

THE EUCHARIST: JESUS, THE PASSOVER LAMB

BACKGROUND READING



Our study of the Sacraments of Initiation culminates in the Eucharist. Although in many places the Sacrament of Confirmation is received after the first Holy Communion, the Church teaches clearly that “The holy Eucharist completes Christian initiation. Those who have been raised to the dignity of the royal priesthood by Baptism and configured more deeply to Christ by Confirmation participate with the whole community in the Lord’s own sacrifice by means of the Eucharist” (CCC 1322).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church calls the Eucharist “the Sacrament of sacraments” (CCC 1330) and “the source and summit of the Christian life” (CCC 1324). All the other Sacraments and every ministry of the Church flow from the Eucharist and point us toward it. The reason for the centrality of the Eucharist is that the Eucharist is Christ Himself!

Jesus instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper. In anticipation of His death on the Cross, Jesus gave His Apostles – whom He made the first priests – His Body and Blood to eat and drink. And because Jesus wanted all His people for all time to eat and drink of this heavenly food, He commanded them to continue to make present and real this

Eucharistic sacrifice. “Do this in remembrance of me,” Jesus instructed His Apostles. So whenever we celebrate Mass, we do so at Christ’s command, and in His name. As we find recorded in the Scriptures, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26).

But why would Jesus ask us to do something that sounds as strange as eating His Body and drinking His Blood? When you understand Jesus’ Sacrifice on the Cross as the culmination of salvation history, the Eucharist begins to make perfect sense.

The Eucharist in Salvation History

St. Augustine said, “The New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old is unveiled in the New.” The Eucharist is a mystery that involves the entire history of salvation. It is prefigured in the Old Testament, finds its origin in the Incarnation, its institution at the Last Supper, and its full revelation and significance in Christ’s death and Resurrection. Aided by the Holy Spirit, these events comprise the bedrock from which we begin to understand the Holy Eucharist.

The Eucharist has deep and mysterious roots in the Old Testament, conveyed by events, archetypes, and symbols all guided by the hand of Divine Providence. The most significant of these is the Passover. The Passover was the principal Jewish feast of the Old Testament. It was instituted to commemorate the Jews' liberation from Egyptian slavery and the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham that He would establish a people uniquely His. By the same covenant, this same people would eventually come into possession of the Promised Land. God's people were commanded to recall this saving event for all generations and to keep this feast day forever.

The Passover Lamb

To deliver His Chosen People from slavery, God sent a series of plagues to Egypt. The last of these was to kill every firstborn son throughout the land. God told the Israelites to sacrifice a lamb according to specific instructions and to apply its blood to the doorposts and lintels of their homes as a sign for God to pass over their homes and spare their firstborn. "The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you" (Exodus 12:13). God also commanded the Israelites to eat the lamb: "They will consume its meat that same night, eating it roasted with unleavened bread and bitter herbs" (Exodus 12:8-9). Finally, God also commanded the Israelites to remember this great act of His salvation by holding a yearly festival known as the Passover: "This day will be a day of remembrance for you, which your future generations will celebrate with pilgrimage

to the LORD; you will celebrate it as a statute forever" (Exodus 12:14).

Many centuries later, it was precisely at the Passover meal when Jesus instituted a New and everlasting Covenant and gave His friends the greatest gift of all – His Body and His Blood.

The Last Supper and the Institution of the Eucharist

At the end of Jesus' public ministry, "the day of the feast of Unleavened Bread arrived, the day for sacrificing the Passover lamb" (Luke 22:7). Jesus gathered the Apostles in the Upper Room for the Last Supper and told them: "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer" (Luke 22:15). Christ prophesied His Passion, revealing that He is the lamb to be sacrificed for our salvation.

Jesus took a cup of wine, and after giving thanks He said, "Take this and share it among yourselves" (Luke 22:17). "Then he took the bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which will be given for you; do this in memory of me'" (Luke 22:19). Christ instituted the Eucharist and commanded that we eat His Flesh and drink His Blood, signaling His victory over death through His Resurrection.

After He broke and shared the bread, in a similar way He took the cup of wine and said: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you" (Luke 22:20). Jesus instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper as the new and eternal sacrifice. It initiated His new and everlasting Blood Covenant with God's people. As the *Catechism* explains, "By celebrating the Last Supper with his apostles in the course of the Passover meal,

Jesus gave the Jewish Passover its definitive meaning. Jesus' passing over to his father by his death and Resurrection, the new Passover, is anticipated in the Supper and celebrated in the Eucharist, which fulfills the Jewish Passover and anticipates the final Passover of the Church in the glory of the kingdom."

Thus, Jesus became for us our Passover Lamb. This gift would win for all mankind the promise of eternal salvation. The Old Testament Passover lamb, whose blood saved God's people, is replaced by the Lamb of God, Jesus; whose Blood is our eternal salvation. Jesus said, "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:54).

Jesus has become the Passover Lamb for all Christians. Using the Greek word *pascha*

for the Hebrew word for Passover, St. Paul writes: "For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:7). The Church transformed the Jewish Passover from a commemoration of God's freeing the Israelites from slavery to a celebration of Jesus Christ's death and Resurrection, and freeing of humanity from the slavery of sin and death. God's promise of redemption is available not just to one people, but to the entire world. In Him there is now one, complete sacrifice memorializing and sustaining our own deliverance from sinful captivity. Initiated on the eve of Calvary's dark desolation, the Eucharist instituted through the Last Supper is a mystery of joyful light.

