

Sacrament of Eucharist

Dr. Maura Thompson Hagarty

Elements of a Memorable Meal

The Sacrament of the Eucharist is at the heart of the Catholic Church. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls it the “source and summit of Christian life” (CCC 1324). It is the apex or highest point of life. One of our challenges as Catholics is to give the Eucharist a central place in our own personal lives, week in and week out. Otherwise, the importance of Eucharist remains simply an idea in our minds and we miss out on the fullness of life in Christ.

One way to meet this challenge is to do some preparation that helps us more fully engage in the actions that comprise our Eucharistic celebrations. The more fully engaged we can become the more open we will be to the transforming effects of the sacrament. Since the Eucharist involves a ritualized eating and drinking, we can enhance our participation by reflecting on the meaning and significance of meal sharing in our own lives, in Scripture, and in the Eucharist.

Our best meal experiences can be a source of insight about our celebrations of Eucharist. Think about memorable meals you’ve experienced. They may have been connected with family holiday gatherings, or milestones such as graduations, baptisms, birthdays, or anniversaries. They may also have been ordinary meals with family or friends that turned into something extraordinary.

Our meals, especially when they involve celebrating special occasions with family and friends, usually follow a four part pattern.

1. We gather and greet one another. If we have been in conflict with someone who is present, ideally, we are able to reconcile.
2. Our time together typically involves the telling of stories. We may speak of things that have happened since our last gathering. Families often talk about ancestors and other relatives, while other groups may tell stories about the people or events that brought them together.
3. After making the necessary preparations, we eat and drink together. The more festive the occasion, typically, the more plentiful and special are the food and drink.
4. We wish each other well and take our leave.

This pattern holds true for what we do when we gather for Eucharist. Our celebration follows the four part structure of a festive meal

We Gather: Introductory Rites. We gather in response to God’s call. After greeting one another and singing an opening hymn, we pray together. These prayers include the Penitential Rite in

which we confess our sins, the ancient hymn of praise called the Gloria, and the opening prayer voiced by the presider. The elements of the introductory rites draw us together as a community and prepare us for the two most important parts of the Eucharist, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

We share stories: Liturgy of the Word. During this part of the Mass the Word of God is proclaimed. On Sundays, we hear several readings including one from the Gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. The Gospel reading is the highpoint of the Liturgy of the Word. We believe that God is speaking to us in the present moment through the proclamation. In the homily that follows, the presider reflects on the meaning of the readings for us today. Ideally, the Liturgy of the Word inspires us to “be doers of the word, and not merely hearers” (James 1:22) and prepares us to be active participants in the Eucharist.

We give thanks and then eat and drink together: Liturgy of the Eucharist. Representatives of the community present gifts of bread and wine over which we pray a special prayer of thanksgiving and blessing called the Eucharistic Prayer. This prayer, led by the presider, is the “heart and summit of the celebration” (CCC 1352). The Liturgy of the Eucharist concludes with the eating and drinking of the consecrated Bread and Wine during the part of the Mass called the Communion Rite.

We are sent forth: Blessing and Dismissal. The presider blesses and dismisses us using words like “Go now in peace to love and serve the Lord,” which challenge us to go forth and live the meaning of the celebration. This challenges us to continue Jesus’ mission in the world.

The insight we can gain about Eucharist from our everyday meal experiences goes beyond the parts and structure of the celebration, however. After all, even the meals we wish we could forget may follow the same pattern. Recall some other characteristics of your best meals. What makes them stand out? The food? The people? Did your relationships with the people you shared your best meals with change in any way? Did you notice some sort of change in yourself? Did you leave the meal with a new attitude about an aspect of your life?

Great food can certainly be memorable, but chances are your best meals stand out because they nourished your spirit, not just your body. This sort of nourishment has more to do with who we eat *with* than *what* we eat. “A meal is not so much about food as it is about people. In all meals it is the guest list not the menu that matters” (Eugene LaVerdiere, *Dining in the Kingdom of God*, p. vii). If you think of your more memorable meal experiences, you may recognize the truth of this in your own life.

