

THE HOLY EUCHARIST CHRIST'S GREAT GIFT TO THE CHURCH

by the Reverend Victor E. Novak

"How I hate this folly of not believing in the Eucharist! If the Gospel be true, if Jesus Christ be God, what difficulty is there?" - Blaise Pascal

Dom Gregory Dix, the great 20th century Anglican Benedictine scholar wrote, "At the heart of Christianity is the Eucharist, a thing of absolute simplicity - the taking, blessing, breaking and giving of bread and the taking, blessing and giving of a cup of wine and water as these were done with their new meaning by a young Jew before and after supper with His friends on the night before He died. He had told His friends to do this henceforward with the new meaning for the recalling of Him, and they have done it always since.

"Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable need, from infancy and before to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacles of earthly greatness to the refugees in the caves and dens of the earth. Men have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and a bridegroom in a little country church; for the proclamation of a dogma or for a crop of good wheat; for the wisdom of the Parliament of a mighty nation or for a sick old woman afraid to die; for a schoolboy sitting an examination or for Columbus out to discover America...

"And best of all, week by week and month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully, unflinching, across all the parishes of Christendom, the pastors have done this..."

WHAT DOES THE WORD "EUCHARIST" MEAN?

The word Eucharist comes from the Greek and means Thanksgiving. The Lord's Supper is often called the Holy Eucharist because when Christ instituted it He gave thanks, "For I [the Apostle Paul] have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: **And when he had given thanks**, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me. After the same manner he took the cup..." (I Cor. 11:23-25). Today this Service instituted by our Lord Himself, is the chief means by which His people offer thanks to God for the saving work of Christ upon the cross, for His continued presence among them (Matt. 28:20), and for the promise of His Second Coming.

GATHERED IN THE LORD'S NAME

Following the example of the Apostles and early Christians, the family of God has assembled on the Lord's Day week after week for nearly 2,000 years for the breaking of bread (the Holy Eucharist) and for prayer. "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers" (Acts 2:42). The Lord's people, in the Lord's House, on the Lord's Day, to partake of the Lord's Supper.

THE PLACE OF THE HOLY EUCHARIST IN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

The Holy Eucharist is the principal act of Christian worship as it is the one Service instituted by Christ Himself. Jews, Muslims and others have prayer, readings, hymns and sermons, but only Christians celebrate the Eucharist. This Service is called by various names in the Bible and by Christians: The Holy Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, the Holy Communion, the Breaking of Bread, the Mass (from the Latin), the Todah (Hebrew), the Divine Liturgy and the Divine Service.

The ancient rabbis had taught that when the Messiah came all of the sacrifices would be done away with except the Todah, the Thank Offering. And they were right. While Christ's sacrifice on the cross for the sins of the world brought the sacrificial system to a close, the Thank Offering, the Holy Eucharist, remains - "For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come" (1 Cor. 11:26).

THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION

The Sacrament received by the faithful (the consecrated Bread and Wine) is called Holy Communion. In this Sacrament the true Body and Blood of Christ are received. At the Last Supper the Lord Jesus said, "This **is** my body" and "This **is** my blood", *not* "This represents my body" or "This is a symbol of my body."

Jesus took bread, blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, "**Take, eat; this is my body.** And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, **Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins**" (Matt. 26:26-28).

Jesus said, "I am that bread of life. Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat? Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.

He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him. As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me. This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live forever” (John 6:48-58).

Just like today, many of the disciples who heard these words would not accept them. “Many therefore of his disciples, when they heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it?” (John 6:60). Yet Jesus did not take His words back, or explain that they were only meant to be taken “symbolically.” And just like today, “From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him” (John 6:66).

The Apostles and early Christians understood that Christ meant his words to be taken literally. The Sacrament of Holy Communion not only represents the Body and Blood of Christ, but presents the Body and Blood of Christ. The Body and Blood of Christ is given, taken and eaten in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

The Apostle Paul wrote, “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?” (I Cor. 10:16). Because Christ is really present in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, St. Paul goes on to warn, “Wherefore whosoever shall eat of this bread and drink of this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body” (I Cor. 11:27-29).

The early Church believed in the “Real Presence” of Christ in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, and so did all Christians everywhere for some 1,500 years until the 16th century. Today, three out of every four Christians world-wide belong to Churches that teach the Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

The *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, commonly known as the *Didache* (c. AD 40-70), a very early Church Manual from the Middle East says, “Thou (God) gavest food and drink to men for enjoyment, that they might give thanks to Thee; but to us Thou didst freely give spiritual food and drink and life eternal through Thy Servant [Jesus Christ].”

