

The Eucharist

by Father Bill McCarthy, MSA

The greatest of all the sacraments is the Eucharist. It is the summit of the Christian life. The greatest way to worship the Father in spirit and truth is to celebrate Mass and to receive His precious body, blood, soul and divinity. At the Mass, we offer the highest praise to the Father. At this sacred liturgy, we join all the angels and saints in their continuous act of worship to the Father, with the son, in the power of the Spirit.

The New Passover

The Mass is the Passover fulfilled and renewed. The Pascal Lamb has been replaced by Jesus, who is the Lamb of God; for by His shed blood, we pass over from death to life. The bitter herbs have been replaced by the bitter agony of Christ's death on the cross. At the Last Supper, Jesus said, "I have desired to eat this Passover with you." Then He took the bread, gave thanks, blessed it and said, "This is my body, do this in remembrance of me." Likewise, after He supped, He took the chalice of wine, blessed it and said, "Take this and drink all of you, this is the chalice of my blood, the new and everlasting covenant. This shall be shed for you and for all so that sins might be forgiven. Do this in memory of me." In and through the Mass Jesus has offered to us an everlasting sharing in the Pascal mystery; that is, His death and resurrection. We share His death to selfishness and sin and His resurrection to new life and hope.

Food for The Journey

The Eucharist is the food of sustenance of Christian life. Every time we receive the Holy Eucharist, we come into the deepest communion with Christ. This is why the Holy Eucharist is called Holy Communion. With Jesus eucharistically present in the depths of our hearts, we listen as He speaks to us through the thoughts that He puts into our minds and the desires that He inflames in our hearts. We speak to him - worshipping him, praising and thanking him for all that He is and has done and is doing for us. Like Mary, our mother, we too can say, 'He lives in me.' We have become a tabernacle - a place for our Savior. This indwelling presence of our Eucharistic Lord transforms us. Our minds are enlightened with the insights that He gives to us. Our hearts are aflame with desires He now pours into them. Our spirits are enlivened with a new strength and power to do the works of God and to resist the temptations of the flesh towards laziness, worldliness, lust, control, and selfishness.

A Great Mystery

Nonetheless, the Eucharist remains a great mystery. It's full significance and presence is just too much for our feeble human minds to grasp. The mysterious union of Father and Son in the Holy Spirit is represented in us. We have become what we have received - bone of His bone, flesh of His flesh, humility of His humility, holiness of His holiness. We can truthfully say with St. Paul, "I live now, not I but Christ lives within me."

A Foretaste of Heaven

One of the things that St. Paul refers to when he says, "**Eye has not seen nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the mind of man the glories that God has prepared for those who love him, these things have been revealed to us**" (1 Cor 2:9) - is the Eucharist. The Eucharist is a foretaste of heaven, a pledge of everlasting life. It is a foretaste of heaven because each time we receive the Eucharist, we are transcending the human to participate in the divine. We pierce the heavenlies and enter into the very manifest presence of God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are surrounded by the celestial choir of angels and saints, singing Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts. Into their eternal celestial liturgy of worship and praise we have now entered. The Eucharist is also a pledge of eternal glory because Christ has promised this when He said, "**He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood I will raise him up on the last day**" (John 6:54).

A Reenactment of The Mysteries of Christ's Life

The Eucharist is a reenactment of Christ's life, death and resurrection. The incarnation is present because Jesus is enfleshed now in the Eucharist. His hidden life at Nazareth is present because He now lies hidden under the appearance of bread and wine. His public ministry is present because from the altar now He proclaims His gospel now and ratifies the covenant in the liturgy of the word. His presentation is present in the offertory, His full gift of self to the Father. His death is present in the separation of the bread (His body) and the wine (His blood). The Last

Supper is present because Jesus, once again, offers Himself to the Father, consecrates the bread and wine, and gives His body and blood in communion to us, His apostles.

The Eucharist, Food from Two Tables

At the Mass, we are fed food from two tables. At the table of the pulpit during the liturgy of the word, we are fed with the gospels and epistles of Paul, John, Jude, Peter, and James. This wisdom is food and sustenance for our minds. Herein we put on the mind of Christ. We partake of His wisdom. We are inspired to think loving, holy, pure, kind, generous, zealous, and forgiving thoughts. We are inspired by the very teachings of Jesus and the apostles. The beatitudes become our mental attitudes. Our minds are enlightened by spiritual insights, understandings and promises.

At the liturgy of the Eucharist, we receive from the altar of sacrifice the very body and blood of Christ. We are transformed from glory into glory into him whom we have received.

