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Questions and Answers on the Eucharist

by
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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON THE EUCHARIST

WHAT DOES OUR FAITH TEACH US ABOUT THE EUCHARIST?

Our faith teaches us that what we proclaim in the Eucharist, Christ's death and resurrection, is also made present in that very action by the power of God's love and goodness. This is the heart of our faith in the sacrament we call the Eucharist, the holy sacrifice of the Mass, the real presence of Christ.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE WAYS IN WHICH THE EUCHARIST IS DESCRIBED?

The **Catechism of the Catholic Church** begins the article on the Eucharist with a reflection on the names by which the sacrament is identified. Here we read that each name "evokes certain aspects" of the sacrament. It is called "Eucharist because it is an action of thanksgiving to God" (1328). It is sometimes referred to as "the Breaking of Bread" because Jesus used this rite, above all, at the Last Supper (1329). The Eucharist is also called "the memorial of the Lord's passion and resurrection... the Holy Sacrifice" because it makes present the one sacrifice of Christ the Savior and includes the Church's offering (1330).

WHY IS THE EUCHARIST SO IMPORTANT TO THE CHURCH?

The Eucharist is at the heart of the Church's life. In the celebration of this mystery of faith, Christ himself is present to his people. Rich in symbolism and richer in reality, the Eucharist bears within itself the whole reality of Christ and mediates his saving work to us. In short, when the Church gathers in worship of God and offers the Eucharistic sacrifice, not only is Christ really and truly present under the appearance of bread and wine, but he also continues his saving work of our salvation.

WHAT DOES THE EUCHARIST TRULY MAKE PRESENT?

In the Eucharist, Jesus has instituted the sacrament in which the very passion, death and resurrection he would undergo would be made present again in our lives in a way that enables us to share in the benefits of the cross. We speak of our dying to sin and rising to new life because we participate in the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection. The Church uses the word "re-present" (make present again) to speak of what is happening in the Mass. The term "holy sacrifice" of the Mass is also exact because sacramentally the death and resurrection of Jesus is once again made present. The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are one single sacrifice.

WHEN AND WHY WAS THE EUCHARIST INSTITUTED?

With great clarity, the Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* teaches: "At the Last Supper, on the night he was betrayed, our Savior instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice of his body and blood. He did this 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 received, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future life is given to us" (SC 47).

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE EUCHARIST AND THE LAST SUPPER?

The origins of the Eucharist are found in the Last Supper. The **Catechism** teaches us that "in order to leave them a pledge of this love, in order never to depart from his own and to make them sharers in his Passover, he instituted 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). In the context of the Last Supper Jesus instituted a new memorial sacrifice. As a perpetual memorial to his death and Resurrection, in the course of the Passover meal with his apostles, he took the bread "blessed and broke it and gave it to his disciples and said 'Take, eat, this is my body'" (Mt 26:26). In like manner he took the ceremonial cup of wine, "gave thanks and passed it to his disciples saying 'this cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood'" (Lk 22:20). Finally, he commanded them: "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:24).

Like the Passover meal, this memorial sacrifice of the new law is both sacrifice and sacred meal. Both aspects remain inseparably a part of the same mystery. In an unbloody re-presentation of the sacrifice of the cross and in application of its saving power, the Lord is offered in the sacrifice of the Mass when through the words of consecration and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit,

Christ is present in a sacramental form under the appearance of bread and wine to become the spiritual food of the faithful.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN THAT JESUS DIED ONCE AND FOR ALL?

It is true that there is only one sacrifice – the self-giving of Christ on the cross at Calvary. Once and for all Jesus, who was the victim for our sins, offered himself up for our redemption. "Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promise of eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred which redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant" (Heb 9:15).