St. Ignatius, an early Church Father, lived from AD 30 to 107. He was Bishop of Antioch, and was martyred for his faith. He and St. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, who was also a martyr, were fellow-disciples under the Apostle John. While awaiting martyrdom he wrote a number of epistles (letters) to various churches. To the Church in Ephesus he wrote, “obey the bishop and presbytery with an undivided mind, breaking one and the same bread, which is the medicine of immortality, and the antidote to prevent us from dying, but that we should live forever in Jesus Christ” (*Epistle to the Ephesians*, c. AD 105).

In his *Epistle to the Romans*, (c. AD 105), St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote, “I desire the bread of God, the heavenly bread, the bread of life, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ,

the Son of God, who became afterwards the seed of David and Abraham; and I desire the drink of God, namely His blood, which is incorruptible love and eternal life.”

In his *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* (c. AD 105), he warned of the Gnostics of his day who denied the doctrine of the Real Presence. His warning is just as valid today. He wrote, “They [the Gnostics] abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they confess not the Eucharist to be the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins, and which the Father, of His goodness, raised up again. Those, therefore, who speak against this gift of God, incur death.”

St. Justin Martyr (AD 100-165) wrote, “And this food is called among us the Eucharist, of which no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that the things we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins, and unto regeneration, and is so living as Christ has enjoined. For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Saviour, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh” (*First Apology*).

St. Irenaeus (AD 120-202) was pupil of St. Polycarp, who was a disciple of the Apostle John. Later he became the Bishop of Lyons in Celtic Gaul (modern France). His great work *Against Heresies* was written between AD 182 and AD 188. In refuting the Gnostic heretics of his day, he wrote, “But our opinion is in accordance with the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn establishes our opinion. For we offer to Him His own, announcing consistently the fellowship and union of the flesh and spirit. For as the bread, which is produced from the earth, when it receives the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist, consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly; so also our bodies, when they receive the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible, having the hope of the resurrection to eternity” (*Against Heresies*).

St. Athanasius of Alexandria (AD 295-373), the great champion of the Orthodox Faith during the Arian crisis said, “But when the great and wondrous prayers have been recited, then the bread becomes the body and the cup the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ” (*Sermon to the Baptized*).

St. Cyril was an early Bishop of Jerusalem, the Mother Church of Christendom. Around the year AD 350 he delivered introductory lectures to his classes of catechumens. Regarding the Eucharist he said, “The bread and wine of the Eucharist, before the invocation of the holy and adorable Trinity, were simple bread and wine; but, after the invocation, the bread becomes the body of Christ and the wine becomes the blood of Christ” (*Mystagogical Lecture* 1.7).

St. John Chrysostom was the Archbishop of Constantinople, modern-day Istanbul, Turkey. He was born between AD 344 and 354 and died in AD 407. Some Christians say that St. John Chrysostom is unparalleled among the Fathers, while others believe

that he was only equaled by St. Augustine of Hippo. Speaking of the Eucharist, St. John Chrysostom said, "When the word says, 'This is My Body,' be convinced of it and believe it, and look at it with the eyes of the mind" (*Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*, AD 370).

St. John Chrysostom says that the bread, "when once Divine Grace has, through the intervention of the priest, sanctified it, is worthy to be called the Lord's Body, although the nature of bread remains" (*Epis. ad. Caes*).

St. Augustine of Hippo (AD 354-430), was the greatest theologian that Western Christendom has ever produced. St. Augustine taught the doctrine of the Real Presence clearly and simply. He said, "I am mindful of my promise. For I promised you, who have now been baptized, a sermon in which I would explain the Sacrament of the Lord's Table, which you now look upon and of which you last night were made participants. You ought to know what you have received, what you are going to receive, and what you ought to receive daily. That bread which you see on the altar, having been sanctified by the word of God, is the Body of Christ. That chalice, or rather, what is in that chalice, having been sanctified by the word God, is the Blood of Christ. Through that bread and wine the Lord Christ willed to commend his Body and Blood, which He poured out for us unto the forgiveness of sins" (*Sermons*).

Gelasius, Bishop of Rome (AD 492), taught, "The grace of the Body and Blood of Christ which we receive is a divine thing, wherefore also we are by the same made partakers of the Divine nature; and yet the substance and nature of bread and wine ceaseth not to be" (*De daub. Christi naturis*).

