

**THE MYSTERY OF THE EUCHARIST  
IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH**

UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

  


A) *The Sacrifice of Christ*

10. To begin to comprehend the tremendous gift offered by Christ through his Incarnation, Death, and Resurrection, that gift that is made present to us in the Eucharist, we must first realize how truly profound is our alienation from the Source of all life as a result of sin. We have abundant experience of evil, yet so many of us deny the cause of much of that evil—our own selfishness, our own sins. As St. John wrote in his first letter, *If we say, “we are without sin,” we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us* (1 Jn 1:8).

11. Sin is an offense against God, a failure to love God and our neighbor that wounds our nature and injures human solidarity.<sup>9</sup> The capabilities, talents, and gifts we have received from God are meant to be used for good—not the false and illusory good that we in our self-centered desire create for ourselves, but the true good that glorifies the Father of goodness and is directed for the good of others and, in the end, is also good for us. When we misuse the gifts of creation, when we selfishly focus on ourselves, we choose the path of vice rather than the way of virtue.<sup>10</sup> This self-centeredness is an inheritance of the Fall of our first parents. Without the grace of Christ received at Baptism, strengthened in Confirmation, and nourished by the Eucharist, this selfishness dominates us.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 236, citing Pope Benedict XVI, Homily on the Solemnity of the Sacred Body and Blood of Christ (June 15, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1849-1850.

<sup>10</sup> See St. Basil, *Regulae Fusius Tractatae*, Question 2, *Patrologia Graeca* 31:910.

<sup>11</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 385ff.

12. In Christ, however, what was lost by sin has been restored and renewed even more wondrously by grace.<sup>12</sup> Jesus, the *new Adam*,<sup>13</sup> “was crucified under Pontius Pilate,” offering himself up as a sacrifice so that we may receive the inheritance that was lost by sin. By freely offering his life on the cross, Christ allows us to *become the children of God* (Jn 1:12) and to inherit the Kingdom of God.<sup>14</sup> St. Peter reminds us, Christ *himself bore our sins in his body upon the cross, so that, free from sin, we might live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed* (1 Pt 2:24).

13. At the Last Supper, celebrating the Passover, Jesus makes explicit that his impending death, freely embraced out of love, is sacrificial: *While they were eating, Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and giving it to his disciples said, “Take and eat; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins”* (Mt 26:27-28). In the words and gestures of the Last Supper, Jesus makes it clear that out of love for us he is freely offering his life for the forgiveness of our sins. In doing so, he is both the priest offering a sacrifice and the victim being offered. As priest, Jesus is offering a sacrifice to God the Father, an offering prefigured by the offering of bread and wine by Melchizedek, Priest of God Most High (Gen 14:18; see Ps 110:4; Heb 5-7 *passim*). Anticipating his Passion in the institution of the Eucharist, Christ has indicated the forms under which his self-offering would be sacramentally present to us until the end of time.

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<sup>12</sup> See *Roman Missal*, Collect for the Nativity of the Lord, Mass during the Day.

<sup>13</sup> See 1 Cor 15:45-49.

<sup>14</sup> See Hebrews 9:15; Ephesians 1:14.

14. Why is it so important that we understand the Eucharist as a sacrifice? It is because all that Jesus did for the salvation of humanity is made present in the celebration of the Eucharist, including his sacrificial Death and Resurrection. Christ's sacrifice of himself to the Father was efficacious and salvific because of the supreme love with which he shed his blood, the price of our salvation, and offered himself to the Father on our behalf.<sup>15</sup> His blood, shed for us, is the eternal sign of that love. As a memorial the Eucharist is not another sacrifice, but the re-presentation of the sacrifice of Christ by which we are reconciled to the Father.<sup>16</sup> It is the way by which we are drawn into Jesus' perfect offering of love, so that his sacrifice becomes the sacrifice of the Church.<sup>17</sup> As Pope Benedict XVI wrote,

