

# Beyond Words

## THE MASS AND ITS MEANING

The Liturgy of the Eucharist culminates with the assembly's communion. In fact, one could say that communion is the high point of the entire Mass. This fact was obscured for centuries because the assembly, for all sorts of reasons, had ceased going to communion. Their role was reduced to one of visual adoration of the transformed host. Once this occurred, the consecration of the bread and wine became an act in and of itself, the sacred species became objects to offer and adore rather than food for the soul. In fact, the separation of communion from the Mass was so deep that respected theologians maintained that the faithful could leave Mass as soon as the priest received communion because the sacrifice was considered complete.

### FOR

Perhaps the most important word in the entire Eucharistic Prayer is the word "for." This is my body which will be given up **FOR** you. This is the blood of the new and eternal covenant which will be poured out **FOR** you. Send down your Spirit [upon these gifts] so that they may become **FOR** us the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Eucharist is a gift left to the Church by Christ to be spiritual nourishment **FOR** us. The transformation of the bread and wine occurs first and foremost in order to feed God's people. This is its primary and most important purpose. The whole goal of gathering as God's people around the Table of Word and Sacrament is so that God can provide us with our essential spiritual food and drink.

### COVENANT RENEWAL

The words of Jesus at the Last Supper are recalled within the larger context of the Eucharistic Prayer which, as explained previously, is an extended prayer of praise and thanksgiving offered to the Father in response to the Father's infinite goodness and generosity. Jesus is the culmination of God's graciousness. His life, death, and resurrection are God's greatest acts of love. In other words, God can do nothing more than to offer us eternal communion through our incorporation into the Body of Christ.

The Last Supper takes place within the context of Passover. The Passover meal was the Jewish celebration and renewal of their salvation through God's covenant. By participating in the annual Passover meal each new generation was incorporated ritually into the foundational experience of Israel's liberation from slavery. Through our participation in the ritual of Eucharist, we remember and renew our participation

in the foundational events surrounding our own liberation from the shackles of sin and death, won for us through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

### EAT AND DRINK

Even during that very long period when communion by the faithful disappeared from the Mass, there were rare occasions when the Body of Christ was shared with non-clergy. Reception of the Blood of Christ, however, was not allowed. Luther harshly criticized this practice. He reminded us that Christ gave a double command: we were to take and eat *and* take and drink.

The Council of Trent found itself between a rock and a hard place. In defense of the established practice it denied that any spiritual harm was inflicted by the fact that the faithful were not allowed to partake of the Precious Blood. At the same time, it appreciated Luther's argument and the opinion of many theologians that it would be spiritually preferable to offer both Body and Blood. It deferred the matter to the pope, who soon thereafter began granting permission to offer the Cup to various dioceses.

Today the United States and Germany are the two countries where the chalice is offered most regularly to the laity. Our bishops wrote in 2001:

"Since . . . by reason of the sign value, sharing in both eucharistic species reflects more fully the sacred realities that the Liturgy signifies, the Church in her wisdom has made provisions in recent years so that more frequent eucharistic participation from both the sacred host and the chalice of salvation might be made possible for the laity in the Latin Church."

*(Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion Under Both Kinds in the Dioceses of the United States, 11).*

## INVITATION TO COMMUNION

### **Priest:**

Behold the Lamb of God,  
behold him who takes away the sins of the world.  
Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb.

### **Priest and People:**

Lord, I am not worthy  
that you should enter under my roof,  
but only say the word  
and my soul shall be healed.

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Following the Eucharistic Prayer, the Communion Rite begins. This part of the liturgy includes a number of prayers of preparation. There are prayers for the entire assembly, private prayers for the priest, and rites to prepare for the communion of the assembly.

We prepare for communion as a community by praying the Lord's Prayer and exchanging a sign of peace. Then the Body of Christ is broken and divided into patens or bowls during the *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God). After praying a couple of private prayers, the priest elevates the sacred species again and invites the people to come forward with an invitation based on the Scriptures.

The first part of this invitation, which takes up the words of the *Agnus Dei* we have just sung, comes from words of John the Baptist in John 1:29: "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world." The second part comes from the vision of the heavenly liturgy in Revelation 19:9. In the Eucharist, we join for a moment in the heavenly liturgy. In the sacrament we are about to receive, we have a foretaste of the heavenly banquet.

Our response is based on the Gospel account of the healing of the servant of a Roman centurion: "Lord, I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof; only say the word and my servant shall be healed" (Matthew 8:8). The new translation of the response more accurately reflects the Latin text and also more obviously echoes the Gospel passage.

This response combines an expression of humility with an act of faith. The centurion believes so completely in Jesus' power that he is confident that just a word from Jesus will do. Jesus remarks: "in no one in Israel have I found such faith."

It is interesting to compare our response to those in other Christian traditions at this moment. In many Eastern Rite churches, the priest invites the people to communion with the words "Holy things for holy people," and the response is an acclamation of praise: "One Holy, one Lord, Jesus Christ to the glory of God the Father." In the Episcopal Church, a prayer before communion recalls a different Gospel

story: "We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table." Then the priest says, "The Gifts of God for the People of God."

Humble awareness of our unworthiness, faith in Christ's saving power, joy in this moment, and hope for the heavenly banquet—all four themes intertwine as we prepare for communion.

## COMMUNAL PILGRIMAGE

What do you "do" as you walk from your pew toward the sanctuary in order to receive the Body and Blood of Christ? It appears that many folks don't really do anything. They consider the walk a mere practical step that must be taken in order to arrive at a communion station.

What would happen if we all began to engage this moment as a communal pilgrimage? Together we stand, together we sing, together we walk "by faith" in order to receive together the spiritual nourishment that God has provided. Communion is not supposed to be a private moment between individual communicants and Christ. It is a shared encounter between the Body of Christ gathered in prayer and the Body of Christ present through transformed bread and wine.

## AMEN

Previously ministers of communion declared, "This is the Body (or Blood) of Christ." "This is" was dropped not only because it is not in the Latin, but also because it too narrowly focused attention on the object in the minister's hands. When we respond Amen to the minister we are professing our faith in the real presence of Christ, not only in the sacred species but also in the person of the minister, in ourselves, in the believing assembly, and in the encounter between minister and communicant. Amen! The Body of Christ is all around us!