

## RCIA CLASS 12: THE EUCHARIST AND THE MASS

I. In the Eucharist, Jesus Christ is present to us under the appearance of bread and wine. He comes to us under the appearance of bread and wine during the Mass when the priest speaks the words of institution, which reflect, in different languages, the words that Jesus spoke at the Last Supper. Jesus continues to be with us under that appearance even after Mass as long as the signs of bread and wine continue.

A. Jesus spoke of the Eucharist during His public ministry, and especially in the Bread of Life discourse, which is recorded in John 6. At the Last Supper, He then instituted the Eucharist, in the context of celebrating the first Mass and ordaining the Apostles as the first priests.

1. Jesus indicated that He would offer Himself as food in the Bread of Life Discourse that is recorded in John 6. There, Jesus described Himself as “the bread of life come down from heaven” and declared “whoever eats of this bread will never hunger.” John 6:35. In response to the crowd’s astonishment, Jesus made the teaching more definite saying that the bread He gives is “My flesh for the life of the world” and that “whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has life eternal, and I will raise him on the last day” for he “abides in Me and I in him.” John 6:51-56.

2. Because the teaching was difficult to understand, many of his disciples left Him on that day, but He let them go, rather than water down the teaching. Jesus asked the twelve Apostles whether they would leave as well. But Simon Peter, on their behalf, “Lord, to whom shall we go. You have the words of eternal life.” John 6:68.

B. Jesus gave us the Eucharist and the Mass at the Last Supper, which was a Passover meal. See Matt. 26:17-19; Mark 14:12-16; Luke 22:7-13. (John does record the Passover as beginning on the next day, i.e. beginning on Friday evening. But some rabbis moved the Passover back a day when it would otherwise fall on a Sabbath.)

1. The Passover was, and is, the highest Jewish feast. At the Passover the Jewish people recall, and in some way, participate in, the freedom that God granted them when Moses led them from Egypt. God told the Chose People to celebrate the occasion as a “perpetual ordinance.” See Ex. 12:14.

2. At the first Passover, each family slaughtered a lamb, placed some of its blood on the doorpost and ate the rest of the lamb that night. During night the angel of death passed through the land of Egypt striking at the pagan households, but not at those marked with the blood of the lamb. And on the next day, all who had eaten the Passover meal, that is the Chosen People, were freed from slavery in Egypt. See Ex. 12. At every annual Passover from that year on, each family (or group of families) likewise recalls, and in a sense make present, this liberation from Egypt and eat another Passover lamb.

3. The Eucharist fulfills this symbolism and is the new Passover, now celebrated as a perpetual ordinance. In the Mass, we celebrate the sacrifice of Christ, the Lamb of God, and that sacrifice does become present to us. Jesus Christ offered Himself as the final Passover Lamb, who frees us from slavery to sin and death. And, carrying out the words of Jesus, we then eat of this Lamb, who is now the Bread of Life.

C. At the Last Supper, which was the first Mass, Jesus took the bread and wine and said, “This is My body” and “This is My blood.” Matt. 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26. There is not any indication that He meant that the bread and wine was merely a symbol; and it would have been very odd for Him to cause such confusion for all of history by saying absolutely what He meant symbolically.

1. Jesus does use symbols elsewhere, as good teachers often do. But a symbol uses somethings familiar (e.g., shepherds, lost coins, wedding feasts, seeds and trees) to explain something more difficult (e.g., God’s guidance in our lives, His seeking out of the lost, the rewards of heaven, the mysterious growth of His kingdom.) And the Scriptures does sometimes use the familiar symbol of eating sweet foods as an image of taking in the wisdom and words of God. See, e.g., Ps. 19:10; 119:103; Prov. 9:1-6; 24:13-14; Ezek. 3:3; Rev. 10:8-11.

2. But in this case, the words Jesus says are precisely what is astonishing and difficult for the public to understand. The idea of eating and drinking His body and blood is itself the great mystery. Eating bread and drinking wine works as a symbol, for it is easy to understand; and it is a symbol of receiving Jesus into ourselves. But, when Jesus speaks of eating His flesh and drinking His blood, that would not work as a symbol, for the image itself is difficult to understand. The fact is that He is offering His very self to be joined with us, an astonishing mystery, and one that no one would teach if Jesus Himself had not promised it.