This one great sacrifice was accomplished by Jesus, the priest and victim, who offered himself on the altar of the cross for our redemption. This sacrifice need not and cannot be repeated, but it can be re-presented so that we are able, sacramentally and spiritually, to enter it and draw spiritual nourishment from it. While it is true that we cannot be physically present at Calvary, there is a real, sacramental and spiritual sense in which we are present as we participate in the Eucharist since the merit obtained for us through the death of Jesus is applied to us in what we call the paschal mystery – passover from death to life.

HOW LONG HAVE CHRISTIANS CELEBRATED THE EUCHARIST AS WE DO?

One of the most intriguing aspects of the celebration of the Eucharist is the fact that it has changed so little over twenty centuries. The essential elements are found in the narrative of the institution of the Eucharist as recorded in the gospels. The liturgical structure of that celebration developed very rapidly in the early life of the Church, as we see in Saint Paul's first letter to the

Corinthians (1 Cor11:26), and the essential elements have remained unchanged. Even in many of the details, we find in the celebration of the liturgy today an identity with what went before us for so many centuries.

As we learn in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, the Church has always taken Christ's command to prepare the large furnished room where he would celebrate the Passover meal with them and institute the sacrifice of his body and blood (Mk 14:12-16; Mt 26:17-19; Lk 22:7-13) as bearing on its own responsibility to give directions concerning the preparation of the minds of the worshippers and the place, rites and text of the celebration of the holy Eucharist. The norms that are used in the missal for the celebration of the Mass according to the Roman Rite "are fresh evidence of the great care, faith, and unchanged love that the Church shows toward the Eucharist" (*General Instruction*, Introduction, 1).

WHAT HISTORICAL EVIDENCE EXISTS FOR THE CELEBRATION OF THE EUCHARIST IN THE EARLY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY?

On speaking about the continuity of the celebration of the liturgy today with the most ancient forms, the **Catechism** holds up for examination the text of Saint Justin Martyr, who lived in the second century of the Christian era: "As early as the second century we have the witness of Saint Justin Martyr for the basic lines of the order of the Eucharistic celebration. They have stayed the same until our own day for all the great liturgical families" (1345). Today the order of Mass calls upon the priest who will preside and the community with whom he will celebrate to come together, especially and particularly on Sunday. This is the day that commemorates the resurrection of Christ and is therefore for Christians the Lord's day, our holy day, the time to celebrate the

memorial of his death and resurrection that Christ asked us to do in his memory.

WHAT IS MEANT BY THE LITURGY OF THE WORD IN THE CELEBRATION OF THE EUCHARIST?

The liturgy is divided into two parts: the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the Eucharist. On Sundays and solemn feast days there are three readings. The usual pattern is one reading from the Old Testament; one from the Acts, the Letters or the Book of Revelation; and the third is always from one of the four gospels. On the weekday celebration there are normally two readings. The first is from either the Old Testament or the New Testament (other than the gospels); the second is from one of the gospels. St. Justin writes: "The memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets are read, as much as time permits" (1345).

In the instruction for the celebration of the Eucharist today, we read: "When the Scriptures are read in the Church, God himself is speaking to his people, and Christ, present in his own word, is proclaiming the Gospel" (*General Instruction*, Chapter Two, 9).

A significant integral part of the celebration of the liturgy of the word is the homily or commentary by the priest on the readings or some other element of the faith and life of the Church. Since so much in our culture changes rapidly, it is essential that the teaching of Christ be applied to circumstances of our day in a way that allows the believer to see the full implications of his or her profession of faith. The *General Instruction* tells us: "the homily, as an integral part of the liturgy, increases the word's effectiveness" (Chapter Two, 9).

At this point in the liturgy, the creed is recited as a summary profession of our faith acknowledging what we have read as the word of God and announcing our adherence to the teaching of

Christ and the profession of his Church so that we can proceed to celebrate worthily the Eucharist. The priest then invites the faithful to offer their prayers for the needs of the Church, the community and their personal concerns. This is called the prayer of the faithful.

WHAT IS MEANT BY THE LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST?

