

Spirituality of the Eucharist: Called, Nourished, and Sent
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First, I want to say that I am aware that some of you are not Catholic. However, as Oblates of this monastery, you are often present for the Eucharistic liturgy in addition to the Liturgy of the Hours. And the reality is that the Rule of Benedict predates the Protestant Reformation. Therefore, the Eucharist would have been a central part of the life of Benedict's communities. However, at that time, daily Mass was infrequent. Generally, it is believed that the monks would have gone to the nearby parish church for Sunday Eucharist and would have had a daily communion service led by the abbot (who probably was NOT ordained). So, today, we want to look at the Eucharist and gain some understanding of what it is that we do during the Mass.

Many of you have probably heard the Eucharist called the "source and summit" of the Christian life. This phrase came out of the Second Vatican Council's document *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. This document defines the church as the people of God and discusses what makes us Church, what makes us the body of Christ. After talking about baptism and the priestly characteristic of those who are baptized, the document says:

"Taking part in the Eucharistic sacrifice, the source and summit of the Christian life, they offer the divine victim to God and themselves along with him. And so it is that, both in the offering and in Holy Communion, in their separate ways, though not of course indiscriminately, all have their own part to play in the liturgical action. Then, strengthened by the body of Christ in the Eucharistic communion, they manifest in a concrete way that unity of the people of God which this most holy sacrament aptly signifies and admirably realizes." (LG 11)

Let's digest that paragraph a bit. In the Eucharist, we, the baptized—not just the priest—offer Christ—the divine victim—to God. And, we offer ourselves as well. We are active participants in the Eucharistic sacrifice, both in our offering and in receiving communion. Through our participation in the Eucharist, we make visible the unity of the Christian people. We become Church. We become the Body of Christ. That's why it's important for us to realize what we do each time we come to the Eucharist. As Christians, we are called to the Eucharist, we are nourished there, and we are then sent forth to be for the world that which we have received.

Let's start with an overview of the Eucharist throughout the centuries, culminating in the rite we now have since the Second Vatican Council. Then, we will look briefly at the various parts of the Eucharistic celebration in order to understand what it is that we do during these moments.

History

As we begin to look at the history of the Eucharist, we can start by looking at the various names by which it has been called. In the First Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul speaks of the Lord's Supper. This reminds us that the Eucharist began as a meal. We also find in scripture the term "breaking of bread." This phrase was borrowed from a ritual at Jewish meals. The name Eucharist itself appears in the Gospel, mainly in the stories about Jesus and the multiplication of loaves. The word is Greek for thanksgiving and tells us the purpose of our gathering—to give thanks.

The Eastern Church speaks of the Divine Liturgy or the synaxis. Synaxis simply means assembly. We, in the Western world, have long called this the "Mass." The term came from the dismissal rite: "Ite missa est." "Go, the Mass is ended." This dismissal, however, means more than that an event has ended. Rather, it sends us out...it missions us. At times we may call it "the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass." This term emphasizes the sacrificial nature of Christ's offering, as well as of our own offering of self. Others, mainly Anglicans and other Protestants, speak of Holy Communion, specifying that particular action of the event and noticing the quality of union with God that occurs through reception of the Eucharist.

Each of these terms is valid and accurate. And, each is limiting in some respect to a certain function or aspect of the Eucharist. In the beginning, we note the use of meal imagery. It's important for us to remember that the Eucharist began as a meal. Sacred meals have been a major part of many religious traditions. There are generally four different types: humans eaten by gods, humans eat the gods, humans and gods share a meal, and commemorative meals. We won't spend a lot of time here...just enough to understand and see the influence on our understanding of what it is we do.

Humans eaten by gods. Here we have sacrifice. This sacrifice is done to appease the gods. Think of the story of Abraham and Isaac.

Humans eat the gods. By eating the gods, the humans can become like them. This is found in ancient Greece and Ireland. Also, in the Aztec culture, the bread of the meal is in the form of a person.

Humans and gods share a meal. This is communion, a covenant meal. The sacrifice was burnt so as to offer part of the meal to the gods.

Commemorative meal. The Jewish Passover is the best example. By sharing in a meal, the people recall an event and pass on the history of that event to the next generation. They not only recall the event; they make it present again in the here and now.

