



by Jethro Higgins

What is Communion?

We celebrate holy Communion at the Mass — also known as the Holy Eucharist, the Blessed Sacrament, or the Lord’s Supper — which is the remembrance of Jesus Christ’s words and actions at the last supper, where he took bread and wine and transubstantiated them into the real presence of his body and blood. The faithful in Catholic churches around the world receive the Sacrament of the Eucharist by eating and drinking the real presence of Christ in the consecrated elements. Those who receive holy Communion participate in the — once-for-all — paschal sacrifice of Christ, in which Jesus Christ fulfills the title Lamb of God prefigured in the Old Testament, especially in the context of the Jewish feast of Passover. The consecrated body of Christ becomes for us the “bread of life” (John 6:22-59), and the blood of Christ becomes the “cup of our salvation” (Psalm 116:13) through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The above paragraph addresses, in a nut shell, Eucharist basic questions, and answers to those questions. We’ll unpack that a bit in the paragraphs below. But before we do, feel free to scroll to the bottom of this post and play one of the suggested Eucharistic songs. I’m confident you will find something you or your music ministry can incorporate into the sacrifice of the Mass, divine liturgy or faith formation programs, including: religious education, youth ministry, children’s liturgy and adult ministry. Your support of these songs helps us to continue to create great content, like this series on the sacraments.

Bible study:

whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood

The real presence of Jesus Christ in the sacrament is pretty clear in the Gospel of Saint John. Jesus does not mince words. Short of quoting the entire chapter, a key section of the Bread of Life Discourse (John 6:22-59) is this:

“The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us [his] flesh to eat?’ Jesus said to them, ‘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. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever.” (John 6:52-58)

The words of Jesus, as recorded by St. John, show that his audience is really having a difficult time accepting a teaching that sounds an awful lot like cannibalism. In fact, the Romans would make this charge as one of the reasons for persecuting the early Church. Jesus and the crowd go back and forth over this teaching several times, and by the end of the discourse Jesus has stated twelve different ways that his body is bread and that it must be eaten. And to hammer his point home, in John 6:54 he uses the verb, Trogon (τρώγω). Because of the word Trogon, this Bible verse has no potentially figurative meaning. Picking an English equivalent for Greek words can be tricky, but the word essentially means to gnaw on, chew, or masticate. It’s the type of word one would use to describe a dog picking meat off of a bone. Many followers of Jesus were so turned off by this teaching that John 6:66 states that they stopped following him entirely. Rather than explain to them that he was speaking figuratively (as he often does when his audience is not understanding) he doubles down! He turns to his twelve disciples and offers them two options, believe or leave too.

Why must we eat this bread and drink this cup to have eternal life?

The Passover and the manna in the desert are what biblical scholars call typology. Throughout the Bible there are

visible signs which are archetypes that don't just echo but amplify into the future, growing in depth and meaning. Examples of this typology (to continue to borrow a phrase from the great Dr. Scott Hahn) would be:

- **The Temple** – *Originally a building, but later Jesus's body and finally our own bodies*
- **Jerusalem** – *First a city, but later the Church and ultimately heaven "the Kingdom of God"*
- **The Ark of the Covenant** – *First a boat built by Noah, then a holy vessel containing the Ten Commandments, and finally Mary containing the Son of God himself.*

The Passover (when God freed Israel from the bonds of slavery) was an archetype prefiguring the salvation of all mankind. To complete the Passover, a family was required to eat the entire flesh of the sacrificial lamb. Jesus is the Lamb of God who frees us from our slavery to sin, just as the Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt. In celebrating the Eucharist, we complete the Passover meal that Jesus started in the upper room at the last supper. We eat the sacrificial Lamb of God (Christ's body and blood) in the form of the unleavened bread, transubstantiated by Jesus on the Passover Table.

The Eucharist in the Church

From the first century of the Church, the nature of what was happening during the celebration of the Eucharist was well understood. Take Paul's warning about eating and drinking in an unworthy manner in 1 Corinthians:

"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."

