

**The origin of the Eucharistic celebration:** The Jews thanked God for two blessings, namely, the gift of time and the gift of riches. They thanked God for His gift of time by observing the last day of the week as Sabbath, a day of rest, worship, learning the Torah and engaging in good works. They thanked God for the gift of riches by offering tithes to Him in the Temple. The early Christians did the same by observing Sunday as The Lord's Day, a day to participate in the "Lord's Supper," and by sharing what they had with the less fortunate ones in their faith community. The Eucharistic Celebration has its roots in the ancient Jewish Passover Meal. Passover was celebrated both as a *memorial feast* and as a *thanksgiving meal*, commemorating the liberation of the Chosen People from their slavery in Egypt. It was at such a Passover (the Last Supper, we call it), that Jesus instituted the Eucharist. The three synoptic Gospels and St. Paul have handed on to us the account of the institution of this Last Supper or the Eucharist. By celebrating this meal with his apostles, Jesus gave the Jewish Passover its definitive meaning: his passage to the Father by death and resurrection. Jesus followed the ancient tradition of blessing the bread and wine. Then, he gave a whole new meaning to the Passover feast when He "took bread, and blessed, and gave it to the disciples and said, 'Take, eat; this is My Body'" (Matthew 26:26). After this, he took a cup of wine, gave thanks, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "*This cup which is poured out for you is the New Covenant of my blood*" (Luke 22:20). Thus, the Last Supper was both a farewell meal and a sacrifice. Jesus Himself was Priest and Sacrifice because He offered His Body and Blood to God in sacrifice for all people.

**Jesus' command and its practice in the Church:** The command of Jesus, "*Do this in memory of me,*" obliges us to repeat his actions and words "until he comes." It also directs his apostles and their successors to carry out a liturgical celebration of Christ's life, death, resurrection, and intercession [CCC.1365]. From the beginning, the Church has been faithful to the Lord's command. It was on "the first day of the week," or Sunday, the day of Jesus' resurrection, that the Christians met "to break bread." Of the early Church in Jerusalem it is written in Acts: "*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers.... Day by day, attending the Temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts.*" As early as the second century, we have the witness of St. Justin, martyr, regarding the basic order of the Eucharistic celebration. Around the year 155, St. Justin wrote to the pagan emperor Antoninus Pius explaining to him the meaning of the Christian Eucharistic celebration. Down through the centuries, the Church has been careful to preserve the basic structure of the Mass in all liturgical families, both in the East and in the West.

**Theology of the Eucharistic celebration:** The Eucharist is one of the seven sacraments, i.e., signs, made sacred by Christ to show His presence in the world

and help us to reach a closer union with God. The species of the Host is the sacrament of Christ's Body, and is substantially Christ's glorified body. The species contained in the chalice is the sacrament of Christ's Blood, and is substantially Christ's glorified blood. In receiving Communion under either Species, as well as under both Species, the communicant receives the whole Jesus, crucified, dead and risen in glory. "Christ is present whole and entire in each of the species and whole and entire in each of their parts, in such a way that the breaking of the bread does not divide Christ" (CCC #1377).

Jesus instituted the Holy Eucharist during the Last Supper as a **sacramental banquet** and a **sacrificial offering**. As a sacrament, the Holy Eucharist is an outward sign in and through which we meet Jesus who shares His life of grace with us. In this Sacrament of the Eucharist, we do meet Jesus the risen Lord who comes to us under signs of bread and wine to nourish and strengthen us for our journey through life. The Eucharistic Meal is a great mystery because during the Eucharistic celebration the substance of bread and wine are converted into Jesus' body and blood, while their appearances (or "accidents") remain. We believe in this transformation of bread and wine (called Transubstantiation), because Jesus unequivocally taught it and authorized his apostles to repeat it. As a sacrament, the Holy Eucharist imparts to us Jesus' abiding presence in our souls. We share in His divine life, which is an assurance of eternal life and the basis for the conviction that we are children of God the Father. God shares His life with Jesus and with all other people. The Eucharist is the sacrament of our union with Jesus. In this sacrament, Jesus gives us his own Body, broken for us on the cross and his precious Blood poured out for us, in order that our sins may be forgiven.