D. The Mass re-presents the sacrifice of Christ (see more on this point below), when we receive the Eucharist. It is the *risen* body and blood, soul and divinity of Christ that we can receive in the Eucharist.

1. At the Eucharist Christ is truly and fully present, body and soul, humanity and divinity. At the Last Supper Jesus “took the bread, said the blessing, broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which will be given for you: do this in memory of Me.’ And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you.’” Luke 22:19-20; see also Matt, 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-26; 1 Cor. 11:23-25.

2. All of Jesus is present in each particle of the Eucharist, so long as the symbol (no longer the essence) of bread or wine is present. Under the appearance of bread, the body of Christ becomes present; but because Jesus cannot be separated, all of Him must be present. And the same is true of the Eucharist under the appearance of wine; the blood of Christ is present; and, therefore, all of Christ must be present. Theologians use the term “concomitance” to describe the fact that all of Christ

must be present if He is present at all. See St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, part III, question 76, article 1.

3. Because the Eucharist is the *risen* body and blood, soul and divinity of Christ, this teaching is nothing like cannibalism, which is the eating of a dead or dying body. Rather, it is sharing in glory, the holiness and (to the degree that a human being can) in the divinity of Christ.

- Jews have always been forbidden from eating meat with blood still in it because, among other things, receiving the blood of an animal is, symbolically at least, sharing in its nature. But receiving the Eucharist does the opposite; it not only symbolically, but truly allows us to share in the life of Christ. Thus the life of heaven, very really the blood of God, does run within us.

4. By receiving Christ Himself in the Eucharist, we become especially united with Him and even now share in a first promise of heavenly glory. For Jesus Himself said, “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 true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in Me and I in him.” John 6:54-56.

- Because we are more closely united to Christ and perceive the presence of God, the Eucharist helps keep us from sin. “By giving Himself in us, Christ revives our love and enables us to break our disordered attachment to creatures and root ourselves in Him. . . The more we share in the life of Christ and progress in His friendship the more difficult it is to break away from Him by mortal sin.” Catechism of the Catholic Church 1394-95.

E. Because a person receiving the Eucharist is receiving Christ Himself in the most sublime way, one must be fully prepared and in God’s grace to receive the Eucharist. As St. Paul wrote, “Whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. . . For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself.” 1 Cor. 11:27-29.

1. Thus, to receive the Eucharist, one must be in a state of grace, i.e., baptized and having received sacramental absolution for any mortal sins committed after baptism. See Catechism of the Catholic Church 1385, 1415; Code of Canon Law 916. (There are some very limited exceptions to the requirement of Confession when this sacrament is unavailable; but even then, there must be complete contrition and recourse to the sacrament as soon as possible. See Catechism 1457.)

2. Furthermore, to receive the Eucharist one must ordinarily be Catholic, for the Eucharist is the sacrament of Catholic unity. See Code of Canon Law 844. Members of the Orthodox churches, and other similar churches, can also receive the Eucharist at a Catholic Mass if their own faith allows it because they have the same Eucharistic theology, the same sacraments and priesthood, and mostly the same beliefs as the Catholic Church does. There are some rare cases, especially

when there is a danger of death, that a non-Catholic Christian can receive the Eucharist if he believes in the sacrament as the body and blood of Christ.

F. In addition to being the Body and Blood of Christ very factually, the bread and wine are very fitting symbols, both naturally and supernaturally, of our unity with Christ and each other.

1. As St. Paul points out, bread and wine combine the many (grains or grapes) together to make one; and the Eucharist likewise brings all of the people in the Church together. See 1 Cor. 10:16-17.

2. Bread is a fitting symbol of the continued sustenance we need on a pilgrimage, here the pilgrimage of life. And wine is a fitting symbol of celebration.

