

11. Holy Communion

To a Catholic the Mass is not only a sacred offering; it is also a sacred meal. That is why Jesus chose to use bread and wine for it. In this way God shows his love and friendship for us by inviting us to eat “the bread of life”. When the time for Holy Communion comes at Mass the priest holds up Christ, saying: “This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are those who are called to his supper”. The priest receives communion and then places the body of Christ on the tongue or in the hand of each person who wishes to receive Our Lord. The person who receives the body of Christ in the hand places the sacred host in his mouth immediately.

Priest and people, having offered together the sacrifice, receive together the victim of sacrifice, Jesus Christ, and are brought into communion with him and each other. Hence this sacrament is called Holy Communion.

The sixth chapter of St. John’s Gospel tells how Christ promised to give himself in Holy Communion, and how he prepared the people for this promise by the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand.

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The Feeding of the Five Thousand

It was at the time of the Feast of the Passover. A crowd of five thousand men, to say nothing of women and children, had followed Jesus to a lonely spot on the shore of Lake Tiberias, called also the Sea of Gallilee. There he preached to them till the evening, when the question arose as to how they were all to get food. The Apostle Andrew said, perhaps jokingly: “There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what are they among so many?” Christ told the people to sit down on the grass, said grace over the food and had it distributed. It was so multiplied that there was enough to eat for all and the bits left over filled twelve baskets. The people were amazed and enthusiastic and wanted to crown Christ as king, but he would not allow them, because he did not want an earthly kingdom.

The prophets often compared the future kingdom of God to a banquet in which God and his people will be joyfully united. No doubt Jesus thought of this when he blessed the bread and fish, as did the sacred writers when they told of it in the Gospel. But he had another purpose. He was preparing them for the promise of a banquet to be shared by the members of his Church.

The Crossing of the Lake

The crowd dispersed to return to their houses around the lake and the Apostles started across to the town of Capernaum by boat. A storm arose, and they were in danger of being wrecked when Christ came to them walking on the water. They were terrified, thinking they saw a ghost, but he said: "It is I; do not be afraid." They were glad to take him into the boat and they proceeded calmly to the town of Capernaum on the opposite shore.

He had shown his divine power by multiplying the bread. He had shown his power over his own body and the laws of Nature by walking on the water. This prepared the Apostles for the astounding promise he was to make in the synagogue at Capernaum.

The crowd gathered as soon as he landed. Among them were some anxious to question him and demand proof of his authority to teach in the name of God. They suggested that the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand with five loaves and two fish was not proof enough. After all, they said, Moses had given the people "bread from heaven" during their journeying in the desert after they had left Egypt. They were referring to the incident found in the sixteenth chapter of the book of Exodus as described below.

The Manna

Two months after their departure from Egypt, the Israelites arrived in a place where they could find no food. They grumbled to Moses: "You have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." God sent them food. In the evening flocks of tiny birds called quail, common to this day in the Middle East, came over the camp and were easily caught, exhausted as they were after their long flight. In the morning the people saw a white substance on the shrubs of the desert, and they said, "Manna," which means, "What is it?" It was probably a gum or sap exuded by the plants. It remained sweet and nutritious for about one day, but corrupted quickly. Hence they were instructed to gather only as much as they needed for one day. They were told, "Let no man leave it till the morning."

They knew that this food was provided by Nature, but that since God is Creator of all things, it was he who had given it to them in their hour of need.

Those who questioned Jesus said that Moses had given the whole people of Israel "food from heaven." Jesus replied that it was God, not Moses, who had given it. Moreover, those who had eaten this food had nevertheless died. He said he would provide a food which would give eternal life to those who ate it. They were amazed at this and replied: "Give us *this* bread always." He went on to promise the Holy Eucharist.

Promise of the Holy Eucharist

Jesus said:

“I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst” (John 6, 35).

They were shocked and murmured because he said that he was the bread from heaven giving eternal life. This was a claim to be divine. But Jesus repeated more emphatically what he had said, and added to it:

“I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever” (John 6, 48-51).

