

times. In neglected tabernacles there seems realized again that emptying of himself by Jesus, that humbling of himself of which the Apostle Paul speaks: "Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross." (Phil. 2:7-8) Yet even there, even when he is overlooked, passed by, abandoned by however many, Christ remains with the offer of his love. That offer will be close at hand until the day God exalts him and every knee bends "of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Phil. 2:9-11)

IV. What is the Holy Eucharist:

The Holy Eucharist is the sacramental renewal, the making present under signs of bread, and wine, of the sacrificial death of Jesus, the Lamb of God, by whose blood we are delivered from sin and death. The Holy Eucharist is the Supper of the Lamb, the Holy Communion in which Jesus feeds us with his own eternal life and gives us in our very flesh the first payment of everlasting life. And the Holy Eucharist is the Blessed Sacrament, the Real Presence of our Lord in the tabernacles on our altars where he, though King of Glory, humbly and patiently awaits our adoration and praise, where he awaits the intimate visits of those he has called friends.

Surely, this gift is such that it prompts us to borrow in joyful gratitude the words of Moses to the chosen people of old: "What great nation is there that has gods so close to it as the Lord, our God, is to us....(Dt. 4:7)

-Fr. Jerome Esper, C.S.C.

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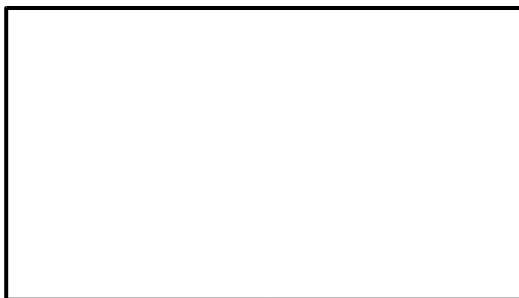
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What is the Holy Eucharist?



1. The Sacrifice of the Lamb:

"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." (Jn. 1:29). So familiar are these words to us from the rite of communion during the celebration of Mass that it is impossible for us to realize how astonishing they would have sounded to his hearers when they were first spoken by John the Baptist. He utters these words as part of his testimony that Jesus, then beginning his public ministry, is, indeed, the one to come after him whose sandal strap he not worthy to loosen (Jn.1:27). And it is testimony he repeats more than once as the evangelist records: "The next day John was there again with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he said, 'Behold the Lamb of God'" (Jn. 1:35-36).

Astonishing words, certainly, for those who first heard them. And yet, words whose meaning was perfectly clear to them. For pious Jews, this metaphor, this image, for Jesus, would call to mind immediately the sacrificial lamb of the Passover by whose blood the firstborn of the Hebrews were spared the sword of the avenging angel, and the chosen people were delivered from the bondage of Egypt. To his hearers, the Baptist was thus saying nothing less than that Jesus too would shed his blood in sacrifice to deliver not just Israel but, the whole world from the slavery of sin. Jesus is to be the sacrificial victim by whose blood the world is to be saved.

How beautifully this role of Jesus as Lamb of God, as sacrificial victim saving the world from sin, is confirmed at his death upon the cross is seen by turning to the account of the Passion of Jesus in the same gospel according to John (Jn.19:31ss). There the evangelist notes that in their concern that Jesus and the others not remain on the cross into the sabbath, that week a solemn one, the Jews ask Pilate to order the breaking of the victims' legs, and he grants his permission. But when they come to Jesus, they find him already dead and so they do not break his legs. And this happened the evangelist notes so that the scripture might be fulfilled, "Not a bone of it will be broken." (Jn.

19:36). The evangelist John is quoting here the prescription found in the Book of Exodus that the perfection of the passover lamb is in no way to be mutilated by the breaking of its bones (Ex. 12:46).

Jesus on the Cross is the Lamb of God, both priest and victim, in a new passover sacrifice whereby the whole world is redeemed from sin and death.

Blessed indeed are we to be the beneficiaries of salvation through the sacrifice of the Lamb of God upon the cross of Calvary. But we are more blessed still than that, for the Lord Jesus in the miracle of his love for us has left us, the way to share in this very sacrifice whereby ours and world's sin is taken away.

For on the night before he died as the Lamb of God upon the cross, the Lord Jesus celebrated with "eager desire" (Lk. 22:15) the Passover with his disciples. There at his Last Supper with them: "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!' And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you.'" (Lk. 22:19-20)

Sacramentally, that is by means of signs which effect what they signify, Jesus on that Holy Thursday presented his sacrificial death as an endowment of love for those who were his then and for us who are his now. As the consecrated elements of bread and wine, His Body and Blood, lie separated upon the altar, his redemptive death is present again with all its grace. What a privilege for the Church to celebrate this sacrifice; yet not just privilege, but duty too. For the Lord has made this his memorial by giving the eucharistic commandment: "Do this in memory of me" (Lk. 22:19-20)

"Were you there when they crucified, my Lord?" the touching American spiritual sings. And we should have to answer, not "I was", but rather "I am", and each time I assist at Mass. For there, each time it is celebrated, there is made present the sacrificial death of Jesus, the Lamb of God, with his gifts of forgiveness and salvation renewed over and over again "until he comes in glory" (Cor. 11:26)

II The Supper of the Lamb:

"Happy are those who are called to his supper." These words complete the invitation of the priest to the faithful to come forward at Mass and receive the Lord in Holy Communion. For while it is true that we are "ransomed... with the precious blood of Christ as of a spotless and unblemished lamb" (I Pt. 1:18-19) this is not the full truth, the full riches of the blessed Eucharist. For in the Eucharist we receive not just the benefit of Christ's death, but we also enter into communion with his life. He gives us his life, his very self, as food and drink.