LESSON 7

THE EUCHARIST AND THE HOLY MASS

BACKGROUND READING



Have you ever wondered: What do people who have died and gone to Heaven do all day? The answer is simple: they worship God, singing endless hymns of praise. To someone unfamiliar with the Catholic worship service, called Holy Mass, it might sound odd to think that Heaven is one perpetual celebration of worship. But someone who understands what Mass is would have to ask, “Why would you want to do anything else?” The Mass is truly and literally Heaven on earth, the wonderful gift Jesus has given us so that we may be with Him in the flesh.

Since Christ first commanded the Apostles (the first priests) to celebrate Mass for all Christians at the Last Supper, ordained priests have invoked the Holy Spirit and pronounced the words of consecration, transforming bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

The Mass is celebrated in two main parts: the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. More information on these two parts of the Mass are in your children’s activity books.

Transubstantiation

The change of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus is called transubstantiation. The entire substances of the bread and wine change, although they appear the same as they did before the change. “By the consecration the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ is brought about. Under the consecrated species of bread and wine Christ himself, living and glorious, is present in a true, real, and substantial manner: his Body and his Blood, with his soul and his divinity” (CCC 1413).

The Eucharist is the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. *The Baltimore Catechism* explains one of the ways we know this: “Christ could not have used clearer, more explicit words than ‘This is My body.’ He did not say, ‘This is a sign of My body’ or ‘This represents My body,’ but, ‘This is My body.’ Catholics take Christ at His word because He is the omnipotent God. On His word they know that the Holy Eucharist is the body and blood of Christ.”

What Are the Fruits of Holy Communion?

When we receive Holy Communion, we are united with Jesus Christ. Our souls are strengthened: we need the Eucharist in the same way our bodies need food. The Eucharist helps us avoid sin and strengthens our charity. The Eucharist separates us from sin: it forgives venial sin and helps us avoid mortal sin in the future. The Eucharist also helps us see the face of Jesus in the poor. The *Catechism* explains, “Participation in the Holy Sacrifice identifies us with Jesus’ Heart, sustains our strength along the pilgrimage of this life, makes us long for eternal life, and unites us even now to the Church in heaven, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and all the saints” (CCC 1419).

Receiving the Eucharist also unites us with other Christians. The very Body of Christ, the Eucharist, strengthens and nourishes the Body of Christ – the Church – whose members are gathered in that Eucharistic celebration: the living on earth (the Church Militant), as well as the saints in Heaven (the Church Triumphant) and the souls in Purgatory (the Church Suffering).

How Do We Receive the Body of Christ?

Anytime you touch something extremely valuable, you do so with great care. When we receive Communion, we are receiving the Body and Blood of God Himself! Therefore, we must receive this precious gift in a way that treats the Blessed Sacrament worthily. For this reason, the Church requires us to fast for at least one hour before receiving Communion, except for water and medicine. We should also encourage our children to

dress in appropriate attire for Mass as a sign of respect.

One can receive the Eucharist on the tongue (the ordinary way), a traditional sign of our humility before God and an acknowledgment that it is Christ who feeds us. It is also possible to receive Communion in one’s hands (the optional way). If you do so, you should make sure your hands are clean and empty, placing your left hand flat over your right. Be sure to put the host in your mouth right away: do not wait until you return to your pew.

Who Can Receive the Eucharist?

Catholics in a state of grace can and should receive the Eucharist. Non-Catholics and Catholics who are in a state of mortal sin may not receive Communion. Some question this decision because they believe it excludes people and causes division among Christians. And the fact is that it does exclude people. But the truth is that when we receive Jesus Christ into our souls, our souls should be ready to give Him a good, pure home. Our souls must be in the state of grace to receive Him worthily. If we are in the state of mortal sin and receive the Eucharist, we commit sacrilege, treating a sacred object unworthily, as if we don’t care. The Sacrament of Confession restores grace to the soul and purifies the soul for the Eucharist. (We will learn more about this Sacrament later this year.) For non-Catholics and others who do not believe that the Eucharist is the Lord, to take the Eucharist would be a lie. The *Catechism* and canon law provide for very limited circumstances in which, in case of “grave necessity,” such as the danger of death, Sacraments may be administered to those

who ask, “provided they manifest the Catholic faith and are properly disposed” (CIC 844 § 4).

Why Should We Receive Communion Often?

Catholics are required to receive Communion once a year, but the Church warmly invites us to receive it much more often: every week, even every day! Just as we need to eat and drink to maintain our physical strength, so we also need to receive the Eucharist for our spiritual strength. When we eat food, our bodies receive the nourishment they need to maintain strength. When we eat the

Eucharist, our souls receive the nourishment they need to maintain strength.

Frequent reception of the Eucharist, explains the *Catechism*, increases charity in our daily life and that charity allows us to root ourselves in Christ (CCC 1394). This means that we see things in a more loving, positive, and hopeful way – a way that leads us to be Christ in the world, as all Christians are called to do. Charity helps us practice the values of the Kingdom of God and to steer clear of choices that modern lifestyles of materialism promote. Frequent reception of the Eucharist helps us to avoid what leads us to sin.