This was startling enough, but his next words were amazing:

“And the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh” (John 6, 51).

Christ is saying here what he said on many other occasions, that he came from God the Father to give new life to men. As food gives natural life, he would give supernatural life. Only those would receive it who believed what he taught. But they had to do more than believe in his word. They had to accept him completely and without reserve. To such he would be united, as food is united to the body, and they would live his life.

Most of his hearers would not accept that he came down from heaven. Nor would they accept that he could give them the life of God. They protested strongly. But he did not take back what he had said. He insisted upon it. He repeated his promise, stressed it and even went much further. He made it clear he was not merely using a figure of speech. In a mysterious way, to be made known later he would give himself as real food and drink to those who believed in him:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me. This is the bread which came down from heaven, not such as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live for ever” (John 6, 53-58).

Most of his hearers refused to believe him. Many even of his disciples lost faith in him and went away. He did not call them back and tell them they had misunderstood him. He turned to the twelve Apostles and said: "Will you also go away?" as if to say: "If you will not accept this teaching, you are not my followers." Simon Peter, as on many other occasions, spoke in the name of them all:

"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6, 68-69).

The Promise kept

This promise was kept when Jesus ate the Last Supper with his Apostles on the night before he died. It was again the time of the Passover. During the Passover meal he said over the unleavened bread: "This is my body," and over the chalice of wine: "drink of it all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26, 26-28).

He did not say, for instance, "This is a sign of my body and blood," or "This will be to those who receive it as if it were my body and blood." He said: "This *is* my body---this *is* my blood." It would be difficult to find simpler words, or words so clear in their meaning. The Apostles, and the whole Church after them, understood him to mean precisely what he said. Bread and wine were changed into his body and blood. What was on the table before him still looked felt and tasted like bread and wine, but was in fact the body and blood of Christ. The appearance remained the same the reality beneath them was changed by the power of God to whom nothing is impossible or difficult.

He said to the Apostles: "Do *this* in remembrance of me." They and their successors, the bishops and priests of the Church, have done it ever since in the Mass.

A Sacramental change

On the altar of a Catholic church during the Mass, the bread and wine lie separate and the words are said over each separately. They seem to remain separate afterwards. This is a sign of the sacrifice of Christ, when his blood was separated from his body. They are not really separate. It is the living Christ, risen and glorious, who is present in the Mass. His body and his blood, under the appearances of the bread and wine, cannot be separated from the whole Christ, truly present. He is present whole and entire, body, blood, soul and godhead, both under the appearances of bread and under the appearances of wine.

Chemical analysis or human science cannot demonstrate that the change has taken place. It is a special kind of change, absolutely unique. It is called sacramental. Such a change can only be known through faith in the teaching of Christ and his Church, faith in the Word of God.

The Sacrament of Unity

The teachings of the Apostles and the early Church concerning the Holy Eucharist is expressed by St. Paul in the eleventh chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians. There he rebukes the Corinthians for splitting up into small groups when they assembled for the Eucharist, thus destroying the unity which this sacrament was intended by Christ to strengthen and develop. He warns them that since it is indeed the body and blood of Christ which they receive, they are in danger of damnation if they receive it unworthily.

“For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body which is broken 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 eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor. 11, 23-27).

The Holy Eucharist is both the sign of the unity of the Church and the chief cause of that unity. It is profaned if it becomes a sign of disunity. Only members of the Church who believe firmly in her teachings, and have not separated themselves from Christ’s life by serious sin, can receive this sacrament worthily. All who wish are welcome to attend Mass in a Catholic church, but only those in full union with the Catholic Church may receive Holy Communion.

The Eucharist and Calvary

The differences between the Sacrifice of Calvary and the Sacrifice of the Mass are not substantial differences.

On Calvary Christ died, but in the Mass he does not die again; it is the immortal, risen Christ that is present.

On Calvary the whole work of our redemption was *accomplished*; in the Mass it is *applied* to us personally. The Mass is not a separate Sacrifice from that of Calvary; it is the same sacrificial offering to God now made present to us who participate in it.