3. Scripturally, the primordial priest Melchizedek offered bread and wine when Abraham came to him after his victories over local kings. And Jesus, through His sacrifice, became, among other things, the fulfillment of the priesthood of Melchizedek, which is more ancient and timeless even than the call of Abraham. Gen. 14:18; Heb. 7.

4. The notion of a bread of life and a spiritual drink also reminds one of the manna and water that sustained the Chosen People in the desert. See John 6:30-40, 58; 1 Cor. 10:1-5. Through the Eucharist, we receive this heavenly food to guide us through the desert of this life towards our final Promised Land.

5. In the Old Testament bread and wine (sometimes combined with cattle or olive oil) are a symbol of prosperity and joyousness in the presence and blessings of God. See, e.g., Gen. 27:28, Duet. 7:13, Ps. 4:7, 104:14-15, Joel 2:24, Is. 55:1-2. (Sour wine given to the unjust can also be a symbol of the wrath of God. See Ps. 75:8; Is. 51:17, 21-23; see also Rev. 14:15-20, describing the grapes of wrath.) By means of the liturgy, the grain and wine of the Eucharist, along with the olive oil used for other sacraments, gives us joy and spiritual riches from heaven.

II. The Eucharist and the Mass are inseparable. The Mass is the celebration of the Eucharist; and, while the Eucharist can be given as Holy Communion outside of Mass, a priest can consecrate the Eucharist only at a Mass.

A. The bread and wine become the true body and blood, soul and divinity of Christ in the Mass and in particular at the Eucharistic Prayer when the priest does two things. First, he invokes the Holy Spirit to come down upon the bread and wine. Then he recites the words that Jesus Christ spoke at the Last Supper, through which He gave us the first Eucharist. "With the Eucharistic Prayer - the prayer of thanksgiving and consecration - we come to the heart and summit of the celebration." Catechism of the Catholic Church 1352.

- Thus, the Eucharist is the high point of the Mass and in fact of the whole Catholic life of faith. "In the most blessed Eucharist is contained the entire spiritual wealth of the Church, namely, Christ Himself as our Pasch [Passover] and the

Bread of Life.” Vatican II Council, Presbyterorum Ordinis (1965) 5. “The Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life.” Catechism of the Catholic Church 1324.

B. In addition, at the Mass, Jesus Christ through His Church overcomes the barriers of space and time to re-present His suffering, death and resurrection; and He becomes truly present to us. “When the church celebrates the Eucharist, she commemorates Christ’s Passover and it is made present. The sacrifice of Christ offered once for all on the cross remains ever present.” Catechism of the Catholic Church 1364.

1. Jesus instituted the Mass at the Last Supper, but Mass is the re-presentation of the sacrifice of Jesus on Calvary the celebration. It is not that Jesus is sacrificed again and again, as the Letter to the Hebrews makes clear. Heb. 9:25-26. Rather, the barriers of time and space are overcome and the sacrifice of Calvary becomes present; or, to put it another way, we are transported in time to Calvary. Catechism of the Catholic Church 1362-67. In the Eucharist, the presence of the Risen Christ is among us, the Church gives thanks to the Almighty God for the Redemption won through this sacrifice of His Son. See Vatican II Council, Sacrosanctum Concilium (1963) 47.

C. By overcoming space and time and uniting us with Christ, the Eucharist also unites the entire Church throughout the world and throughout all the ages, “The Eucharist is the efficacious sign and sublime cause of that communion in the divine life and that unity of the People of God by which the Church is kept in being.” Catechism of the Catholic Church 1325.

D. Christ remains present in the Eucharist after the Mass. Because Christ continues to be present in the Eucharist, we are reverent and prayerful in the presence of the Eucharist at all times. “The Church and the world have a great need for Eucharistic worship. Jesus awaits us in this sacrament of love. Let us not refuse the time to go and meet in Him in adoration, in contemplation full of love, and open to making amends for the serious offenses and crimes of the world.” St. Pope John Paul II, *Dominicae Canae* (1983), quoted in the Catechism of the Catholic Church 1380.

III. The whole of the Mass thus guides us on our pilgrimage to heaven and thus is a first taste of the prayers and celebration in that greater kingdom. Cf. Vatican II Council, Sacrosanctum Concilium 8. We can see this effect in several ways.