The Eucharist can be seen in all these ways. We offer ourselves to God. We consume the bread and wine—we “eat the gods.” We share a meal—we create a covenant. And we commemorate a past event, making it real and present again in the here and now.

For many years, the Last Supper was considered to be the forerunner of our Eucharistic meal. We find here a covenant meal in which scripture tells us that Jesus said, “Do this in memory of me.” However, it can be helpful to consider the other meals of Jesus for examples of furthering the meaning of the Eucharist for us. Consider how many times in the Gospels we see Jesus eating. His first miracle was in the setting of a wedding banquet. He eats in the home of Matthew. Over and over he is shown or talked about as eating with sinners. He eats in the home of Martha and Mary and of Simon, the leper.

We also have stories of Jesus feeding others, specifically the multiplication of loaves. And later, we have stories of the Resurrected Christ appearing at meals at Emmaus, to the Eleven, fixing breakfast at the Lake of Tiberius. In these meals we find the repetition of four important verbs: take, bless, break, and give. These verbs, these actions of Jesus, form the basis of what we do at the Eucharist. We take the bread and wine, we bless it, we break the bread, and we give it to one another.

The early church gathered in the context of a meal in a house. The ritual was celebrated in a home around a table and as part of an actual meal. After the legalization of Christianity this began to change. The gathering of Christians could take place more publicly. And, with an influx of converts, the home was no longer big enough. During this time, the meal imagery begins to change to sacrificial imagery. The table becomes an altar. In the ninth century, the bread becomes a host. The word itself, *hostis*, is associated with victim and sacrifice. The use of a host is a return to unleavened bread associated with the Jewish Passover.

Gradually, throughout the centuries, there is a movement from communion to adoration. Penitential practices began to impact the reception of communion. Many began to have a sense of unworthiness and therefore did not receive. This led to the Eucharist, the Mass, itself becoming something to be watched. For centuries what had started as a meal, in which all shared, had become a sacred ritual done by a priest. The people simply watched.

[Put the remainder on our website.](#) I

Vatican II

In the years leading up to the Second Vatican Council, scholars had uncovered some of the early history of the church and its Eucharistic practices. The changes made by Vatican II were done so as to move from a passive assembly to an assembly-centered liturgy. The laity are called to participate fully and actively, to take rolls as greeters, cantors, readers, servers, and communion ministers. The church states that participation by the assembly is a true involvement of the baptized in the sacramental action of Jesus (who is the true presider). The Council called for an intimate sharing by all in the action of the sacrament at the table of the word and the table of the bread of God.

In *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the Council stated:

“It is very much the wish of the church that all the faithful should be led to take that full, conscious, and active part in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy, and to which the Christian people, “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people”, have a right and to which they are bound by reason of their Baptism.” (SC 14)

And it continues on the section dealing with the Eucharist:

“The church, therefore, spares no effort in trying to ensure that, when present at this mystery of faith, Christian believers should not be there as strangers or silent spectators. On the contrary, having a good grasp of it through the rites and prayers, they should take part in the sacred action, actively, fully aware, and devoutly. They should be formed by God’s word, and be nourished at the table of the Lord’s Body. They should give thanks to God. Offering the immaculate victim, not only through the hands of the priest but also together with him, they should learn to offer themselves. Through Christ, the Mediator, they should be drawn day by day into ever more perfect union with God and each other, so that finally God may be all in all.” (SC 48)

This is what we are about when we come to the Eucharistic table. So, let's turn to look at the various parts of the Eucharist. Before doing so, however, are there any questions or thoughts that you have?

Various Parts of the Mass

I. Assembling/Introductory Rites

Let's turn now to the various parts of the Mass. The first act that we do is to assemble. When we assemble, we bring individuals together into a whole. The Hebrew word for this is Qahal. The primary Qahal (assembly) of Israel is that which occurred at Mount Sinai. Here we learn the essential elements of the qahal:

- i. Assembly is gathered by God
- ii. To hear the word of the covenant
- iii. The people respond in prayer and praise
- iv. The covenant is ratified by sacrifice

If we take this concept into our own experience of the Eucharist, then what we first note is that the Mass does not begin with the procession or the gathering song. It, rather, begins when we get up in the morning and do what we need to do in order to come together to celebrate. It begins with God calling us. God is the one who initiates. God calls us to gather as a people. God calls us to come to celebrate.

