

THE EUCHARIST

by

The Liturgical Commission of the Diocese of London

Introduction

The Diocesan Liturgical Commission has prepared this series of articles to give a full and balanced teaching on the Eucharist. In Part One, we shall consider the Eucharist as Sacrifice and Sacred Meal; in Part Two, the Eucharist as the Sacred Banquet of the Christian Community; in Part Three, the Eucharist as our Communal Act of Praise and Thanksgiving to God our Father through Jesus; in Part Four, the Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist; in Part Five, Our Sharing in Jesus= Body and Blood; and in Part Six, the Social Consequences of Partaking in Jesus= Death and Resurrection through this Communion Sacrament.

We hope and pray that these articles will enable you to participate more fully in Jesus= saving act of love and obedience, which is signified by our eucharistic celebration.

1. Sacrifice and Meal

AAt the last supper, on the night he was betrayed, our Savior instituted the eucharistic sacrifice of his Body and Blood ... in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the Cross throughout the ages ... and to entrust to 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 consumed ... **A** (Second Vatican Council, Decree on Sacred Liturgy, no. 47).

The Eucharist is both a sacrifice and a sacred banquet; the sacrifice and the sacred meal belong to the same mystery.

Sacrifice

Let=s look for a moment at the meaning of sacrifice. In biblical times before Christ, a sacrifice took place when the priest sprinkled the blood of a slain animal on the altar and the people, who made an interior offering of themselves to God. The most important thing about the sacrifice was what went on in people=s minds and hearts **C** the acknowledgment that God is the source of all gifts, and the desire to be united to God.

To symbolize their desire to be one with God, they cooked and ate part of the sacrificed animal in a sacred banquet. The sacrifice and the banquet that accompanied it involved a

renewed commitment by the people to live lives of goodness and justice.

Jesus placed the same emphasis on our relationships with God and other people: **A**If you are bringing your offering to the altar and there remember that someone has something against you, leave your offering before the altar, go and be reconciled with that person first, and then come back and present your offering@ (Matthew 5:23-24).

Jesus= Sacrifice

Jesus gave us the supreme example of sacrifice and love. At the Last Supper, when he commanded his apostles: **A**Do this in memory of me,@ he was not simply referring to the Eucharistic celebration. He was asking us to hand over our lives in loving obedience to the Father, and in service to the community, as he had done.

For the Jews, the purpose of sacrifice was to acknowledge God as their creator and to seek union with him. This required a **A**change of heart@. For us, the same is true.

As Jesus offered himself to his heavenly Father, we offer ourselves with him. In this process, we are changed and become more like Jesus. But we know that our self-offering is incomplete and we are not as Christ-like as we could be. Hence, we need to repeat the celebration over and over again.

In the Eucharist, we praise God. We celebrate God=s mighty deeds. We give thanks to God for creating everything, for saving us and making us holy in spite of our sins.

We do not come to the Eucharist because we are worthy **C** we come because we need to be changed. While external ceremonies are important and helpful, what counts most is our willingness to give ourselves to God who can make us love one another more perfectly.

Sacred Meal

Perhaps no activity of ours is more significant than the sharing of food. Eating together signifies the sharing of all that we have and need. This is why Jesus gave us himself under the sign of a meal. It is true that in the Eucharist we have only the bare elements of a meal (bread and wine), but these are enough to tell us something of Jesus= sacrifice. As his body was broken, so is the bread; as his blood was poured out, so is the wine. In this sacrificial meal, Jesus is truly present under the sign of bread and wine. And he is present for one purpose only: to feed us with his life, which he gave up in sacrifice to his Father.

The Eucharist is, therefore, both sacrifice and meal.

What to Do?

If the Eucharist and my life are so intimately connected, what must I change in my life if I am to live out what I=ve just celebrated? What attitudes must I change?

Perhaps I must be more accepting of my daily suffering, be less of a complainer or

whiner. Jesus is the suffering servant, and so am I.

Can I remain indifferent to the suffering of other people **C** my family, my neighbours, those in the Middle East or Latin America? Jesus says, **A**Insofar as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you neglected to do it to me[@]. (Matthew 25:45).

Can I find the time to listen to those around me who are lonely, misunderstood, or depressed? Can I remain a **A**marginal[@] parishioner, taking but rarely giving, when Jesus has given me all? In short, do I look or act like Jesus?

To offer sacrifice through the ritual of the Eucharist is to commit myself to the way of Jesus. The Eucharist means giving praise and thanks to God, not only on Sunday, but every day. It means letting people discover the sacrificial love of Jesus in me.

