

Difference between Holy Eucharist and Holy Communion?

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Answer: This question addresses a serious issue in the manner in which the Mass is viewed today. In common discourse, many people may identify the terms “Holy Eucharist” and “Holy Communion”. Though they are related to each other, the former is, strictly speaking, more all-encompassing. It expresses the whole action of the Mass; the latter expresses only one aspect of this action. The impression is that many Catholics wish to reduce the Mass to a communion service. I heard of an incident where there was a chapel at a beach where no priest was available to celebrate Sunday Mass, so a religious sister led a communion service. This consisted of readings, and then distributing Holy Communion. One of the ladies, who attended this service, remarked afterwards that she liked “Sister’s Mass” much better than Father’s saying the Mass, because it was much shorter. The woman had apparently no knowledge that there were important elements missing from the communion service which would cause it to be disqualified as a legitimate Mass—the offertory and the consecration. Though the action of the Holy Eucharist includes Holy Communion, much more is taking place during the Mass—it is also a sacrifice.

The recently deceased Cardinal Alfons Maria Stickler, an Austrian who was an archivist and librarian at the Vatican, and who also attended Vatican II where he was very involved in the discussion of the Vatican II documents, said this about the present tendency to want to simplify the Mass: “The essential center, the sacrificial action itself, suffered a perceptible shift towards Communion, in that the entire Sacrifice of the Mass was changed into a Eucharistic meal, whereby in the consciousness of believers the integrating component of Communion replaced the essential component of the transforming act of sacrifice.” It is important to return to a realistic understanding that, though the Church highly recommends

frequent communion, and communion is the fullness of participation in the Eucharist, it is only one element.

The Mass, in fact, makes present the sacrifice of the Cross offered by Christ, the High Priest, which is eternal in its effect. Christ is said to be “a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek,” according to St. Paul, and as such Christ was “without father or mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life.” (Heb 7: 3) Christ, as man, does not need to be ordained to be a priest. Since he is the person of the Word, who took a human nature, his human nature is substantially holy, and so he is substantially a priest. As his human nature can never lose this grace, Christ is an eternal high priest. He is “king of righteousness” because he is full of grace, and brings righteousness to us. (Heb 7: 2) He is “King of Salem, or Peace” (Heb 7: 2), because he not only brings peace to our souls again by giving us back grace, but also peace to the human race in the society of the Church, his body. Abraham, who symbolizes the priesthood of the Old Testament, pays tithes to him because his priesthood is superior to what would become the priesthood of the Old Testament. Christ offers the unique sacrifice of bread and wine because of the connection of the Mass to the Last Supper. (Heb 7:1)

Christ atoned for the Original Sin, and all other sins, while he hung on the Cross, by an act of loving obedience in which he faced one of our punishments for the Original Sin, suffering, and death. He began his bloody sacrifice by associating his disciples directly with it at the Last Supper. In the Mass, we ourselves are associated with the whole of Christ’s atoning action. The Mass does not make up for anything lacking in the Cross. Instead, during the time it is celebrated, we participate, in our time and space, in the action of the Cross made present to us. The Priest is the same, Christ; the victim is the same, Christ; only the manner of offering differs—it is bloody on the Cross for Christ, but unbloody for us who receive Christ. The Mass is the same sacrifice of the Cross in the sense that the priest and victim are the same. It is a new sacrifice in the sense that we now offer it with Christ in an unbloody manner.

The film, *The Passion of the Christ*, graphically depicted the connection between the Last Supper and the Cross, by portraying many of the symbolic actions at the Supper as being actually fulfilled on the Cross. In the Mass, we participate in both actions.

On the Cross, Christ surrenders his human nature to the Father. In the Mass, we make this surrender our own by our surrender of power, too. The bloody sacrifice of the Cross is an absolute sacrifice, not a commemoration of a past historical event, or looking forward to a future one. The Mass is a relative sacrifice as it only makes present the Cross. Though the Mass is said to be a “memorial,” this is not in the sense of a mere historical recollection as might occur in a play. Instead, in the Mass Christ Risen is really made present with the marks of the nails, and the attitude of will, which led to his perfect obedience in love. The bloody sacrifice is mystically represented in the separate consecration of the bread and wine. In death, body and blood are separated from each other. Christ is now not actually killed. This happened only once in a bloody way. Now he is mystically killed by the separate consecration of the elements.

The primary priest in every Mass is Christ offering Himself. The human priest is merely his visible minister. Christ uses the ordained priest as his servant, and fulfills the consecration through him. In every Mass, Christ himself performs an actual, immediate sacrificial action which must not be conceived as many successive acts, but as one single uninterrupted action of offering. The purpose of the sacrifice of the Mass is the same as the Cross, and all sacrifices—the glorification of God. The Holy Eucharist, then, refers to the whole action of the Mass, including its sacrificial nature. Holy Communion refers to one aspect of that action: the reception of the Body and Blood of the Lord.

Every Mass, then, involves the presence of Christ from heaven, and the application of His sacrifice to the living and the dead. “For even though a priest should offer mass in private, that Mass is not something private [...] [F]or the salvation of the entire world, she [the Church] applies the single, boundless, redemptive power of the sacrifice of the Cross.” (Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei*, 32) All the saints and angels are present adoring Christ, as they do in heaven, no matter how many people are physically at Mass.

There are two aspects to the self-offering in the Mass, also called the oblation. The first is the exterior sacrifice which we can see and touch. It is made present to us by transubstantiation in the separate consecration of the elements. The second is the interior act of oblation, Christ’s love and obedience which Christ performs through the ministerial priest. Because the priest makes Christ present on the altar, and offers the Mass in the name of the Church, each participant is also invited to offer himself. This is

worship. According to the strength of our interior offering, each of us grows in the attitude of Christ—grace, charity, and obedience. This is the active participation (*actuosa participatio*) demanded by Vatican II. This does not mean a constant hustle and bustle, constant singing, constant noise during the Eucharist in which the believer is not allowed to have a quiet thought. Actual participation means a most holy moment in which one mystically encounters the God-Man in contemplation. In Masses where only action is emphasized, and not silence, and inner gift, the human element obscures the divine, and man—who thirsts for God to fill his heart—is left with emptiness and disappointment.

The Church demands that we assist at Mass on Sunday, not go to communion. This is because, though the ultimate mystical encounter is experienced in communion, and frequent communion is strongly recommended, there is a value to being spiritually present at the sacrifice itself, because in it, Christ continuously glorifies his Father. The Mass not only glorifies God as an act of praise and thanksgiving (what greater act of praise and thanksgiving could there be than Christ's), but also by expiation and appeal. It is a sacrifice offered for the living and the dead.