The Liturgy of the Eucharist is the very heart of the Mass. Using one of the approved Eucharistic prayers, the priest prays over the gifts, asks the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon them, recites the narrative of consecration, elevates the host and cup for the faithful to reverence and proceeds to call to mind the passion, resurrection and glorious return of the Lord Jesus. In this sacred, sacramental action the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ and we, through our participation in this mystery of faith, share spiritually in Jesus' death and resurrection. Saint Justin describes this great prayer of thanksgiving and then notes: "when he has concluded the prayers and thanksgivings, all present give voice to an acclamation by saying: 'Amen.'"

In describing the liturgy of the Eucharist, the **Catechism** tells us: "We carry out this command of the Lord by celebrating the *memorial of his sacrifice*. In so doing, we *offer to the Father* what he has himself given us: the gifts of his creation, bread and wine which, by the power of the Holy Spirit and by the words of Christ, have become the body and blood of Christ. Christ is thus really and mysteriously made *present*" (1357).

Then comes the communion of the Body and Blood of Christ. We read in the *General Instruction* that at this point in the Mass "the priest then shows the Eucharistic bread for communion to the faithful and with them recites the prayer of humility in words

from the Gospels. It is most desirable that the faithful receive the Lord's body from hosts consecrated at the same Mass and that, in the instances when it is permitted, they share in the chalice. Then even through the signs communion will stand out more clearly as a sharing in the sacrifice actually being offered" (Chapter Two, 56 g, h).

If we turn to the **Catechism** we read that "*Holy Communion augments our union with Christ.*" The principal fruit of receiving the Eucharist in Holy Communion is an intimate union with Christ Jesus. Indeed, the Lord said: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him" (Jn 6:56). Life in Christ has its foundation in the Eucharistic banquet: "As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me" (Jn 6:57) (1391).

WHAT IS MEANT BY CHRIST'S REAL PRESENCE IN THE EUCHARIST?

The faith of the Church concerning the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist under the appearances of bread and wine is traced back to the words of Jesus himself as recorded in the gospel of Saint John. In the Eucharistic discourse after the multiplication of the loaves our Lord contrasted ordinary bread with a bread that is not of this world but which contains eternal life for those who eat it. He said: "I am the bread of life... I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh" (Jn 6:48, 51).

What Jesus offers us is his continuing, enduring presence every time we celebrate the Eucharist. The bread and wine become his body and his blood. "This is my body... this is the cup of my blood."

The way in which Jesus is present in the Eucharist cannot be explained in physical terms because it transcends the ordinary necessities of space and measurement. It is a supernatural mystery that the person who becomes fully present at Mass is the same Risen Savior who is seated at the right hand of the Father. In becoming present sacramentally, Christ's condition does not change. He does not have to leave heaven to become present on earth.

WHAT IS MEANT BY TRANSUBSTANTIATION?

In explaining this doctrine of the faith the Catechism quotes the Council of Trent as it summarized our Catholic belief. "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" (1376).

WHY IS THE EUCHARIST KEPT IN THE TABERNACLE?

The real presence endures after the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy. It is for this reason that there is a tabernacle in churches. Once communion has been distributed, the remaining hosts are placed in the tabernacle to provide viaticum for those who turn to the Church in their final hour and also to provide a focal point for prayer and worship of Christ in his real presence.

With the passage of time, reverent reflection led the Church to enrich its Eucharistic devotion. Faith that Jesus is truly present in the sacrament led believers to worship Christ dwelling with us permanently in the sacrament. Wherever the sacrament is, there is Christ who is our Lord and our God; hence he is ever to be worshipped in this mystery. Such worship is expressed in many ways: in genuflections, in adoration of the Eucharist and in the many forms of Eucharistic devotion that faith has nourished.