2. The Sacred Banquet of Our Community

ABy your Holy Spirit gather all who share this one bread and one cup into the one body of Christ, a living sacrifice of praise. **@** (Eucharistic Prayer IV)

We have just seen that in ancient times, sacrifice and banquet usually went together, and that Jesus intends us to celebrate the Eucharist as a sacrifice/banquet. Now we will consider what it means to call the Eucharist our community=s sacred banquet. We will also see that the Eucharist should help us to become a better community.

The Meaning of a Banquet

A banquet is a way we have of celebrating an important event **C** a wedding or ordination, an anniversary, a retirement. If you have attended a banquet, you have probably noticed that it follows a kind of pattern: the guests go to their places, the head table guests enter in a procession, the food is blessed, and then everyone begins to eat and enjoy themselves. Following the meal, one or more persons make a speech. This is what we all a **A**ritual**@**.

No one would think of not eating. No one would sit completely alone without making any effort to speak to the others at the same table. No one would arrive late or leave early, unless it were for a very serious reason. This would be strange behaviour indeed.

The Eucharist as Banquet

Our Eucharist is a banquet in which we celebrate the most important event of history **C** the death and resurrection of Jesus. And we follow a certain ritual. The people gather, the priest and special ministers process into the church, the priest greets everyone, leads us in the **A**penitential rite**@**, the **A**Gloria**@**, the opening prayer. Then we hear God=s word in the Scripture readings and homily **C** through these we are reminded of why we are gathered. Then we join in a sacred meal. Finally, there is the dismissal, and the closing procession.

As with any banquet, a good time should be had by all. No one should think of not eating (unless there=s a good reason). No one should sit alone, isolated from those nearby. No one should remain silent for the entire meal. No one should arrive late and leave before the celebration is over. That would be strange behaviour indeed.

Through the Eucharist, Jesus calls us to break out of our individualism and isolation. He calls us out of our **A**private**@** relationship with him so that we might recognize that we are moving toward the fulness of God=s kingdom in company with others. Jesus calls us to recognize our oneness with others because we are members of his body, members of the one family of God that we call the Christian community.

The Christian Community

The community that we belong to becomes visible when we gather in our churches (on Sunday, for example). We come together to celebrate and praise God our Father. It is only

recently that we have discovered what it means to give praise, as a community, to God. We are more accustomed to the idea of privately asking for gifts or forgiveness for our sins. But we must give attention to the others present. They are our true brothers and sisters in Christ, not strangers, and we should try to get to know them.

Our Parish

But does this happen in your parish? Do people introduce themselves to you? Do you introduce yourself to others? Do you try to go beyond a lukewarm, or even impersonal sign of peace? Do you avoid **A**bothering@ with other people at church? Is the priest who celebrates an inviting sort of person, someone you feel comfortable with? Is the music the kind that moves you to any feeling about God=s presence? Does the celebration move you to respond to the prayers, and to want to talk to God?

If your parish is not a warm and welcoming community, the celebration of God=s love in the Eucharist will not seem much like a banquet. It will feel more like a cold, empty ritual.

Our Responsibility

So who is responsible for making the parish a welcoming community in which real celebration takes place? It belongs to each of us, not just the priest. We can begin by asking God to help us see that we are not strangers to one another. At least, we need not be. We all have a mutual friend: Jesus. In fact, he is more than a friend; he is our brother. And we are brothers and sisters to each other because of him. We should act accordingly.

Jesus has redeemed us and reconciled us to our heavenly Father. He has made us one with each other, but he asks our cooperation. He asks us to bring his unifying love and his forgiveness to everyone we meet.

We should leave the Sacred Banquet satisfied but not complacent, joyful but not uncaring, reconciled but ready for fresh conversions. We are God=s people, fed at the banquet, sharing Jesus= new life, a life that must be shared with others.

3. Our Praise and Thanksgiving

We are God=s children, and it seems that most of the time we are asking God for things. We trust that God is not annoyed by our requests; in fact, Jesus told us to ask our Father for what we need. But our Father must be pleased when we acknowledge the gifts we receive, when we thank and praise him. We are not yet very good at doing this, but we are slowly learning how.

We are beginning to see that we have a great way of praising and thanking our heavenly Father for all his gifts to us: the Eucharist. As a matter of fact, the word **A**Eucharist@ means thanksgiving. That is why the Church now uses this word more frequently to designate **A**The Mass@. It is a fuller word, indicating more precisely what we gather to do.

In the Eucharist, we are able to give praise and thanks to our Father because Jesus unites us to himself and joins our prayers to his. What is more, in a mysterious way, when we pray we speak for all humanity and all creation. Through us, creation is able to respond in praise to its

creator.

