

Eucharist: Historical/Theological Overview

The mystery and miracle of the Eucharist has not changed through the centuries. The Church still celebrates the same sacrificial meal that Jesus celebrated with his apostles in the upper room. However, the way the Church celebrates the Eucharist has changed a great deal since the time when the followers of Jesus first recognized him in the breaking of the bread.

The Book of Exodus recalls how God saved his people from slavery in Egypt. This recounting was ritualized in the form of a yearly Passover meal (Exodus 12:1-28). Bitter herbs symbolized the bitterness of their slavery. The lamb that was eaten reminded the Jews of the blood of the lamb smeared on the doorposts of their homes in order to protect their first born from death. By telling the story and sharing in the meal the Jewish people not only remembered the way God had saved them, but also participated in that past event in such a way that God's saving deed became present to them in the here and now of their celebration. The community's story and vision declared that if God had saved his people in the past, then God continues to save them now.

Jesus celebrated the Passover many times. However, at the last Passover meal of his earthly life he gave the ritual celebration of Israel's deliverance a new significance when he declared that the bread was his body and the wine was the blood of a new covenant. After Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension (the Paschal Mystery) his followers realized that the elements of the Jewish Passover now had a new meaning – a meaning that reflected their belief in the risen Lord. Jesus was the Lamb of God. The one sacrificed on the cross. The one who expressed God's perfect love. The one who set the whole world free from the slavery of sin.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, written about thirty years after Jesus' death, contains the earliest written statement about the meaning of the community's Eucharistic meal (I Corinthians 11:23-25). Yet there is not just one account of the Eucharist. Each of the four gospel accounts carries its own traditions regarding the action and meaning of the meal Jesus celebrated with his disciples on the night before he was crucified.

Because the followers of Jesus were Jews, they related the Lord's Supper to experiences and images from their own Jewish tradition. When Jesus spoke of his blood in connection with a new covenant, he himself seems to have had in mind Jeremiah's prophecy (Jeremiah 31:31-34). The prophet Isaiah had spoken of an end-time banquet in the context of the triumph over death and the fulfillment of all God's promises (Isaiah 25:6-10). In the memorial acclamation we pray, "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again."

The interpretation of the Lord's Supper as a sacrifice is related to the link between the Passover and the crucifixion of Jesus. The letter to the Hebrews, written late in the first century, develops the concept of Jesus as both priest and victim offered to God (Hebrews 5:5-10).

When the Jewish followers of Jesus were joined by large numbers of Gentile believers, some of the Jewish aspects of the Eucharist lost their prominence. A basic pattern emerged in the various local Churches founded throughout the Roman Empire: gifts of bread and wine were offered, a prayer of thanksgiving was said, bread was broken and the community participated in the taking of the bread and wine. A priest or bishop presided, that is, led the prayers spoken in the name of those gathered. The whole community thanked God the Father for his gifts, particularly the gift of salvation given through Jesus the Christ. The celebration was very informal. There were no commonly accepted rules regarding what prayers were to be said.

For the first three centuries Eucharistic worship kept this rather simple form. However, after Constantine recognized Christianity, and after Theodosius declared in 380 that Christianity was the official religion of the Roman Empire, the liturgy became a more elaborate public worship enacted in rectangular buildings with raised floors at one end. Eucharistic liturgy began to take on some of the characteristics of the Roman court.

This period is often referred to as the golden age of liturgy because of its variety and creativity. Only gradually did the Roman liturgy begin to replace the many liturgies celebrated in various countries. Chant was introduced in this period, but it was sung for the most part by choirs. This was the beginning of a process in which the Eucharist became more and more a clerical affair, with the laity becoming passive spectators. The altar was separated from the congregation. Eventually, the priest presided with his back to the people and said most of the prayers of the Mass quietly to God.