The popularity of the feast of Corpus Christi (The Body and Blood of Christ), with its joyful hymns and public processions, encouraged further development of Eucharistic devotions. At times the Blessed Sacrament is removed from the tabernacle in which it is ordinarily kept and placed upon the altar for adoration. These periods of exposition are sometimes extended into holy hours. Enjoying particular popularity is the parish tradition of a Eucharistic day or days (e.g. Forty Hours devotion) with exposition of the Blessed Sacrament and a homily calling particular attention to this glorious, divine gift. At the conclusion of such devotions the congregation is blessed with the Eucharist. This blessing is known as Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO PREPARE MYSELF TO RECEIVE THE EUCHARIST?

To respond to the Lord's invitation to eat his flesh and drink his blood, the believer must be prepared. Saint Paul urges us to examine our conscience. "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). Before we approach the table of the Lord it is important to reflect on our life, ask God's forgiveness for our failings and if necessary, due to serious sin, to avail ourselves of sacramental confession.

Recent polls indicate that a significant number of Catholics do not have a complete understanding of the Eucharist and specifically the real presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. Whatever the cause of such misunderstanding of the faith, all who approach the table of the Lord need to recognize the significance of their action and the importance of their spiritual preparation. It sometimes becomes the task of older members of the family, especially parents, to review with the younger ones what is happening at Mass and who we receive in holy communion. Grandparents have in some instances a unique and privileged role as a teacher of the faith in an age where the awareness of the real presence seems to be diminished.

HOW SHOULD I PREPARE MYSELF TO RECEIVE THE EUCHARIST?

In a tradition that is enjoying a resurgence in many parishes a number of people are once again coming to church early to prepare themselves quietly for the spiritual experience of the Eucharistic Liturgy and the reception of our Lord in communion. This is one small practice that each of us can adopt as a way of strengthening our own faith and appreciating more deeply the mystery we are invited to enter as we approach the presence of God with us in the Eucharist. Those few minutes of quiet preparation have the spiritual effect of making our heart "an avenue for the Lord." All it takes is a little time to recollect our thoughts, recall what we are doing and thank God for the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist.

IS EVERYONE PERMITTED TO RECEIVE THE EUCHARIST?

Often at weddings, funerals and other religious occasions where those who do not share our faith are present, there is the tempta-

tion among those present to try to avoid any type of awkwardness by inviting non-Catholics to receive the Eucharist. Those who are not in full communion with the Church, however, are not permitted to participate at the table of the Lord as if they were full members, sharers in the full sacramental life of the Church. Reception of communion creates the public perception that the one receiving the Lord is in full unity with the Catholic Church. The guidelines for the reception of communion approved by the United States Bishops are found at the end of these reflections.

To help both Catholics and those who do not share our faith respond appropriately, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops has issued guidelines for receiving holy communion. These remind Catholics of the need to be properly disposed, to maintain a fast for at least one hour before reception of holy communion and to seek to live in charity and love with their neighbors. For other Christians, the text points out that "it is a consequence of the sad divisions of Christianity that we cannot extend to them a general invitation to receive communion. Catholics believe that the Eucharist is an action of the celebrating community signifying a oneness in faith, life and worship of the community. Reception of the Eucharist by Christians not fully united with us would imply a oneness which does not yet exist and for which we must all pray."

HOW DOES THE EUCHARIST MAKE US GOD'S PEOPLE?

Just as individually we are brought into union with Christ through our participation in the paschal mystery and our share in the consecrated bread and wine, so the Church as the new people of God comes to be in its celebration of the Eucharist. We are a people made one with Christ and one with each other precisely in the Eucharist. It is for this reason that the **Catechism** teaches:

"the Eucharist is the efficacious sign and sublime cause of that communion in the divine life and that unity of the People of God by which the Church is kept in being" (1325).

WHY SHOULD I ATTEND MASS AND RECEIVE THE EUCHARIST?

Since we are constituted God's family – God's people – his Church – precisely by our participation in the Eucharist, we cannot grow into Christ's new body as a healthy and full member without sharing in the Eucharist. On each Sunday, which is a commemoration of the day Jesus rose from the dead, the faithful come together not only to profess the faith but also to renew the life of Christ within them. Not as individuals isolated from each other and related only to God but precisely as God's family inter-related to each other and through the Church related to God do we gather – made one in the Eucharist.