The blog Shamelesspopery.com does a great job of diving into Paul's theology on the Eucharistic species. That's a little too deep for the point I'm trying to make here. The take away from that deep dive is that we can know with relative certainty from the writings of Paul that the church of God in the first century believed the apostles (and those they passed the ministry of Jesus on to) transubstantiated bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Roman Catholics believe and have maintained this as part of Sacred Tradition since the time of the apostles. The Catechism of the Catholic Church — available through the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops website — makes this point very explicitly:

"The mode of Christ's presence under the Eucharistic species is unique. It raises the Eucharist above all the sacraments as 'the perfection of the spiritual life and the end to which all the sacraments tend.' In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist 'the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained.' 'This presence is called 'real' - by which is not intended to exclude the other types of presence as if they could not be 'real' too, but because it is presence in the fullest sense: that is to say, it is a substantial presence by which Christ, God and man, makes himself wholly and entirely present.'" (CCC 1374)

If you don't have a copy of the Catechism you should get one. It's the greatest of study tools for all things related to the Catholic faith. The Catholic Encyclopedia, New Advent, also has the Catechism available for free online.

Throughout Church history, many theologians have attested to this central truth about our Catholic faith, including St. Justin Martyr, St. John Chrysostom, Pope St. Paul VI and Pope St. John Paul II the Great, who said in the first paragraph of his encyclical letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*:

"The Second Vatican Council rightly proclaimed that the Eucharistic sacrifice is 'the source and summit of the Christian life'. 'For the most holy Eucharist contains the Church's entire spiritual wealth: Christ himself, our passover and living bread. Through his own flesh, now made living and life-giving by the Holy Spirit, he offers life to men'."

Throughout that encyclical, Pope St. John Paul II borrows heavily from documents from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, The Council of Trent, St. John Chrysostom and the Code of Canon Law. He draws a direct theological line through history from the Lord's table at the last supper, through the way the early Christians celebrated communion, to the Liturgy of the Eucharist and the Eucharistic prayers found in the Roman Missal. This is not a "light read," but it is a warm, heartfelt read, and worth the time if you are interested in going deeper into Eucharistic theology. It's not long (62 paragraphs) but it is dense with meaning that must be unpacked. He closes this document by directing our thoughts as faithful Catholics toward the communion of saints in heaven who are visible signs of "Eucharistic piety." In the presence of Jesus the risen Christ, they share with us an

example that the late pope hopes will be “contagious.” This message is all the more meaningful as he has taken his place among them.

The world’s understanding of the word Eucharist

As with many of the sacraments, a dictionary or encyclopedic definition doesn’t really do the reality of the sacrament justice. Take the word Eucharist for example. We have discussed quite a bit already about what Eucharist means. In the Encyclopaedia Britannica definition however, there is some problematic language that is a result of trying to define the Eucharist in a way that is acceptable to the majority of readers.

“Eucharist, also called Holy Communion or Lord’s Supper, in Christianity, ritual commemoration of Jesus’ Last Supper with his disciples, at which (according to tradition) he gave them bread with the words, ‘This is my body,’ and wine with the words, ‘This is my blood.’ The story of the institution of the Eucharist by Jesus on the night before his Crucifixion is reported in four books of the New Testament (Matthew 26:26–28; Mark 14:22–24; Luke 22:17–20; and I Corinthians 11:23–25). The letters of the Apostle Paul and the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament demonstrate that early Christians believed that this institution included a mandate to continue the celebration as an anticipation in this life of the joys of the banquet that was to come in the Kingdom of God.”

Now, there is nothing untrue about this “word of the day” style sound bite, but it is missing key elements of what the Eucharist truly is — namely, receiving the body of Christ (literally) as a memorial of his death for the forgiveness of sins. The page continues on to equate the Eucharist with a mere sign, and fails to make the connection that the Eucharist is a participation by the adopted brothers and sisters of Christ (us) in the Passover sacrifice at the Lord’s table, which is a continuation of the same once-for-all sacrifice that was consumed at the Last Supper.

The first line of the Catholic Encyclopedia, New Advent makes the proper distinction right from the beginning, and then continues to tackle the historical truth of the Eucharist.

“The name given to the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar in its twofold aspect of sacrament and Sacrifice of Mass, and in which Jesus Christ is truly present under the appearances of bread and wine.”

The word Communion

Even more confusing is the understanding of the word, “communion.” The word comes from Middle English origin (more than a millennium after the last supper) and means, to share in common. Many pastoral ministers often refer to communion as our “common union.” The word implies a common participation in a faith community and even a common theology. This meaning remains true even for communion services that don’t reflect the sacramental intentions of Christ in the Eucharistic definition at the top of this page. We’ll discuss that more below, but you can see how this could become problematic when differing communion celebrations are assumed to essentially be the same.