A Pivotal Chapter - John 6

The magnificent 6th chapter of John's gospel is the key text for understanding the Eucharist. It begins by saying that the Jewish feast of the Passover was near. Most likely, this took place one year before the Last Supper. In any event, it is the Eucharist that was promised. The first thing that Jesus does is miraculously feed the 5,000, thereby showing His miraculous power over bread that can be eaten as sustenance. The next day, the crowds followed him to Capernaum. There, in the synagogue, He promises them living bread come down from heaven, not like the manna their forefathers ate in the desert. "Whoever eats this bread will live forever." "Lord give us always this bread," is their response.

My Own Flesh for The Life of The World

Then Jesus startles them by saying, "**The bread that I will give is my own flesh for the life of the world.**" Their response is one of unbelief. "How can this man give us His own flesh to eat?" Jesus' answer is most powerful, He says, "**With all of the earnestness I possess I tell you this, unless you eat of the flesh of the son of man and drink His blood you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. This is the bread come down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever**" (John 6:53-60).

Plain and Clear Words

These words are so clear, so simple, and so plain. Jesus, in His Eucharistic promise, is declaring that He will make a way for us to receive His body and blood so we may live out of him in the same way He lives out of the Father. He is the new Passover lamb. And just as the unblemished male Pascal lamb had to be eaten in its entirety, so also the new Passover lamb has to be eaten and digested. We become what we have received.

The Disciples Mixed Reaction

These words that so centralize the Christian life are met with mixed response right from the beginning. Many of his disciples said, "This is a hard saying. Who can accept it?" they returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him" (John 6:66). Turning to the twelve, Jesus asked, "Do you also want to leave?" Notice here that Jesus does not take back any of the realism or sting of His words. He does not try to explain them away as merely symbolic. It is so obvious that He is willing if necessary to let them all walk away.

Thank God for Peter

But Peter, His first pope, says with great faith, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words to eternal life." Yes Peter, that's exactly what Jesus has - words of eternal life. The Eucharist is about Christ's eternal life within us.

The Church's Understanding

Jesus left behind him the Church that would be one, true, universal and apostolic as the pillar and the standard of truth and as the official interpreter of the Scriptures. The Church has always understood these words literally. St. Paul, for example, some 30 years later, said, "**For I receive from the Lord what I also passed on to you; the Lord Jesus, on the night He was betrayed, took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you, do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, after supper, He took the cup saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this whenever you drink it in remembrance of me.' Whenever you eat this bread and drink this blood you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup, for anyone who eats or drinks without recognizing the body and blood of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and sick and a number of you have died**" (1 Cor. 11:23-30). It is so obvious that Paul believed in the presence of Jesus without equivocation.

The Fathers of The Church

The references of St. Ignatius of Antioch (AD 107) to the Eucharist, in the seven authentic letters he wrote while on his way to Rome to suffer martyrdom, are sufficient to indicate that the mystery of the Lord's Body and Blood was a most significant aspect in his thought and in his own spiritual life. In his *Letter to the Christians of Tralles*, for example, he apparently compares the virtues of faith and love to the Eucharistic mystery when he writes: "Therefore, arming yourselves with gentleness, renew yourselves in faith, which is the Flesh of the Lord, and in charity, which is the Blood of Jesus Christ. Hold nothing against your neighbor."

His *Letter to the Romans* is almost mystical in its Eucharistic allusions. He compares his own upcoming tortures to the process that the wheat must undergo. In facing death, Ignatius states that his only remaining desire is to encounter Him who has made Himself the food and drink of Christians: "**I am God's grain and am being ground by the teeth of the wild beasts in order that I may be found [to be] pure bread for Christ. My [earthly] love has been crucified, and there is in me no fire of material love, but rather a living water, speaking in me and saying within me, 'Come to the Father.' I take no pleasure in corruptible food or in the delights of this life. I want the bread of God, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, who is of the seed of David; and as drink I want His Blood, which is incorruptible.**"

St. Thomas Aquinas

From Thomas Aquinas in his *Selected Writings* is found this reverence for the Eucharist. "Let no one, therefore, approach this wondrous table without reverent devotion and fervent love, without true penitence or without remembering His redemption. For it is the pure Lamb that is eaten in the unleavened bread...Approach the Lord's Supper, the table of wholeness and holiness, child of faith, in such a way that at the end you may enter into the wedding feast of the Lamb...There we shall be filled with the abundance of God's house; then we shall behold the King of Glory and the Lord of Hosts in His beauty, and shall taste the bread of our Fathers kingdom; our host shall be our Lord Jesus Christ, whose power and reign are without end. Amen."

