he has gone away, the people begin seeking Jesus in Capernaum (see Jn 6:24). When they find him, Jesus teaches them the meaning of the miracle.

He says, "[T]he will of my Father [is] that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life" (Jn 6:40), because he is the "true bread from Heaven" (Jn 6:32) which "gives life to the world" (Jn 6:33). Not only must they believe in him, but also they must eat and drink his Flesh and Blood:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat

the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (see beginning verses). Those who heard the teaching said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to [that is, believe and follow] it?" (Jn 6:60).

"After this [teaching] many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him" (Jn 6:66), but the Twelve remained (see Jn 6:67-69). At the

Last Supper, Jesus gave the Twelve the power to change bread and wine into his Body and Blood (see Mt 26:26-28; Mk 14:22-23; Lk 22:19-20; 1 Cor 11:23-26). Ever since the Last Supper, Christians truly eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood in the Eucharist.

The Eucharist completes Christian initiation, because it is the most intimate union with Christ. Although Jesus is present in the other sacraments, Jesus is fully present in the Eucharist, that is, he is present Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity in the

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Eucharistic species (the consecrated bread and wine). For this reason, the Eucharist is called the Real Presence. Also, for this reason, the Eucharist is the source and summit of all Christian life, a participation in the life in Heaven given to those who believe in him while he is still on earth. In other words, every aspect of the Christian faith leads toward and flows from this sacrament, which is nothing other than Jesus himself. In his love, God also gave to us the Third Commandment, "Remember to keep holy the sabbath day." This commandment, which in Pope John Paul II's words is "a defining and indelible expression of our relationship with God" (*On Keeping the Lord's Day Holy* 13), is transferred in the New Covenant from the sabbath (the seventh day, or Saturday), to the Lord's Day (Sunday) because Sunday was the day when Jesus rose from the dead. We therefore recall God's saving works by honoring the "new day of creation," the weekly Easter. Participation in Sunday Mass is obligatory — a participation which is necessary for the People of God to live as God created them and to praise him rightly as he deserves to be praised. Furthermore, through the Holy Spirit, this required Sunday participation has also

become the first precept of the Church, "You shall attend Mass on Sundays and on holy days of obligation and rest from servile labor"¹ (CCC 2042) (see handout on The Sabbath and Sunday Worship).

Names for the Eucharist

The sacrament of the Eucharist is known by several different names, each revealing some aspect

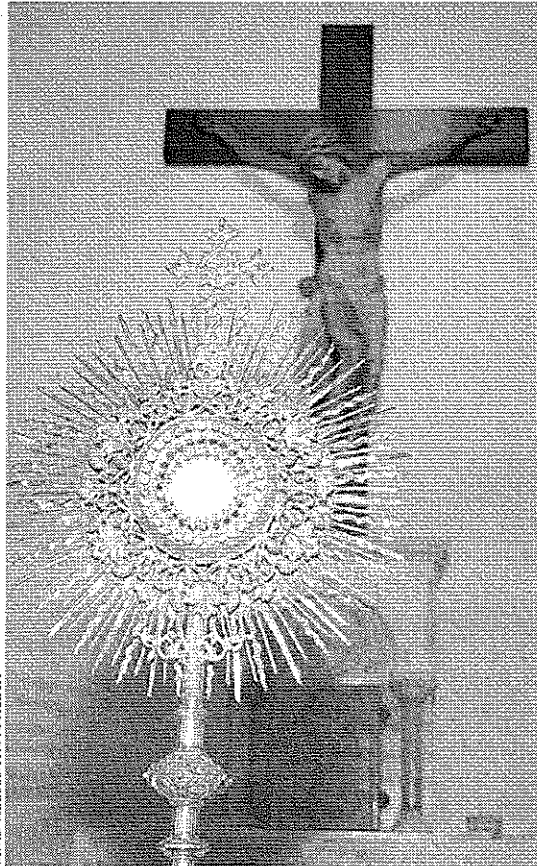
of the sacrament. The name "Eucharist" is drawn from the Greek word *eucharistein*, meaning "to give thanks." This word is found in two of the Last Supper accounts, the Gospel of Luke and St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, a related Greek word *eulogein*, meaning "to bless or praise," is used. Since the Eucharist is celebrated as a community, the celebration is sometimes referred to as the "Eucharistic Assembly."

