

THE EUCHARIST

At the heart of the life of every real Catholic is the celebration of the Eucharist, the Mass, which Jesus told us to do in memory of him.

Every year, Jews celebrate the Passover, the beginning of their rescue from slavery in Egypt. They eat a special meal, including unleavened bread and cups of wine, and in Jesus' time the whole meal was centred on eating a lamb sacrificed the day before. They remember what God has done for them, and that great event comes alive so they can share in its fruits: the new friendship between God and his people (the 'Covenant'), and the freedom God achieved for them.

Before his arrest, Jesus ate the Passover meal with his disciples, but transformed its meaning as he did so, from a meal celebrating liberation from Egypt to one celebrating the liberation from sin and death which he was to achieve by his death on the cross. He himself was to be the sacrificed Passover lamb shared by God's people.

Jesus took the bread, and identified it with himself: 'This is my body which will be given for you' (Luke 22:19). After they had eaten the lamb together, he took the cup of wine and identified that with himself as well: 'This is my blood, the blood of the covenant, which is to be poured out for many' (Matthew 26:28). Jesus was saying, 'This is me, giving myself for you.' Catholics believe that Jesus meant what he said, and that this is still true today when we do the same in memory of him. When we eat the bread, and drink from the chalice, it is the Lord himself we receive. This is because Jesus actually changes the deepest reality of the bread and wine (their 'substance'), regardless of how they appear, into his own Body and Blood. By the power of the Spirit, they become the 'Blessed Sacrament' of the Lord's body given for us, his blood shed for us.

There is much more to the Eucharist than reading the Scriptures, saying prayers and receiving the Lord's presence in Holy Communion. It is Jesus' body given for us and his blood shed for us that is present, in other words Jesus sacrificing himself for our salvation. By taking part in this celebration, we are made 'at one' with Jesus in his once-for-all sacrifice.

The Eucharist is the greatest act of worship we can give to the Father. We are not worshipping on our own, trying to reach God of our own accord, but in deep communion with Jesus in his worship, his total giving of himself.

The Eucharist is the sacrament of salvation: all that Jesus has achieved for us by his death and resurrection is made present under the visible signs of the Church's worship in memory of him. Christ's sacrifice is not repeated, but the deepest mystery of Calvary and Easter is made present for us, so that we can be drawn into it and share it in full. Through the Mass, we enter into the movement of Jesus' self-offering, his loving sacrifice. The offering of our own lives as the Body of Christ is taken up by the Lord and united to his own offering as Head of the Body. As a community united with Christ, we are taken up 'through him, with him and in him' into the heart of God, and become ourselves an everlasting gift to God. We celebrate not only on our own behalf, but for the whole human race, living and dead, allowing the mystery of Calvary and Easter to radiate powerfully into the world around us.

All this is what we mean by the Mass being a sacrifice. It is the presence among us of the risen Lord and his whole saving work, and there is no greater thing we can do on earth. This is why the Catholic Church insists so strongly that we celebrate Mass at least every Sunday and Holy Day. Sunday in particular is the Lord's Day, the day set aside to worship him, and the day when Jesus rose from the dead. There is no better way of worshipping and celebrating than coming together to share in the Eucharist.

As each of us receives the Body and Blood of Jesus, we are drawn closer to each other, and the bonds of communion between us are deepened and strengthened. We are a people across the world who hold 'in common' the full presence of Jesus himself and a union in faith with his saving work.

Although the Eucharist deepens our unity, Catholic teaching sees receiving Holy Communion as the sign of the full visible communion we already share. This means that normally we cannot share sacramental communion with Christians who are not in full communion with us. The pain we feel at this reflects the pain of our division, and should urge us to work for full Christian unity so that we can share the Eucharist as truly one.

Once Mass is ended, we continue to treat any 'bread' left over with reverence as the 'Blessed Sacrament' of Christ's presence. It is kept in the tabernacle, and from this 'reserved sacrament' Holy Communion is taken to the sick. Sometimes it is placed on the altar as a focus for our adoration of the Lord, the sacrament of the fullness of his presence.

As the Israelites were given 'bread from heaven' or manna by God on their journey to the Promised Land, so Jesus gives himself to us as the new manna, 'the bread of life', real food and real drink for our pilgrim journey to God (see St John's Gospel chapter 6 verses 22-66).