**As a sacramental meal**, the Eucharist is a foretaste of the eternal banquet of "*the Lamb that was slain*" (Revelation 5:12). The Eucharist is also known as the "Mass." It recalls the Last Supper because it is 1) a holy meal that provides for Christians spiritual food for the journey, and 2) a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. In other words, every Mass is both a sacrifice and a meal, a means of fulfilling both of Jesus' two great commandments. The Eucharist is the *heart and center of Catholic life*. It is the best way to express our faith and share in the saving grace of Christ. Hence, the more we understand the meaning of the Eucharist, the more perfectly we are able to offer this sacrifice and to receive this sacrament. The Eucharistic celebration or Holy Mass is the central act of Catholic worship. But no doctrine in our Catholic Faith has been more misunderstood by non-Catholics than that of the Holy Mass. As the central act of Catholic worship the Mass is **primarily a sacrifice**. In the 16th century Martin Luther and many other Protestant leaders denied that the Mass is a sacrifice; they stressed the *meal* aspect exclusively. The Council of Trent reacted by emphasizing what was under attack, namely, that the Mass is a sacrifice. This sacrifice of the Mass is

offered on the altar using signs and symbols. These rituals of the Mass enable people to know *what* is going on and *how* and *when* they are to join in. They also encourage greater participation by the people.

**Sacrifice in the Old Testament:** In the Bible, a sacrifice is the *offering of a gift back to God as an expression of our desire for union with him.* But the sacrifice is not a *substitute* for the person offering it. Rather, it is the real sign of his or her self-offering. The *gift to God alone and union with Him is the main joint-object.* It is we who need the sacrifice, not God. In the Bible, sacrifice was not an effort to feed a hungry God, nor to *appease* or soothe an angry God. It gave the people some sense of union with God, the Lord and Owner of all things. At first, the descendants of Abraham offered sacrifices for the benefit of the entire nation. Gradually they began to realize that they should offer sacrifices not only for the sins of the nation but also for the sins of individuals. Such sacrifices showed that the person wanted to reestablish a right relationship with God. In Biblical religion, genuine sacrifice is linked to a God-centered life of goodness and justice.

**Sacrifice in the New Testament:** Jesus insisted on genuine interior piety for a sacrifice, and he emphasized the closeness of sacrifice and love of one's neighbor. Truly God and truly human, Jesus, by his life, death and resurrection offered a sacrifice which was unique and, therefore, unrepeatable (Hebrews 9:25-28). The writers of the New Testament saw Jesus' entire life as a sacrifice. Jesus commanded his apostles, "Do this in memory of me." This command referred not only to offering the Eucharist, but also to imitating Jesus by handing over their lives in obedience to the Father and in service to the community. The center of Biblical sacrifice for both the Jews and the early Christians was acknowledging the Giver of all and seeking a *conversion* of heart which leads to a renewal of love and service. The rituals were intended only to help that conversion. Sacrifice is to change our lives – not God's mind. In Biblical religion, genuine sacrifice is linked to a God-centered life of goodness and justice.

**The Church teaching upholds the Mass as sacrifice.** According to the Council of Trent, the Mass is a true and proper sacrifice which is offered to God. It is the same as Jesus' Calvary sacrifice, "only the manner of offering being changed" from bloody to unbloody. By the words, "Do this in commemoration of me" (Luke 22:19; I Corinthians 11:24), Christ made the apostles priests. Moreover, He decreed that they and other priests should offer His Body and Blood. The Sacrifice of the Mass is not merely an offering of praise and thanksgiving, or simply a memorial of the sacrifice on the Cross. It is a propitiatory sacrifice which is offered for the living and dead, for the remission of sins and of the punishment due to sin, as satisfaction for sin and for other necessities. Vatican II's decree on the liturgy (1963) said: "At the Last Supper, on the night he was betrayed, our Savior 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" (#47). Pope Paul's 1965 encyclical, *The Mystery of Faith*, described the Mass as reapplying the power of Calvary "for the forgiveness of those sins which we daily commit" (#27). The 1967 *Instruction on the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery* said that the Mass is simultaneously "a sacrifice, a memorial, and a banquet" (#1).

**Sacrifice of the Holy Mass:** Perhaps the best way to describe this connection is to say that in the Mass we re-link ourselves to Calvary. In the Mass, Christ's sacrifice on Calvary is perpetuated by the priest, who offers it anew to the Father. St. Paul told his converts in Corinth, "Every time, then, you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26). It is not a new sacrifice, but rather the same sacrifice that Jesus offered on the cross 2,000 years ago. The Eucharist is not a matter of "repeating" that action but of reestablishing our bond with it. The difference, however, is that Jesus no longer dies at each Mass, but is simply re-offered to the Father. It is a "bloody" sacrifice only in the sense that it contains the Body and Blood of Christ. But it is "unbloody" in the sense that it is offered only in a sacramental fashion under the appearances of bread and wine. In other words, in the Mass, we re-present -- or mystically renew -- the Sacrifice of Calvary. In other words, we offer Jesus' sacrifice to God the Father on the altar during Eucharistic celebration for the remission of our sins, using signs and symbols. This means that, once again, we offer Christ to the Father, saying: "Father, look upon the Lamb that was slain for our sake." By the words of consecration, Christ is made present again through the "transubstantiation" of the bread and wine into Christ's Body and Blood.