Praise and Thanksgiving in the Bible

For the Jewish people, praise and thanksgiving (Berakah) is a characteristic of prayer, as we see in many of the Psalms in the Old Testament. The attitude of praise and thanksgiving to God is especially important during the Jewish feast of Passover. During this feast, the people celebrated their freedom from slavery and their new relationship (covenant) with God which was established at Mount Sinai through Moses.

Jesus celebrated his Last Supper with his apostles in a Passover setting. He wants us to understand the Eucharist as a celebration of his passing from death to life, a celebration of our freedom from the slavery of sin, a celebration of the new covenant that he established between us and God on Calvary.

Jesus taught us that our greatest response to our Father is praise and thanksgiving. Even when he faced suffering and death, Jesus offered himself in praise and thanksgiving to his Father. His self-offering is symbolized in the offering of bread and wine.

Jesus identified himself with the bread and wine: bread representing his body which is broken for us; wine as his blood which is poured out for us. In his life, death, and resurrection, he brings about a new relationship with God (a new covenant). We are drawn more deeply into this covenant when we eat this bread and drink this cup.

The Eucharist: Our Praise and Thanksgiving

When we gather for the Eucharist, we begin by praising and thanking God our Father for all his gifts (**A**Glory to God in the highest...**@**). We recall some of these gifts through the Scripture readings and the homily.

But we do not only receive gifts; we respond to them as well: by our conscious participation in the ritual, by being alert to what is said and done, by offering ourselves in union with the gifts that we offer to the Father **C** at first only bread and wine, then the body and blood of Jesus.

The offering we made is the same offering Jesus made to his Father on the cross and continues to make. This is true praise and thanksgiving: our Eucharist too.

We too can be transformed by the Holy Spirit, just as the bread and wine are transformed. We must identify ourselves with Jesus who shared his body, broken for us, and his blood, poured out for us. We too must give ourselves to God by giving ourselves for our brothers and sisters.

Our celebration of the Eucharist is not something passive; it is active generosity, authentic praise and thanksgiving to God our Father.

And so?

Some reflections may help us to understand this teaching as applied to our daily lives.

Do we experience our community as one that gathers to give praise and thanks, not only in words, but in welcoming, in gesture, and in song?

Does the homily assist the community to connect the act of praise and thanksgiving with the act of generosity to others, both as individuals and as a community?

Do we feel that the Eucharistic Prayer calls the whole community to affirm its response, the Great Amen, with attention, commitment, and enthusiasm?

If we can truly praise and thank God in our Eucharistic celebration, we have a much better chance of praising and thanking him in our daily lives. Our active generosity in Eucharist will be translated into active generosity toward our fellow human beings.



4. The Presence of Jesus

AAs we receive from this altar the sacred body and blood of your Son, may we be filled with every grace and blessing. @ (Eucharistic Prayer I)

Jesus Christ is present in the Eucharist. **A**So what else is new? @ you might say, **A**I know that already @. But do you know that Jesus is present in you, not just when you receive him in Communion, but all the time (unless you deliberately reject him)? It seems that we often forget that God is present in us by grace, the gift of himself that begins at our Baptism.

Why a Sacramental Presence?

If God is already present in us, we should not think of the sacraments as a way of making present an otherwise absent God, as if God pops in and out of our life. Rather, we should think of the sacraments as the ways in which God=s presence can be felt, just as a handshake or a hug reveal an already existing friendship.

Sacraments make real for us a God who is already personally and actively present in our lives. We cannot see or touch God, but through the sacraments, God touches us. He uses materials, gestures, and words to reassure us that he is involved in our lives, that he cares for us, and loves us deeply.

In the sacrament of Eucharist, God becomes present in a unique way. The bread and wine cease to be bread and wine, and are transformed into the body and blood of Jesus, the sign of his death and resurrection, the sign of him as food.

Jesus= Nourishing Presence

As we grow physically, so must we grow spiritually, allowing God to become more a part of our life. We grow spiritually most of all in our sacramental encounters with God, especially the Eucharist. In this sacrament, Jesus comes to us, under the sign of food, expressly to feed and heal us.

Jesus= presence in the Eucharist is not meant to be a substitute for his continuing presence in us by grace but the source of its growth and the sign of its reality. The food of the Eucharist is the impetus for a new outpouring of our love for God, stirred up by our joining in the offering of Jesus to the Father.

