

Exploring the Mystery of the Eucharist

With the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as our guide

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* devotes an entire article to the Sacrament of the Eucharist. It is located as follows:

- Part 2: The Celebration of the Christian Mystery
- Section 2: The Seven Sacraments of the Church
- Chapter 1: The Sacraments of Initiation
- Article 3: The Sacrament of the Eucharist

This presentation will explore various aspects of the Sacrament of the Eucharist, as discussed in Article 3 of the *Catechism*. Included will be the theology of the Sacrament, its celebration in the Church's liturgy, and its effects in the lives of the faithful.

Article 3 is divided as follows:

- I. The Eucharist — Source and Summit of Ecclesial Life
- II. What is the Sacrament Called?
- III. The Eucharist in the Economy of Salvation
- IV. The Liturgical Celebration of the Eucharist
- V. The Sacramental Sacrifice: Thanksgiving, Memorial, Presence
- VI. The Paschal Banquet
- VII. The Eucharist — “Pledge of the Glory to Come”
IN BRIEF

I. The Eucharist — Source and Summit of Ecclesial Life (#1324-1327)

The title for this section comes from *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, promulgated by the Second Vatican Council. The *Catechism* quotes an instruction issued shortly after the Council by the Congregation of Rites, which describes the Eucharist as, “the culmination both of *God's action sanctifying the world* in Christ and of the *worship men offer* to Christ and through him to the Father in the Holy Spirit.”

- Hence, in the Eucharist, the sanctifying action of God and the worship of human beings intersect *in the person of Christ*, who is both divine and human. God's grace comes to us *through Christ*, and our worship is offered to the Father *through Christ*.
- Note: The priest celebrating the Eucharist acts “in the person of Christ” in both directions. He lifts up the prayers of the community to God, and God acts through him to confer the grace of the sacrament on the people.

II. What is the Sacrament Called? (#1328-1332)

The various names by which we call the sacrament reflect its multiple meanings.

- Eucharist (from the Greek word for “thanksgiving”), because it is an action of *thanksgiving* to God. In particular, it is thanksgiving for God’s works of creation, redemption, and sanctification. (This is most clearly seen in the preface of the Eucharistic Prayer.)
- The Lord’s Supper, because of its connection with the supper which the Lord took with his disciples on the eve of his Passion *and* because it anticipates the wedding feast of the Lamb in the heavenly Jerusalem.
- The Breaking of Bread, because Jesus, as master of the table at the Last Supper with his disciples, blessed and broke the bread, according to the Passover ritual, before distributing it to them and explaining its new significance. (Referring to the Sacrament of Eucharist as the “breaking of bread” is analogous to referring to the Sacrament of Reconciliation as “confession.”)
- The Eucharistic assembly, because the Eucharist is celebrated amid the assembly of the faithful, the visible expression of the Church. (Vatican II taught that Christ is also present in the assembly gathered for worship.)
- The memorial of the Lord’s Passion and Resurrection. (The concept of “memorial” will be explored in more detail later.)
- The Holy Sacrifice, because it makes present the one sacrifice of Christ the Savior *and* includes the Church’s offering. (So, in the celebration of the Eucharist we participate in *the sacrifice of Christ*, and we offer *our own sacrifice* to the Father through him.)
- The Holy and Divine Liturgy, because the Church’s whole liturgy finds its center and most intense expression in the celebration of this sacrament. (“Liturgy” can be used to describe any form of communal prayer. The celebration of the Eucharist is the highest form of liturgy.)
- The Sacred Mysteries, because the celebration of Eucharist is a human and divine action at once. Therefore, it is a mystery which surpasses our human comprehension.
- The Most Blessed Sacrament, because the Eucharist holds a unique status even among the seven sacraments of the Church. That uniqueness is a result of Christ’s abiding presence in the reserved sacrament and the sacrament’s role in the life of the Church.
- Holy Communion, because by this sacrament we are united to Christ and to the rest of the faithful who share in his Body and Blood.

- Holy Mass (*Missa*, or “dismissal”), because the liturgy in which the mystery of salvation is accomplished concludes with the *sending forth* of the faithful, so that they may fulfill God’s will in their daily lives. (In other words, the celebration of the Eucharist doesn’t simply *end* in church. The grace of the sacrament flows out into the world by the sending forth of the people.)