For this reason the Church calls upon believers to celebrate the great gift of God with us in the Eucharist every Sunday. To absent oneself from the Sunday Eucharist is to diminish one's own spiritual life – one's own communion with Christ's new body, the Church. We celebrate Eucharist as a faith family – as the Church – on Sunday because it is here that we find our identity, our unity and our very being as members of Christ's body, members of his Church.

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In concluding its teaching on the Eucharist, the **Catechism** reminds us that it is also "the pledge of the glory to come." "There is no surer pledge or clearer sign of this great hope in the new heavens and new earth 'in which righteousness dwells' than the Eucharist" (1405). The **Catechism** closes with reference to

Saint Ignatius of Antioch: "Every time this mystery is celebrated, 'the work of our redemption is carried on' and we 'break the one bread that provides the medicine of immortality, the antidote for death, and the food that makes us live forever in Jesus Christ'" (1405).

Our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, in his beautiful apostolic exhortation *The Church in America* teaches us: "The Eucharist is the outstanding moment of encounter with the Living Christ. For this reason, by their preaching and catechesis, the Pastors of the People of God in America must strive to give the Sunday Eucharistic celebration new strength, as the source and summit of the Church's life, the safeguard of communion in the Body of Christ and an invitation to solidarity expressing the Lord's commandment: 'Love one another as I have loved you'" (Jn 13:34) (35). His words should help all of us, bishops, priests, deacons, men and women in consecrated life and faithful lay women and lay men, to renew our commitment to thank God for the extraordinary gift of Jesus' presence in the Eucharist.

Guidelines for the Reception of Communion

On November 14, 1996, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops approved the following guidelines on the reception of communion. The guidelines seek to remind all those who may attend Catholic liturgies of the present discipline of the Church with regard to the sharing of Eucharistic communion.

For Catholics

As Catholics, we fully participate in the celebration of the Eucharist when we receive Holy Communion. We are encouraged to receive Communion devoutly and frequently. In order to

be properly disposed to receive Communion, participants should not be conscious of grave sin and normally should have fasted for one hour. A person who is conscious of grave sin is not to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord without prior sacramental confession except for a grave reason where there is no opportunity for confession. In this case, the person is to be mindful of the obligation to make an act of perfect contrition, including the intention of confessing as soon as possible (canon 916). A frequent reception of the Sacrament of Penance is encouraged for all.

For our fellow Christians

We welcome our fellow Christians to this celebration of the Eucharist as our brothers and sisters. We pray that our common baptism and the action of the Holy Spirit in this Eucharist will draw us closer to one another and begin to dispel the sad divisions which separate us. We pray that these will lessen and finally disappear, in keeping with Christ's prayer for us "that they may all be one" (Jn 17:21).

Because Catholics believe that the celebration of the Eucharist is a sign of the reality of the oneness of faith, life, and worship, members of those churches with whom we are not yet fully united are ordinarily not admitted to Holy Communion. Eucharistic sharing in exceptional circumstances by other Christians requires permission according to the directives of the diocesan bishop and the provisions of canon law (canon 844 Section 4). Members of the Orthodox Churches, the Assyrian Church of the East, and the Polish National Catholic Church are urged to respect the discipline of their own Churches. According to Roman Catholic discipline, the Code of Canon Law does not object to the reception of communion by Christians of these Churches (canon 844 Section 3).

For those not receiving Holy Communion

All who are not receiving Holy Communion are encouraged to express in their hearts a prayerful desire for unity with the Lord Jesus and with one another.

For non-Christians

We also welcome to this celebration those who do not share our faith in Jesus Christ. While we cannot admit them to Holy Communion, we ask them to offer their prayers for the peace and the unity of the human family.

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