

On the Sacrament of Eucharist

The Eucharist is the central and greatest sacrament of the Church.

It is the means by which the Church is continually maintained in communion with Jesus Christ the Lord and the means by which each Christian participates in the once and for all sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. The Catechism of the Catholic Church following a document of Vatican II calls the Eucharist the '**source and summit of the Christian life**'.

The word 'Eucharist' [from the Greek word for 'thanksgiving'] is commonly used in various ways: You might read a sign outside a church that says: "Sunday Eucharist: 8.00, 9.30 and 11.00 am". Here the word Eucharist means the Mass – the act of worship through which Catholics re-present and participate in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Or you might ask a child, "When did you receive your first Eucharist"? Here the word refers specifically to the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ: the bread and wine consecrated during the Mass through the eating and drinking of which we are drawn into communion with Jesus Christ and the Church, hence it is also referred to as Holy Communion.

There are actually many titles for the Eucharist each with its own special emphasis. The **Catechism of the Catholic Church** #1328-1332 provides a list of these titles with a brief explanation of each.

The Mass: a meal and a sacrifice

Two crucial ways the Church speaks of the Eucharist are as a meal and as a sacrifice.

Each of these ways of understanding the Eucharist expands the other. The Mass is a ritual representation of the last supper of Jesus and takes the form of a meal. Yet the Last Supper gains its true significance from the fact that Jesus associates his words and actions at that supper with the sacrifice of his life on the cross that he would make on the next day. Both these aspects of the Mass speak to the human dimensions of our lives.

The Mass as a Meal

The most obvious human dimension of the Eucharist is that of the meal. While on one level meals are very much taken for granted in the affluent society in which we live, on another level they represent a human necessity – eating – without which we would simply die. Hence bread (which represents all food) is a potent sign or symbol of our dependence on what is beyond ourselves – God - for life.

Meals are also occasions when a family or a community group come together to converse, share experiences, laugh or complain or simply sit. Research shows that members of families who regularly eat together experience a stronger sense of belonging and security, are more resilient and less likely to feel alienated and depressed.

The Mass as a Sacrifice

Sacrifice means giving up or setting aside something exclusively to God. The word comes from the Latin 'to make holy'. Jesus' death on the cross was a sacrifice because Jesus freely offered his whole life and self to God, and for others. His death was an act of freedom and trust totally consistent with his life of love and service. And yet the initiative was God's. God 'shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.' (Rom 5:8). Jesus' death on the cross is of universal significance for all time and all history.

The Eucharist is understood as a sacrifice because it re-presents throughout the ages Jesus' self-offering on the Cross. Through the Eucharist we can share in this sacrifice as if we had been present there. It is explicitly there that we make Jesus' prayer of self-offering to the Father our own, and join our prayers to his.

What does the sacrifice of Jesus have to do with our ordinary human experience?

Human hunger, the longing for community, the search for justice, the desire for self-giving even willingness to give one's life for what is right are just some of the human impulses and longings which find expression in the sacrifice of the Mass. But so do the daily efforts of dying to selfishness and living for God and other 'sacrifices' which are part of every ordinary Christian life.

The Eucharist is where we learn, little by little, to model our lives on the paschal mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection. The Eucharist invites all of us who belong to the Church to see ourselves as we are before God, to make sense of our lives in the light of Jesus' self-giving, to unite ourselves with his offering to God, to become more and more the Body of Christ by receiving his Body, to accept all he accepted and refuse all he refused, to be his presence in the world.

A note about the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross: it is important to understand that Jesus did not offer his life to appease an angry, vengeful God. It was not the Father who inflicted torture and death on Jesus but sinful humanity. God not only does not destroy us for our sinfulness but in the person of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, absorbs the violence and sinfulness of all human beings. Jesus' death shows us the utter injustice and wrongness of human violence and sin; Jesus' resurrection shows us God affirming the innocence and righteousness of Jesus. In Jesus, God suffers for the life of the world.

So the Mass is:

- not simply a communal meal but a sacrificial meal;
- not simply of local but of universal significance;
- it happens in time but is beyond time.

It does not matter that we do not always appreciate the full significance of what we are doing at Mass – no-one ever can. What matters is that we are there and that we open ourselves as much as we can to the central mystery of our faith.