

EUCHARIST

“The mystery of faith!” declares the priest at the heart of Mass. And the whole assembly acclaims in these or similar words, “We proclaim your death, O Lord, and profess your resurrection, until you come again.”

This brief and emphatic exchange conveys the essence of the Eucharist: Jesus Christ, yesterday, today and forever. In a key speech to a Gentile audience the Apostle Peter testified

how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. . . . They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. (Acts 10: 38-41)

Eating and drinking with Jesus

The first witnesses to the risen Lord, Peter declares, ate and drank with him. Eating and drinking with Jesus was not an unexpected novelty for those who had followed him from Galilee. Jesus’ disciples were familiar with his prophetic practice of dining with all and sundry. Along with preaching and healing, table fellowship was a distinctive feature of Jesus’ ministry. Whether a guest in a Pharisee’s house or the host of a lakeside feast, Jesus made use of meals to manifest the reign of God. They offered a powerful experience of divine mercy and human solidarity.

One of these meals has a significance above all others. The meal Jesus shared with his most intimate companions on the night before he died played a unique role in his mission. We know it as the Last Supper. Three of the Gospel writers – Matthew, Mark and Luke – and the Apostle Paul give similar but not identical accounts of this meal.

Here is an extract from Paul’s version. Addressing the Christians at Corinth, he writes:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11: 23-26)

“Do this in memory of me”

It is Jesus’ command, “Do this in remembrance of me,” that his followers have obeyed ever since. They have gathered together, spoken faithfully of him, broken bread in his memory, and gone forth to live what they have commemorated. Down through the centuries the meal celebrated in the Lord’s memory has attracted a variety of names. It has been called the Lord’s Supper, the Eucharist, the sacrifice of the Mass, Holy Communion, or simply Mass. It is so central to the life of Christian believers that the bishops of the Second Vatican Council called it the “fount and apex of the Christian life” (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 21 November 1964, #11). This short phrase captures the rhythm of coming together and going forth that characterises the Eucharist.

In contrast with the other Gospel writers, John gives a distinctly different account of Jesus’ farewell meal with his disciples. There is no description of a supper with bread and wine. Instead John highlights the action of Jesus in washing his disciples’ feet. But just as the three other evangelists

report Jesus' command to continue to sup in his memory, so John records a parallel command. Jesus bids his disciples to imitate his washing of their feet: "I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13: 15).

The Paschal Mystery

These two sign-actions, the one with bread and wine, the other with water and basin, manifest Jesus' complete self-giving in love to the Father and to all. We remember this at every Mass when we pray: "This is my Body, which will be given up for you . . . This is the Chalice of my Blood . . . which will be poured out for you." The mystery made present in the celebration of the Eucharist is the mystery of Jesus' unconditional self-sacrificing love. It is called the Paschal Mystery because it represents the whole passover of Jesus – his life's journey through suffering and death to the glory of the resurrection.

The Paschal Mystery is not something that concerned Jesus alone or is over and done with. It is our mystery as well, here and now. The followers of Jesus are engaged in a life-long process of dying and rising. Day by day the clarion call of Jesus addresses them: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). Dying to one's lesser self and welcoming the Gospel of life is the insistent rhythm of the disciple's day. Nowhere is this pattern of life made plainer than in the celebration of Sunday Mass.

Breaking Bread with the Risen Lord

All this is captured beautifully in a story recorded towards the end of Luke's Gospel (24: 13-35). Two of Jesus' followers are trudging away from Jerusalem, their hearts heavy with grief. They had put their faith in Jesus as "the one to redeem Israel" because "he was a prophet mighty in deed before God and all the people." But the "chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him." Burdened and blinded by sorrow, the two travellers fail to recognise the stranger who joins them on the way. Yet he penetrates their gloom and manages to engage them in conversation. He invites them to reconsider and reinterpret what Scripture had to say about the Messiah.

Gradually he rekindles the dying embers of their faith. Enough life stirs within their hearts for them to invite their travelling companion to supper. As they sit at table their guest unexpectedly becomes their host. Something in the way he takes, blesses and shares the bread triggers recognition. Yes, it is Jesus indeed, now crucified and risen, just as the rumours had suggested and just as the scriptures had foretold. So thrilled are they at this revelation that they defy the darkness and its dangers to return immediately to Jerusalem and share the good news.

The Eucharist

Many see in this story the familiar shape of the Eucharistic liturgy: gathering together, breaking open the Word of God, breaking bread with the risen Lord, going forth on mission.

