

## The Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist

One day, during His Public Ministry, Jesus found himself in the midst of more than five thousand people who had come to hear him preach about the Good News of salvation. Soon it was dinnertime and all the people were extremely hungry.

Jesus looked with love upon them and said to his apostles, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" (Jn 6:5) (Although He knew exactly what He was going to do, yet he wanted to test the faith of His apostles.) Philip reminded Jesus that it would cost over half a year's wages to feed such a crowd. Andrew then brought to the Lord five loaves of bread and a couple of dried fish but wondered how it would feed the multitude gathered.

Jesus blessed these small portions and told the apostles to hand them out to the crowd. The disciples were shocked to see that there was more than enough food, with twelve full baskets left over! This was a miracle!

### Jesus, the Bread of Life

The people were amazed and wanted Jesus to do this again. Why not send bread (manna) down from Heaven just as God did for our people during the Exodus, they asked. Jesus revealed to them that God was going to give his people a much greater bread; he was telling them about the Holy Eucharist: *I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate manna in the desert, but they died. I myself am the living bread come down from Heaven. If anyone eats this bread he shall live forever; the bread I will give is my Flesh, for the life of the world. . . Let me solemnly assure you, if you do not eat the Flesh of the Son of Man and drink his Blood, you have no life in you. He who feeds on my Flesh and drinks my Blood has life eternal, and I will raise him up on the last day (Jn 6:48-54).*

The listeners were horrified! Eat his flesh and drink his blood! Does he think we are cannibals? they wondered. Many disciples left Our Lord that day, but the Twelve Apostles remained firm in their faith. They awaited the day when he would give them this holy bread of life.

### Jesus Gives Us the Holy Eucharist

At the Last Supper, Jesus kept his promise and give God's people the bread of eternal life. The evangelist Saint Matthew, who was an eyewitness of this event, tells us about it in his Gospel: *During the meal Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to his disciples. "Take this and eat it" he said, "this is my Body." Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them. "All of you must drink from it," he said, "for this is my Blood, the Blood of the covenant, to be poured out in behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins." (Mt 26:26-28).*

Just as he had changed water into wine at the beginning of his ministry, so now he was changing bread and wine into his very Body and Blood. This was the first Holy Mass, or

*Eucharist* as we often call it today. The word "eucharist" is from the Greek word for "thanksgiving", and it is used as a name for the Mass because Jesus gave thanks to the Father while *consecrating* the bread and wine. There are many other names by which this holy Sacrament is known: Lord's Supper, Blessed Sacrament, Sacrament of the Altar, Bread of Life, Holy Communion, and Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

### **The Sign of the Sacrament**

We can learn the most obvious purpose of the Eucharist by looking at the signs which are used: bread and wine, together with the words of Consecration ("This is my Body. . . This is the cup of my Blood . . ."). They tell us that food is being given to us, but it is supernatural food - the Flesh and Blood of the Son of God!

These two sources of nourishment were an important part of the diet of the people of the Holy Land. Bread was their main food and wine was the most common beverage. To them these two items meant life and health for the body; Jesus made them the life and health of the soul as well. Without the Holy Eucharist our souls would starve to death!

Today, with so many different kinds of foods available to us, we do not see the importance of bread and wine as clearly as our ancestors did. But if you think about it, you will realize that so many of our favorite foods are made out of wheat flour, "which earth has given and human hands have made" (Offertory prayer over the bread). And even to this day wine is used as *the* celebration drink at weddings, parties, and many other get-togethers.

### **The Mystery of the Eucharist**

At the Consecration of the Mass, the priest changes the bread and the wine by the power which he has received at ordination. This change is known by a rather large word: *transubstantiation*. If we break this word apart we can see what it is trying to express. *Trans* here means "change" and *substantiation* comes from "substance" or what a thing is. Well, at Mass the "things" are bread and wine, so the word is simply saying that these change into Jesus Christ.

Our Lord chose appropriate means by which we could receive this Sacrament: he gave it to us under the *appearances* of bread and wine. When we go to Holy Communion we see and taste ordinary food, but our faith in Jesus tells us that it is not what it seems. We are really "eating the Flesh of the Son of Man and drinking his Blood" (Jn 6:53).

This is why the Eucharist is called the ***Mystery of Faith***. We can only accept it on God's word. At every Mass, right after the Consecration, the priest says to us, "Let us proclaim the Mystery of Faith." He invites us to recite a prayer of faith in the *Real Presence* of Jesus in this Sacrament.

The bread and wine are not changed into Jesus' Flesh and Blood just for a time during Mass. They remain the Body and Blood of the Lord after Mass, and the Host is reverently kept in the *tabernacle* in the church. This is a special, solid, immovable

container that is decorated with symbols of Jesus. A vigil lamp (candle) is kept burning before the tabernacle day and night as a way of honoring Jesus in the Eucharist.

Saint Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386 A.D.) was a holy bishop and doctor (exceptionally great teacher) of the Church. He used to encourage the Catholics in his diocese to have faith in the Real Presence saying: *When Christ says, "This is my Body", who should dare to doubt him? When he says, "This is my Blood", who dares to say that it is not? Once he changed water into wine. Does he not deserve our faith in being able to change wine into his Blood? Do not think of the Blessed Sacrament as ordinary bread, for according to the words of Christ, it is his Flesh. Even though your senses do not convince you, let your faith strengthen you that you do not judge according to your taste (Cat. 4 myst.).*

### **The Effects of the Holy Eucharist**

When we receive the Blessed Sacrament worthily - that is, free from mortal sin, having fasted from food and drink (except water and medicine) for one hour beforehand, and approaching the altar with faith - Jesus does wonderful things for our souls!

He increases the life of grace within us and takes away our venial sins. He actually makes us one with him. He is truly within us after Holy Communion.

He unites us with one another, for we all are made one with the same Eucharistic Lord. Holy Communion helps us to love one another.

He helps us to overcome our faults and sinful desires. By the frequent reception of the Eucharist we are given the power to give up all our sins and even our selfish desires.

With each Holy Communion Christ's life increases in us. Those who receive the Eucharist often and worthily will have a deeper relationship with Jesus in Heaven.

Lastly, Our Lord prepares us for the resurrection of the dead. The Creed tells us that everyone will rise from the dead at the end of the world. Those who go often to Communion with faith, hope, and love will be more sure of being in Heaven, body and soul, someday.

But if we do not receive him properly, we will not profit from this Sacrament. As a matter of fact, to receive Communion with a mortal sin is one of the worst offenses against the Lord. It is called a sacrilege and must be confessed as soon as possible.

**Words to know:** Holy Eucharist, Mystery of faith,