Karl Adam, in his book 'The Spirit of Catholicism' expresses this very beautifully. He writes; "In the Sacrifice of the Mass we are not merely reminded of the Sacrifice of the Cross in symbolic form. On the contrary, the Sacrifice of Calvary, as the great supra-temporal reality, enters into the immediate present. Space and time are abolished. The same Jesus is here present who died on the Cross. The whole congregation unites itself with his holy sacrificial will, and through Jesus present before it, consecrates itself to the heavenly Father as a living oblation'.

Mary and the Eucharist

Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary helps us to grow in love for Christ present in the Blessed Eucharist. He did not begin the work of our Redemption without Mary's consent, which she freely gave. "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word". (Luke, 1, 38). Likewise he did not complete it on Calvary without her presence. "Standing by the cross of Jesus, were his mother, and his mother's sister". (John 19, 25).

At each Mass the whole Calvary scene is made present to us. Space and time are abolished. By uniting ourselves in spirit with Mary at Mass we are uniting ourselves with that little band of faithful followers who stood by the Cross of Jesus on Calvary. Thus we are united all the more fully with Christ our Redeemer.

The Church's constant teaching

There has never been a time when the Church has not believed and taught that Christ is really present in the Holy Eucharist and gives himself to his people as food bringing them supernatural life. Apart from a few lone voice, no one denied this teaching for fifteen hundred years. These lone voices speaking against the general teaching made it necessary for the Church to state clearly and firmly Christ's teaching in this matter. This she did in particular at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215.

The Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century held deeply and widely different opinions about it. Many denied that any change in the elements of bread and wine took place in the Eucharist, and held that the faithful received the power in the Eucharist, and held that the faithful received the power of virtue of the body and blood of Christ in this sacrament, but not the actual body and blood. There are many shades of belief among the non-Catholic Christians of today. They range from those who say that in the Lord's Supper there is nothing more than bread and wine, eaten and drunk as a memorial of the Last Supper, to those who accept the Catholic teaching as stated above. The teaching of the sixteenth-century Protestants was the occasion for the Church to state her teaching once more at the Council of Trent in 1551. There the word "Transubstantiation" was used to state, in the philosophical language of the day, the truth that the whole

substance, or underlying reality, of the bread and wine are changed into the whole substance of the body and blood of Christ. Only the "accidents," the outward appearances, remain the same. The Catholic Church does not tie herself firmly to any system of philosophy when stating her teaching. She is bound only to the teaching of the New Testament: Christ, truly present in the Holy Eucharist, body, blood, soul and godhead, offers himself to the Father as a victim of sacrifice, and gives himself as food to his people, bringing them eternal life.

A Personal Experience

Reg was a bright young man with a reasonably good knowledge of the Bible. June, his fiancée was a Catholic. For weeks he had been going regularly with her to Sunday Mass.

"What's your secret for getting people to go to Church so regularly?" he asked me. "The priest up at June's church is a very dull speaker; yet the Church is crowded four times every Sunday morning".

"It's the Real Presence," I told him. "They don't go to Mass just to listen to Father X; they go because they are convinced that Jesus is really there".

"Are you genuinely convinced of that?" he asked.

"Yes I really believe it; all Catholics who go regularly to Mass believe it". When Jesus said 'This is my body', he meant what he said, and meant it literally.

"That's my real problem", Reg said. "How can you be so sure that his words at the Last Supper are to be taken literally? You don't take him literally when he says 'I am the vine' or when he says 'I am the door'. Why do you take it literally in this case?"

"Let's begin at the beginning. The first question is, Could Jesus do it? i.e. could he make himself really present under the appearance of bread and wine, if he wanted to?"

"Yes, of course he could. I have no problem about that; I believe Christ is God in human form. As God he is all powerful, but that's not the point, what I'm asking is, how do you know that he wanted to do it?"

"It's a question of evidence", I explained. "You know your Bible pretty well, have you read the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John recently?" I was surprised to find that, in spite of his reasonably good knowledge of the Bible, Reg had no recollection of the context of John 6. Even when I quoted some verses from it, he seemed to be hearing them for the first time.