This is what the bishops of Vatican II had to say about the Eucharist in #47 of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (4th December 1963):

At the Last Supper, on the night when He was betrayed, our Saviour instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice of His Body and Blood. He did this in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the Cross throughout the centuries until He should come again, and so to entrust to His beloved spouse, the Church, a memorial of His death and resurrection: a sacrament of love,

a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a paschal banquet in which Christ is eaten, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us.

The Eucharist is a rich and multi-faceted reality. It is rightly called a mystery, not because it cannot be understood but because its meaning can never be exhausted. There is always more to the Eucharist than we can fathom. It holds together heaven and earth, time and eternity, humanity and divinity, life and death, past and future, failure and forgiveness. It draws believers into communion with one another and with the God who is Father, Son and Spirit. Almost without exception the prayers of the Mass are addressed to the Father through Jesus Christ in the unity of the Holy Spirit. The Eucharistic Prayer always culminates in the doxology:

Through him, and with him, and in him,
O God, almighty Father,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
all glory and honour is yours,
for ever and ever.
Amen.

Taking our cue from this burst of praise, we can explore the mystery of the Eucharist as:

- thanksgiving to the Father,
- the memorial of Jesus Christ, and
- invocation of the Holy Spirit, all of which makes us
- the Body of Christ, the Church, and
- Apostles of the Reign of God.

Thanksgiving to the Father

Jesus' life and mission were intensely focussed on God his Father. All four Gospels testify to the centrality of Jesus' relationship with the one he called "Abba, Father." As a young man he told his parents that he must be in his Father's house (Luke 2:49). At his baptism in the Jordan, a voice from heaven addresses him as "my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11); the same occurs at his transfiguration (Matthew 17:5). In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught his disciples to address God as Father in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 7:9-13).

Once Jesus enters Jerusalem for the last time, his relationship with the Father becomes paramount. This is made especially clear in the Gospel of John. At the very beginning of the Gospel Jesus was identified as "God's only Son, close to the Father's heart" (1:18). When Jesus gathers with his disciples for a final meal, all that he does and says is centred on the Father. It was because Jesus knew "that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going to God" (13:3) that he set about washing his disciples' feet. In the several chapters of his farewell discourse, and especially in the concluding prayer, the Father is the centre of Jesus' attention: "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that your Son may glorify you" (17:1).

In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus prays passionately, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want" (Mark 14:36). Luke has the dying Jesus cry out, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

Every Eucharist engages the Church in the Father-focussed faith and prayer of Jesus. With him the Church acclaim God as Creator and Father and offers praise and thanksgiving for the gifts of creation and salvation. In the name of the whole assembly, the priest celebrant always begins the Eucharistic Prayer with words like these:

It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation,
always and everywhere to give you thanks,
Lord, holy Father, almighty and eternal God.

The prayer goes on to identify the grounds for our gratitude, summing up the wondrous mystery of salvation or elaborating on a particular facet of it:

For just as through your beloved Son
you created the human race,
so also through him
with great goodness you formed it anew. (Common Preface III)

All of which provokes the whole assembly's confession of praise: "Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts . . . Hosanna in the highest." From start to finish the Eucharist is a prayer of praise and thanks to God the Father.

Memorial of Jesus Christ

At the heart of the Eucharistic Prayer the priest celebrant announces "The mystery of faith" and all respond with an acclamation such as "We proclaim your death, O Lord, and profess your resurrection, until you come again." This particular formulation provides a key to the mystery of the Eucharist. With succinct simplicity it reaches out from the present to embrace past and future. As the celebrating community professes the present reality of the risen Lord, it remembers the historic event of his death and looks forward to his return in glory. The One who is present is the crucified, risen and awaited Lord.

A life of self-emptying

It is the whole mystery of Jesus' life, suffering, death, resurrection and sending of the Spirit – the Paschal Mystery – that is celebrated in the Eucharist. In the words of an ancient Christian hymn, it is the mystery of Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death –
even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:6-11)

Jesus' entire life was one of self-emptying. This defining characteristic of his being came to its climax in his self-surrender on the cross. There he handed his life over to the Father in loving self-sacrifice, offering himself unreservedly on behalf of the whole of humanity and the entire creation and thus bringing about their reconciliation with God.

At the Last Supper he anticipated and symbolised this self-sacrifice by the words he spoke over the bread and wine. We repeat them at Mass: "he took bread and, giving thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying: Take this, all of you, and eat of it, for this is my Body which will be given up for you." Then "he took the chalice and, once more giving thanks, he gave it to his disciples, saying: Take this, all of you, and drink from it, for this is the chalice of my Blood . . . which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins."

