



**For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup,
you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.**

1 CORINTHIANS 11:26

Eucharist

The whole of the Christian life comes together in the celebration of Eucharist. For the followers of Jesus, there is no greater act on earth. Whether to celebrate a royal wedding or to remember the victims of a national tragedy, for the canonization of a new saint or to establish a new missionary outpost in a foreign land, to implore protection for armies going into battle or in thanksgiving for a bountiful harvest, to celebrate a great feast day in a gothic cathedral or to remember the Lord's Day in a country church, followers of Jesus in every age obey the command of their master, "Do this in memory of me."

The church memorializes salvation history's most climactic moments through simple signs of bodily nourishment and universal gestures of hospitality and feasting. At the altar of Christ's sacrifice, the table of the Lord's Supper, the church expresses the solemn mystery of its faith: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. Celebrated in every epoch for two millennia and expressed in every culture scattered throughout the world, the Eucharist offers humanity's best to God. Eucharistic worship has inspired the finest works of human creativity, from the house churches of the early Christians to the solemn basilicas and splendid cathedrals of later centuries. Enhanced by architecture of diverse cultural styles, a rich tradition of painting, iconography, sculpture, and a diverse heritage of sacred music, the Eucharist has motivated artistic vision to honor the divine made flesh in sacramental mystery.

The richness of this ritual celebration is expressed through the different names it has been given. “The Lord’s Supper” (1 Corinthians 11:20; Revelation 19:9) recalls the founding meal that Jesus ate with his disciples on the eve of his sacrificial death and anticipates the wedding banquet of the Lamb in the future Jerusalem. “The breaking of the bread” (Acts 2:42) is the name given by the early Christians of Jerusalem for their communal worship in which they recognized the Risen Lord (Luke 24:35). “Holy Communion” expresses the unity we experience with Christ as the broken bread and cup of blessing become a communion in his body and blood (1 Corinthians 10:16–17). “The Divine Liturgy” evokes the fact that the public worship of the church finds its most intense expression in the eucharistic ritual, while “the Mass” brings to mind the sending forth (*missio*) that concludes the Eucharist, as participants are commissioned to serve Christ in the world. “Eucharist” comes from the Greek word *eucharistein*, “to give thanks” (1 Corinthians 11:24), recalling the Jewish blessings that give thanks for God’s work of creation, redemption, and sanctification. Each name evokes diverse aspects of the unlimited treasure of the Christian Eucharist.

Eucharist, the center of the church’s life, somehow seems to say it all. It says in a hundred different ways: this is who we are, and this is who God is. It can make us sorrowful and joyful, enthusiastic and silent, committed and awestruck all at once. When we look at Eucharist in all its rich fullness, we can rekindle within ourselves eucharistic amazement and wonder at this great gift God has given us in his Son Jesus.

Reflection and discussion

- What thoughts and emotions come to mind in association with Eucharist?

- Has Eucharist lost its amazement for me? In what ways can I rekindle wonder at this divine gift?

Holy and Living Sacrifice of the New Covenant

The Eucharist is permanently marked by the climactic event of Christ's passion and death. He instituted the Eucharist on the night before his death on the cross and expressed the meaning of his saving death within the Eucharist. His words of self-offering assert that his death would be a sacrifice. His body is "given for you," and his blood is "poured out for you" (Luke 22:19–20), that is, offered in sacrifice. The Eucharist is Christ's supreme gift to his church: the gift of himself and the gift of his saving work.

The Lord's sacrifice is so decisive for humanity's salvation that he offered it and returned to the Father only after he had left us a means of sharing in it as if we had been present there. The sacrifice of Christ on the cross and the sacrifice of Christ in the Eucharist are one single sacrifice. Jesus Christ was offered "once for all" on the altar of his cross; yet that one sacrifice is made present anew wherever the Eucharist is celebrated until the end of the world. Since the work of Christ for our salvation cannot be confined to its historical time and place, we can say that Christ has offered and is always offering for us his saving sacrifice on the cross, which is sacramentally re-presented on the altars of his church across the world.