The remembrance of his perfect gift consists not in the mere repetition of the Last Supper, but in the Eucharist itself, that is, in the radical newness of Christian worship. In this way, Jesus left us the task of entering into his "hour." "The Eucharist draws us into Jesus' act of self-oblation. More than just statically receiving the incarnate *Logos*, we enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving."<sup>18</sup>

15. The Eucharist is a sacrificial meal, "the sacred banquet of communion with the Lord's body and blood."<sup>19</sup> Its fundamental pattern is found in the Jewish celebration of the Passover, which involves *both* a meal *and* a sacrifice. The Passover meal is celebrated in remembrance of the Exodus, when the Israelites were told to sacrifice a lamb to the Lord and to mark the doorposts of their houses with the blood, so that the angel of death would pass over their houses and leave the Israelites unharmed. This marked a people set apart and chosen by God as his special possession.

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<sup>15</sup> See Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 10.

<sup>16</sup> See Council of Trent, Session 22, *Doctrine on the Sacrifice of the Mass*, chapter 1.

<sup>17</sup> See Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 10, and *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1368.

<sup>18</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 11, quoting *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 13.

<sup>19</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1382.

Each family was then to eat the lamb with unleavened bread as a reminder of the haste with which the Israelites had to prepare for their departure from Egypt and with bitter herbs as a reminder of their deliverance from slavery. At the Last Supper, Jesus reveals himself to be the Paschal Lamb (“Behold the Lamb of God”) whose sacrifice brings liberation from slavery to sin and whose blood marks out a new people belonging to God. All the sacrifices in the Old Testament prefigure and find their fulfillment in the one perfect sacrifice of Jesus.

16. The saving work of Jesus Christ, which has brought to fulfillment what was announced in figure in the Passover, is now re-presented in the celebration of the Eucharist. The Eucharist “makes present the one sacrifice of Christ the Savior.”<sup>20</sup> As Pope St. John Paul II taught: “The Church constantly draws her life from [this] redeeming sacrifice; she approaches it not only through faith-filled remembrance, but also through a real contact, since *this sacrifice is made present ever anew*, sacramentally perpetuated, in every community which offers it at the hands of the consecrated minister.”<sup>21</sup>

17. Finally, this great sacrament is also a participation in the worship offered in heaven, in and through Christ, by the angels and saints. Pope Benedict XVI explained that

every eucharistic celebration sacramentally accomplishes the eschatological gathering of the People of God. For us, the eucharistic banquet is a real foretaste of the final banquet foretold by the prophets (cf. Is 25:6-9) and described in the New Testament as “the marriage-feast of the Lamb” (Rev 19:7-9), to be celebrated in the joy of the communion of saints.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1330.

<sup>21</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 12.

<sup>22</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 31.

## *B) The Real Presence of Christ*

18. From the very beginning, the Church has believed and celebrated according to the teaching of Jesus himself: *Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him on the last day. For 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* (Jn 6:54-56). It is not “ordinary bread and ordinary drink” that we receive in the Eucharist, but the flesh and blood of Christ, who came to nourish and transform us, to restore our relationship to God and to one another.<sup>23</sup>

19. In the Eucharist, with the eyes of faith we see before us Jesus Christ, who, in the Incarnation *became flesh* (Jn 1:14) and who in the Paschal Mystery *gave himself for us* (Ti 2:14), accepting *even death on a cross* (Phil 2:8). St. John Chrysostom preached that when you see the Body of Christ “set before you [on the altar], say to yourself: Because of this Body I am no longer earth and ashes, no longer a prisoner, but free: because of this I hope for heaven, and to receive the good things therein, immortal life, the portion of angels, [and closeness] with Christ.”<sup>24</sup>

20. How can Jesus Christ be truly present in what still appears to be bread and wine? In the liturgical act known as the epiclesis, the bishop or priest, speaking in the person of Jesus Christ, calls upon the Father to send down his Holy Spirit to change the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, and this change occurs through the institution narrative, by the power of the words of Christ pronounced by the celebrant.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See St. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, LXVI.