III. The Eucharist in the Economy of Salvation (#1333-1344)

This section provides some historical perspective on the Eucharist. There are three parts:

- Part 1 describes how bread and wine functioned as a sign of the goodness of creation in the Old Testament.
- Part 2 describes how Jesus transformed the bread and wine of the Passover meal into a *new sign*, making them into a memorial of his Passion, death and Resurrection.
- Part 3 describes how Jesus’ command at the Last Supper to “Do this in memory of me” prompted Christians to adopt Sunday as their new Sabbath, their day to “break bread” together sacramentally.

IV. The Liturgical Celebration of the Eucharist (#1345-1355)

This section begins with St. Justin Martyr’s description of the Eucharistic celebration in his letter to Emperor Antoninus, around the year 155. The order of Mass in the second century sounds remarkably similar to the Mass today. It even includes mention of sharing the “eucharisted” (consecrated) bread with those who were absent.

- The only notable difference from our experience of the Mass is that the sign of peace was exchanged after the prayers of the faithful, instead of after the Lord’s Prayer.
- In its original placement, the sign of peace signified the assembly’s unity as they prepared to offer their sacrifice to God through the Eucharistic Prayer. In its current placement, it signifies the assembly’s unity as they come to the table to receive Holy Communion.

Next, the structure of the Mass is divided into two fundamental parts:

1. the gathering, the liturgy of the Word, with readings, homily and general intercessions;
2. the liturgy of the Eucharist, with the presentation of the bread and wine, the consecratory thanksgiving, and communion.

The *Catechism* emphasizes that these two parts are “one single act of worship,” for “the Eucharistic table set for us is the table both of the Word of God and of the Body of the Lord.” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* and *Dei Verbum*)

The next few paragraphs go through “the movement of the celebration,” i.e., the basic parts of the Mass are opened up into their constituent parts. The most detailed section deals with the Eucharistic Prayer, which is called “the prayer of thanksgiving and consecration.” The elements of the prayer are described as follows (#1352-1354):

- “In the *preface*, the Church gives thanks to the Father, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit, for all his works: creation, redemption, and sanctification. The whole community thus joins in the unending praise that the Church in heaven, the angels and all the saints, sing to the thrice-holy God.”

Example: Original preface for Eucharistic Prayer II

- *It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation, always and everywhere to give you thanks, Father most holy, through your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, your Word through whom you made all things, whom you sent as our Savior and Redeemer, incarnate by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin.*
- *Fulfilling your will and gaining for you a holy people, he stretched out his hands as he endured his Passion, so as to break the bonds of death and manifest the resurrection.*
- *And so, with the Angels and all the Saints we declare your glory, as with one voice we acclaim:*
- *Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts...*
- “In the *epiclesis*, the Church asks the Father to send his Holy Spirit... on the bread and wine, so that by his power they may become the body and blood of Jesus Christ and so that those who take part in the Eucharist may be one body and one spirit...”

Example: Eucharistic Prayer II

- *You are indeed Holy, O Lord, the fount of all holiness.*
- *Make holy, therefore, these gifts, we pray, by sending down your Spirit upon them like the dewfall, so that they may become for us the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

[Discuss the symbolism of the dewfall:

- *This phrase was restored to Eucharistic Prayer II in the new English translation.*
- *The dewfall forms as the unseen water vapor in the air condenses on the ground — a fitting symbol for how the Holy Spirit invisibly comes down to consecrate the bread and wine on the altar.*
- *The dewfall also recalls the manna in the desert, which appeared after the dewfall evaporated each morning.]*
- “In the *institution narrative*, the power of the words and the action of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit, make sacramentally present under the species of bread and wine Christ’s body and blood, his sacrifice offered on the cross once for all.” (Note that the “words of institution” spoken by the priest are not an exact quote from Scripture. They are a combination of the traditions found in the three synoptic gospels and in Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, with an additional change from “cup” to “chalice.”)