Paul taught, "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26). Though God has already accepted Christ's sacrifice in raising him to life, we continue to offer the memorial of Christ's sacrifice and share in the sacrificial meal because we want to share in the benefits of Christ's sacrifice. He is the living victim being continually offered to the Father as the one sacrifice for the world. In celebrating the Eucharist we are praying that the saving benefits of Christ's sacrifice have their effect in us, that in Christ we become a true offering to God. We are asking that, as the body of Christ, we be made a sacrifice to the Father,

an offering that is truly acceptable because of the way we live as his people in union with Christ.

The high point of the life of the ancient Israelites was going up to Jerusalem to offer sacrifice in ceremonies that honor and glorify God. Some sacrifices were offered in reparation for sins, others in thanksgiving for specific blessings, and others to praise and worship God because he is God. Sacrifices involved offerings of animals as well as grains, bread, and wine. Holy meals were often part of the sacrificial ceremony and a way of sharing in it. The sacrifice consisted of the offering of the victim as well as the sharing of the meal. The sacrificial meal completed the sacrificial offering and gave participants a way to participate in the benefits of offering the sacrifice.

The New Testament teaches that the sacrifices of the old covenant were shadows or incomplete versions of the things to come. The total cleansing of sin, perfect thanksgiving, and complete worship of God would occur when Christ is both the priest who offers sacrifice and the sacrificial victim offered. The one, perfect sacrifice was accomplished as Christ willingly consecrated his whole life and gave himself completely as an offering to the Father out of love for the world. By raising his Son and bringing him into his heavenly presence, God received Christ's self-offering as a fully acceptable sacrifice. As the eternal high priest before God's throne, Christ is forever presenting his perfect sacrifice to the Father and interceding for us.

At the Last Supper, Jesus offered his body and blood in anticipation of what was to occur on the cross and as a means of sharing the blessings of that sacrifice with all who would take part in his church's Eucharist. When we partake of the Eucharist, we are asking to share in the saving benefits that come from the offering of Christ's body and blood on the cross, and we renew the sacrifice of the new covenant, deepening our covenant commitment and our bond in Christ.

The purpose of Christ's sacrifice was to make his whole church, the body of Christ, a holy offering, a sacrifice consecrated to God. In Christ, we belong to God and have been offered to him (Colossians 1:22). Through the Holy Spirit, we continually offer our lives in union with Christ to God. Paul urges us to make our lives sacrificial: "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Romans 12:1). All of our prayers, works, joys, and sufferings can be presented to God along

with the sacrifice of Christ as an acceptable offering to the Father. We thus become “a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5). By consciously making our lives a sacrifice to God, we express our desire to honor God and acknowledge him as our God. In this way, the offering of the church through all generations is offered in union with the eucharistic sacrifice of Christ on the altar.

Reflection and discussion

- In what way are the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and the sacrifice of Christ in the Eucharist the same sacrifice?

- How can I offer my life more consciously to the Father in union with the sacrifice of Christ?

Real and Living Presence of Christ

The Eucharist makes present not only the mystery of the Lord’s passion and death, but also the crown of his sacrifice, the resurrection. Because he is the living and risen Lord, Christ can become our eternal sacrifice and our life-giving bread for the world. When we celebrate Eucharist, the Risen Lord is truly and sacramentally present for us. He gives us his whole being; his presence is real, substantial, and whole. The one who loved us on the cross, the one who has given himself completely, is here for us. The constant faith of the church confirms, though our senses suggest otherwise, that in the most blessed sac-

rament of the Eucharist, Christ is truly present—body and blood, soul and divinity. Human reason surely experiences its limitations before this mystery of God's love.

