

THE CELEBRATION OF THE EUCHARIST – A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

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There is one ceremony which more than any other separates the Catholic and Orthodox Churches from all other ecclesial communities, and that is the celebration of the Eucharist. In the Catholic Church it is commonly referred to as ‘The Mass,’ while in Orthodoxy it is also known as ‘The Divine Liturgy.’

THE PASSOVER

The celebration has its roots in Jewish history, specifically in the Passover – that night when the Jews were finally released from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12). Every year faithful Jews commemorate this event (Luke 22:1) with the Passover Meal and this was a commemoration with which Jesus Christ was quite familiar (Mark 14:12-16) and it is from his last celebration of the Passover that our celebration derives. On that occasion, while gathered with his closest friends in Jerusalem, Jesus took two of the important elements of the Passover Meal – the bread and wine – and gave them to his disciples telling them that they were now his body and blood (Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:19-20). In the original Passover, the angel of the Lord visited the land and all the first-born in the land were slain. Those Jews who had daubed the blood of a lamb on their doorposts were ‘passed over’ and were unharmed – through the blood of a lamb of sacrifice they were freed. In ancient Jewish tradition, the blood of animals was used to redeem the people from their sins and to seal covenants between the Chosen People and God. In giving the apostles the bread and wine as his body and blood, Jesus also told them that this was the blood of the new covenant between God and his people. Unlike the previous covenants this one is eternal – no more sacrifices will again be required for Christ’s sacrifice of himself is for all time and it frees us from the power of sin and death so that we may enjoy eternal life with God.

The Resurrection

Our celebration of the Eucharist recalls this moment in history when Christ gave the apostles his body and blood. But it can only be properly understood in the context of the days following the Passover Meal which include Christ’s death upon the cross, his burial and his resurrection (Luke 22:1-24:49). The apostles took seriously the Lord’s instruction to “*Do this in memory of me*” and they gathered regularly to commemorate the Lord’s Supper as they had the Passover. This has continued throughout the centuries and while the ceremony itself has changed over time the central point has not altered – the changing of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit through the actions of the priest. The body of Christ is then given to the faithful during the celebration.

LIFE OF THE CHURCH

The celebration of the Eucharist is more than just a sharing in Christ’s one eternal sacrifice, it also builds unity in the Church as it is the same ceremony which is celebrated throughout the Catholic Church. It is also the source and summit of the Church (*Lumen gentium* 11) and from which the Church draws life. The Church was born out of the paschal mystery, that is, out of the death and resurrection of Christ, and so the Eucharist is at the centre of the life of the Church (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia* 3). In his encyclical letter on the Eucharist, Blessed John

Paul II affirmed that the Eucharist “is the most precious possession which the Church can have in her journey through history” (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia* 9). This article looks at the format of that celebration.

The format of the celebration as we know it today dates back to the years following the Second Vatican Council (1963-1965). The previous format had been used since the Council of Trent in the mid-sixteenth century. The current celebration is much simpler than the Tridentine Rite and is usually celebrated in the language of the people rather than the traditional Latin.

INTRODUCTORY RITE

The celebration begins with the priest in vestments and those assisting him processing to the sanctuary – this is a specially designated place within a Church building where the altar, ambo and presidential chair are to be found. When he reaches the altar the priest kisses it in a sign of reverence for it is on the altar which the sacrifice of the Mass will take place – the offering up of the body and blood of Christ. The celebration is then begun in the name of the Trinity – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – and this is followed by the greeting. After a few introductory words the priest leads the *Penitential Rite* during which all those who have gathered acknowledge their sins and pray for forgiveness before the priest prays the absolution. On Sundays and other important days, the assembly then prays the *Glory to God in the highest*, a hymn or prayer which praises God and in particular Jesus Christ (this prayer is omitted during Advent and Lent). The Introductory Rite ends with a pause for silent prayer before the priest, with arms outstretched, prays the *Opening Prayer* (the Collect).

LITURGY OF THE WORD

Everyone now sits as a reader goes to the ambo to read the passages from Sacred Scripture for that day. There are readings assigned to each day of the year and also to the memorials of saints and to the celebration of the different sacraments. The readings bring to mind God’s great love for us but also remind us of our responsibilities as baptised Christians. Throughout the week there is a first reading from either the Old or New Testament, and a Psalm with a set response which is made by the people. On Sundays and other solemnities there is a reading from the Old and the New Testaments with the Psalm in between. Every day there is a passage from one of the four Gospels and it is proclaimed by either a priest or a deacon. On Sundays and other occasions this is followed by a sermon or homily during which the priest or the deacon gives an instruction or interpretation on the readings or the particular celebration being held that day. This is an opportunity for the celebrant to make the celebration more meaningful and to explain our part in the history of salvation. When the homily comes to an end the priest then leads the faithful in the *Prayers of the Faithful* where special prayers on behalf of the Church, the world and those gathered are offered to God. On Sundays, these prayers are preceded by the *Creed* – a prayer which is said in common by all and which clearly sets out what we believe as the basis of our faith as Catholics.

LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

The next part of the celebration is the central one. “*Now the centre and high point of the entire celebration begins, namely, the Eucharistic Prayer itself, that is the prayer of thanksgiving and sanctification. The priest calls upon the people to lift up their hearts towards the Lord in prayer and*

thanksgiving; he associates the people with himself in the Prayer that he addresses in the name of the entire community to God the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit” (General Instruction to the Roman Missal, 78). The chief elements of the Eucharistic Prayer are thanksgiving; acclamation (in the Holy, Holy); the epiclesis which invokes God’s power through the Holy Spirit and sanctification on the gifts; the narrative of the institution and consecration; the anamnesis or recalling of the reasons for the celebration; the offering of all present as we seek greater union with the Father; the intercessions for the members of the Church both living and dead; and the final doxology or hymn of praise (cf General Instruction to the Roman Missal, 79).