<sup>24</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Corinthians*, 24.7, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First series (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 142.

<sup>25</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1353.

21. The reality that, in the Eucharist, bread and wine become the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ without ceasing to appear as bread and wine to our five senses is one of the central mysteries of the Catholic faith. This faith is a doorway through which we, like the saints and mystics before us, may enter into a deeper perception of the mercy and love manifested in and through Christ's sacramental presence in our midst. While one thing is seen with our bodily eyes, another reality is perceived through the eyes of faith. The real, true, and substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist is the most profound reality of the sacrament. "This mysterious change is very appropriately called by the Church transubstantiation."<sup>26</sup> Though Christ is present to us in many ways in the liturgy, including in the assembly gathered, the presiding minister, and the word proclaimed, the Church also clearly affirms that "the mode of Christ's presence under the Eucharistic species is unique."<sup>27</sup> As St. Paul VI wrote, "This presence is called 'real' not to exclude the idea that the others are 'real' too, but rather to indicate presence *par excellence*, because it is substantial and through it Christ becomes present whole and entire, God and man."<sup>28</sup> In the sacramental re-presentation of his sacrifice, Christ holds back nothing, offering himself, whole and entire. The use of the word "substantial" to mark the unique presence of Christ in the Eucharist is intended to convey the totality of the gift he offers to us.

22. When the Eucharist is distributed and the minister says, "the Body of Christ," we are to look not simply at what is visible before our eyes, but at what it has become by the words of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit—the Body of Christ.<sup>29</sup> The communicant's response of "Amen" is

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<sup>26</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Credo of the People of God*, no. 25; cf. Council of Trent, Session 13, *Decree on the Sacrament of the Eucharist*, ch. 4.

<sup>27</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1374; see also *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no.7.

<sup>28</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei*, no. 39.

<sup>29</sup> See St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, IV.16.28.

a profession of faith in the Real Presence of Christ and reflects the intimate personal encounter with him, with his gift of self, that comes through reception of Holy Communion.

23. The Church's firm belief in the Real Presence of Christ is reflected in the worship that we offer to the Blessed Sacrament in various ways, including Eucharistic Exposition, Adoration, and Benediction; Eucharistic Processions; and Forty Hours Devotions. In addition, the practices of reverently genuflecting before the Blessed Sacrament reserved in the tabernacle, bowing one's head prior to the reception of Holy Communion, and refraining from food and drink for at least one hour before receiving Communion are clear manifestations of the Church's Eucharistic faith.<sup>30</sup>

### *C) Communion with Christ and the Church*

24. When we receive Holy Communion, Christ is giving himself to us. He comes to us in all humility, as he came to us in the Incarnation, so that we may receive him and become one with him. Christ gives himself to us so that we may continue the pilgrim path toward life with him in the fullness of the Kingdom of God. The fourteenth-century Orthodox theologian Nicholas Cabasilas described this sacrament by saying, "unlike any other sacrament, the mystery [of the Eucharist] is so perfect that it brings us to the heights of every good thing: here is the ultimate goal of every human desire, because here we attain God and God joins himself to us in the most perfect union."<sup>31</sup> Through this sacrament, the pilgrim Church is nourished, deepening her communion with the Triune God and consequently that of her members with one another.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See *Code of Canon Law*, can. 919 §1. "A person who is to receive the Most Holy Eucharist is to abstain for at least one hour before holy communion from any food and drink, except for only water and medicine."

<sup>31</sup> Nicholas Cabasilas, *Life in Christ*, IV.10, quoted in Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 34.

<sup>32</sup> See Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 34.