The real presence of the Lord in the Eucharist is a conclusion consistent with the biblical revelation about God who manifests himself as God-with-us. The elusive glory of God came and went throughout the narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures, but now that divine presence manifests itself in real, bodily reality, permanently with us. Throughout salvation history, God's universal and external presence became increasingly personal and interior in us. The Eucharist is the final step in the long path of God's "descent" into the human condition: creation, revelation, incarnation, Eucharist.

The Eucharist is the expression of the paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, but it is equally an expression of the incarnation, God's becoming flesh among us. It is the memorial of what Christ did for us as well as the real presence of the Word made flesh. In the incarnation the Word became flesh (John 1:14); in the Eucharist he has given us his flesh to eat (John 6:52–56). It is as the Word made flesh that Jesus died, rose, is exalted, and is now present to us in this sacrament. In the Eucharist the two great mysteries of incarnation and redemption come together and offer us eternal life.

The real presence of Christ in the Eucharist means that he is objectively present with us, in contrast to something that is only mentally present to us, like an idea or memory. We may be low in faith, lacking in desire, or inattentive, but Christ is truly there. In Eucharist we relive the experience of the disciples who came to experience the presence of the risen Lord when they broke bread with him at Emmaus: "Their eyes were opened and they recognized him" (Luke 24:31). When grace opens our interior eyes with insight and we understand more deeply the wondrous mystery of Christ's living presence in Eucharist, we recognize the one who wants to be received by us with hearts overflowing with reverence and devotion.

Jesus Christ gives himself to us in bodily form, and so we must respond to him with bodily expression. There are lots of signs that indicate how deeply the eucharistic presence of Christ is felt in a faith community. The church's liturgy includes numerous bodily gestures. With hymns of praise, words of thanksgiving, profound silence, burning candles and wafting incense, humble bows and genuflections, standing and kneeling, the church adores her saving

Lord. The church also venerates Christ's eucharistic presence outside the liturgy, through reservation of the sacrament in the tabernacle, exposition of the sacrament for adoration and prayerful contemplation, and eucharistic processions. The eucharistic mystery remains present outside the liturgy because Christ is always giving himself. In all of these ways people express their faith in Christ's living presence, but the greatest sign of a faithful, eucharistic community is demonstrating the presence of Christ alive in the world through bodily expressions of his self-giving love.

A nonchristian once said: "If I could believe as you believe that God is really there on the altar, I think I would fall on my knees and stay there forever." Though we must not remain on our knees because God has given us responsibilities in the world, we can maintain an orientation toward the eucharistic presence of Christ. We can continue to adore the Lord in our hearts as we work, travel, and care for our families. The real presence is not only a personal gift but a responsibility we have to the world around us. When the disciples at Emmaus "recognized" the presence of Christ, they hastened to tell the other disciples. When we recognize our eucharistic Lord, we no longer want to live for ourselves but for him, and the world around us becomes our field of mission.

Reflection and discussion

- In what way is the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist consistent with the history of God's revelation of himself?

- What can deepen my faith in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist?

Feasting at the Table of the Lord

The Eucharist is both a vertical event, making present Christ's sacrifice on the cross, and a horizontal event, uniting his community at a sacred banquet of communion in his body and blood. The place around which disciples gather is, at the same time, the altar of Christ's sacrifice and the table of the Lord. Christ himself is both the sacrificial victim offered for our redemption and food from heaven as he gives himself for our nourishment.

The sacrifice at the altar and the holy meal around the table are presented in the New Testament as a new Passover. The ancient Passover of Israel took place in two moments: the sacrificial offering of the lamb in the temple and the communal supper gathered around the table. John's gospel emphasizes that Jesus is the Lamb of the New Passover, sacrificed on the cross so that the food and drink of his flesh and blood might bring eternal life to all believers. The other gospels focus on the institution of the Eucharist at the Passover supper. The bread and wine at the table become the body of Christ broken for us and the blood of the new covenant.