A. The ancient temple was built upon the pattern of the heavenly Temple that Moses saw when he was on Mount Sinai. See Heb. 8:5-6. The idea is that there is a glorious worship of God in heaven beyond earthly imagination. The ancient Jewish sacrifices, and especially those of the Temple, reflected as much as possible, for the time before Christ, this celestial prayer. (The Book of Revelation regularly refers to this worship in heaven.) Now the Mass reflects this worship even more and enables us to join with the angels and saints in their prayers.

B. As noted above, the highest Jewish feast was the Passover, the celebration of their freedom from slavery and calling as the People of God. The Mass fulfills this celebration,

making us the new People of God, freed from sin and on our journey to the Promised Land. Jesus used the occasion of this feast to institute the Mass as the Last Supper. See Matt 26:17-29; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-38. And of all of the events of Christ's life on this earth, St. Paul focuses on three of them, His death, His resurrection, and the institution of the Eucharist. See 1 Cor. 11:23-26.

1. Jesus called this celebration the new and everlasting covenant. The prophets of old had promised a new covenant in which all of us will know God in person and be filled with the Spirit. See, e.g., Is. 55:1-5, 59:20-21, 61:8-11; Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 34:25-31, 37:24-28. It is through the Mass that this covenant is renewed.

2. Thus, the Mass is the celebration of Christ's sacrifice, which paid the debt of our sin, and thus saves us from everlasting death. Through Jesus, we are enabled to be in the company of heaven beyond death. Through His sacrifice, and through His body and blood, which we consume, we are freed from sin, and so enabled to make this journey to everlasting life.

IV. The Mass is divided into two main parts and two supporting parts. The main parts are the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The supporting parts are the Introductory Rites and the Concluding Rites. General Instructions to the Roman Missal 28. These sections of the Mass focus in succession on: (1) preparing the way for God; (2) receiving guidance from the Bible and the faith generally so that our minds and hearts will be ready for Him; (3) the glorious gift of Jesus Christ coming into our presence and re-presenting His sacrifice on Calvary; and (4) finally receiving the commission to bring His salvation into the world.

A. The introductory rite prepares us for the entrance into God's presence. Although at times God, or an angel, would appear to people suddenly, in general people were supposed to prepare themselves for God's presence, e.g., on Mount Sinai and in the Temple. See Ex. 19:9-12; Neh. 9:2-3. The priests of the Old Testament had to prepare themselves carefully before approaching the Ark of the Covenant for sacrifices. E.g., Ex. 40:12-15; Lev. 8:14-30; 22; 2 Chron. 5:11. The Day of Atonement was meant to obtain forgiveness of sins so that all Israelites would be worthy to be God's people. See Lev. 16:1-34, 23:26-32. And in general, there is a Biblical notion of approaching God with repentance and petition and thus being rendered by Him worthy to being His presence. See, e.g., Isaiah 6:6-7; Rev. 1:17-19.

B. The Liturgy of the Word proclaims God's written word to us before the personal Word of God become present. This proclamation of the written word of God reflects the fact that God prepared His people by revealing the truth about Himself in words and deeds throughout the time of the Old Testament before sending His Son to earth to establish the new and everlasting covenant. In addition, the Chosen People heard the word of God, and a summary of His saving acts, in preparation for entrance into the Promised Land. See Duet. 5-33. And, once again, the priests proclaimed the a summary of God's Providence throughout history when the Temple was dedicated and rededicated so that the people would be prepared for the overwhelming presence of the Lord. See 1 Kings 8:14-21; Neh. 9:3-37. In the Liturgy of the Word we receive from God and His Church the "words of eternal life" before we receive the Son as the bread of eternal life. See John 6:68. In the context of describing Himself as the Bread of Life, Jesus said, "Everyone who listens to

My Father and learns from Him comes to Me.” John 6:45. The readings from Scripture are generally followed by a homily (a liturgical sermon), intercessions and, on Sundays and solemnities, a recitation of the Nicene Creed.