- “In the *anamnesis* (memorial) that follows, the Church calls to mind the Passion, resurrection, and glorious return of Christ Jesus; she presents to the Father the offering of his Son which reconciles us with him.”
- “In the *intercessions*, the Church indicates that the Eucharist is celebrated in communion with the whole Church in heaven and on earth, the living and the dead, and in communion with the pastors of the Church, the Pope, the diocesan Bishop, his presbyterium and his deacons, and all the bishops of the whole world together with their Churches.”

V. The Sacramental Sacrifice: Thanksgiving, Memorial, Presence (#1356-1381)

#1358 We must therefore consider the Eucharist as:

- thanksgiving and praise to the *Father*;
- the sacrificial memorial of *Christ* and his Body;
- the presence of Christ by the power of his word and of his *Spirit*.

This section reflects on those three aspects of the Eucharistic sacrifice. It is the most theologically dense portion of the entire Article.

Thanksgiving and praise

#1360 The Eucharist is a *sacrifice of thanksgiving* to the Father, a blessing by which the Church expresses her gratitude to God for all his benefits, for all that he has accomplished through creation, redemption, and sanctification. Eucharist means first of all “thanksgiving.”

(Recall the preface at the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer.)

#1361 The Eucharist is also the *sacrifice of praise* by which the Church sings the glory of God in the name of all creation. This sacrifice of praise is possible only through Christ: he unites the faithful to his person, to his praise, and to his intercession, so that the sacrifice of praise to the Father is offered *through* Christ and *with* him, to be accepted *in* him.

(Recall the doxology at the conclusion of the Eucharistic Prayer.)

- Through him, and with him, and in him, O God, almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, for ever and ever.

Memorial

In what sense is the Eucharist a “memorial” of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross? What does “memorial” signify, besides just remembering a past event?

#1366 The Eucharist is thus a sacrifice because it *re-presents* (makes present) the sacrifice of the cross, because it is its *memorial* and because it *applies* its fruit:

[Christ], our Lord and God, was once and for all to offer himself to God the Father by his death on the altar of the cross, to accomplish there an everlasting redemption. But because his priesthood was not to end with

his death, at the Last Supper “on the night when he was betrayed,” [he wanted] to leave to his beloved spouse the Church a visible sacrifice (as the nature of man demands) by which the bloody sacrifice which he was to accomplish once for all on the cross would be re-presented, its memory perpetuated until the end of the world, and its salutary power be applied to the forgiveness of the sins we daily commit.

— *Council of Trent; cf. 1 Corinthians 11:23, Hebrews 7:24, 27.*

In other words (Fr. Pete’s words), though Christ’s one perfect sacrifice on the cross was sufficient for our salvation, the sacramental *memorial* of the Eucharist makes that original sacrifice of Christ present to us in an unbloody manner, so that we can receive its healing benefits *in the present moment*.

Hence, in celebrating the Eucharist, we are not simply remembering Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, nor are we repeating it. That sacrifice is being made present for us in an unbloody way, so that we can participate in it and receive its fruits.

Examples of the anamnesis: Eucharistic Prayer II

- *Therefore, as we celebrate the memorial of his Death and Resurrection, we offer you, Lord, the Bread of life and the Chalice of salvation, giving thanks that you have held us worthy to be in your presence and minister to you.*
- *Humbly we pray that, partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, we may be gathered into one by the Holy Spirit.*

Examples of the anamnesis: Eucharistic Prayer III

- *Therefore, O Lord, as we celebrate the memorial of the saving Passion of your Son, his wondrous Resurrection and Ascension into heaven, and as we look forward to his second coming, we offer you in thanksgiving this holy and living sacrifice.*
- *Look, we pray, upon the oblation of your Church and, recognizing the sacrificial Victim by whose death you willed to reconcile us to yourself, grant that we, who are nourished by the Body and Blood of your Son and filled with his Holy Spirit, may become one body, one spirit in Christ.*

Examples of the anamnesis: Eucharistic Prayer for Use in Masses for Various Needs

- *Therefore, holy Father, as we celebrate the memorial of Christ your Son, our Savior, whom you led through his Passion and Death on the Cross to the glory of the Resurrection, and whom you have seated at your right hand, we proclaim the work of your love until he comes again and we offer you the Bread of life and the Chalice of blessing.*
- *Look with favor upon the oblation of your Church, in which we show forth the paschal Sacrifice of Christ that has been handed on to us, and grant that, by the power of the Spirit of your love, we may be counted now and until the day of eternity among the members of your Son, in whose Body and Blood we have communion.*

Who participates in the Eucharist?