Many of us think that the liturgy is our worship of God. That can be. However, another view is that the liturgy is God's work in us. God is the initiator. God is the presider. We, the assembly, are there for God to work in us, to form us, and to send us forth in God's image, to be God's hands and feet for others.

So, what do we do to prepare ourselves to come together? What do you do before you actually walk into church on Sunday morning?

Once we have gathered, the Introductory Rites is simply that, introductory. They introduce us to the word and action that will follow. The gathering song is meant to express the unity of the assembly. Accompanying the song is the procession of ministers.

After the song, the first words spoken are those of the Sign of the Cross. In this gesture we trace the central event of our Christian faith. Then comes the greeting, "The Lord be with

you.” This is not a “good morning” kind of greeting. It is called an apostolic greeting because it comes from the apostles, from the greetings Paul used in his letters to the early churches. It expresses a reminder of our faith standing in a long line of saints and witnesses. By answering, “And with your spirit,” we say much more than “the same to you.” We address the spirit of the presider and ask him to lead us in prayer.

After the greeting, we have the Penitential Rite. We acknowledge our sinfulness and ask for God to have mercy upon us. On Sundays and solemnities, except for Sundays in Advent and Lent, we sing the Gloria. This hymn echoes the song of the angels on the night Christ was born. After this we have the Opening Collect. This prayer collects the individual prayers of all of us gathered.

II. The Liturgy of the Word

This is the first major part of our gathering. We listen to the Word of God. It is God who speaks to us. We respond to that word. The word is active. It is God’s movements within creation and within salvation history. In the readings we hear the event of creation and of God’s action in the lives of the Chosen People. We listen to the stories and find in them a revelation of God.

Our first reading is generally from the Old Testament. (During Easter Season, we instead hear readings from the Acts of the Apostles.) Here we listen to the stories of our ancestors in faith, of our Jewish ancestry. We listen to the stories of God’s movements in their lives. We do so, though, with the gift of hindsight. We can hear in these various stories and sayings pre-echoes of what is to come in Jesus.

After this reading comes a moment of silence. Then, we sing a Responsorial Psalm. We use the Book of Psalms because this was the hymn book of Israel and therefore the prayer book of Jesus himself. These are prayers that speak to every human condition and emotion. Next, we have a second reading, this time from the letters of the New Testament. The contents of these letters are often an explanation of the Gospel or of the Christian life to the various communities of early Christians. We then prepare to hear the Gospel by singing the Alleluia! This is a shout of praise.

The Gospel is then proclaimed, either by the priest or by a deacon. We stand for this reading, just as we stand out of respect for any important person who comes to speak to us. The

Gospels tell us the story of Jesus' life here on earth, his teachings, and the paschal mystery of his being born, suffering, dying, and rising from the dead. But this is more than just a story being retold. We believe that Jesus himself is present in these words. So, when we hear of Jesus teaching the crowds on the mountainside, we actually are hearing Jesus speak to us.

After the Gospel, we sit for the Homily, for the unpacking of what we have just heard. There are two more elements of the Liturgy of the Word: the Creed and the Prayer of the Faithful. The Creed originated in the baptismal liturgy. The newly converted were given the Creed and then professed it prior to receiving baptism. By professing our faith again we renew our baptismal promises and faith.

In the early church, the newly baptized were led from the baptismal font directly into the gathered assembly of Christians for the Prayer of the Faithful, also called the Universal Prayer. As baptized Christians, we now have the right and responsibility to offer prayer to God on behalf of others, on behalf of the entire world. These are broad, all-embracing prayers. We pray for the Church so that it can be holy and pleasing to God. We pray for the world so that it may know the salvation offered in Christ and so that sufferings may be relieved and injustices redressed.

III. The Liturgy of the Eucharist

We now move to the second major part of the Mass, the Liturgy of the Eucharist. It begins with a rite entitled the Preparation of the Gifts.

Preparation of the Gifts

After the Universal Prayer the gifts are collected. In most parishes we have a collection of money. It can be helpful to think of this as an offering of ourselves, our work, and the hours of our lives. In early days, the gifts offered were objects given by the people, such as chickens. This offering is brought forward along with the bread and the wine to be used during the Eucharist. We offer our gifts to God to use them, to transform them. In the process, we offer ourselves so that we may be transformed, as well.