The name "Lord's Supper" references both the Last Supper and the Heavenly Banquet. During the Last Supper, Jesus first instituted both Holy Orders and the Holy Eucharist when he took, broke, and blessed the bread and wine and instructed the apostles to do this in memory of him (see Lk 22:19-20). The Heavenly Banquet anticipates "the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rv 19:9), when the entire family of God will all be present in glory.

The name "Breaking of the Bread" points to the fact that the Eucharist is prefigured by the Jewish Passover meal that also had a "Breaking of the Bread." When Jesus appeared to the two disciples on the Road to Emmaus, it was not until he broke the bread that "their eyes were opened and they recognized him" (Lk

24:31). This name was also used by the first Christians (see Acts 2:46; Acts 20:7, 11).

The names "Holy and Divine Liturgy" or "Most Blessed Sacrament" state the truth that the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life. It is the sacrament to which all other sacraments lead, because Jesus is really present, Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity.



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*"Christians truly eat
the flesh of the Son of Man
and drink his blood
in the Eucharist."*

¹ Cf. Codex Iuris Canonici, cann. 1246-1248; Corpus Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium, can. 880 § 3, 881 §§ 1,2,4

The name "Sacrifice of the Mass" emphasizes that in the Eucharistic celebration, Jesus' sacrifice of his Body made "once for all" (Heb 10:10) time and all people is truly present. In other words, when we participate in the Eucharist, we join Jesus at the cross. Scripture also uses the names "sacrifice of thanksgiving" (Ps 50:14; Ps 116:17), "spiritual sacrifice" (1 Pt 2:5).

The name "Holy Communion" tells the reality that in the Eucharist, we unite ourselves with Christ and his Body (the Church) whose members are in Heaven, Purgatory, and on earth.

Last, the most common name "Holy Mass" or "Mass" comes from the ancient Latin closing words of the priest: *Ite, missa est* ("go, you are sent"). We hear in English, "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord," and these words send the faithful into the world to carry out the mission of Jesus Christ and to take the charity which comes from our communion with Christ to the world (see Mt 28:18-20).

The Eucharistic Celebration

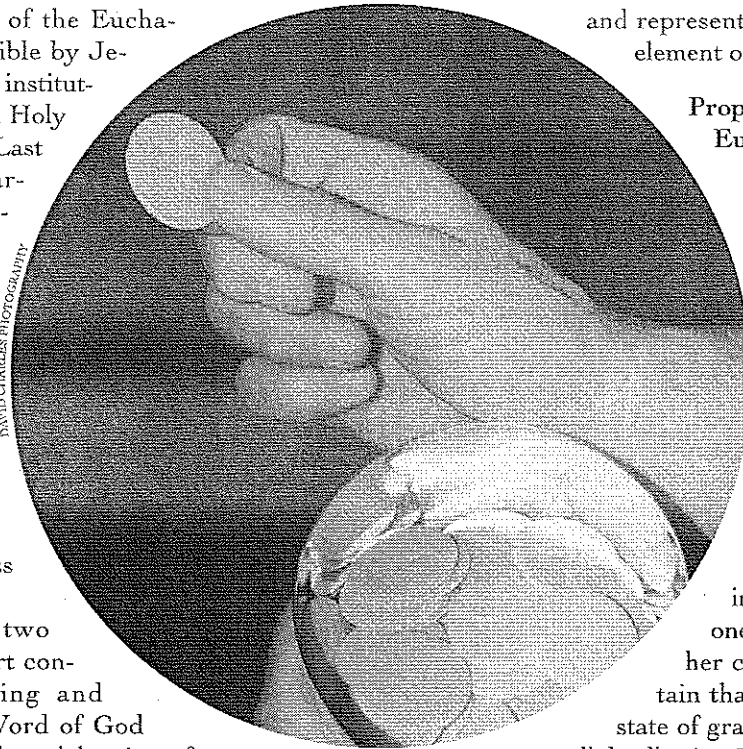
The celebration of the Eucharist was made possible by Jesus himself when he instituted Holy Orders and Holy Communion at the Last Supper. Particularly, through the institution of Holy Orders, every priest acts *in persona Christi* ("in the person of Christ"; see handout on *In Persona Christi*), and so Jesus and his Paschal mystery are made present every time Mass is celebrated.

