



THE HOLY EUCHARIST

The source and summit of the Christian life

Texts from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*



WHAT IS THE EUCHARIST?

The completion of Christian initiation

The holy Eucharist completes Christian initiation. Those who have been raised to the dignity of the royal priesthood by Baptism, and configured more deeply to Christ by Confirmation, participate with the whole community in the Lord's own sacrifice by means of the Eucharist. (1322)

Jesus instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice of his body and blood

“At the Last Supper, on the night he was betrayed, our Saviour instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice of his Body and Blood. This he did in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the cross throughout the ages 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 consumed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us’.” (Vatican II, the Sacred Liturgy) (1323)

The Eucharist contains the whole spiritual good of the Church – Christ himself

The Eucharist is “the source and summit of the Christian life” (Vatican II, the Church). “The other sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate, are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented toward it. For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Pasch” (Vatican II, the Priestly Ministry). (1324)

“The Eucharist is the efficacious sign and sublime cause of that communion in the divine life and that unity of the People of God by which the Church is kept in being. It is the culmination both of God's action sanctifying the world in Christ and of the worship men offer to Christ and through him to the Father in the Holy Spirit”. (1325)

Finally, by the Eucharistic celebration we already unite ourselves with the heavenly liturgy and anticipate eternal life, when God will be all in all. (1326)

In brief, the Eucharist is the sum and summary of our faith: “Our way of thinking is attuned to the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn confirms our way of thinking” (St Irenaeus).” (1327)

WHAT IS THIS SACRAMENT CALLED?

The inexhaustible richness of this sacrament is expressed in the different names we give it. Each name evokes certain aspects of it. It is called:

Eucharist, because it is an action of thanksgiving to God. The Greek words *eucharistein* and *eulogein* recall the Jewish blessings that proclaim - especially during a meal - God's works: creation, redemption and sanctification. (1328)

The Lord's Supper, because of its connection with the supper which the Lord took with his disciples on the eve of his Passion, and because it anticipates the wedding feast of the Lamb in the heavenly Jerusalem.

The Breaking of Bread, because Jesus used this rite, part of a Jewish meal, when as master of the table he blessed and distributed the bread, above all at the Last Supper. It is by this action that his disciples will recognise him after his Resurrection, and it is this expression that the first Christians will use to designate their Eucharistic assemblies; by doing so they signified that all who eat the one broken bread, Christ, enter into communion with him and form but one body in him.

The Eucharistic assembly (synaxis), because the Eucharist is celebrated amid the assembly of the faithful, the visible expression of the Church. (1329)

The Memorial of the Lord's Passion and Resurrection.

The Holy Sacrifice, because it makes present the one sacrifice of Christ the Saviour and includes the Church's offering. The terms *holy sacrifice of the Mass*, *sacrifice of praise*, *spiritual sacrifice*, *pure and holy sacrifice*, are also used, since it completes and surpasses all the sacrifices of the Old Covenant.

The Holy and Divine Liturgy, because the Church's whole liturgy finds its centre and most intense expression in the celebration of this sacrament; in the same sense we also call its celebration *the Sacred Mysteries*. We speak of the *Most Blessed Sacrament* because it is the Sacrament of sacraments. The Eucharistic species reserved in the tabernacle are designated by this same name. (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. We also call it: *the holy things (ta hagia; sancta)* - the first meaning of the phrase ‘communion of saints’ in the Apostles' Creed - *the bread of angels, bread from heaven, medicine of immortality, viaticum...* (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 fulfil God's will in their daily lives. (1332)

THE EUCHARIST IN GOD'S PLAN OF SALVATION

Prefigured in the sacrifice of the king-priest Melchizedek

At the heart of the Eucharistic celebration are the bread and wine that, by the words of Christ and the invocation of the Holy Spirit, become Christ's Body and Blood. Faithful to the Lord's command the Church continues to do, in his memory and until his glorious return, what he did on the eve of his Passion: “He took bread...” “He took the cup filled with wine...” The signs of bread and wine become, in a way surpassing understanding, the Body and Blood of Christ; they continue also to signify the goodness of creation. Thus in the Offertory we give thanks to the Creator for bread and wine, fruit of the ‘work of human hands’, but above all

as 'fruit of the earth' and 'of the vine' - gifts of the Creator. The Church sees in the gesture of the king-priest Melchizedek, who 'brought out bread and wine' (Gen 14:18), a prefiguring of her own offering. (1333)