Decree on The Ministry and Life Of Priests, The Documents Of Vatican II

"The other sacraments, as well as every ministry of the Church and every work of the apostolate, are linked with the Holy Eucharist and are directed toward it. **For the most blessed Eucharist contains the Church's entire spiritual wealth, that is, Christ Himself, our Passover and living bread.** Through His very flesh, made vital and vitalizing by the Holy Spirit, He offers life to men. They are, thereby, invited and led to offer themselves, their labors, and all created things together with him. **Hence the Eucharist shows itself to be the source and the apex of the whole work of preaching the gospel.** Those under instruction are introduced by stages to a sharing in the Eucharist. The faithful, already marked with the sacred seal of baptism and confirmation, are through the reception of the Eucharist fully joined to the Body of Christ (No. 5).

The Catechism of The Catholic Church

"The mode of Christ's presence under the Eucharistic species is unique. It raises the Eucharist above all the sacraments as 'the perfection of the spiritual life and the end to which all the sacraments tend' (St. Thomas Aquinas). In the most Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist, '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' (Council of Trent). We call this presence 'real' not in an exclusive way, as if His other modes of being present were not real, but

because it is a presence par excellence, since it is substantial, in the sense that Christ, whole and entire God and man, becomes present" (No. 1374).

The Council of Trent - Transubstantiation

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, and this holy council declares it 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. The Catholic Church fittingly and properly called this change transubstantiation (ref. No. 1376).

Pope John Paul II

Pope John Paul II has spoken repeatedly on the Eucharist and its impact on our lives. He said, "The mysterious reality of the Eucharist introduces us into the plan of God, creator and redeemer. God wanted His only Son to be incarnate and ever present among us as our traveling companion on the arduous journey toward eternity.

Message to The Eucharistic Congress at Lourdes, July 17, 1981

"The sacrifice of the cross is so decisive for the future of man that Christ did not carry it out and did not return to the Father until He had left us the means to take part in it as if we had been present. Christ's offering on the cross - which is the real Bread of Life broken - is the first value that must be communicated and shared. The Mass and the cross are but one and the same sacrifice. Nevertheless, the Eucharistic breaking of bread has an essential function, that of putting at our disposal the original offering of the cross. It makes it actual today for our generation. By making the Body and Blood of Christ really present under the species of bread and wine, it makes - simultaneously - the Sacrifice of the Cross actual and accessible to our generation, this Sacrifice which remains in its uniqueness, the turning point of the history of salvation, the essential link between time and eternity."

Fulfillment of The Law and Prophets

Jesus comes to bring the old covenant to fulfillment (Matthew 5:17). "I have not come to destroy the Law but to bring it into fulfillment." In the Old Testament salvation "came from the Jews." In the New Testament, it comes from the cross of Christ reenacted in the Mass. **The Mass perpetuates the sacrifice of Calvary. There is no greater participation in the fruits of Calvary than the Mass. The Mass is, in fact, a reenactment of the passion and death of Christ now in an unbloodied manner.** Christ in His passion, death, and resurrection, is fully present.

The Real Presence of Jesus Christ In The Eucharist, Cardinal Gaetano De Lai

Two sacrifices of the Old Law were, before all others, representative of the Sacrifice of the Divine redeemer. The first is that of Abraham, who, in obedience to God's command, offers his son Isaac as a holocaust; but God accepts his goodwill and spares the life of Isaac. The second very celebrated example, also in the time of Abraham, and more nearly figurative of the Eucharist, is the sacrifice of Melchizedek, king of Salem (Jerusalem).

Melchizedek Offering Bread and Wine

Abraham was returning victorious, and bearing the spoils of his victory over the five kings of Upper Asia. He meets the king of Salem, who, in thanksgiving for the victory, offers bread and wine as a holocaust, exclaiming: "Blessed be Abraham...and blessed be the Most High God, by whose protection thy enemies are in thy hands" (Genesis 14:19-90).

The prophet David, St. Paul the apostle, the synagogue, and all Christian tradition agree that the Messiah, the Divine Redeemer, Christ Jesus, was prefigured in Melchizedek, "a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." This is then no doubt (the Fathers of the Church and Christian sentiment are in agreement) that the Holy Christian Sacrifice of our altars was foretold and represented 2000 years beforehand in the sacrifice of bread and wine offered to God by Melchizedek. And, therefore, as the clean oblation foretold by Malachi foreshadows the Eucharist, so does the sacrifice of bread and wine that was offered by Melchizedek, foreshadow the same sacrament.