The Mass has two parts. The first part consists in the reading and preaching of the Word of God and the second in the celebrating of the Eucharist. After the preaching, the faith-

"Calling down the Holy Spirit . . . transforms the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ by means of the same words spoken at the Last Supper."

ful are invited to present their needs to God in prayer. Next, the Liturgy of the Eucharist begins with the Presentation of the Gifts. The gifts are bread and wine because they are ancient

symbols of God's creation which call to mind many Old Testament images, among which is the offering of the priest-king Melchizedek (see Gn 14:18-20). They are brought forward, sometimes in procession by the faithful as a sign of thanksgiving to God for the goodness manifested to them in the abundance of his creation. After receiving these gifts, the priest begins the Eucharistic Prayer by offering these gifts in the name of all those gathered and the whole Church to God the Father. Then, by calling down the Holy Spirit, he transforms the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ by means of the same words spoken at the Last Supper: "Take this all of you and eat it; this is my body given up for you. Take this cup and drink from it; this is my blood shed for you and for all for the forgiveness of sins; do this in memory of me." These words are referred to as the words of consecration and represent the most important element of the Mass.



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Proper Reception of the Eucharist

"Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Cor 11:27), which is known as a sin of sacrilege. In order to receive Jesus in the Eucharist in a "worthy manner," one must examine his or her conscience to be certain that he or she is in the state of grace, that is, free from all deadly sin. Those who are aware of deadly sin in their own lives must first re-

ceive absolution in the sacrament of Reconciliation. For those who come to Mass with venial (lesser) sins, a proper disposition of contrition and the faithful praying of the Introductory prayers (penitential) are all that is required to be properly prepared. One also prepares to receive the Body and Blood of Jesus by observing the one-hour fast before Communion, spending time in prayer immediately before Holy Communion, and through a daily life of prayer and Christian witness. Thus freed from all sin and strengthened by prayer, the faithful may receive the Eucharist. They are

obliged to receive Holy Communion at least once a year, but they can receive whenever they participate in the Mass. The Body and Blood of Jesus may be received either on the hand (making a "throne" for the Lord) or the tongue. Some prior act of reverence — genuflecting, bowing, or making the Sign of the Cross — must also be done, keeping in mind the appropriate etiquette (not "lording it over others" or prolonging the Communion line disruptively). In the United States, a simple bow of the head prior to receiving the host and the chalice is recommended as the norm for all the faithful (see Phil 2:10). Most importantly, these signs of reverence should reflect an interior disposition of gratitude and adoration for Jesus who has humbled himself to become bread for us to eat.

This coming up to Holy Communion and the subsequent "Amen" is the "altar call" for the believing Catholic. In this "altar call," it is Jesus himself (acting in the person of the priest) who gives his very Body and Blood to be taken inside each one who receives him following their affirmation of faith: Amen ("I believe").



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"The consecrated bread and wine are our spiritual food."

Grace of the Eucharist

The principal effect of the Eucharist is an intimate union with Christ. Jesus says, "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him" (Jn 6:56). By receiving Holy Communion, the Christian is physically joined to Jesus — a union in which the believer becomes ever more like him. Thus this union preserves, increases, and renews the grace received in Baptism. The consecrated bread and wine are our spiritual food.

Christians cannot be intimately united with Christ, who was without sin, without themselves being for-

given of all sin. This release from sin enkindles in us charity and a greater love for God, strengthening our spiritual life so that we practice virtues and give Christian witness. In turn, we become even more like Christ and find it more difficult to sin in the future. This cycle of spiritual growth is continuously repeated as the image of Christ is made more visible in the heart of every Christian who properly receives Jesus in this sacrament.

"Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:17), that is, when we receive Holy Communion, we are not only intimately united with Christ, but also with his Body, the Church, the family of God. In other words, in the Eucharist, we are more intimately united to each other. Furthermore, since we are all united with Christ, we share in his mission together. In Christ, we are to go out to all the nations and teach them all that Jesus commanded (Mt 28:18-20) so that they might also be united to the family of God in Baptism and eventually feast at the heavenly marriage supper of Christ and his Church.

(CCC 1322-1405, 1533, 2042, 2835-2837)