Communion in other faiths

Many denominations of Christianity have a Eucharistic celebration or a Communion service of some kind. In Eastern Orthodoxy the reality of the Eucharist is nearly identical to that of eastern churches in line with the Pope in the Latin church. Communion in the Episcopal Church is probably the next closest to the Catholic understanding. But as we dig deeper into the multitude of Christian denominations the Theology of the Eucharist starts to break down. Some denominations of Christianity in the United States translate the phrase “bread and wine” in the Bible to “bread and drink” and contest that wine at the time of Jesus was non-alcoholic. For this reason, you’ll find grape juice instead of wine in the communion cup at those churches. Receiving Communion at these churches is essentially saying that this cup of grape juice is the same as the chalice of his blood — an opportunity to create great scandal. This is especially true for denominations who may look at a practice like perpetual adoration of the blessed sacrament and despise the Church for what they mistakenly believe to be idol worship.

A Catholic should not be taking Communion at any of these denominations. The reason for this is that the reception of Communion proclaims a participation in the community, and as of the writing of this blog article the afore mentioned churches are not in communion with the Catholic Church. Additionally, many churches do not recognize Christ’s presence under the species of bread and wine.

Sometimes Holy Communion in the Catholic Church is referred to as a closed communion. As the quote from St. Paul’s First letter to the Corinthians above shows us, those receiving Communion without discerning the Lord’s body in the sacrament of the altar, eat and drink condemnation upon themselves. So, until such a time that a Christian is prepared to receive Christ’s body and blood and become a member of the Catholic faithful, we

ask them to refrain from presenting themselves for Holy Communion. They are, however, free to worship with us and join us in prayer at the Eucharistic sacrifice, including processing forward for a blessing during Communion.

The breaking of bread in parish life

When we enter into the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, we enter into a close relationship with the Son of God. Some may call it a personal relationship with Jesus. When we receive the Eucharist, we unite ourselves with Christ's sacrifice and become part of the mystical body of Christ, the people of God. Because of this reality, we are asked by the Church to examine ourselves before receiving Christ in the Eucharistic substance of the bread. In eating the consecrated bread, we don't merely remember Jesus in the English sense of remembering, rather our remembrance is a participation in the fullness of Christian life: in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord — a deep and intimate relationship with God.

The Church guides us not to approach the altar if we are weighed down by mortal sins, and the reasoning rings true. Mortal sins cut us off from the grace necessary to enter the Kingdom of God. Through mortal sin, we sever the relationship Christ intended for us when he spoke the words of institution. We intentionally cut ourselves off from the authentic relationship the Eucharist is intended to be. For this reason, Jesus also gave us the sacrament of Reconciliation. Frequent confession keeps us in a state of grace, so that we can frequently receive the Holy Eucharist, the source and summit of all Christian life.

To Live with Him Forever

By Sarah Hart (ocp.org/songs/87551)

Sarah's co-write "To Live with Him Forever," with phenomenal lyricist Robert Feduccia, is a contemporary Communion song written in the style of a hymn. It expresses the deep longing we have here on Earth to experience complete union with God forever in heaven, and how the Eucharist is our foretaste of what that will be like.

I Am the Bread of Life

By Steve Angrisano (ocp.org/songs/88197)

Steve Angrisano and Tom Booth collaborate on this brilliant Communion song that ties in language from the bread of life discourse like a love letter from God to the faithful.

Remembrance

By Matt Maher

From the Spirit & Song hymnal, Matt's "Remembrance" is equal parts prayerful and theological. Matt's lyrics

highlight the Christian understanding of what it means to "do this in remembrance of [Him]."

This series is intended to provide a more in-depth look at each of the Sacraments their institution in the Bible, current practice, and some beautiful musical suggestions. Explore more from related articles in this series:

- **Baptism:** *What is Baptism?*
- **Eucharist:** *What is the Eucharist?*
- **Confirmation:** *What is the Sacrament of Confirmation?*
- **Confession:** *Sacrament of Reconciliation*
- **Anointing of the Sick:** *Last Rites and the Anointing of the Sick*
- **Matrimony:** *Being husband and wife*
- **Holy Orders:** *What is the Sacrament of Holy Orders?*

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