The Way of Divine Love, Words Of Our Lord To Sr. Josefa Menendez

"The Blessed Sacrament is the invention of love. It is life and fortitude for souls, a remedy for every fault, and a viaticum for the last passage from time to eternity. In it sinners recover life for their souls; tepid souls true warmth, fervent souls, tranquility and the satisfaction of every longing...saintly souls, wings to fly towards perfection...pure souls sweet honey and rarest sustenance. Consecrated souls find in it a dwelling, their love and their life. In it they will seek and find the perfect exemplar of those sacred and hallowed bonds that unite them inseparably to their heavenly Bridegroom.

Indeed, O consecrated souls, you will find a perfect symbol of your vow of poverty in the small, round, light smooth host; for so must the soul that professes poverty be: no angels, that is to say, no petty natural affections, either for things used nor for her employment's, or for family or country...but she must ever be ready to leave, or give up, or change...Her heart must be free, with no attachments whatever.

This by no means signifies insensibility of heart; no, for the more it loves the more it will preserve the integrity of the vow of poverty. What is essential for religious souls is first that they should possess nothing without the permission and approbation of superiors, and secondly, they should possess and love nothing that they are not ready to give up at the first sign."

The Story of Therese Neumann

The secret of Therese Neumann's abundant life, despite her complete abstinence from all earthly food, is revealed in her statement that she is sustained by a heavenly food, the Body of her Eucharistic Lord.

On Palm Sunday evening 1930, the third year of her absolute fast, Father Hartl asked her if she was hungry. "You know very well that I do not eat," she answered. The curate of the village church then asked, "Do you wish to be greater than the Savior? He ate when He was on earth." Therese smiled and said, "The Savior can do all things. Or do you not think He is all powerful?" Turning to the other priest present, Father Helmut Fahsel of Berlin, she declared with great earnestness, "The Savior sustains me. He said, 'My body is food indeed,' so why shouldn't it be actually true for once, if He wills it?"

The Eucharist And Healing, John Bertolucci

Did you know that every Sunday, at all the Masses in all the Catholic churches in the world, millions of people join in prayers for healing? The fact that most people are surprised by that statement merely shows our lack of attention to the words we pray. For every Catholic immediately recognizes the prayer I am talking about, which the priest and congregation recite together just before Communion: "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you but only say the word, and I shall be healed."

As even that one prayer indicates, the Eucharist is truly a sacrament of healing. The Eucharist celebrates our covenant with God - the covenant that frees us from sin and from all the effects of sin, including affliction and death. Through the Eucharist we take part in Jesus sacrifice of His very life, the sacrifice that has become life and healing for us.

The Eucharist brings us into the most intimate possible contact with Jesus Himself. His blood flows through our veins; His body becomes one with ours. His mind touches our mind; His very being touches our being. When we enter this moment with real awareness of what is happening and with genuine faith in the Lord's presence, how can it help but be a moment of healing? "With faith in your love and mercy I eat your body and drink your blood. Let it not bring me condemnation, but health in mind and body."

A Powerful Witness, Miracles Do Happen

Sister Brieger McKenna, OSC, tells this story in her book, "*Miracles Do Happen*." "A young priest phoned me, very anxious and afraid. He had just found out he had cancer of the vocal chords and he had to have his voice box removed in three weeks. He was telling me he was desperate. He had been ordained only about six years. As I prayed with him, I felt the Lord wanted me to tell him about the Eucharist. I said, 'Father, I can pray with you now on the phone, and I will. But this morning, didn't you meet Jesus? Don't you meet Him every day?'

What I didn't know was that this priest didn't celebrate Mass daily. I told him 'Father, every single day when you go to Mass, when you take the sacred Host, when you eat it, you meet Jesus. The woman only touched the hem of Jesus' cloak. But you touch Jesus and receive Him into your body. You have Him as food. Do you realize that

Jesus is actually going down through your throat? There is no better one to go to than Jesus. You ask Jesus to heal you.'

I heard him crying over the phone. He kept saying to me, 'Oh, Sister, thank you. Thank you.' Three weeks later, he went in for his surgery. He phoned me later to tell me that he didn't have the surgery. The doctors discovered the cancer was gone and he had brand new vocal chords."

The Fruits of Holy Communion

According to the New Catechism, the Eucharist augments our union with Christ (1391), separates us from sins (1393), wipes away venial sins (1394), preserves us from future mortal sins (1395), increases the unity of the mystical body (1396), commits us to the poor (1397), and leads to the unity of Christians (1398). That is why the catechism clearly teaches, "It is in keeping with the very meaning of the Eucharist that the faithful, if they have the required dispositions, **receive Communion each time they participate in the Mass** (1388)."

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