Meal and sacrifice

Thus the Eucharist is at one and the same time meal and sacrifice. The form or pattern of the celebration is that of a communal meal, while the reality at its heart is the self-offering of Jesus. By eating and drinking with the Lord the Church unites itself with the once-and-for-all self-gift of Jesus to the Father and pledges its allegiance to the new and eternal covenant.

Communion in Body and Blood

Communion with Jesus is communion in his Body and Blood. His command was that we should both eat his Body and drink his Blood. In obedience to his charge the whole assembly should be offered Communion under both kinds. Full participation in the Eucharist implies drinking from the cup of salvation as well as eating the Bread of Life.

The presence of Christ

It is in these holy gifts that Christ is most powerfully present for believers. By Christ's Word and the power of the Holy Spirit the bread and wine have been transformed. The consecrated bread and wine now bear the presence of Christ in a unique and unsurpassed way. But Christ is present in the celebration in other modes. As the bishops of Vatican II declared, Christ is present in the gathering of God's faithful, in the proclamation of the word of God, and in the person of the presiding priest (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* #7). The modes of presence are many but it is the one Lord, crucified and risen, who is there for us in all of them.

Sunday

It was early on the first day of the week that Mary Magdalene and then the other disciples came to the empty tomb (John 20:1-2). In the evening of that same day Jesus revealed himself as risen Lord, first in the breaking of bread at Emmaus (Luke 24:30-31), then in eating with the disciples in Jerusalem (Luke 24:42-43). Ever since, for Christians the first day of the week – Sunday – has been the day of the Lord, the day of resurrection and new creation, the day of Eucharist and the Church. Only on Sunday do all these meanings come so powerfully into play. It is indeed a holy day.

Invocation of the Holy Spirit

One of the theological blessings of the twentieth century has been the rediscovery of the Holy Spirit. Lost sight of in the Western Church but not in the East, the Holy Spirit has re-emerged from centuries of obscurity. The testimony of the Scriptures to the power and presence of the Spirit of God has been recovered.

The Spirit in scripture

In the very beginning the Spirit hovered over the primeval waters (Genesis 1:2). As history unfolded the Spirit was with Moses and the elders (Numbers 11:25), and later with the charismatic leaders of Israel, the judges (Judges 1-21). The preaching of the prophets was inspired (cf Ezekiel 2:2) and several of them promised a gift of the Spirit (eg Isaiah 11:2; 42:1; Ezekiel 36:27; Joel 3:1). The spirit of wisdom is celebrated in several books (eg Proverbs, Wisdom).

The Spirit of the Lord comes upon Mary at the Annunciation; is manifest at Jesus' baptism; at work in his exorcisms; promised in his farewell discourse (John 13-17); breathed out on the day of resurrection (John 20:22); poured out at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-11).

The Spirit in the Eucharist

When the Church celebrates Eucharist today, it is above all the Eucharistic Prayer that makes the work of the Holy Spirit explicit. In the Third Eucharistic Prayer, for example, after recalling the role of the Holy Spirit in creation the priest celebrant asks God to sanctify the bread and wine by the power of the Holy Spirit:

Therefore, O Lord, we humbly implore you:
by the same Spirit graciously make holy
these gifts we have brought to you for consecration,
that they may become the Body and Blood
of your Son our Lord Jesus Christ,
at whose command we celebrate these mysteries.

Later on he prays that the Spirit will accomplish unity in those who share communion in these holy gifts:

. . . grant that we, who are nourished
by the Body and Blood of your Son
and filled with the Holy Spirit,
may become one body, one spirit in Christ.

Journeying in the Spirit

The prayers reveal that the work of the Spirit is to bring into being the Body of Christ, both as communion and as Church. This is the climax towards which the Holy Spirit has been directing us on our sacramental journey. It began with our rebirth in the waters of baptism. By the agency of the Holy Spirit, the word and water of baptism made us new-born children of God. In Confirmation we were anointed and sealed with the Spirit and readied for full participation at the Eucharistic table. There we reach maturity as sisters and brothers in the Lord. The goal of our journey of faith is to take part heart and soul in the Eucharist as the "source and summit" of our Christian life.

Sacrament of mercy

And when we fall short in our living of the Gospel and lapse into old ways, it is the Eucharist that assures us of mercy and forgiveness. Unless we have radically alienated ourselves from God and need first to be reconciled through the sacrament of penance, the Eucharist serves as our ordinary sacrament of forgiveness. The penitential rite, the proclamation of the Scriptures, the Eucharistic Prayer and the preparation for Holy Communion all testify to God's determination to forgive our sins. The Eucharist is a thorough-going sacrament of mercy.

