

The Eucharist is the “source and summit of the Christian life”. This declaration was made in one of the documents from Vatican II. At first it’s a pretty easy thing to brush off, but think about that. The “source and summit” – it’s basically the most fundamental and biggest thing in the life of a Christian. That’s a very bold statement to make, but it was made. So what makes it true?

To begin, let’s go over 4 different names the Eucharist has been called throughout the centuries: thanksgiving, the Lord’s supper, the Holy Sacrifice, and communion.

- Thanksgiving. The word Eucharist comes from the Greek words *eucharistein* and *eulogein* literally mean “thanksgiving” and were both used in Jewish blessings of thanksgivings to God.
- Referring to the Eucharist as the Lord’s Supper recalls the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper on Holy Thursday when Jesus said “take this all of you and eat (drink)...for this is my body (blood).”
- Referring to the Eucharist as the Holy Sacrifice stresses the sacrificial nature of Jesus’ action on the cross. This sacrifice – Christ’s cross, death, and resurrection – are re-presented each time Mass is celebrated. This one is probably the most difficult to really understand, but we’ll get back to it later.
- Finally, probably the most common alternate name for the Eucharist is “communion”. Just think of all the times you say Communion instead of Eucharist – I received communion today, so-and-so had their first communion. The communion we all refer to here has 2 dimensions to it – us to God and us to one another. Jesus said that when we eat his flesh and drink his blood, God truly lives in us and we within him. So by receiving Communion at Mass, we have the opportunity to be physically united with God, which is so crazy cool! The Eucharist also brings all of us together into communion, since we are all sharing in the Lord’s supper together.

The Mass and Eucharistic theology are thoroughly rooted in Scripture.

- From the early chapters of the Bible, bread and wine were often used to symbolize the goodness of God’s creation.
- In Genesis 14, we hear of this high priest named Melchizedek who offered thanksgiving to God for one of Abraham’s victories in battle by offering bread and wine.
- Then at the beginning of Exodus when Moses was working to get the Israelites out of Egypt, unleavened bread was used during the first Passover (when they put lamb’s blood on the door post to have the angel of death pass over). They also had the “cup of blessing” at the end of the Passover meal to symbolize the new joy in the hope of the Messiah and the rebuilding of Jerusalem.
- Once they were wandering in the desert, God blessed the Israelites with Manna – or “bread from heaven” – each morning that served as a reminder that God sustains man, not just bread.

The New Testament provides us with even more explanation about the Eucharist and various aspects of it.

- For example, the multiplication of the loaves foreshadows the bounty of the Eucharist Christ was soon to establish. He blessed the bread and provided food for the multitude (also notice he did this by having the disciples distribute it – think: priests).

- The New Testament is filled with other parables and stories about grain and bread and grapes and wine – think the wedding feast at Cana, the parable of the sower, the vine and the branches, and the great feast, to name a few.

Earlier we learned a bit about the roots of the Eucharist from the Old Testament. So, let's spend a few minutes examining some of the roots in the New Testament.

- Matthew, Mark, and Luke (as well as some of the letters of Saint Paul) give us accounts of the actual words of the institution of the Sacrament. For example, Luke 22:19 says, "And he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."" Sounds pretty similar to what Father Bill says at Mass, right?
- We should also notice that Jesus has the Last Supper on the feast of Passover – which we touched on earlier. This was no accident. The Passover was celebrated to remember God delivering his people from slavery through Moses. The Last Supper becomes the "New Passover" that we celebrate to remember God delivering his people – US! – from the slavery of sin through his son, Jesus. So when Jesus told us to celebrate his feast "until he comes" again, that's pretty similar to how they celebrated Passover every year even when they were not in slavery.
- We know that the Eucharist has been celebrated from the very beginning of the Church because of the account in the Acts of the Apostles that said the early Church devoted themselves to the "breaking of the bread" as Christ instructed them to do.

So thus far we have seen how much the Eucharist is tied to the Scriptures. Now we get to get into the theological mystery of it!

We call it a mystery because that's what it is (think of when the priest says, "the mystery of faith!" and we all respond with "Amen!"). And in this context, mystery doesn't mean we don't have enough information and can't get a clear picture about it. Instead, there is so much truth and beauty to learn about it, that we can never understand all of it. Even the Church who has been learning about the Eucharist for 2,000 years cannot understand everything.

One of the biggest mysteries about the Eucharist is what Saint Thomas Aquinas called "transubstantiation". Literally it breaks down to be "trans" – across + "substantia" – substance → To change from one substance into another. In simpler terms, it means that after the priest says the words of consecration, the bread and wine on the altar become the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Christ, the True Presence of Christ. But even though the True Presence is now there, it looks the same – it looks like bread/wine and tastes like bread/wine. Or, in Catholic speak, it still has the accidents of bread and wine, but now has the substance of Christ. Accidents are external, physical properties of a thing. The substance is what it really is. So an example: If I went home and dyed my hair, would I be changing myself? My substance? (I hope not). No, I am changing my physical appearance. God basically does the opposite. He keeps the external (accidents) of the bread/wine the same, but changes the substance.

Transubstantiation and the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist has been a stumbling block

to people from the beginning. Let's take a moment to think back to the *Bread of Life Discourse* from John 6 starting at verse 51:

*I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread to live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world."*

*The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, "how can this man give us his flesh to eat?"*

*Jesus said to them, "amen, amen, I say to you, whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.*

*..Then many of his disciples who were listening said, "this saying is hard; who can accept it?"*

*As a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him. Jesus sends it to the Twelve, "do you also want to leave? "*

As a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him. This is the only time in the Gospels that Jesus' followers leave him – when He is telling them that He is the Bread of Life. You would think with all of his disciples started leaving him, Jesus might be like, "LOL I'm just kidding guys! It's not really." But instead, he reiterated it and emphasized it even more. So this must be very important. It's so important, in fact, that Jesus even turned to his twelve apostles to ask if they wanted to leave – men he had hand chosen and who had given up literally *everything* to follow him. That's how adamant Jesus was about this teaching. And it makes sense for people to get caught up on this – because it really doesn't make sense at first. Here is Jesus telling a bunch of Jews to not only eat flesh – which was a huge no-no in Jewish law - but eat HIS flesh (and remember he is still alive at this point).

Somehow the God of the universe is present in those tiny pieces of bread – even if you pay no attention during Mass. And there's part of the mystery about it! We can learn more about it and fall in love with the Eucharist infinitely because it IS God (who is infinite). We will never know everything about it, and that is okay! We know it is true because Jesus said it is true. And we see proof of it throughout the entire history of the Church. People have left the Church because of it, yes, but so many have come to the Church because of it as well.

"Once you understand the Eucharist, you can never leave the Church. Not because the Church won't let you, but because your heart won't let you."