The Reformers all agreed with the Scriptures and the Fathers of the Church in believing in the doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. The first major religious leader to dissent from the historic doctrine was Ulrich Zwingli; and Luther reacted strongly against him and refused to be in communion with him or his followers. According to Zwingli, the Eucharist is a bare sign, a mere memorial. Rather than the Real Presence, he taught what amounts to be the real absence of Christ in the sacrament. Unfortunately, modern evangelical Christianity and most of modern protestantism long ago embraced Zwinglian sacramental theology. With such a theology they cannot be in any way heirs of the primitive Church or the Reformers.

John Wycliffe, the "Morning Star of the Reformation," said that the change that occurs in the Eucharist, "effects the presence of the body of Christ...Not that the bread is destroyed, but that it signifies the body of the Lord there present in the sacrament" (*De Eucharistia*).

Jan Huss, the great Bohemian Reformer of the 15th century believed likewise. He said, "The humble priest doth not...say that he is the creator of Christ, but that the Lord Christ by His power and word, through him, causes that which is bread to be His body, not that at that time it began to be His, but that there on the altar begins to be sacramentally in the form of the bread what previously was not there and therein."

Jan Huss was a faithful Catholic priest who was martyred by the Roman authorities for trying to restore communion in both kinds to the laity. As late as AD 1095 the Council of Clermont, under the presidency of Urban II, Bishop of Rome, decreed that “no one shall communicate at the altar, without receiving the Body and the Blood separately and alike, unless by urgent necessity and for caution.” The withdrawal of the chalice from the laity and Communion in one kind only began in the 12th century, although in the 13th century St. Thomas Aquinas speaks of the primitive practice lingering in some places. Communion in one kind did not become the general practice in the Britain until after the burning of Huss at the Council of Constance (AD 1415), which decreed it. This error was of short duration in Britain as the chalice was restored to the laity by a unanimous act of Convocation on December 2, 1547.

Martin Luther, who launched the Reformation in AD 1517, firmly believed in the Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. In his famous and still popular *Small Catechism*, Luther wrote, “What is the Sacrament of the Altar? It is the true Body and Blood of Christ, under the bread and wine.”

John Calvin concurred. In his *Short Treatise on the Holy Supper* Calvin wrote, “It is a spiritual mystery which cannot be seen by the eye nor be comprehended by human understanding. Therefore it is represented for us by means of visible signs, according to the need of our weakness. Nevertheless, it is not a naked figure, but one joined to its truth and substance. With good reason then, the bread is called body, because it not only represents, but also presents it.”

When people describe mere memorialism as Calvinism they are mistaken. It was Zwingli, not Calvin, who taught mere memorialism: that the Sacrament of Holy Communion is merely a sign or symbol. Unfortunately, most Reformed theologians and denominations embraced Zwinglian sacramental theology long ago, and that is why Zwinglian sacramental theology is often described as Calvinism today.

In the Catechism of the historic American Book of Common Prayer is presented the Anglican understanding of the Sacrament of Holy Communion:

“Question. What is the outward part or sign of the Lord’s Supper?

Answer. Bread and Wine, which the Lord hath commanded to be received.

Question. What is the inward part, or thing signified?

Answer. The Body and Blood of Christ, which are spiritually taken and received by the faithful in the Lord’s Supper.”

Queen Elizabeth I, gave testimony of her faith in the words of this short poem:

“He was the word that spake it,
He took the bread and break it;
And what his word did make it,

That I believe and take it.”

IS THE EUCHARIST A SACRAMENT OR A SACRIFICE?

The Eucharist is both a sacrament and a sacrifice. While Christians do not re-sacrifice Christ or sacrifice Him anew on the altar, the Eucharist is a commemorative sacrifice in that Christians re-plead the one sacrifice of Himself that Christ offered upon the cross. It is also a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving (Greek: Eucharist), an offering of bread and wine, souls and bodies, tithes and offerings to God through Christ the great High Priest.

Long ago in the second century, St. Irenaeus of Lyons wrote, “Again, giving directions to His disciples to offer to God the first-fruits of his own created things - not as if He stood in need of them, but that they might be themselves neither unfruitful nor ungrateful - He took that created thing, bread, and gave thanks, and said, ‘This is my body.’ And the cup likewise, which is part of that creation to which we belong, He confessed to be His blood, and taught the new oblation of the new covenant; which the Church receiving from the apostles, offers to God throughout all the world, to Him who gives us as the means of subsistence the first-fruits of His own gifts in the New Testament, concerning which Malachi, among the twelve prophets, thus spoke beforehand: ‘I have no pleasure in you, saith the LORD Omnipotent, and I will not accept sacrifice at your hands. For from the rising of the sun, unto the going down [of the same], My name is glorified among the Gentiles, and in every place incense is offered to My name, and a pure sacrifice; for great is My name among the Gentiles, saith the LORD Omnipotent’ [Malachi 1:10-11] - indicating in the plainest manner, by these words, that the former people [the Jews] shall indeed cease to make offerings to God, but that in every place sacrifice shall be offered to Him, and that a pure one; and His name is glorified among the Gentiles” (*Against Heresies*).

