

IX. A. HISTORY AND THEOLOGY OF THE EUCHARIST

The *Book of Exodus* (12:1-13:16) recalls the salvation story of God saving the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. This event is ritualized in a yearly Passover meal. Bitter herbs symbolized the bitterness of their slavery; the lamb shank reminded the Jews of the blood of the lamb smeared on the doorpost of the homes of the Hebrews 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. In the community's story and experience of the Passover meal they proclaim that God had saved God's people in the past, and continues to save people now.

The Gospels tell us of Jesus eating meals with the disciples and with sinners and outcasts of all sorts. These scenes of meals with Jesus are a sign of the reign of God, which is open to all people. The Last Supper meal and all of Jesus' life focused on the reign of God. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, written about 30 years after Jesus' death, contains the earliest written statement about the meaning of the community's Eucharistic meal.

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, 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 death of the Lord until he comes. (*1Cor.* 11:23-26)

There is no one complete account of the early Christian Eucharist. Each of the four gospels tells of its own community's traditions regarding the action and meaning of the meal Jesus celebrated with his disciples on the night before he was crucified. Knowing that Jesus and his followers were Jews, they related the Last Supper with the experiences and images from their own Jewish tradition. When Jesus spoke of his blood in connection with a new covenant he seems to have in mind Jeremiah's prophecy:

The days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers the day I took them by the hand to lead them forth from the land of Egypt; for they broke my covenant and I had to show myself their master, says the LORD. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD. I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer will they have need to teach their friends and kinsmen how to know the LORD. All, from least to greatest, shall know me, says the LORD, for I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more. (*Jer.* 31:31-34)

We can also find in the Book of Isaiah an end-time banquet in the context of triumph over death and the fulfillment of all God's promises:

On this mountain the LORD of hosts
 will provide for all peoples
 A feast of rich food and choice wines,
 juicy, rich food and pure, choice wines.
 On this mountain he will destroy
 the veil that veils all peoples,
 The web that is woven over all nations;
 he will destroy death forever. (*Is 25:6-7*)

In the *Acts of the Apostles* we find reference to one of the earliest gathering of the Church: “They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers” (*Acts 2:42*). The Church grew rapidly and was



quickly joined by many Gentile believers. The Jewish aspect of Eucharist celebrations became intermingled with local traditions. In time a pattern emerged in churches 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 sharing of the Eucharist. In time a bishop or priest led the gathering in prayer. The whole community thanked God the Father for gifts, particularly the gift of salvation through Jesus.

During the first three centuries Eucharistic celebration was simple in form. This changed when Christianity became an acceptable religious practice in the Roman Empire. With the Edict of Constantine (often called the Edict of Milan) in 313, religious tolerance was granted to all religions including Christianity. The Church was recognized as a legal entity allowing it to own property. Emperor Theodosius called the Council of Constantinople in 381 which reiterated the teaching of equality of Christ with God, recognized the full humanity of Jesus and the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Christianity grew in numbers and Christian worship became more widely accepted because Emperor Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of the Empire. Those who wanted to be in step with imperial policy adopted Christianity as their religion. A public acceptance of Christian worship began a time when liturgy became more elaborate. This marked the beginning of a process when the celebration of Eucharist became more solemn and gradually more of a clerical performance. The laity became increasingly more passive.

As we do today, the early Church recognized Jesus’ presence in the assembly, the word of God, the bread and wine, and the priest. As centuries passed, more attention was given to and importance placed on the presence of Jesus in the consecrated bread and wine. As the liturgy took on greater solemnity the awareness of the presence of Jesus narrowed. The areas of fellowship, devotion to teachings, and prayer took second place to the sacred objects of the consecrated bread and wine. During the Middle Ages emphasis was placed on a person’s sinfulness and unworthiness leading to increasingly rare reception of Eucharist. 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 was intended as a minimum standard for membership in the church but it became the norm for many.

During the Protestant Reformation a dichotomy existed between the Protestant Reformers who contended that the liturgy is a commemorative meal and the Catholic Church which stressed that the Mass is a sacrifice. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) provided a format for the liturgy referred to as the “Latin Mass” or the “Tridentine Mass.” Because of the antagonism between Catholics and some Reformers, the Tridentine liturgy with its stress on sacrifice and the Scholastic explanation of the mode of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist became central aspects of Catholicism.