Another action that is ancient is that of the mixing of water and wine. What started out as a practical action has taken on spiritual significance. The wine in ancient days was a thicker mixture that needed water to be able to be drunk. However, by the third century, our foremothers and forefathers were seeing in the gesture a symbol of our earthly humanity being joined to Christ's divine nature. Next, we see the priest wash his hands. When all sorts of gifts

were brought forward, such as chickens, it was a matter of necessity for the priest to wash his hands. Now, it is a symbolic gesture. The priest says inaudibly: “Lord, wash away my iniquity; cleanse me from my sin.” We, too, are called to pray the same prayer, asking to be cleansed of any sin.

Eucharistic Prayer

The prayer that follows is the greatest prayer of the Mass, the Eucharistic Prayer, a long prayer that is filled with mystery. It is directed to God the Father, through Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit. We begin with a narrative, telling again of the great mysteries of God’s working in his people. We recall creation and then the death and resurrection of Jesus. But, this recalling, is more than simply remembering. In this recollection, the events of the past are made present. The Church prays on behalf of the entire world, offering this prayer to God the Father and pleading for God to send the Holy Spirit on the gifts being offered.

During this prayer we sing the Holy, the song of the angels in heaven. We join them in their song. We then hear the priest address God, speaking of all that God has done. We hear the story of Jesus’ passion and death and we recall the resurrection.

At various points during this prayer there is an epiclesis, a calling down of the Spirit. The first is called down upon the gifts...that the offering may become the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Following that is the Institution Narrative. Many see the words here as the “magic” words of the prayer. But, the entire prayer is consecratory. The narrative recalls the incarnation, the last supper, and the command to do in remembrance of Jesus.

Following this is the Mystery of Faith. It is a pause for us to give voice, to exclaim our awe and wonder at the work of God. We mention the past event of Jesus’ death, the present reality of his Resurrection, and his future coming in glory. All of that is lying hidden on the altar under the form of bread and wine.

We then call down the Spirit once again. Now, the Spirit is called to renew us, to fill us so that we may become one body, one Spirit in Christ. We are asking the Spirit to transform us. We include petitions for the pope and bishop. We pray for communion with all others, those who are Catholic, those who are of other Christian denominations, and those who do not know Christ. We pray for all who seek God with a sincere heart. We remember those who have died.

The prayer concludes with a doxology and an Amen. A doxology praises God and glorifies God. It speaks in Trinitarian language. Our Amen, our ascent is to the entire

Eucharistic Prayer. We ask that all that has been asked will be done. The Amen should be festive and full voiced.

Communion

We stand at the end of the Doxology and Amen and join together in praying the Our Father. After praying this prayer, we extend the Sign of Peace. This is not the time for good morning or happy birthday, or any other similar greeting. We offer peace to those around us as a symbol of our desire for peace and unity with all, especially with those with whom we struggle. We reach out with a sign of reconciliation.

Then, we break the bread. A practical action with symbolic meaning. The loaf is one and we are one body. Many are made one by sharing in one loaf. During this we sing the Lamb of God, addressing Jesus himself and asking for mercy and for peace.

Now it is time to receive Communion, to receive the body and blood of Christ. All form a procession forward to receive the bread and wine now becomes the body and blood of Christ. The communion song is begun as soon as the priest has received, and all sing while processing. The idea is that we go together to receive and we sing in one voice to receive from the one bread and one cup. We confirm in our bodies what our lips have prayed. The ritual words simply tell us “The Body of Christ” or “The Blood of Christ.” We answer Amen, saying, yes, I believe that this is the body of Christ...and that you (the minister) are the body of Christ, and that I am the body of Christ. We accept the consequences of receiving –that we become what we receive.

The time of communion is not a private time of prayer. However, after all have received it is appropriate to have a period of silence. After that silence, the priest again collects our prayers with the Prayer after Communion. Here we ask that the sacrament bear fruit in us and that we be faithful to what we have received.

Dismissal Rites

The final unit of the Mass is probably the shortest, the dismissal rite. It is important, though, because the purpose is to send us forth into the world to live the mission that we have received in the Eucharist. Remember that the word Mass is derived from this rite and from the word which means to send. The elements include brief announcements; the greeting and blessing, the dismissal, and the kissing of the altar by the priest followed by a profound bow to

the altar. We end as we begin...With the Sign of the Cross and with a procession of ministers.
We are sent forth to be what we have received...Christ for the world.