Jesus’ Meals

The New Testament tells many stories about Jesus sharing meals with others. These stories shed light on the meaning of the Eucharist for us today. Consider one rather striking feature of Jesus’ table fellowship—his meal companions. “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors

and sinners?” (Luke 5:30) complained the Pharisees after Jesus dined at the home of Levi, a tax collector. When Jesus went to eat with another tax collector named Zacchaeus the people who saw this grumbled saying “he has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner” (Luke 19: 7).

Jesus’ dining practices received a lot of attention because in ancient Mediterranean culture the gesture of sharing a meal was a sign of closeness. Those who complained couldn’t understand why Jesus was choosing to spend time with and share himself with people they found undesirable.

Jesus gave some startling advice about sharing meals while dining at the home of a leader of the Pharisees: “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors . . . when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” (Luke 14:13). This admonition implies the challenge to share oneself and one’s care and concern—even love—with the people most in need in our communities.

Jesus’ sharing of meals with the sinners and outcasts was an invitation to them to enter into relationship with him. It was intended to change them. The Gospel according to Luke portrays Jesus seeking out Levi and Zacchaeus—the lost—in order to save them. Levi, also known as Matthew, became one of Jesus’ disciples. Zacchaeus responded to Jesus’ initiative with a life-changing promise. “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much” (Luke 19:8).

The focal point of Jesus’ meals with sinners was forgiveness and conversion rather than physical sustenance. This doesn’t mean that working to meet the immediate needs of those without food is not important. Quite the contrary. Consider how Jesus describes those destined for eternal life. “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matthew 25: 35-36).

The hungry and the suffering in our local communities and across the globe are very much our concern. Scripture, however, distinguish between the food and drink that keep us physically alive and the “bread of life” and “living water” that keeps us spiritually alive. In doing so they make clear that there is more to human existence than the material world.

In the Gospel according to John, Jesus says, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. . . I am the living bread . . . whoever eats of this bread will live forever” (John 6:35,51). He tells the Samaritan woman he meets at the well “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:13-14).

Jesus’ metaphorical language is well-chosen because satisfying hunger and thirst is the most fundamental of all human needs. In ancient Mediterranean culture, bread and water were primary means of satisfying these physical needs. When we say we ‘hunger’ and ‘thirst’ for

thing—such as companionship, meaning in our lives, or love—we are emphasizing how much we need and desire them. We are saying that we can't live without them.

The Good News Jesus spread tells us to live fully human lives and to live eternally we absolutely need what God makes possible through the Holy Spirit—love, forgiveness, and union with God and one another. The language of metaphor emphasizes that these things are as important to our spiritual lives as food and drink are to our physical lives. “What material food produces in our bodily life, Holy Communion wonderfully achieves in our spiritual life” (CCC 1392).

The Last Supper

The last meal Jesus shared with the disciples before his death is likely the one most familiar to Catholics, since we hear an account of it at every Mass during the Eucharistic Prayer. At this meal, often referred to as the Last Supper, Jesus identified his own self with bread that is broken and wine that is poured out for the sake of others. Luke tells us that Jesus:

. . . took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood (Luke 22:19-20).

Jesus’ words and actions announce that he is a source of life-giving sustenance more vital than the food and drink that keep our bodies going.

The disciples would have been accustomed to the religious ritual of taking, blessing, breaking or pouring, and then sharing wine and bread. These gestures were a usual part of the Jewish Passover meal. This was an annual celebration of thanksgiving for God’s freeing the Israelites from captivity in Egypt and promising them a future as a chosen people. At the Passover meal, bread was blessed by the host and shared before the main course. At the end of the meal the host would take a cup of wine, say a longer prayer of thanksgiving. Then all the people would share a sip of wine from the one cup.

Jesus followed the usual custom, but he added an unexpected element when he said “Do this in remembrance of me.” The deep meaning and significance of this is apparent only in light of subsequent events: the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The Paschal Mystery

Jesus’ death shortly after the Last Supper left his disciples shaken and afraid. Soon, however, they discovered that the crucifixion was not the end for their beloved friend. The Scriptures tell many stories about Jesus revealing that he was still alive.

- John tells of Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene after she goes to his tomb (see John 20:17).
- The two disciples who met a stranger while on the road to Emmaus realized the man they encountered was Jesus when the three broke bread together at the end of the day (see Luke 24:13-35; Mark 16:12-13).
- A number of disciples encountered Jesus at the beach after a night of fishing and ate breakfast with him. They recognized Jesus after he told them where to drop their fishing nets (see John 21:1-14).
- Jesus also appeared to the disciples while they were huddled together, full of fear, in a locked room in Jerusalem (see Luke 24: 36-43; John 20:19-20).

