

# THE EUCHARIST

## **Why the Mass is an awesome experience!! or what's really going on here? (A reflection by Fr. Greg Fay)**

Wow, where do I begin??

Originally, Mass was always celebrated in the native language of the people who worshipped. After the 'Reformation', the Church went 'on guard.' The Church wanted to protect the Mass from any rebel priests trying to do their 'own thing,' so the Vatican sent the Mass prayers out to all the world in 'it's' native language – Latin. Looking back historically we can understand how and why this happened. It wasn't until after Vatican II that the Mass returned to the native language of people about 1964.

That was a very good thing, because when I was in elementary school the Mass was still in Latin. I can remember sitting at Mass with my family. My brothers and I had our 'St. Joseph Missals' to use. Those missals had Mass in Latin on the right page, and on the left page was the English. We used to sit there and try to match up words, thumb through and look at the pictures, and look at the countless holy cards we stuck in the missal, (You got those in school when you had a correct answer, etc.). So you can't really say we 'participated' in the Mass. It was something you 'observed.' Once Mass returned to English in our country, people were able to more fully participate in the Mass celebration.

I don't think a lot of Catholics fully appreciate Mass (Or they would arrive on time ☺ ). They don't fully comprehend Mass. In a way, that is understandable, because it really is 'the incomprehensible' that is happening.

*Let me try to explain what is happening at Mass and why it is so awesome.*

We need to remember that Jesus instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper. Jesus was celebrating the Jewish Passover Meal. At Mass today, we are doing much more than just 'remembering' or 'reenacting' the Last Supper.

The biblical idea of remembering is far richer than our modern idea of remembering. For Jews, the Passover Meal was not just recalling or reenacting a past event. (The Passover event as found in the book of Exodus – when the Angel of death 'passed over' the Israelites.)

When the Jewish people celebrated the Passover, they believed that they brought this event forward into the present and 'lived it.' They participate in it believing they are present in person at the original event (The Jewish people believed this – Jesus, being Jewish, believed this – We believe as Jesus believed – We did not invent the idea or change what He believed – And it is this Jewish belief that He handed onto us.)

This idea is different from our modern idea of reliving an event. For example, when we celebrate our birthday or wedding anniversary, we are just 'remembering' and celebrating the fact that we were born or got married - but we do not believe we are 'being born or being married' as in the first time these events happened. We realize that these are 'past' events that cannot literally be relived.

So it is this special kind of remembering that Jesus, who followed Jewish beliefs, had in mind when he told the Apostles to "Do this in memory of me." - when Jesus instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper / Passover Meal.

Therefore we Catholics believe, as Jesus and the Jewish people believe, that we too bring these events into the present just as Jesus passed them onto us, so that we can participate in them just as truly as the Apostles did at the Last Supper.

Let me repeat.....

The sacrifice of the Mass is not a new sacrifice. It is the very same sacrifice that Jesus inaugurated at the Last Supper and completed on Good Friday. We are actually participating in it with Jesus- just as truly as did the Apostles at the last Supper.

*So how did I come to my understanding and appreciation of the Eucharist?*

I'll never forget the experience of taking the courses in the seminary on the Eucharist, the Mass, and the theology of it all. Again, this is back in the days when I tried to learn everything logically and theologically. In other words, I was probably a student 'nerd.' It wasn't until I learned to open up to the action of the Holy Spirit in my life that these teachings started to all come together and made some sense. Oh sure, I certainly believed in the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist. That belief was based on faith. I just didn't intellectually understand it. But once you are a priest, people will ask you to explain to them 'why' do we believe in the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Our understanding of the Eucharist is one of the Church's "Mysteries of Faith." And some people want to try and take it to a level besides faith, and that level is the intellectual, academic level. I'm not sure that's possible in the purely academic sense - after all, we are talking about 'faith' here. But I'll give it a shot.....