Paragraphs #1368-1371 explain how the faithful of the Church, the ministers of the Church, the saints in heaven, and all the faithful departed participate in the Eucharist. This explains why the *anamnesis* (remembrance) and intercessions are included in the Eucharistic Prayer, after the consecration takes place.

#1368 The Church which is the Body of Christ participates in the offering of her Head... The lives of the faithful, their praise, sufferings, prayer, and work, are united with those of Christ and with his total offering, and so acquire a new value. Christ's sacrifice present on the altar makes it possible for all generations of Christians to be united with his offering.

#1369 The whole Church is united with the offering and intercession of Christ.

- The Pope, by virtue of his office, is the sign and servant of the unity of the universal Church. Hence, he is associated with *every* celebration of the Eucharist.
- The local Bishop is responsible for the proper administration of the sacraments in his diocese. Hence, even when another priest presides over the Eucharist, he does so in communion with the Bishop and by his authority. [*Mention the concept of "faculties."*]
- This explains why the Pope and the local Bishop are always mentioned by name in the Eucharistic Prayer.

#1370 To the offering of Christ are united not only the members still here on earth, but also those already in the glory of heaven.

Hence, the saints are always mentioned in the Eucharistic Prayer, because they are participating in it, as well.

#1371 The Eucharistic sacrifice is also offered for the faithful departed.

A quote from the Council of Trent mentions specifically those who are still in need of purification. But another quote from St. Monica suggests that *all* the faithful departed are included, even the saints. Just prior to her death, she said: "Put this body anywhere! Don't trouble yourselves about it! I simply ask you to remember me at the Lord's altar wherever you are."

Hence, the Eucharist Prayer mentions all those who have "fallen asleep in the hope of the resurrection," without distinguishing between saints and more ordinary people.

[Compare the intercessions from EP II and EP III. Note how the intercessions are separate and distinct in EP II, but interconnected in EP III.]

Example of intercessions: Eucharistic Prayer II

- Remember, Lord, your Church, spread throughout the world, and bring her to the fullness of charity, together with Francis our Pope and Kevin our Bishop and all the clergy.
- Remember also our brothers and sisters who have fallen asleep in the hope of the resurrection, and all who have died in your mercy: welcome them into the light of your face.
- Have mercy on us all, we pray, that with the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, with Blessed Joseph, her spouse, with the Blessed Apostles, and all the saints who have pleased you throughout the ages, we may merit to be coheirs to eternal life, and may praise and glorify you through your Son, Jesus Christ.

Example of intercessions: Eucharistic Prayer III

- May he make of us an eternal offering to you, so that we may obtain an inheritance with your elect, especially with the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, with Blessed Joseph, her spouse, with your Blessed Apostles and glorious martyrs, and with all the Saints, on whose constant intercession in your presence we rely for unfailing help.
- May this Sacrifice of our reconciliation, we pray, O Lord, advance the peace and salvation of all the world. Be pleased to confirm in faith and charity your pilgrim Church on earth, with your servant Francis our Pope and Kevin our Bishop, the Order of Bishops, all the clergy, and the entire people you have gained for your own.
- Listen graciously to the prayers of this family, whom you have summoned before you: in your compassion, O merciful Father, gather to yourself all your children scattered throughout the world.
- To our departed brothers and sisters and to all who were pleasing to you at their passing from this life, give kind admittance to your kingdom. There we hope to enjoy the fullness of your glory through Christ our Lord, through whom you bestow on the world all that is good.

The presence of Christ in the Eucharist

One particular paragraph in this section clarifies the meaning of “Real Presence.”

#1374 The mode of Christ’s presence under the Eucharistic species is unique... 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 of Christ is called ‘real’... 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.”