When Jesus revealed that he was full of life after having been put to death, the disciples' fear and uncertainty turned to joy. From then on, when they broke bread together in remembrance of Jesus, they celebrated not only the life that came to an end on the cross but also his ongoing and loving presence and his union with God the Father.

Jesus life, death, and resurrection is often referred to as the "Paschal Mystery." Paschal comes from a Greek word for passing over. When we use the phrase *Paschal mystery* we are referring to the mystery of passing from life, through death, to new life. As with the earliest Christians, every time we gather to celebrate Eucharist in remembrance of Jesus, as he commanded, we celebrate this mystery.

Our sacramental eating and drinking with one another is meant to satisfy our spiritual hunger and thirst. It is meant to bring us into unity with one another and with God. In short, it is meant to change us. The change is not necessarily drastic or dramatic, but over time, the practice of celebrating the Eucharist shapes us more and more into what we are called to be—the Body of Christ in the world.

Remembering the Past, Present, and Future

In order to grasp the significance of our Eucharistic celebrations, it is helpful to think about what it means to remember. The term *remember* is commonly used in the sense of bringing to mind an image or idea from the past. In Eucharist, we bring to mind events from long ago, using, for example, stories about the Israelites and about things Jesus did during his earthly ministry.

Our remembrance in liturgy, however, has present and future dimensions as well. We are not simply remembering a person who is long gone and events thousands of years removed from our lives. We are remembering someone who is in our midst now and events taking place now.

When we remember Jesus' Resurrection and the revelation of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, we open our minds and hearts to the reality that God is present and active in our lives today. When we celebrate the Eucharist we are celebrating the Paschal mystery as a present reality. Its roots

in the past—in Jesus’ earthly life—are essential for understanding this mystery, yet our celebration’s focus is primarily on what God is doing now and the implications for the future.

We strive to remember the true character of our lives , graced by the love of God and the promised future of eternal life in God’s embrace. We also strive to remember that these realities have implications for the way we live. Our focus is not on remembering past events for their own sake. It is on God’s action today and our efforts to respond with faith.

Full, Active Participation

To follow Jesus’ command to “remember” in Eucharist is to fully participate in the action. This goes beyond external participation, that is, the things we do that are observable. We make the sign of the cross, listen attentively, sing the hymns and responses, exchange the sign of peace, go to Communion, and perform many other ritual actions. We might even serve in a ministry—greeting, reading, cantoring, ushering, or distributing communion.

While this external participation is very important; full, active participation entails something more. It requires internal participation. This refers to what is going inside our hearts and minds. It is the spiritual dimension of our participation. Without it, we are just going through the motions and our ritual expressions are empty.

When we participate fully, we are attentive to all the ways Christ is present in our midst: in the people who are assembled, in the Word that is proclaimed, in the presider who leads us, and in the bread and wine, blessed and shared. Our eyes are open to God’s invitation and our hearts are ready to respond in faith.

When we participate in communion our external action is to proceed to the altar together and then to eat and drink. Internally and spiritually, we are joining ourselves to the Body of Christ. We are joining ourselves to Jesus’ sacrifice and to his paschal mystery. We embrace the promise that if we die with Jesus we will also rise with him. When we say *Amen* we agree to give our own selves for the sake of others. We pledge to be bread broken and wine poured out so that others may have the fullness of life.

St. Augustine, a bishop who lived in the fifth century, captured the essence of Eucharist in a phrase that is often quoted today: “Be what you see, and receive what you are.” He was talking about the Body of Christ. Augustine was reminding Christians of their identity and encouraging them to fully live out what it means to be the body of Christ. He explained: “To that which you are you respond ‘Amen’ (“yes, it is true!”) and by responding to it you assent to it. For you hear the words, ‘the Body of Christ’ and respond ‘Amen.’ Be then a member of the Body of Christ that your Amen may be true” (CCC 1396).

This article has an imprimatur from the Most Reverend John G. Vlazny, May 12, 2005.

This article was originally published as part of the People of Faith series from Harcourt Religion Publishers.