Doing away with fancy theological terms, this is how I came to better understand this awesome miracle:

First we need to look at all the different miracles that Jesus performed. There are a vast variety of miracles. Let's think of some here:

- At the wedding feast of Cana, Jesus turned ordinary water into wine. And it was no ordinary wine - the wine steward and guests said it was the best wine!
- Jesus walked on water.
- Jesus calmed the sea and the storm.
- Jesus expelled demons.
- He cured the sick of a host of diseases. The blind regained their sight. The deaf could hear. The lame could walk. Paralytics jumped up and walked. Lepers were cured. The mute could speak. "Great crowds came to Him, having with them the lame, the blind, the deformed, the mute, and many others. They placed them at his feet, and He cured them." Mt: 15:30
- Jesus brought people back to life!! And not just his friend Lazarus, but on at least two other occasions.
- He multiplied the loaves and fish to feed thousands of people - with bread left over!! And he did this on more than one occasion.
- And let us not forget the Transfiguration of Jesus - three Apostles saw Him in all His Glory.
- And He rose from the Dead!!

Now why did Jesus perform such a vast variety of miracles? The miracles that were about physical healings and expelling demons were certainly out of love and compassion. But what about walking on water and calming the storm and the sea? And what's with the turning water into wine? These were not 'necessary', shall we say, miracles.

Was Jesus trying to 'show off' to the Apostles when He walked on water or calmed the storm and the sea?? And why did He turn water into wine at a party? Did Jesus just enjoy a good party? While He probably did, that wasn't the reason.

By performing such a vast array of miracles Jesus is showing us that He has complete control over the entire world. He can do anything, He is GOD. And if Jesus can do anything He wants.....

He can give us the great gift of His Body and Blood in the Eucharist!!

We must remember that the triune God is the creator of all that exists and has the power to do more than we can possibly imagine - For example the creation of the entire Universe!!

As St. Ambrose said: "If the word of the Lord Jesus is so powerful as to bring into existence things which were not, then *a fortiori* those things which already exist can be changed into something else."

Now let us look at “The Bread of Life Discourse” in the Gospel of John. It is found in chapter 6:22-69

The Jews are asking Jesus what sign he could perform, and as a challenge, they noted that “our ancestors ate manna in the desert.” Jesus tells them that the real bread from heaven comes from the Father. “Give us this bread always,” they said. At this point Jesus says, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.” Here the Jews understand Jesus as speaking metaphorically.

Then Jesus astounds them by saying: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.” The Jews respond (and rightly so), “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

Jesus’ listeners were beyond themselves - this sounds impossible!! They realized He was speaking literally. Jesus in response repeats His words with more emphasis: “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you do not have life within you. 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.”

Now you need to notice here that Jesus makes no attempt to soften what He said, no attempt to correct any ‘misunderstanding.’ In other parts of scripture Jesus explains His teaching more clearly if there was any chance the people misunderstood Him. Here Jesus makes a statement, and repeats it more emphatically - He meant what He said.

An interesting thing happens next. Immediately following His statement we read: “then many of His disciples who were listening said, ‘This saying is hard; who can accept it?’ Okay, these were His disciples, followers who were used to His remarkable teachings and miracles. Then we read: “As a result of this, many of His disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied Him.” This is the only time we read of any of His followers leaving Him for purely doctrinal reasons.

If His teaching had been misunderstood, if He meant it as a metaphor and not in the real sense, why didn’t He call them back and straighten things out??? But He did not call them back. Actually twelve times He said He was the bread that came down from heaven; four times He said they would have “to eat my flesh and drink my blood.”

I want to point out that the Greek word used here for “feeds on” is very blunt and has the sense of ‘actually chewing or biting down on something to eat it.’ This is not the language of metaphor.

Jesus also says “The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” He does not say, “The words I have spoken to you are symbolic.” The word ‘spirit’ is never used in that way in the Bible. The sentence means that what Christ has said will be understood only through faith.