The bishops of the Council of Trent, in order to affirm the Church’s belief that Jesus is really and truly present in the Eucharist, used the philosophical term “transubstantiation” to explain how Jesus becomes present in the Eucharist. The real presence of Jesus Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist refers to the “substance” of the bread and wine which is changed by the power of the Holy Spirit into the “substance” of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. We do not see a change because substance is not visible. The “accidental,” the shape and color of bread and wine that which we can see, taste and touch, remains. At the moment of consecration what appears to be bread and wine is the body and blood of Christ. This change at the level of substance from bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ is called transubstantiation. We see the bread and wine, the accidental without seeing its new essence or nature, the substance of the body and blood of Christ. The Eucharistic presence remains as long as the Eucharistic species subsist. Christ is present whole and entirely in the species and whole and entirely in each of the parts. (CCC # 1376-1377)



Scholars began to do research into the origins and development of the Eucharistic liturgy in the late 19th century. Infrequent reception of communion and the lack of participation by the laity in the Eucharistic liturgy had persisted. At this time the age for the reception of the Sacrament of Eucharist was 14 years and older. In 1910 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, considered to be about the age of seven, are permitted to receive the sacrament of Eucharist.

In 1963, the Second Vatican Council’s promulgation of *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* was the culmination of nearly a century of research, writing, and practice regarding the development of the Eucharistic Liturgy. The conciliar bishops stated that the ideal is that Catholics would come to celebrate the Eucharist with “proper dispositions,” and with “thoughts that match their words.” (CSL #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. (CSL #11)

In order that the laity participates in the Eucharist “knowingly, actively and fruitfully,” the liturgy was thoroughly revised to highlight scriptural readings as well as reception of the consecrated bread and wine. The narrow focus on the moment of consecration (with the ringing of bells and elevation of host and chalice) has given way to an emphasis on communal participation in the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (#7) speaks of the fourfold presence of Christ coming together in our common action of Eucharist. Christ is present in the Word, in the Eucharistic elements, in the ordained ministers and in the assembly. This concept is reflective of the early church. Through the proclamation of the Word and in the Eucharistic food, we become Christ present in a world that still needs visible signs of his saving presence. The Eucharistic food, now consumed, has become part of us and we have become part of Christ; thus, we become more and more signs of Christ’s presence and agents of his ministry in the world.

In Eucharist we share in God’s plan of salvation. We are united with the person of Christ, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him” (*Jn* 6:56) and share in the divine life of Christ: “Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me.” (*Jn* 6:57) In Eucharist we remember the sacrifice of Christ and are joined in the sacrifice with Christ. Sin and death are conquered and we are reconciled to God and receive the many benefits of union with God. We are active participants at Eucharist. As Church, the Body of Christ, we are participants in the sacrificial offering. In the Eucharist, the sacrifice of Christ becomes the sacrifice of the members of his Body who united to Christ form one sacrificial offering. (CCC #1368)

In this study we see that the Catholic Church has moved from an early Church community that gathered to pray and break bread, to a Church focusing on a theology of the Blessed Sacrament which stressed the consecration of bread and wine, to a Church that recognizes that the Eucharist has many dimensions. All these are components of the community’s celebration of the Eucharistic Liturgy. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states:

The inexhaustible richness of this sacrament is expressed in the different names we give it... (#1328).

Eucharist, because it is an action of thanksgiving to God... (#1328).

The Lord’s Supper, because of its connection with the supper which the Lord took with his disciples... (#1329).

The *Breaking of Bread*, because Jesus used this rite ... when... he blessed and distributed the bread, (Cf. *Mt* 14:19; 15:36; *Mk* 8:6, 19.) above all at the Last Supper... (#1329).

The *Eucharistic assembly (synaxis)*, because the Eucharist is celebrated amid the assembly of the faithful, the visible expression of the Church... (Cf. 1Cor 11:17-34.) (#1329).

The *memorial* of the Lord's Passion and Resurrection... (#1330).

The *Holy Sacrifice*, because it makes present the one sacrifice of Christ the Savior and...since it completes and surpasses all the sacrifices of the Old Covenant. (#1330).

The *Holy and Divine Liturgy*, because the Church's whole liturgy finds its center and most intense expression in the celebration of this sacrament... (#1330).

Holy Communion, because by this sacrament we unite ourselves to Christ, who makes us sharers in his Body and Blood to form a single body... (Cf. 1Cor 10:16-17.) (#1331).

Holy Mass (Missa), because the liturgy in which the mystery of salvation is accomplished concludes with the sending forth (*missio*) of the faithful, so that they may fulfill God's will in their daily lives. (#1332).

Eucharist is simultaneously an act of worship, a participation in Jesus' eternal sacrifice, a celebration of the salvation given us through Jesus Christ, a thanksgiving to God the Father in union with the risen Jesus and more. Living in the presence of mystery we are able to recognize that the sacramental reality of the Eucharist is dynamic, unfolding and resistant to efforts that restrict its meaning to any one theological system. When we take part in the Eucharist our "Amen" is the affirmation that we make to the words "Body of Christ" and "Blood of Christ." This speaks of our personal and communal commitment to both Jesus and the believing community. With our "amen" we not only confess our desire to enter into communion with the Risen Christ, but also declare our intention to become what we eat—the body of Christ in a broken world.