

The Eucahrist - The Sacrament of Holy Communion

This feast of the Lord's table is called by different names: - The Eucharist meaning thanksgiving; The Lord's Supper referring to Jesus' institution during the Seder Passover meal with His Apostles the night before His crucifixion; The Mass; The Holy Communion; the Divine Liturgy.

Regardless what term one uses, it is a reference to a special meal that emanates from the gathering of Jesus with the Twelve in an Upper Room in Jerusalem where He eats the Passover meal with his closest friends the night before His death. It was also the night before the actual Passover was to be celebrated. Knowing what was forthcoming Jesus desired to share this final meal with these companions. But there is also another reason for His celebrating the meal at this time. On the next day He would become the Passover sacrificed for mankind and the Lamb of God sacrificed for the sins of the whole world.

In the meal He tells His friends to "do this in remembrance of me". The Greek word is "*anamnesis*" and is difficult to translate into the English language. Hence the phrase "in remembrance" is taken by some to mean a "memorial". Not so!

One early liturgy is that of Saint John Chrysostom where this recall of the words of Jesus include "remembering, therefore, this command of the Savior (i.e., to eat and drink in remembrance of Him) and all that came to pass for our sake, the cross, the tomb, the resurrection on the third day, the ascension into heaven, the enthronement at the right hand of the Father and the second, glorious coming....". In other words, it is to bring from the past (the Upper Room and events in Jesus' life) the Incarnation and Atonement in Jesus into the present by way of this meal.

Another component of the Prayer of Consecration is the "*epiklesis*" when the Priest asks God to send the Holy Spirit to change the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps one can better understand the significance of this Meal when a brief review of the Seder itself is understood. The Seder is a family meal; Eucharist is a family of God meal. The family is seated around the table; in the Eucharist the family of Believers are gathered around the Altar, perhaps kneeling at an altar rail. The father as head of the family has a pouch at his right hand beside his plate. As his father before him, and other ancestral heads prior did, so he finds in the pouch three pieces of bread or matzo. For unknown reason to him, he extracts the middle piece from the pouch. The three pieces of matzo in the pouch immediately is clear to the Christian as representing the Trinity and the middle piece extracted would be the Second Person of the Trinity – Jesus. He wraps it in a linen napkin, placing it beneath a pillow under his chair. The ceremony continues with a recall of the ten plagues God visited upon the Egyptians the night of His Passover that freed the Jewish people. With each plague recalled the family members around the table put a drop of red wine from their glass onto a saucer. To remember the weeping of the Jewish people in Egyptian slavery they will eat horseradish to bring forth tears. The father will then bring back the wrapped piece of matzo from beneath his chair, break it

into the number of pieces designed to be given to each member at the table, with one piece left which will later be put in a high place in the house.

Without realizing it, he has acted out the death, burial, resurrection and ascension of Jesus in this first part of the meal. It was at this point that Jesus must have said in way explanation to the Twelve, “this is my Body”. What they had done for centuries that night was given its fulfillment meaning, and this Bread brings to the consumer the benefits of the death, burial, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. In John’s Gospel Jesus says “except you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you.” He is referring to the Eucharist that would be instituted before His crucifixion.

Luke in his Gospel speaks of a second cup of wine that followed the meal. There are actually four cups of wine consumed during the contemporary Seder meal. The second cup in the meal is consumed in the actual meal itself. Following the meal is the third cup (Luke’s second) called the Cup of Redemption. It illustrates the redemption or deliverance of the Children of Israel from Egypt and their being spared because of the Lamb’s blood on the doorpost of their houses. The meal is concluded with a final cup that in modern interpretation would be sort of a toast looking forward to the next year when perhaps Elijah will come and occupy the empty chair that has been at the table all evening.

So what is Jesus asking His friends to do and subsequently, the Church today? As the father of the family presides over the Seder, Jesus presides over the Supper that last night when he would eat with His friends. In like manner the Bishop as chief shepherd of the church family (a priest authorized to preside in the absence of the Bishop) presides over the Eucharist and asks the Holy Spirit to transform the bread into the spiritual Body of Jesus! He likewise does the same thing as he prays over and blesses the wine. “And so, Father, we now bring before You these gifts. Sanctify them by Your Holy Spirit to be the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord.” We refer to the change as “the Real Presence”. In Roman Catholic dogma it is called “transubstantiation”. At this point we no longer refer to the bread as bread or the wine as wine, but the proper terms are Body and Blood. This terminology in the early church was a reason why pagans referred often to Christians as cannibals. The Jews were forbidden to drink blood because the life of the creature is in the blood, hence the reason for killing an animal in such a manner (Kosher) that all the blood drained from it. In what we receive in the Holy Communion is both Body and Blood of Jesus; bread and wine that joins us to all the mysteries of Jesus and the Kingdom of God.

The Eucharist was the primary focus of worship by the early Church. Saint Paul deals with the practice and observance of this gathering in his first letter to the Corinthian Church. He explains what it means and warns against the abuse of the meal. We are directed to examine ourselves and repent of our sins in order that the Body and Blood of Jesus will be received into clean vessels. In the General Confession as part of the Order of Worship we confess and are absolved by the Bishop (Priest in the absence of the Bishop) and given the assurance that the Blood of Jesus has washed away our sins. As we approach the altar it is appropriate for us to be meditating on what Jesus has done for

us in His atoning for our sins, and receive the Body and Blood in the expectancy that He is now going to do something in us. We have received life in these elements; the life of Jesus. And we leave the altar in thanksgiving for His sustaining life now in us. Each time we commune we are rededicating ourselves to the Lord and renewed in the strength of His indwelling.

I have often pondered what would be the thinking of an alien from another planet if one were to enter the Church and see people eating this little piece of wafer and taking a sip of wine from the cup. It is definitely not a meal that would satisfy physical hunger. However, if the stranger were to understand the spiritual significance of this meal he may conclude that it does definitely satisfy spiritual hunger. For this we partake regularly. It is the primary service of worship because in no other order of worship is the need in the worshipper's spirit and body fulfilled as we are in receiving the Body and Blood of Jesus. As one regularly eats to sustain the physical body, so we need to be in communion with Jesus to sustain the spiritual body.