We opened the Bible and read John 6 carefully from beginning to end. For Catholics this one of the most important chapters in the whole of the Bible.

The discussion which followed was a turning point in Reg's life. Here, as I now recall from memory, is how I explained it to him:

We had John 6 opened before us and went through it verse by verse. To understand what I explained to Reg, you will need to do the same.

For the sake of clarity, chapter 6 of the gospel according to St. John can be divided into two sections. In the first section, verses 26-51, Jesus asks for the stresses the need of *faith*, belief in him. Such insistence was, of course, fundamental and a necessary prelude to his following words (verses 51-59) --- the second section) which contain the great promise to give "his flesh to eat and his blood to drink". Verses 50-51 mark the transition.

It is clear from the context that Christ intended his words in verses 51-59 literally. That is the way he was understood by his hearers and he did not correct them, which he would have done had they understood him wrongly.

In fact, "when they disputed among themselves saying 'How can this man give his flesh to eat?' (verse 53) his reply was simply to insist upon the literal meaning four times (see John 6, 54-59, e.g. verse 55 "My flesh is food indeed and my blood is drink indeed"). Then when many of his disciples murmured saying "this is a hard saying: who can listen to it", (verse 61) and when many of them "drew back and no longer went about with him" (verse 66) Christ did not call them back and say that they had misunderstood Him. Rather he rebuked them for their lack of faith.

Finally, he even put the test clearly to his chosen twelve Apostles with the words: "Will you also go away?" (verse 67).

He was prepared to let even the chosen twelve go away rather than withdraw what he had said. The people had understood him literally. He was insisting that they would continue to do so.

Peter's reply (verses 68-69) on behalf of the twelve, was a perfect act of faith. "To whom shall we go? . . . we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God". Peter didn't know or understand how Jesus was going to fulfil that promise, yet he accepted it completely because he was convinced of two things:

1. Jesus meant it.

2. Jesus was 'the Holy One of God and, as such, he could do it if he wanted to.

Today we still don't understand *how* the bread and wine are changed into the real living Christ, but like Peter we are convinced of two things:

(a) Jesus meant it.

(b) Jesus is the Holy One of God, and as such he can do it

Our human eyes still see only the outward appearance of bread and wine, but our faith (like the faith of Peter) convinces us that Christ is really and truly present, because he is God and his word is true.

The Family meal

Christ gives himself in the Holy Eucharist to be the life and food of men. He said: "For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed . . . He who eats this bread will live for ever" (John 6, 55-58).

This is the family meal of the believing Christian Community. The every-day family meal has three main effects. It gives joy and contentment to the members of the family at being together. It gives them strength to do their work and to serve each other. It is a powerful bond of union.

These are the three chief effects of Christ's family meal. The Catholic returns from Holy Communion knowing that he has Christ's body and blood within him. This gives him great joy and comfort and strengthens his love of his divine Lord and Saviour. It gives him a fuller share in Christ's life and the strength to serve God, his family and his fellow-men, and resist evil inclinations and suggestions. It unites him more closely to Christ, and to those he loves and all the members of the Church.

St. Cyril of Alexandria said that as two pieces of wax, melted together, form one, so is the soul united to Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. He who has received Holy Communion can say with St. Paul: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2, 20).

The Church teaches that all her members should receive Holy Communion at least once a year and urges them to do so, if possible, every time they go to Mass. Thousands go to Holy Communion every day. There is nothing which gives a surer guarantee of eternal life. Christ said: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6, 54).

Necessary Preparation

Before receiving Our Lord in Holy Communion one must try to be prepared as well as possible for so great a sacrament. Four things are essential:

- (1) **To be a baptized member of the Catholic Church.** Reception of Holy Communion is a sign of our being in full communion with the Catholic Church.
- (2) **To be free from mortal sin.** A Catholic who knows that he has committed a serious sin since his last confession does not receive Holy Communion without first going to Confession and sincerely repenting of his sin. (Confession will be explained in detail in Lesson 12).
- (3) **To abstain from all food and all drink, except water, for at least one hour before receiving Holy Communion.** This is a law made by the Church to help us remember that the spiritual food of Holy Communion is more important than mere bodily food. Christians in former times abstained from all food and drink from midnight before receiving Holy Communion. Exceptions are made for the sick.
- (4) **To receive Holy Communion for a good and spiritual motive;** e.g., to increase our union with Christ and to strengthen ourselves spiritually. One should never receive Holy Communion for a mere human motive such as making a good impression on friends.