— Council of Trent , Paul VI (*Mysterium Fidei*)

Two points are made here:

1. Christ’s presence in the Eucharist is not merely symbolic, but real and substantial.
2. Christ’s presence is not merely physical. The *whole Christ* is bodily and spiritually present in the sacrament.

Hence, when we consume the Eucharist, we are truly receiving Christ bodily and spiritually, entering into communion with the whole Christ.

VI. The Paschal Banquet (#1382-1401)

#1382 The Mass is at the same time, and inseparably, the sacrificial memorial in which the sacrifice of the cross is perpetuated and the sacred banquet of communion with the Lord's body and blood. But the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice is wholly directed toward the intimate union of the faithful with Christ through communion. To receive communion is to receive Christ himself who has offered himself for us.

#1383 *The altar*, around which the Church is gathered in the celebration of the Eucharist, represents the two aspects of the same mystery: the altar of the sacrifice and the table of the Lord.

This section then goes on to reflect on the many fruits of receiving the Lord in Holy Communion. They include:

- Augmenting our personal communion with Christ.
- Nourishing us spiritually, as material food nourishes our bodies.
- Cleansing us from past sins and preserving us from future sins.
- Strengthening our charity and freeing us from disordered attachments.
- Strengthening the unity of the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ.

In an ironic twist, the same Eucharist that unites us who receive it together in Holy Communion also divides the separated Christian communities from one another. For many centuries, the Eucharist was the preeminent sign of unity among all Christians. Sadly, since the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, it has become a sign of disunity between Catholics and non-Catholic Christians.

VII. The Eucharist — “Pledge of the Glory to Come” (#1402-1405)

The Eucharist is a memorial of the Passover of the Lord Jesus, which reaches its fulfillment in heavenly glory. Therefore, each time we participate in the Eucharist, we are anticipating that heavenly glory, which is still to come. Thus, even as the reception of Eucharist brings us into more intimate communion with Christ, the communion that we experience here in this life is merely a pledge of the *greater* glory and *more perfect* communion that we will experience later in heaven.

- Fr. Pete's prayer as he purifies the communion vessels:
“Lord, may every drop of your precious blood and every morsel of your precious body bring those of us who receive you this day closer to eternal life and closer to you in this life.”

Conclusions (from the IN BRIEF section, #1406-1419)

#1407 The Eucharist is the heart and summit of the Church's life, for in it Christ associates his Church and all her members with his sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving offered once for all on the cross to his Father; by this sacrifice he pours out the graces of salvation on his Body which is the Church.

Note: Christ's death on the cross is described as a "sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to the Father," the same words used to describe our participation in the Mass.

#1409 The Eucharist is the memorial of Christ's Passover, that is, of the work of salvation accomplished by the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, a work made present by the liturgical action.

Note: The Eucharist is not just a memorial of the Last Supper or even of Christ's death on the cross. It encompasses his entire "work of salvation." The entirety of his life, death and resurrection is made present by the liturgical action. Therefore, we participate in all of it when we celebrate Mass.

#1413 By the consecration the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ is brought about. Under the consecrated species of bread and wine Christ himself, living and glorious, is present in a true, real, and substantial manner: his Body and his Blood, with his soul and his divinity (cf. Council of Trent).

Note: It is more than just Christ's physical body that becomes present in the consecrated bread and wine. His entire self is present: his Body and his Blood, with his soul and his divinity.

#1416 Communion with the Body and Blood of Christ increases the communicant's union with the Lord, forgives his venial sins, and preserves him from grave sins. Since receiving this sacrament strengthens the bonds of charity between the communicant and Christ, it also reinforces the unity of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ.

Note: The beneficial effects of receiving Holy Communion are both personal and communal. The individual communicant receives forgiveness and strength and is united more closely with Christ, but the entire community is likewise bound together by their shared communion with Christ.

#1419 Having passed from this world to the Father, Christ gives us in the Eucharist the pledge of glory with him. Participation in the Holy Sacrifice identifies us with his Heart, sustains our strength along the pilgrimage of this life, makes us long for eternal life, and unites us even now to the Church in heaven, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and all the saints.

Note: As we sojourn through this world, with heaven as our destination, the Eucharist not only sustains us on our pilgrimage, but it also unites us, even now, with Christ and the saints.