25. The Sacrament of the Eucharist is called Holy Communion precisely because, by placing us in intimate communion with the sacrifice of Christ, we are placed in intimate communion with him and, through him, with each other. Therefore, the Eucharist is called Holy Communion because it 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.”<sup>33</sup> How can we understand this? The Gospel of John recounts that, when Jesus died on the cross, *blood and water flowed* out (Jn 19:34), symbolic of Baptism and the Eucharist. The Second Vatican Council teaches, “The origin and growth of the Church are symbolized by the blood and water which flowed from the open side of the crucified Jesus,”<sup>34</sup> and that “it was from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth the wondrous sacrament of the whole Church.”<sup>35</sup> In this image from the Gospel of John, we see that the Church, the Bride of the Lamb, is born from the sacrificial love of Christ in his self-offering on the cross. The Eucharist re-presents this one sacrifice so that we are placed in communion with it and with the divine love from which it flows forth. We are placed in communion with each other through this love which is given to us. That is why we can say, “the Eucharist makes the Church.”<sup>36</sup>

26. We are first incorporated into the Body of Christ, the Church, through the waters of Baptism.<sup>37</sup> Yet Baptism, like the other sacraments, is ordered toward Eucharistic communion.<sup>38</sup>

The Second Vatican Council teaches,

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<sup>33</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1325, citing *Eucharisticum Mysterium*, no. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 3.

<sup>35</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 5

<sup>36</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1396.

<sup>37</sup> *Code of Canon Law*, c. 849; *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, c. 675 §1.

<sup>38</sup> *Code of Canon Law*, c. 897.

The other sacraments, as well as with every ministry of the Church and every work of the apostolate, are tied together with the Eucharist and are directed toward it. The Most Blessed Eucharist contains the entire spiritual boon of the Church, that is, Christ himself, our Pasch and Living Bread, by the action of the Holy Spirit through his very flesh vital and vitalizing, giving life to men who are thus invited and encouraged to offer themselves, their labors and all created things, together with him.

The Council Fathers continue,

In this light, the Eucharist shows itself as the source and the apex of the whole work of preaching the Gospel. Those under instruction are introduced by stages to a sharing in the Eucharist, and the faithful, already marked with the seal of Baptism and Confirmation, are through the reception of the Eucharist fully joined to the Body of Christ.<sup>39</sup>

That is why the Council calls the eucharistic sacrifice “the source and summit of the Christian life.”<sup>40</sup>

27. St. Paul emphasizes that this communion exists not only among ourselves but also with those who came before us. In addressing the Church at Corinth, he praises them for holding *fast to the traditions, just as I handed them on to you* (1 Cor 11:2). Later, he highlights the Eucharist as a sacred tradition handed on by Christ to the Apostles, and in which we now share: *For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you* (1 Cor 11:23). During every Mass we are united with all the holy men and women, the saints, who have preceded us.

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<sup>39</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 5.

<sup>40</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 11.

28. The obligation to attend Mass each Sunday, the Lord’s Day, on which we commemorate the Resurrection of Jesus, and on other holy days of obligation, is therefore a vital expression of our unity as members of the Body of Christ, the Church.<sup>41</sup> It is also a manifestation of the truth that we are utterly dependent upon God and his grace. A third-century instruction on the life of the Church points out one of the consequences of willful absence from Mass: “Let no one deprive the Church by staying away; if they do, they deprive the Body of Christ of one of its members!”<sup>42</sup> St. John Paul II, writing of Sunday as “a day which is at the very heart of the Christian life,” further asserts, “Time given to Christ is never time lost, but is rather time gained, so that our relationships and indeed our whole life may become more profoundly human.”<sup>43</sup> We have been reborn in Baptism and nourished by the Eucharist so that we may live in communion with God and one another, not only today but also in the fullness of the heavenly Kingdom. To worship God on Sundays, then, is not the mere observance of a rule but the fulfillment of our identity, of who we are as members of the Body of Christ. Participation in the Mass is an act of love.



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<sup>41</sup> *Code of Canon Law*, cc. 1246-1248; *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, c. 881.

<sup>42</sup> *Didascalia Apostolorum*, no. 13.

<sup>43</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Dies Domini*, no. 7.