

THE EUCHARIST

Most Blessed Sacrament

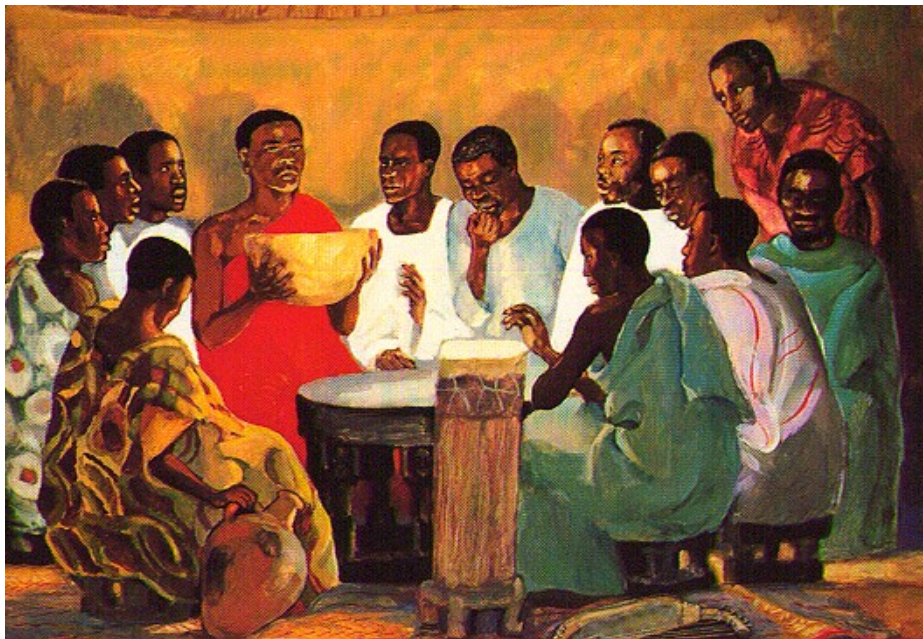
Of all the sacraments, the Eucharist is called the Most Blessed Sacrament. This is because the other sacraments point to Jesus, and help draw us to him but the Eucharist *is* Jesus. The Eucharist we receive is not merely a symbol of the Body and Blood of Jesus. We believe, based on Jesus' own teaching that when we partake of the Eucharist we actually receive the whole Christ, his Body, his Blood, His Soul and his Divinity.

The Outward Sign

Just as with the other sacraments, the Eucharist uses outward signs. The outward signs of the sacraments are those things that we can perceive with our senses but which give us graces that we cannot immediately see. Though we cannot see these graces with our eyes, they are nonetheless just as real. In the case of the Eucharist the outward sign is bread and wine. But over the bread and wine are said words which change their very reality. Over the bread is said, *Take this all of you and eat it, this is my Body, which will be given up for you.* Over the cup that is filled with wine are said these words, *Take this all of you and drink from it. This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven. Do this in memory of me.*

Established by Christ

It was Jesus himself who celebrated the first Eucharist and commanded us to do the same. Jesus did this at the Last Supper. There are many scriptural accounts of that first Eucharist. Here is one from St. Paul: *For I received from the Lord what I*



also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which 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. (1 Cor. 11:23-25). There are several other passages which likewise record this solemn act of Christ in establishing the Eucharist: Matthew 26: 26-29; Mark 14:22-25; and Luke 22:19-20) In the 6th Chapter of the Gospel of John there is also an extended teaching by Jesus on the Eucharist.

The Graces received

The greatest gift received in the Eucharist is the gift of Jesus himself. While it is true that we can distinguish other gifts for special mention we should dwell for a moment on the glorious and mysterious truth that we actually receive the Lord Jesus in this sacrament.

The True Presence

When Jesus was at the Last Supper he celebrated the Eucharist for the first time. When he took bread he said, *This is my body.* We must pay careful attention to these words. He did not say, "This bread is a symbol of my body." He said, *This is my Body.* Likewise he said of the wine in the cup, *This is the*

cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you. Here too there is no indication in the text that Christ was speaking only symbolically.

An important background to the texts from the Last Supper is given in the 6th chapter of the Gospel of John. There John records how Jesus had already taught about the Eucharist long before he celebrated the Last Supper. In his teaching, Jesus was very clear to emphasize the true and literal understanding that his followers were to have of his presence in the Eucharist. Here are some excerpts from Jesus' teaching: *Jesus said to them, I am the bread of life; he who*

comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst....The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, "I am the bread which came down from heaven...Jesus answered them, "Do not murmur among yourselves. No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day....I am the bread of life...I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world." The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him...he who eats this bread will live for ever." This he said in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum. Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples murmured at it, said to them, "Do you take offense at this?...It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you that do not believe...After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him. Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; (John 6:32ff)

Jesus' listeners that day concluded that he spoke literally when he said they must eat his flesh and drink his blood. Many were greatly offended by

such talk. Had Jesus meant his words to be understood only symbolically he would have corrected them and they probably would not have taken offense in the first place. Nevertheless he insists on being understood literally. He paid a high price for this teaching too for many left him that day and would no longer walk in his company because of it. Thus it is that Jesus teaches that the Eucharistic Bread and Wine we receive are in fact not bread and wine at all but are his flesh and blood. That this was the understanding of the early Church is evident in another passage from Scripture: *The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a partaking in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a partaking in the body of Christ?* (1 Cor 10:16)

In keeping with biblical tradition the Church has taught that the Eucharist is the very flesh and blood of Christ. Even more, the whole Christ is received, Body Blood, Soul and Divinity. Although we may from time to time see references to the Holy Eucharist as "bread" we understand this in the scriptural way: "The Bread is my Flesh (Jn 6:51)."

In this way we can also see how, in a certain sense, the Eucharist also contains every other grace and blessing. The catechism teaches it this way, *The Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life...in the Blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself...(# 1324).*

Though the Eucharist in a way contains every grace, certain graces can be particularly highlighted

Holy Communion

When we receive the Eucharist we are drawn into union with Jesus and through Jesus to one another. That is

why we often call this sacrament "Holy Communion." Jesus teaches, *He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him* (John 6:56). Likewise St. Paul reminded the Corinthians *Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.* (1 Cor 17:10).

Nourishment, Healing, Transformation

Consider too the glory of the Eucharist as food. There is a saying, "You are what you eat." This is greatly true at the physical level. Whenever we eat, the food we have received is drawn into our bodies and through a wonderful and hidden process becomes part of the very fiber of our being. It is the same with the Eucharist. We receive Jesus and his body becomes part of our very being. If we are faithful in receiving the Eucharist worthily we are gradually transformed to become the one we receive. Jesus enters our body and soul and continues his wonderful work of healing and perfecting.

This also helps us to understand why Jesus insists so strongly on our reception of the Eucharist. Without food we starve and eventually die. It is the same in the spiritual life, without the Eucharist we starve and are dying, *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you* (John 6:56).

Consider then glory of the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Jesus himself enters our body and soul and quietly nourishes, heals and transforms us into his own glorious image. He becomes one with us so that we may become one with him. St. Augustine urged long ago, *Christian, become what you receive.*