At the *Offertory*, the gifts to be used in the celebration – the bread and the wine – are brought forward to the priest who places them on the altar and offers them to God with prayers of thanks.

Thanksgiving:

The priest then invites the people to lift their hearts to God and give him praise and thanks. This is followed by the *Preface*, a prayer which sets out the reasons for this particular celebration.

*It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation,
always and everywhere to give you thanks,
Lord, holy Father, almighty and eternal God.*

*For you so loved the world
that in your mercy you sent us the Redeemer,
to live like us in all things but sin,
so that you might love in us what you loved in your Son,
by whose obedience we have been restored to those gifts of yours
that, by sinning, we had lost in disobedience.*

Preface VII of Sundays in Ordinary Time

Acclamation:

At the end of this prayer everyone joins in the *Holy, Holy, Holy* – a prayer of praise taken from Scripture (see Revelation 4:8).

*Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts.
Heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.*

Epiclesis:

The priest then begins the *Eucharistic Prayer* of which there are four for regular use, Two for Reconciliation, and four for Various Needs. The priest begins this prayer with praise of God before he calls on the Holy Spirit to change the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ.

*Therefore, O Lord, we humbly implore you:
by the same Spirit graciously make holy*

*these gifts we have brought to you for consecration,
that they may become the Body and ✠ Blood
of your Son our Lord Jesus Christ,
at whose command we celebrate these mysteries.*

Eucharistic Prayer III

Institution Narrative:

This is the central act of the celebration and in it the priest uses the words which Christ himself used during his last Passover Meal. The priest first takes the bread in his hands and says:

TAKE THIS, ALL OF YOU, AND EAT OF IT,
FOR THIS IS MY BODY,
WHICH WILL BE GIVEN UP FOR YOU.

He then raises up the host for all to see. He then takes the chalice and says:

TAKE THIS, ALL OF YOU, AND DRINK FROM IT,
FOR THIS IS THE CHALICE OF MY BLOOD,
THE BLOOD OF THE NEW AND ETERNAL COVENANT,
WHICH WILL BE Poured OUT FOR YOU AND FOR MANY
FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS.
DO THIS IN MEMORY OF ME.

He then raises the chalice now containing the precious blood so that all may see it and have a moment to venerate them. The people then say or sing the *Memorial Acclamation* which is itself a proclamation of faith:

*Save us, Saviour of the world,
for by your Cross and Resurrection
you have set us free.*

Anamnesis & Intercessions:

The *Eucharistic Prayer* then continues with the priest laying out the reasons for the celebration – the commemoration of Christ’s suffering, death and resurrection, and how Christ has enabled us to share in the inheritance of the saints. The prayer also asks for peace in the world and for the unity and well being of all the faithful united with the pope and bishops and for all who seek God.

Final Doxology:

The prayer concludes with a doxology – a prayer in praise of the Father in union the Holy Spirit through the Son.

*Through him,
and with him,
and in him,
O God, almighty Father,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
all glory and honour is yours,
for ever and ever.*

To this the people give the *Amen* which is their assent not just to this final prayer but also to the entire *Eucharistic Prayer* – it affirms their belief in all that has happened in the celebration.

COMMUNION RITE

Traditionally people kneel during the *Eucharistic Prayer* in a sign of reverence and submission before God but in the *Communion Rite* they stand as a sign of their redemption in the eyes of God. The rite begins with the entire assembly praying the *Our Father*, the prayer which Christ himself gave us (Luke 11:1-4), a prayer in which we pray for the spiritual food which we need each day and for the strength to forgive others as we ourselves are forgiven by God. This is followed by the *Prayer for Peace* after which the people offer each other a sign of peace according to local custom. This is followed by the *Agnus Dei* – the *Lamb of God*:

*Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us,
Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us,
Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, grant us peace.*

Following the *Lamb of God* the priest and his assisting members then give the body of Christ to those faithful who come forward to receive it. In many places the blood of Christ is also given to the faithful. Having received *Holy Communion* everyone returns to their seats and spend some time in silent prayer in thanksgiving for what they have received.

CONCLUDING RITE

When an appropriate time has been given the priest calls the people to prayer. He prays the *Final Blessing* over the people in which he asks God to continue to bless and strengthen his people who have celebrated the Eucharist. He then blesses the congregation in the name of the Trinity and sends them out in the peace of Christ.

*May almighty God bless you,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.*

Go forth, the Mass is ended.

Or:

Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord.

Or:

Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.

Or:

Go in peace.

PARTICIPATION

We all share in the one priesthood of Christ and we all have a role to play in the celebration of the Eucharist. For some, this means leading the celebration as ordained priests, for others it involves reading the texts from scripture, or assisting at Holy Communion, or assisting at the altar, or leading the singing to name but a few. But for everyone there is a participation which involves attending the celebration and joining our lives with Christ's sacrifice which means living lives faithful to our baptism and following Christ's own example of service.

The celebration of the Eucharist on weekdays is often a low-key and simple affair. By contrast celebrations taking place on Sundays and other special occasions are made all the more special and uplifting through the use of music and singing and many beautiful settings of the Mass have been written over the years.

The celebration of the Eucharist is a communal one meaning that people come together as a community of faith at each celebration. This community gathering helps to strengthen a local community as people share and express their faith in a very public setting. The Eucharist is also at the heart of many community celebrations and occasions such as at Easter and Christmas, at weddings and funerals, for anniversaries and jubilees and other significant events in the lives of the people and their local area. It is a focal point and touch stone for the people and one which builds the bonds of unity within the local and wider Church.