Communion Doesn=t Just Happen

This growth doesn=t happen automatically. We come to Eucharist to do something, not just to receive. In fact, unless we do something, we will receive very little. The Church teaches: **A**Like the passion of Christ itself, this sacrifice, though offered for all >has no effect except on those united to the passion of Christ by faith and charity.. To these it brings a greater or less benefit in proportion to their devotion=@ (Congregation for Divine Worship, Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery (1967), no. 12).

That is to say we must participate consciously in the whole act of worship; our faith must be stirred, our love activated. It is Jesus himself who urges us on so that we might receive him with full effect.

Once the act of eating is finished, once the Bread is consumed and no longer looks like bread, this particular sign of Jesus= presence is gone. But he continues to be present.

When the Eucharist is reserved for communion to the sick, the dying, and those unable to be present at the celebration, the sign of Jesus= presence continues. But it must never be an external substitute for the permanent inward presence of Christ within us by grace.

Devotion to Jesus in the Reserved Sacrament

In the last 20 years, the Church has presented clear teachings about devotion to Jesus in the reserved or **ABlessed@** Sacrament. She strongly urges us to have a Blessed Sacrament chapel attached to each church. The chapel should be separate from the main church, warmly and fittingly decorated, and thus more suitable for private devotion.

In our devotion to Jesus present in the reserved sacrament, we should ponder the meaning of what we celebrate in the Eucharist **C** his death and resurrection. How am I to die with Jesus? How am I to share his risen life? Where do I start **C** in my family, circle of friends, my fellow workers?

Facing Reality

It is in my devotional relationship with Jesus present in the sacrament that I must face the hard realities of my celebration of his death and resurrection. My celebration must lead me to action. It must lead me to confront my laziness or my refusal to live out Jesus= death and resurrection. It is with the sign of his presence before me that I can gain the courage to be his instrument, his voice, his healing hands, his loving heart. My devotion to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament must lead me to accept and fulfill my responsibilities to others, even at the risk of being rejected.

The Eucharist is a sign of Jesus= presence among us and within us by grace. It is also the spiritual food which makes his life grow in us. By celebrating the Eucharist, we allow Jesus to fill us more and more with his life and love. We can then live his life more fully and reflect it more surely by our care and love for our brothers and sisters.

5. Our Communion with the Lord

ATake this, all of you, and it is: this is my body... Take this, all of you, and drink from it: this is the cup of my blood, ... Do this is memory of me.@ (Words of Institution)

The Eucharist is our communal **A**sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving@, a time of intimate union with God, and with one another. Our receiving of communion is the natural and obvious conclusion of our sacrifice. It is our partaking of the banquet. The reception of the Body and Blood of Jesus signifies and seals the offering we have made. In other words, communion is not an isolated event; it is a consequence of the whole celebration.

To make our communion a deeper experience of union with Jesus, we make use of many elements; good music, reverence, an orderly procession. But one of the most effective ways to enrich our communion experience is to receive communion under the species of both bread and wine.

Eating the Bread

Over the past few years, the Church has asked us to look at the elements we use for the Eucharist, and to consider ways in which we might make them better signs of what we do. She asks us to consider using bread that looks and tastes more like the bread we are used to eating at home. Because it is food, we may chew it before swallowing it. And we now have a choice in the way we receive the sacred bread. We may take it directly on the tongue, or we may receive it on an outstretched left hand, then take it with our right hand and place it in our mouth. This second option seems to be a more natural way for us to **A**take and eat@, and is therefore a better sign.

Drinking from the Cup

At the Last Supper, Jesus told his disciples to remember him by eating and drinking. For about twelve centuries after that, Christians received communion under both signs **C** bread and wine. Gradually, however, in the Roman Church, drinking from the cup came to be reserved to the clergy. Lay people received only the sacred bread.

It has always been our belief that when we receive communion under only one of the signs, we receive the total Christ. But we now see that our usual practice of receiving only the sacred bread is not the full sign of receiving implied by Jesus' command **A**take and eat, take and drink. **@**

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council made clear their desire to restore this ancient practice when they called for a more active form of participation in the Eucharist by all assembled. Opening up the possibility of communion from the cup to greater numbers of people is one way in which they sought to encourage such fullness of participation: **A** communion under both kinds may be granted when the Bishops see fit, not only to clerics and religious, but also to the laity... **@** (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 55)

When the liturgy was reformed in 1969, one of the directives stated: **A** the sign of communion is more complete when given under both kinds, since in that form the sign of the eucharistic banquet appears more clearly **@** (Introduction to the Sacramentary, no. 242). Following the directives of the Holy See, the Canadian Bishops have encouraged wider use of communion from the cup.