The Real Presence

The Blessed Sacrament is kept in a safe called the tabernacle. This is always in a prominent place in the church, either near the altar of sacrifice or in a decorated side chapel. There is always a lamp burning near it to let the people know that Christ is there. In cathedrals and city churches there is constant stream of worshippers who kneel in silent prayer for a few moments before the Blessed Sacrament, then return, spiritually refreshed, to the business of the day.

Visits to the Blessed Sacrament

A man who became a Catholic after toying with the idea for almost twenty years recently wrote as follows: "Before I became a Catholic I often went to the local Catholic church to the chapel of the Blessed Sacrament for private prayer. It was an interesting experience. There seemed to be so many people who used the building at any odd time and their conduct was a strange mixture of reverence and freedom. Everybody seemed at home."

He put his finger on the spot. Everybody *is* at home. Sincere Catholics make a habit of often calling into the church in this way to make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. As they kneel or sit there before the tabernacle they realize they are in the presence of Christ Our Lord. They speak to him in their own words, asking his help and his blessing on themselves, their homes and families. Some just remain there in silence knowing that they can draw peace and strength and delight from that contact. The world for the moment is shut out. *They are at home.*

Perhaps *you* would like to try it. Drop into a Catholic church sometime for a quiet prayer.

Benediction

In many parish churches there is a ceremony called Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. The consecrated Host is taken out of the tabernacle and placed in a beautifully ornamental display case which we call a **monstrance**. This is placed on or above the altar where all can see it. The altar is decorated with flowers and lighted candles; sweet-smelling incense is burned in a metal container called a thurible; its fragrant smoke symbolizing prayer rising up to God. Hymns of praise are sung and prayers are said together by priest and people. The priest raises the monstrance and with it makes the sign of the cross in blessing over all the people. They know that it is Christ their Lord who blesses them.

On special occasions the Blessed Sacrament is carried under a canopy in procession around the church, and even through the streets, that the people might see it and adore.

These are extensions of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. A Catholic believes the best way of adoring God and showing love and reverence for Jesus Christ is to join with him and his people in offering the Sacrifice of the Mass and receiving Holy Communion.

Throughout the English speaking world there is no hymn better known and loved by Catholics than "Soul of my Saviour." This is free translation of a Latin hymn, "Anima Christi," composed by an unknown author in the early fourteenth century. It is a beautiful expression of faith in the presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist and an earnest prayer for the blessings which he gives in Holy Communion.

*Soul of my Saviour, sanctify my breast;
Body of Christ, be thou my saving guest;
Blood of my Saviour, bathe me in thy tide,
Wash me with water, flowing from thy side.*

*Strength and protection may thy Passion be;
O Blessed Jesus, hear and answer me;
Deep in thy wounds, Lord, hide and shelter me;
So shall I never, never part from thee.*

*Guard and defend me from the foe malign;
In death's dread moments make me only thine;
Call me, and bid me come to thee on high,
When I may praise thee with thy saints for aye.*

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POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- (1) Can you quote some passages from chapter 6 of St. John's Gospel to show that Christ promised the Eucharist to his followers.**
- (2) Give some reasons for believing that Christ wanted his words to be taken literally when he said "This is my body".**
- (3) Suggest some ways in which the believing Christian can take advantage of Christ's closeness to us in the Eucharist.**
- (4) How does the Eucharist strengthen the bond of unity between Christians.**
- (5) Using the effects of bodily food as an example, show the value of regular reception of Holy Communion.**
- (6) Suggest a suitable prayer in your own words to be said during a private visit to a Catholic Church.**