C. Standing at the high point of the Mass and of the faith, the Liturgy of the Eucharist brings Christ to us under the appearance of bread and wine. The prayers leading up to the consecration of the Eucharist prepare the way by offering God bread and wine, along with other offerings that represent the gift of our lives. As Jesus prayed the high priestly prayer at the Last Supper before this sacrifice, see John 17, so we progress up to the sacrifice of the Eucharist with prayers in the Eucharistic Prayer. See also 1 Kings 8:22-53 (the prayer of Solomon before the consecration of the Temple.)

D. The Concluding, or Dismissal Rites reflect a commissioning to bring the word of God as heard and the personal Word of God as received in the Eucharist forth into the world. When Jesus appeared after the Resurrection, He consistently commissioned His disciples to bring the gospel to others, at least implicitly. Above all, at Pentecost, He sent the Spirit upon Mary and His disciples so that they could witness to the faith. The Concluding Rites reflect this commissioning.

E. These parts of the Mass reflect, not only the last Supper, but also the appearance of the risen Christ to His disciples on the road to Emmaus and Jesus’ public ministry as a whole. See Luke 24:13-35; St. Pope John Paul II, Mane Nobiscum Domine (2004).

1. The disciples on the road to Emmaus, although unaware of the fact, were being prepared for Jesus’ presence by discussing the events surrounding His life and death, and a longing for His presence. Jesus then came to them (without their knowing who He was) and opened the word of Scripture to them, explaining how it pointed to Him. After they then invited Him to stay with them for supper, He revealed Himself to them in the breaking of the bread. After recognizing His presence, the disciples immediately ran to Jerusalem, despite the dangers of nighttime travel, to tell others about Jesus. Likewise, the Mass begins with us gathered together, wondering at the mysteries of faith; God presents the Scripture to us in the Liturgy of the Word. We invite Jesus to be with us in the presentation of gifts, and then we recognize Him and the bread and wine. We then proceed forth to share the Good News.

2. Jesus’ public ministry was introduced by John the Baptist with his preaching and call to repentance. Then, through His preaching and actions, Jesus gradually revealed Himself and prepared the way for His sacrifice. Finally, from the Last Supper through His passion, death, and resurrection, Jesus accomplished the ultimate saving works for our salvation. He then sent His disciples forth to witness to the world. Likewise, the Mass is introduced by the initial prayers and call to repentance. We then proceed onto the teachings of the Jesus, the heroes of the Old Testament and the disciples of Jesus. We then proceed onto the climax of the Mass and the Eucharist and surrounding prayers make present the sacrifice of Christ. Finally, the concluding words send us forth into the world.

3. Thus, Mass reflects these progressions through the Introductory Rites, the Liturgy of the Word, the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and the Dismissal Rites, respectively.

4. In addition, the progress of the Mass reflects any good narrative, with an introduction (the Introductory Rites), a buildup of the plot (the Liturgy of the Word), a climax (the Eucharist) and a Conclusion (the Dismissal Rite.)

V. A couple of prayers are good to know in preparing for receiving the Eucharist and giving thanks to God after this Holy Communion.

Adoro Te (I Adore You)

Godhead here in hiding, whom I do adore  
Masked by these bare shadows, shape and nothing more,  
See, Lord in thy service low lies here a heart  
Lost, lost all in wonder at the God thou art.  
Seeing, touching, tasting are in Thee deceived;  
How says trusty hearing? That shall be believed;  
For what God's Son has told me, take for truth I do;  
For truth Himself speaks truly or there's nothing that is true.

- St. Thomas Aquinas, quoted in the Catechism of the Catholic Church 1381

Anima Christi (Soul of Christ)

Soul of Christ, sanctify me;  
Body of Christ, save me;  
Blood of Christ, enrich me;  
Water from the side of Christ, cleanse me;  
Passion of Christ, strengthen me;  
O good Jesus, hear me.  
In Your wounds, hide me;  
Permit me never to be parted from You.  
From the malignant enemy protect me.  
In the hour of my death call me,  
And bid me to come to you  
That with Your saints, I may praise You  
For ever and ever. Amen.