In Our Diocese

At the request of several of our parishes, Bishop Sherlock has, after consultation, permitted general use of the cup at all Masses throughout the diocese. He has set the following conditions:

- \$** that it be at the discretion of the pastor;
- \$** that it be introduced only after adequate preparation;
- \$** that it be only for those who have been confirmed;
- \$** that it be clearly optional **C** like communion in the hand, it is the choice of the recipient.

Having offered our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, we come forward to seal this offering by receiving Jesus. We may soon have the opportunity to receive him under the fuller sign of eating and drinking.

The change will not occur overnight. There are many details to be worked out. In the meantime, we can prepare ourselves through reflection upon the value of this fuller sign, which

adds to our sense that this sacrifice is, indeed, a sacred meal.



6. Our Mission

AGo in peace to love and serve the Lord[®]. With these similar words, the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist comes to an end. For many Catholics, these words also mark the end of their relating to God until the following Sunday. They do not understand what it means to be a member of the Church; nor do they understand their role in the world in which they live. They do not understand that celebrating Eucharist also means celebrating and preparing for our mission in this world.

We are called to personal conversion and the conversion of society. Conversion is the principal gift coming from the Eucharist, the real healing of our lives in Christ.

The Eucharist celebrated without our personal conversion becomes fruitless for us and we fail to advance the mission of the Church. Celebrating Eucharist becomes a narrow, individualistic self-seeking of Jesus, completely the opposite of his teaching **C** **A**I was hungry, and you gave me to eat, ... I was in prison and you visited me...[®] (Matthew 25).

The failure to understand that our mission in the Church involves, not only personal conversion, but also the conversion of society has resulted in only 5-8% of **A**practicing[®] Catholics being active in parish life, and about the same number being involved in **A**helping[®] projects outside the Church.

The Road to Recovery

There are three principles involved in recovering our sense of mission: first, to realize what it means to be a member of the Body of Christ, the Church; second, to be convinced that salvation **C** and the Gospel **C** is addressed to every dimension of our lives; and third, that the Gospel and liturgy are concerned with rebuilding our society in the image of Christ.

We are the Body of Christ

Since Vatican II, we are recovering a sense of our parish as a community of believers. But in stressing the parish community, have we lost our awareness that each parish is a part of the Body of Christ? We do not stand alone before God, ever, but as a member of this immense community whose head is Christ. Nor do we ever go to God alone; it is only in and through the Church, the Body of Christ.

These realities must make us stop and reflect on the nature of our personal piety: where does it lead us? Do we move to God and to each other, both vertically and horizontally? Do we indeed feed each other, care for our sick, slake the thirst of the parched, visit the unwanted in the nursing homes? If our personal piety only moves vertically (**A**me and God[®]), we have not heard the message of the Gospel; we have not grasped what it means to be a member of Christ=s body, the Church.

Salvation in addressed to the whole person

This second principle teaches us that our faith (how we relate to God) must interact and be part of every other aspect of our lives. And every one of life=s experiences affects our whole

being, including our relationship with God. For example, our married life affects many people, not just the immediate members of our family; our school years are important because we learn, not just how to earn a living, but how to relate to many different kinds of people.

Rebuilding Society in Christ

When we understand and appreciate that our oneness in Christ involves our whole being, and not just our **A**spirital life[@], we will work at rebuilding our society. We will be convinced that as Christians, the work we do for justice, like the liturgical action itself, is God=s work. We are not independent operators but fellow-workers with Christ and his Spirit. We cannot fail, no matter how many setbacks we may experience.

By maintaining the vision of faith, we will see that justice is indivisible. We will not act unjustly in order to remedy another injustice. We will realize that we cannot bomb abortion clinics, employ strikebreakers, or fight violence with violence. Our respect for others will extend even to our opponents and enemies.

Jesus died a violent death, and in his dying absorbed all anger, violence, and hatred. He is in us, and we must allow him to continue to absorb all the violence we encounter. We cannot work against the victory of Christ.

Liturgy and Justice

In celebrating liturgy, we look to a new society, a new humanity, already begun in Christ through his death and resurrection. It has also begun in us who are his Church, even if only imperfectly. In celebrating the brokenness of all humanity. If our celebration does not remind us of these realities, if it does not move us at least to change ourselves, then we are in danger of forgetting our mission to this world of ours.

Do we want to understand our real relationship with each other? Do we want to search for justice in all areas of our lives? Do we want to rebuild our society in the image of Christ? Will we accept this call?

(This sixth section is based on a talk given by Msgr. John Egan at Boston College, June 1983, Printed in *Origins*, Vol. 13, no. 15)

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