Malachi 1:11 is a prophecy of worship under the New Covenant. It reads, “From the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place [no longer just in the Jerusalem Temple] incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure offering: for my name shall be great among the heathen, saith the LORD of hosts.” All of the Church Fathers who quote this prophecy apply it to the Holy Eucharist; and overwhelmingly the prophecy most often applied to the Eucharist by the Church Fathers was this one from Malachi.

WHO CAN OFFER THE HOLY EUCHARIST?

From the very beginning of Christianity only an apostle, a bishop who is a successor of the apostles, or a presbyter (priest) ordained by such, may properly offer the Holy Eucharist. In his *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* (c. AD 105), St. Ignatius of Antioch, a disciple of the Apostle John, wrote, “See that ye follow the bishop, even as Jesus Christ does the Father, and the presbytery as ye would the apostles; and reverence the deacons, as being the institution of God. Let no man do anything connected with the Church without the bishop. Let that be deemed a proper Eucharist, which is

[administered] either by the bishop, or by one to whom he entrusted it [a presbyter]. Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude [of the people] also be; even as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.”

SHOULD THE HOLY EUCHARIST BE CELEBRATED WITH REVERENCE?

Yes. The Holy Eucharist has ever only been offered by a bishop or presbyter (priest), often with a deacon and other ministers (readers and acolytes) assisting. It has always been celebrated with great reverence, often with incense as foretold by the prophet Malachi.

Reverence for the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ extended to the Holy Table, the altar, and to the chalice and paten (plate), and other articles used in the Eucharistic Liturgy. Tertulian (c. AD 160-230) describes chalices decorated with images of Christ (*On Modesty*); and in AD 303, during the Roman persecution of Christianity and ten years before Constantine’s edict of toleration, a Roman court in North Africa recorded the items seized from a house-church. The confiscated items included two golden chalices, six silver chalices, six silver dishes, a silver bowl, seven silver lamps, two torches, seven short bronze lampstands with their lamps, and eleven bronze lamps on chains.

A century later, St. Jerome, the great Bible Scholar who translated the Holy Scriptures from Hebrew and Greek into Latin, the language of the Western Roman Empire of his day, wrote of the need “to instruct by authority of Scripture ignorant people in all the churches concerning the reverence with which they must handle holy things and minister at Christ’s altar; and to impress upon them that the sacred chalices, veils, and other accessories used in the celebration of the Lord’s passion are not mere lifeless and senseless objects devoid of holiness, but that rather, from their association with the body and blood of the Lord, they are to be venerated with the same awe as the body and blood themselves” (*Letter 114.2*).

From its very institution by Christ on the night of the Last Supper, Christians have believed that the Sacrament of the Altar, Holy Communion, is the very Body and Blood of Christ. For some 1,500 years this was the belief of all Christians East and West. This was also the belief of the Reformers of the 16th century. It was not until Zwingli that some began to dissent from the universally held belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, and Zwingli and his followers were condemned by Luther in the strongest terms. Those Christians of today who consider the Lord’s Supper to be a mere memorial, that the bread and wine (grape juice?) are merely symbols representing Christ’s broken body and shed blood reminding believers of His death on the cross nearly 2,000 years ago, are dangerously out of step with the clear teachings of Christ, the apostles, and with the teachings of historic Christianity. When the Lord Jesus said, “This is My Body” and “This is My Blood,” He meant just what He said. Dr. E.B. Pusey summed up the doctrine of the Real Presence when he said, “It is truly flesh and blood, and these received into us cause that we are in Christ and Christ in us.”

WHO MAY RECEIVE HOLY COMMUNION?

Baptized Christians who have been admitted to Communion, and who:

1. Are repentant; steadfastly purposing to lead a new life, having a living faith in God's mercy through Christ; and being in charity with all men.
2. Believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.
3. Are spiritually prepared to receive the Blessed Sacrament. According to the historic practice of the Church, the Sacrament of Holy Communion should be received fasting.

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