The Body of Christ – the Church

In the Acts of the Apostles Luke sketches some idealised pen portraits of the Christian community in Jerusalem. In one he says: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (2:42). In a fuller text he writes:

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and great grace was upon them all (4:32-33).

The early Church, as Luke presents it, was a community of faith, fellowship and prayer. The Apostle Paul, in the late letters that bear his name, names this reality in more explicit theological terms. He identifies the Church as the body of Christ:

[God] has put all things under [Christ’s] feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Ephesians 1:22-23)

He himself [the Father’s beloved Son] is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church . . . (Colossians 1:18)

Church and Eucharist

The use of the same phrase, “body of Christ,” for both the Eucharistic bread and for the Church points to a reciprocal relationship between them. This has been expressed in the saying, “The Church makes the Eucharist, and the Eucharist makes the Church.”

Earlier on, in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul elaborated on the image of the body. It is an image both of unity and of diversity:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body – Jews and Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of the one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:12-13)

One Body, many ministries

This analogy allows Paul to speak of the different gifts that animate the community. There are apostles, prophets, teachers, healers, leaders, miracle-workers (12:27-28). In other words the body is not a formless mass but has a shape and a structure. Under Christ as head, there are diverse roles. The unity and diversity of the Church is manifest at the Eucharist. It is the whole assembly that prays as one, but under the leadership of the ordained minister, the priest celebrant. He has been entrusted by the Church with the authority that ensures the Eucharist being celebrated is truly the Lord’s Supper. He may be assisted by a deacon.

Serving in a variety of roles are other ministers. These may include acolytes, lectors, cantors or song leaders, musicians, choristers, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, commentators, welcomers, ushers, collectors and gift-bearers. These are faithful members of the assembly called forth to exercise their baptismal mandate in a liturgical ministry.

Apostles of the Reign of God

The Mass does not come to an empty conclusion. The dismissal pronounced by the priest celebrant is a commission, a directive that all who have taken part in the Eucharist should live out what has been celebrated. All are sent forth as apostles of the reign of God. Just as Jesus brought forth the reign of God in his teaching and healing, and above all in his dying and rising, so the Church manifests the reign of God when it celebrates the Eucharist. Christ's presence in Word and Sacrament, in priest and people, is real and active, bringing God's new world to birth in the midst of the assembly.

The mission of the Church, under the guidance of the Spirit, is to bring what is symbolised in the Eucharist to realisation in the world. The intercessions in the Eucharistic Prayer for Use in Masses for Various Needs (Forms III and IV) make this abundantly clear.

Grant that all the faithful of the Church,
looking into the signs of the times by the light of faith,
may constantly devote themselves to the service of the Gospel.
Keep us attentive to the needs of all
that, sharing their grief and pain,
their joy and hope,
we may faithfully bring them the good news of salvation
and go forward with them
along the way of your Kingdom. (III)

Open our eyes
to the needs of our brothers and sisters;
inspire in us words and action
to comfort those who labour and are burdened.
Make us serve them truly,
after the example of Christ and at his command.
And may your Church stand as a living witness
to truth and freedom,
to peace and justice,
that all people may be raised up to a new hope. (IV)

Heavenly banquet

Even as the Eucharist directs the faithful to do all they can to build up the kingdom of God in this world, it opens up a new and ultimate horizon. It offers a vision of a new world, a new creation, beyond the limits of time and place. This is the new and heavenly Jerusalem where all the saints are gathered to feast at the marriage banquet of the Lamb of God (Revelation 19:9). The Eucharist is the pledge of this future glory when God will wipe away every tear from our eyes and death will be no more (Rev 21:4).

Conclusion

In his Apostolic Exhortation on the Eucharist, **The Sacrament of Love** (22 February 2007), Pope Benedict XVI meditated on it as a mystery to be believed, a mystery to be celebrated, and a mystery to be lived. He concluded:

True joy is found in recognising that the Lord is still with us, our faithful companion along the way. The Eucharist makes us discover that Christ, risen from the dead, is our contemporary in the mystery of the Church, his body. Of this mystery of love we have become witnesses.

Let us encourage one another to walk joyfully, our hearts filled with wonder, towards our encounter with the Holy Eucharist, so that we may experience and proclaim to others the truth of the words with which Jesus took leave of his disciples: “Lo, I am with you always, until the end of the world” (Matthew 28:20).

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