Indeed, as Jesus, the night before he died, handed to his disciples the bread now become his Body he said, "Take and eat", and likewise with the cup now become his Precious Blood he said, "Drink from it all of you" (Mt. 26:26-27). At that Last Supper Jesus began by celebrating the ancient Passover meal wherein the sacrificial victim was shared; he ended that meal by leaving the church the banquet of

the new Passover, His Body and Blood, a communion in his very life. The old reality was revealed as temporary and is now transformed into the symbol for the new, the new and everlasting covenant.

To say that through our sharing of the consecrated gifts of the Body and Blood, we share in the very life of Christ our Lord, would not be something we would dare to assert on our own. But we dare assert it, nonetheless, because of Christ's word, indeed, he requires that we do so. In the gospel according to John, though the account of the eucharistic institution is missing from his chapters on the Last Supper, we find the exalted discourse of Jesus on the Bread of Life: "I am the bread of life.... I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world." (Jn. 6:48-51)

These words are already so clear and so radical that they give rise to quarrels among Christ's hearers. Yet, Jesus in no way retracts them. Rather he goes on to state this again with even more radical clarity: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you.... My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.... who feeds on me will have life because of me." (Jn. 6:53,55-57)

Scandalized, not just some but, as John records, many of Jesus' disciples leave him over this hard saying. Yet Christ does not refrain from saying this is a matter of utmost consequence not just for our earthly pilgrimage but, in fact, for our eternal destiny as well: "Unlike your ancestors who ate (the manna) and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever... whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will and I will raise him on the last day." (Jn. 6:58,54)

In Holy Communion Christ gives us his life for this life and his life for eternal life. The seed of immortality is sewn in our very flesh by our sharing in his Body and Blood; the pledge, the first payment, of everlasting life is given us. While others go away, we like Peter our spokesman repeat the joyful affirmation: "To whom should we go? You and the words of eternal life." (Jn. 6:68)

Banquet of the "new and everlasting covenant" (words of consecration) this sacramental food we share is destined, unlike our earthly food which becomes part of us, to make us into part of Christ, to make us his Body, living now and destined to be revealed with him in glory. And since, we are made one with him in his life, we are likewise made one with each other in the communion of love which is the Church. "The Cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf." (I Cor. 10:16-17)

The covenant, new and everlasting, established by Christ's death on the cross, and celebrated by the Church down the ages in the sacrament of the Eucharist, is an alliance of life and love between Christ and his Church as intimate and unbreakable as the spousal love of husband and wife. Christ taught that the Kingdom is to be revealed at the end as the joyful wedding feast the Father will give for his Son; and more, we know that, "Christ loved the church and handed

himself over for her to sanctify her.... that she might be holy and without blemish" against that day (Eph. 5:25-27).

At each Eucharist Christ's bride, the Church, makes herself ready for that day of glory when the heavenly voice will cry out. "The wedding day of the Lamb has come" (Rv. 19:7). And in each Mass the Church acknowledges her blessedness to be, in fact, the assembly of those to whom the words are addressed: "Blessed are those who have been called to the wedding feast the Lamb." (Rv. 19:9)

III Worthy is the Lamb:

In the Book of Revelation, traditionally accredited by the Church to the apostle-evangelist John, the seer presents to us in prophecy and in vision the fulfillment of our salvation, won by the Lamb. We are thus allowed beforehand to glimpse the heavenly liturgy in which we one day hope to share. In one scene of great energy and glory we read, "They (the angels, living creatures and elders) were countless in number, and they cried out in a loud voice: 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches, wisdom and strength, honour and glory and blessing.' Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, everything in the universe cry out: 'To the one who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour, glory and might forever and ever.' The four living creatures answered, 'Amen,' and the elders fell down and worshiped." (Rv. 5:11-14)

Wait though we must for the experience of the vigorous joy of this eternal worship, the Church, nonetheless, in the development of her eucharistic piety found ways by which we could anticipate it already here below.

From ancient times the Eucharist had been reserved apart from Mass under the species of bread so that it could be brought to the sick and particularly to those dying for whom it served as viaticum, that is "food for the journey". This preservation of the Eucharist meant, then, that the Church had always in her midst the Real Presence, the Blessed Sacrament, her Lord of Glory. How could she fail to come and attend upon him with praise and adoration?

Thus, progressively, in the Church's devotional life there developed as a central orientation the honouring of the eucharistic Lord in the tabernacles of her most majestic cathedrals as well as in those of her humblest chapels. Visits to the Blessed Sacrament, Benediction, Holy Thursday processions, Forty Hours, the Solemnity of Corpus Christi (the "Body of Christ"), lay and religious communities organized around perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, all these attest to the grace of the Holy Spirit shaping the heart of the Church with a Eucharist-centered love of her Lord. The King is in our midst and awaits us with love; we may have audience at any time. Sometimes we shall honour him with shared public devotions, at other times alone, silently, heart speaking to heart.

"I will set my Dwelling among you and not disdain you. Ever present in your midst, I will be your God and you will be my people...." (Lv. 26:11-12). The relentless love of Christ, his "eager desire" to be with us, remains ardent even when his disciples love grows lukewarm, even cold. In much of the secularized West, reverence for and devotion to the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament has waned in recent