The unleavened bread, the manna in the desert, the blessing cup

In the Old Covenant bread and wine were offered in sacrifice among the first fruits of the earth, as a sign of grateful acknowledgement to the Creator. But they also received a new significance in the context of the Exodus: the unleavened bread that Israel eats every year at Passover commemorates the haste of the departure that liberated them from Egypt; the remembrance of the manna in the desert will always recall to Israel that it lives by the bread of the Word of God; their daily bread is the fruit of the promised land, the pledge of God's faithfulness to his promises. The 'cup of blessing' at the end of the Jewish Passover meal adds to the festive joy of wine an eschatological dimension: the messianic expectation of the rebuilding of Jerusalem. When Jesus instituted the Eucharist, he gave a new and definitive meaning to the blessing of the bread and the cup. (1334)

The miraculous multiplication of the loaves, the miracle at Cana

The miracles of the multiplication of the loaves, when the Lord says the blessing, breaks and distributes the loaves through his disciples to feed the multitude, prefigures the superabundance of this unique bread of his Eucharist. The sign of water turned into wine at Cana already announces the Hour of Jesus' glorification. It makes manifest the fulfilment of the wedding feast in the Father's kingdom, where the faithful will drink the new wine that has become the Blood of Christ. (1335)

The announcement of the Eucharist: 'A hard saying' – 'Will you also go away?'

The first announcement of the Eucharist divided the disciples, just as the announcement of the Passion scandalised them: "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" (John 6:60) The Eucharist and the Cross are stumbling blocks. It is the same mystery and it never ceases to be an occasion of division. "Will you also go away?" (John 6:67): the Lord's question echoes through the ages, as a loving invitation to discover that only he has "the words of eternal life" and that to receive in faith the gift of his Eucharist is to receive the Lord himself. (1336)

The institution of the Eucharist

The Lord, having loved those who were his own, loved them to the end. Knowing that the hour had come to leave this world and return to the Father, in the course of a meal he washed their feet and gave them the commandment of love. In order to leave them a pledge of this love, in order never to depart from his own and to make them sharers in his Passover, he instituted the Eucharist as the memorial of his death and Resurrection, and commanded his apostles to celebrate it until his return; "thereby he constituted them priests of the New Testament" (Council of Trent). (1337)

The three synoptic Gospels and St. Paul have handed on to us the account of the institution of the Eucharist; St. John (ch 6), for his part, reports the words of Jesus in the synagogue of Capernaum that prepare for the institution of the Eucharist: Christ calls himself the bread of life, come down from heaven. (1338)

Jesus chose the time of Passover to fulfil what he had announced at Capernaum: giving his disciples his Body and his Blood:

"Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the passover lamb had to be sacrificed. So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, 'Go and prepare the passover meal for us, that we may eat it...' They went... and prepared the passover. And when the hour came, he sat at table, and the apostles with him. And he said to them, 'I have earnestly desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you I shall not eat it again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.'.. And he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And likewise the cup after supper, saying, "This cup which is poured out for you is the New Covenant in my blood." (Luke 22:7-20)

The new Passover

By celebrating the Last Supper with his apostles in the course of the Passover meal, Jesus gave the Jewish Passover its definitive meaning. Jesus' passing over to his father by his death and Resurrection, the new Passover, is anticipated in the Supper and celebrated in the Eucharist, which fulfils the Jewish Passover and anticipates the final Passover of the Church in the glory of the kingdom. (1340)

'Do this in memory of me' – the Church has been faithful to the Lord's command

The command of Jesus to repeat his actions and words 'until he comes' does not only ask us to remember Jesus and what he did. It is directed at the liturgical celebration, by the apostles and their successors, of the *memorial* of Christ, of his life, of his death, of his Resurrection, and of his intercession in the presence of the Father. (1341)

From the beginning the Church has been faithful to the Lord's command. Of the Church of Jerusalem it is written: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers... Day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts." (Acts 2:42, 46) (1342)

The Eucharist on the 'first day of the week' – the centre of the Church's life

It was above all on "the first day of the week" (Acts 20:7), Sunday, the day of Jesus' resurrection, that the Christians met "to break bread". From that time on down to our own day the celebration of the Eucharist has been continued so that today we encounter it everywhere in the Church with the same fundamental structure. It remains the centre of the Church's life. (1343)

Thus from celebration to celebration, as they proclaim the Paschal mystery of Jesus "until he comes", the pilgrim People of God advances, "following the narrow way of the cross", toward the heavenly banquet, when all the elect will be seated at the table of the kingdom. (1344)

IN BRIEF

- **The Eucharist is the heart and the summit of the Church's life, for in it Christ associates his Church and all her members with his sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving offered once for all on the cross to his Father; by this sacrifice he pours out the graces of salvation on his Body which is the Church. (1407)**