With the advent of the Middle Ages there came an increasing focus on the consecrated bread and wine as sacred objects and an increasing sense of awe and mystery in the liturgy. Although the early Christians thought of Jesus as present through the entire Eucharistic liturgy, with the passing of centuries more emphasis was placed on Jesus' presence on the altar. Moreover, the community began to think of Jesus' special presence as related to the prayer that began with the offering of bread and wine to the Father and ending with the giving of the bread and wine to the assembled community. Ultimately, the moment that began Christ's special presence was restricted even further so that it began with the pronouncement of the words of consecration: "This is my body..." Thus, the majority of believers were no longer aware of Jesus' presence in the gathered community and in the Word of God as well as in the consecrated bread and wine.

In the Middle Ages all of Europe was Catholic and the Mass was the central focus of faith. The experience of liturgy in the great medieval churches must have been awesome. Artists and musicians dedicated themselves to providing the faithful at Mass with an experience of what heaven might be like. The great cathedrals of Europe were constructed with this in mind. They were filled with paintings, sculptures and music that inspired and uplifted the people.

The overpowering sense of awe at Jesus' presence at Eucharist and a medieval stress on a person's sinfulness and unworthiness led to a situation in which people rarely received the Eucharist. To remedy this situation, in 1215 the bishops of the Fourth Lateran

Council passed a law that required believers to receive the Eucharist at least once a year – during the Easter season. This law, which was intended to state the minimum, unfortunately became the norm for many believers.

Following the Council of Trent (1545-63), Pope Pius V standardized the prayers and rituals to be used at liturgy throughout the Church. It was called the “Tridentine Mass.” The bishops at the Council of Trent stressed that the Mass was a sacrifice in response to the contention of the protestant reformers that the liturgy was a commemorative meal. In order to affirm what the Church has always believed, namely, that Jesus is present in the Eucharist, the bishops took the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas and used the philosophical term “transubstantiation” to explain how Jesus became present in the Eucharist. Because of the antagonism between Catholics and Reformers, the Tridentine liturgy with its stress on sacrifice and Thomas’ explanation of the Eucharistic presence of Jesus became central aspects of Catholicism.

In 1910, Pope Pius X, in an attempt to promote greater lay participation in the Mass through more frequent reception of the Eucharist, decreed that children who have reached the age of reason (about age 7) were permitted to receive the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist. Since the aftermath of the Council of Trent, the age for reception of these sacraments had been 14 years and older.

Because of infrequent reception of communion and lack of participation in the Eucharistic liturgy on the part of the laity, many liturgical scholars and bishops became aware of a need for renewal. Scholarly research into the origins and development of the Eucharistic liturgy began in the latter part of the nineteenth century. In 1963, the promulgation of The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy at the Second Vatican Council was the culmination of nearly a century of research, writing, and practice regarding the meaning and development of the Eucharistic liturgy. The conciliar bishops stated that Catholics should come to celebrate the Eucharist with “proper dispositions,” and with “thoughts that match their words.” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium #11*) The bishops asked pastors to...

realize that, when the liturgy is celebrated, more is required than the mere observance of the laws governing valid and licit celebration. It is their duty to ensure that the faithful take part knowingly, actively and fruitfully. (*SC #11*)

To encourage the laity to participate in the Eucharist “knowingly, actively and fruitfully,” the liturgy was thoroughly revised. The language was changed to the vernacular and lay people were given active roles in the celebration. The narrow focus on the moment of consecration (as important as that is) broadened to an emphasis on the entire celebration, the Liturgy of the Word as well as the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

It may be said that the main reason for the liturgical renewal was to bridge the gap between the Mass and the people. If the Church is the people, and if the Church is most truly and fully the Church in the celebration of the Eucharist, then it follows that this

celebration must really be the act of all the people, not something done for them. The role of the priest is still vital. He is the presider, the one who calls the community together. He is the one through whom Christ is present in a special way, not only through the words of consecration but also in the person of the priest.

The liturgy is the fountain and summit of Catholic life and worship. It is not removed from life, but it is at the very heart of life. In liturgy, all the faithful are able to celebrate the meaning of their lives within the context of the death and resurrection of Christ. This is the principle that provides the basis for a deep and genuine renewal of Eucharistic faith and life.