**Once-and-for-all saving sacrifice:** According to the liturgical theologian, Fr. Lawrence Landini O.F.M., "the ritual sacrifice of the Mass is a sacrament of Jesus' once-and-for-all sacrifice – and that sacrifice alone has power to save us. The action that really avails unto salvation is not precisely our remembering, done again and again; it is not our repeated eating and drinking of His Body and Blood; it is not our repeated offering of ourselves to God; it is not our repeated sacrifice of praise. Rather, it is Jesus' sacrifice. In other words, all of these ritual and sacrificial actions point to and contain the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Christ which alone unites us more intimately with God and with one another." By giving us the Mass, our Lord ensured for us a means of applying to all generations the graces merited on His Holy Cross. In the sacrifice of the Mass, the Church offers a gift to God and prays that all these people may achieve union with him. Both offering a sacrifice and becoming a "living sacrifice of praise" are essential to the Biblical meaning of sacrifice. As James Cardinal Gibbons noted, "In the Sacrifice of the Mass, I apply to myself the merits of the

sacrifice of the Cross, from which the Mass derives its entire efficacy" [*The Faith of Our Fathers*, p.258]. The Church also teaches that the "chief fruit of the Eucharist is an **intrinsic union** of the recipient with Christ" (Ludwig Ott in *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 394).

**The role of the people in the sacrifice of the Mass:** The great Liturgy Encyclical of Pius XII, *Mediator Dei*, explains well that the people can be said to exercise their royal priesthood, to offer the Mass with the priest: first, "from the fact that the priest at the altar in offering a sacrifice in the name of all His members, does so in the person of Christ," whose members they are. Secondly the people can be said to offer since: "The people join their hearts in praise, petition, expiation and thanksgiving with the prayers or intention of the priest, in fact, of the High Priest Himself, so that in the one and same of offering of the Victim... they may be presented to God the Father "(*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 39:556). Vatican II explains (LG # 10) that this is what it means for them to "offer spiritual sacrifices." These spiritual sacrifices consist of their obedience to the will of the Father, already carried out, and planned for the future (Cf. LG #34). This includes their works, their bearing the troubles of life, their prayers, their apostolic efforts, their living out the duties of their state in life, even their relaxation of body and mind if all these things are done as part of the Father's plan, to enable them to serve Him better. It would be good to take a moment before each Mass to see what one has to join with the obedience of Christ, soon to be offered on the altar. Then Mass cannot be without meaning; rather, it dominates all of life, for we should bring our past obedience, and look ahead to the obedience of the near future.

**Life applications of the Eucharistic celebration:** 1) **We need to be Eucharist persons:** In simple terms, this means imitating Jesus in our thoughts, words and actions. The Eucharist is Christ's body-broken and blood-poured-out for others. Accordingly, we will participate fully in the benefits of the Eucharist only to the extent that we imitate, in all aspects of our lives, the generosity and unselfishness that we see in the life and death of Jesus himself. The Eucharist should help us to be more thoughtful, compassionate and forgiving Eucharistic persons. But this cannot happen without our own serious commitment to love and serve others. Just as Jesus brought the good news of God's love, salvation and healing to the world, so must we. This means that we must care for others, feed them, forgive them, accept them and help them to become children of God. In these ways, we may truly become Eucharistic persons.

2) **We need to live a Eucharistic life** by extending the celebration of the Paschal Mystery into our daily lives. This means that, "as faithful followers of Jesus, our praise, sufferings, prayer and work, must be united with His total offering. In this way our actions acquire a new value" (CCC 1368). In the light of the Eucharistic

Mystery, no life is without meaning or worth. Where there appears to be no meaning or worth, the Eucharist brings hope and inspiration.

3) **We need to receive Jesus in Holy Communion with proper preparation:** *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us of two requisites for receiving Communion. First, our conscience must be free from mortal sin. “To respond to this invitation we must prepare ourselves for so great and so holy a moment. St. Paul urges us to examine our conscience: ‘*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. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment upon himself.*’ Anyone conscious of a grave sin must receive the sacrament of Reconciliation before taking Holy Communion” (CCC #1385). The frequent use of confession is an indication that the person’s spiritual life is in good shape and that he is struggling to overcome sins and weaknesses. Secondly, we must fast one hour before we receive Holy Communion. “To prepare for worthy reception of this sacrament, the faithful should observe the fast required in their Church. Besides, our bodily demeanor (gestures, clothing) ought to convey the respect, solemnity, and joy of this moment when Christ becomes our guest” (CCC #1387).

4) **We need to become Christ-bearers and conveyers:** By receiving Holy Communion we become Christ-bearers as Mary was, with the duty of conveying Christ to others at home and in the workplace, as love, mercy, forgiveness and humble and sacrificial service.