A little further on in the Gospel of John Jesus states: ‘I have told you this while I am with you. The Advocate, the Holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name - he will *teach* you everything and remind you of all that I told you.’ Jn:14:25

This promise of Jesus’ is important. Jesus is *promising* the Apostles that he will guide, guard and preserve His teachings through them. And He is saying that He will continue to teach them through the Holy Spirit. To doubt the Church’s teaching on the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist is not only doubting the Church’s teaching authority (Given to it by Christ), but also basically calling Jesus a liar!!!!!! Jesus doesn’t lie. He promised, and did send them the Holy Spirit to guide them from error and continue to teach them, forever.

And so we not only have Jesus’ words in scripture to instruct us. We also need to remember the many times in scripture we read that Jesus took the Apostles off by themselves to teach them.

Now how do we get this ‘fuller’ teaching of Christ’s that He taught them by themselves? Well, we look at the scripture from the early Church that comes after Jesus’ Resurrection. Here we see the Apostles ‘putting into practice,’ not only the teachings revealed to them privately, but also teachings brought to light and guided by the Holy Spirit - *As Jesus promised he would do through the Holy Spirit.*

*What was the early Church’s teaching regarding the Holy Eucharist?*

It is common knowledge that the early Church celebrated liturgy, at first in people’s homes. St. Paul became aware of a problem in Corinth - a problem with what was happening when the people gathered together to celebrate liturgy / Mass. This is St. Paul’s powerful message to the Christians in Corinth:

### **“THE LORD’S SUPPER**

An Abuse at Corinth: In giving this instruction, I do not praise the fact that your meetings are doing more harm than good. First of all, I hear that when you meet as a church there are divisions among you, and to a degree I believe it.....

When you meet in one place, then, it is not to eat the Lord ‘s Supper, for in eating, each one goes ahead with his own supper, and one goes hungry while another gets drunk. Do you not have houses in which you can eat and drink? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and make those who have nothing feel ashamed? What can I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this matter I do not praise you.

Tradition of the Institution: For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is 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 drink it, in remembrance of me.’

Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. A person should examine himself, and so eat the bread and drink the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself.”

First Corinthians: 11: 17-29

WOW, can it get any clearer than that!?! The early Church definitely believed in the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist.

*Let me sum up for you.*

We believe in the true, real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist by putting all this together:

- The setting: Jesus chose the Passover Meal to institute the Eucharist. At this meal Jewish people believed they were actually celebrating the Passover of the Exodus event with their ancestors. So, when we celebrate Mass, Jesus' Passover Meal, we are actually celebrating Passover with Jesus and His Apostles. Jesus personally handed on to the Apostles the power to celebrate the Eucharist at Mass.
- Miracles: We look at all the miracles Jesus performed and see that He has complete control of the Universe. He is God. He can do anything. Therefore He can give us His Body and Blood in the Eucharist. As St. Ambrose said: “If the word of the Lord Jesus is so powerful as to bring into existence things which were not, than *a. fortiori* those things which already exist can be changed into something else.”
- His words: In the Gospel of St. John, Jesus tells us we must eat His body and drink His blood to have eternal life. When people questioned this teaching, He repeated it with stronger emphasis.
- The Holy Spirit: Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit to guide the Apostles (the Catholic Church) and continue to teach them, (to guide them from error).
- We look at the early Church's teachings: St. Paul strongly warns the people that unless they discern the body and blood of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, they will be judged sternly.

*A good way to get a better understanding of the Mass and the Eucharist is to read whatever you can find on those topics. Writers have different approaches to understanding something. So the more you read, the more ways you have to understanding. Besides using the traditional books I include ideas from several outside sources in teaching any class, for example the R.C.I.A. class (The class we use to bring people into the church and/or to Confirm Baptized Catholics). A couple good ones I have used as resources are “Catholic Answers” published out of San Diego and “Catholic Update” published by St. Anthony Messenger Press.*