Eucharistic sacrifice is directed toward the union of disciples with Christ through communion. In receiving the Lord's body and blood in communion, the saving effect of the sacrifice is fully realized. Christ himself becomes our nourishment for the journey, and food for our pilgrimage through life. What earthly food produces in our bodily life, communion in Christ's sacramental presence achieves in our spiritual life. In the most intimate union imaginable in our physical lives, Christ gives his very self to us to be consumed and digested, so that we become one with him and share in his very life. Christ assures us: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" (John 6:56).

At the table of Eucharist we look back to the Last Supper and the passion of Christ, and we also look forward to the banquet of that new world God wants to create. The memory of the past, the presence of grace, and the expectation of the glorious future come together in the eternal, eucharistic moment. God wants to make the world alive in a new way, like he did for Jesus on the first day of the week. The Eucharist is a sure pledge of the world to come; it is an anticipation of the goal, a foretaste of the fullness of joy promised by Christ. Celebrating Eucharist plants a seed of hope in our daily commitment to the work we do in this life and allows us a glimpse of heaven

on earth. It offers us a deeper sense of responsibility for creation, obliging us to seek God's will on earth, committing us to transforming the world in harmony with God plan.

As we are nourished by Christ's body and blood, we are filled with his Holy Spirit. Jesus lives within us, as though he's put his breath inside us. The Holy Spirit makes us want to be like Jesus, led by his Spirit, wanting to do things his way. Celebrating Eucharist proclaims to the world that forgiveness has been given and death has been defeated. We don't have to wait until after death to receive eternal life; we already possess it in our sacramental union with Christ (John 6:54). The whole world has become a different place, and we are already living in the new world to come. In celebrating the Eucharist, we are united to the heavenly liturgy and become a part of that great multitude of angels, apostles, martyrs, and saints, worshipping God. The expectation of "a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21:1) assures us that the banquet to come will be a communion between God and a creation renewed in his love.

Reflection and discussion

- What do I really experience as I feast at the table of the Lord?

- In what way does the Eucharist offer us a glimpse of our hope for the future?

Exploring the Biblical Sources of Eucharist

From Old Testament archetypes, to Jesus and his church, to our own sacramental life—this is the type of connection we will trace in this study as we deepen our understanding of the rich biblical roots of Eucharist. It may seem surprising that a study of Eucharist would spend so much time focusing on the Old Testament. But we will be following the lead of the church's earliest theologians, who built our eucharistic understanding around the insight that the sacraments fulfill God's ancient promises. The people and events of the Old Testament are "types" or "foreshadowings" of Christian realities.

In the early church, the catechumens were baptized and anointed at the Easter Vigil and participated in the Eucharist for the first time. While they had learned the stories of the Old and New Testaments during their time of preparation, only in light of the Easter sacraments were they able to understand the deeper spiritual realities these stories communicated. A period of reflective instruction after Easter helped the new Christians understand the sacraments they had received in light of the ancient Scriptures.

We too will follow the gradual, reflective process of the early church as we reflect on these sacred texts of the Bible and use them to deepen our understanding of the Eucharist we experience. This study will root our understanding of the Eucharist deeply and thoroughly in sacred Scripture. Encountering the biblical sources for the Eucharist can inspire fidelity to the church's tradition and evoke new appreciation for the Eucharist we already know from our experience. These scriptural texts will have done their work in us when we present the sacrifice of Christ to the Father with greater faith and when we receive communion knowing that Christ will transform our lives as we live in him with greater faith, hope, and love.

Prayer

Crucified and Risen Lord, you have given to your church the great gift of Eucharist as a memorial of our redemption. Give me a new appreciation of the meaning of your Eucharist as I study your revelation and reflect on the sacred Scriptures. Human senses fail and human reason falters when confronted with this sacrament of your divine love. Give me eyes to recognize your living presence as you give me your body to eat and your blood to drink, and deepen my faith in the holy mystery of your Eucharist.