

# Making Sense of the Eucharist Today

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Pope John Paul II proclaimed 2005 to be the Year of the Eucharist in order to remind us that the Eucharist is the source and summit of the life of the Church. It is a central moment in our life of faith, as it is what Jesus left us so that we may remember him – “Do this in memory of me”. Unfortunately, for many people, the significance of this celebration of the Eucharist (the Mass) has been lost, so that it is often experienced simply as an obligation or duty, which is mostly boring, and from which they are very happy to be dispensed! How, then, can we understand and experience the Eucharist so that it becomes something desirable and meaningful in our lives?

Firstly, when speaking about the Eucharist, I am primarily referring to the celebration of the Mass. Other ways in which people experience the Eucharist (in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, in Corpus Christi processions, etc.) can help them to feel the presence of Jesus, but it is essentially in “the breaking of bread” (Luke 24:35; Acts 2:42), in the eating of it, and in the drinking of wine together that we recognise his presence.

## Real Presence of Jesus

In the Mass (which consists of two parts: Word and Sacrament), we hear and absorb the message and symbolic action of Jesus, and thus make Him part of our own bodies, our own lives. We allow the words of the gospel to become God’s Word, and we allow the bread and wine to become the Body and Blood of Jesus, so that they can make Jesus present for us in a real way. A sacrament is a symbolic object, perceived by the senses, which enables us to come close to, or feel God. Thus Jesus was and still is perceived by those who have encountered him as the primary sacrament or symbol of God, and the Eucharist is the primary symbol or sacrament of Jesus around which the Church gathers. This memory of him is the source which inspires us to continue his (God’s) mission.

There are those who say that the Eucharist is not “just a symbol”, but rather the “Real Presence” of Jesus. However, with a more precise definition of the word “symbol”, it can help us a great deal to understand the meaning of “Real Presence” in the language of today. It can help us avoid regarding “the transformation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus” as simply a “magical” action, and it can make this action more understandable to a rational mind! A symbol is something we can see, hear, smell, taste, or touch, which we associate with a much broader reality or meaning that is intangible. It makes that broader reality real for us. Thus we associate a na-

tional flag with our country, and we might get very upset if someone else shows disrespect for it. This “piece of material” thus becomes “our country”. Or a “wedding ring” becomes “our marriage commitment”. Or the “words of the Bible” become “God’s Word”. So the word “symbol”, when referred to the Eucharist, becomes “Real Presence”!

Thus we have to *allow* the Eucharist to evoke in us the memory of the full reality of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; to enable us to feel his presence as the apostles and all those who encountered him felt it, especially those who felt his healing power; and (as Pope Benedict XVI continually reminds us) to feel his friendship. In Jesus’ life, death and resurrection we see the same dynamics or reality that each one of us experiences in our own life – suffering (sickness, injustice, etc), despair, yet also resurrection (new life, joy, a deep sense of meaning, etc). This reality of paradoxes is what we call the “Paschal Mystery”. This is why Jesus in the Eucharist can help us to feel close to God, to have a taste of God’s love, of God’s Kingdom. This should inspire us to go out and share that love with everyone else.



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## Thanksgiving

“Eucharist” comes from the Greek word which means “thanksgiving”. Therefore the celebration of the Eucharist is an act of thanksgiving. The giving of thanks is a naturally joyful act of appreciation for something that is experienced as a gift. We cannot give thanks without a feeling of joy and happiness – without smiling. What, then, is the gift for which we can be thankful when we celebrate the Eucharist?

Firstly, we are reminded that Jesus reveals to us the unmerited and unconditional gift of Love – which is God. This reminds us too of the giftedness of each one of our lives. How often do we meditate on all the totally unmerited gifts that we have all received (be it our health, our families, our friends, our education, etc),

which are there even in the midst of much suffering? Only when I can thus appreciate and accept that I am indeed loved, despite all my weaknesses and failings, am I capable, in turn, of really loving others without conditions.

Secondly, in a slightly different nuance of the same love, we are reminded again of the promise or gift of life, of salvation, of liberation that sum up the Kingdom or Reign of God that Jesus primarily proclaimed in all his teachings and actions. Thus the Eucharistic symbols are an affirmation of the life – of the body and blood - of each and every one of us. They are an affirmation that our bodies are important, that the world is important, that the Kingdom of God is in continuity with, and is the fulfilment of the lives, the bodies, and the world that we now experience in a very limited and often painful way. "...the whole creation ...has been groaning in labour pains" (Romans 8:22), in the expectation that it "might be freed from its slavery to corruption and brought into the same glorious freedom as the children of God" (Romans 8:21). What more can we be thankful for than such a promise of eternal life, which responds to our deepest desire?

### Meal and Sacrifice

The Christian community through history has always recognised two dimensions to the understanding of Jesus' institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper – as a *meal* and as a *sacrifice*. Each of these dimensions influences the mood and spirit with which we approach the Eucharist.

The dimension of the Eucharist as a *meal* emerges from Jesus' words, "Take this and eat it ...and drink it". This points to us remembering Jesus by eating and drinking together (in 'communion') the bread and wine – his body and blood. The focus is therefore on the 'table' around which we sit, and, in 'eating and drinking', we allow ourselves to be penetrated by the life and spirit of Jesus, and to digest the 'bread of life' so that we can be nourished by it in order to live more and more like Him. As a meal or feast, this understanding invites a spirit of celebration, of joy, and of informality, and the focus is on all those present being equal participants in the meal in an effort to become truly "one body, one spirit in Christ".

The dimension of the Eucharist as a *sacrifice* emerges from Jesus' words, "This is my body, which will be given up for you ... This is my blood; the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven". This understanding of the Eucharist recalls the ritual sacrifices in the Old Testament through which the Jews renewed their relationship (their pact) with God.

It points to us remembering Jesus as the 'sacrificial lamb', through whose sacrifice our sins are forgiven and our relationship with God is renewed. The focus is therefore on the 'altar' and on the 'cultic priest' in a clear hierarchy of participation. As a moment of sacrifice, this understanding of the Eucharist invites a spirit of solemnity and formality, with manifestations of piety, use of incense, etc.

How we celebrate the Eucharist, and the relative emphasis we give to either the *meal* or *sacrifice* dimension is normally a good reflection of how we understand the Church. It is thus very interesting to note the different ways in which different cultures celebrate it, and how these differences are also evident within our own movement. While both dimensions and different styles are present everywhere, one is struck, for example, by the formal, deeply respectful, sober and solemn singing of the whole Mass, with a profuse use of incense, in many Mid-Eastern and Eastern Rites and cultures; and by the informality and sense of celebration in many African cultures, where time is not an issue, and joyful singing and dancing prevail, as well as in the guitar music prevailing in many Latin and North American cultures – even if some of them are often in a hurry!

There is thus a challenge for all our cultures to integrate both these dimensions into our celebration of the Eucharist, while ensuring that we are celebrating the 'new covenant' that Jesus instituted. This emphasises the joy of God's love, mercy and forgiveness (which each culture expresses in its own way) and the empowerment and full participation of all the believers. They become one through a mutual spirit of service which breaks through all political, economic, cultural, and even ecclesial barriers, privileges and prejudices. As a lay movement, we are particularly called on to enable our members to realise the urging of the Second Vatican Council, and thus to assert their own 'priestly role' by virtue of their baptism. Thus, while respecting the specific role that the priest has to play, we should not expect him to be the centre of all activity.



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## ”Inculturation

As indicated above, it is vital that every community seeks to celebrate the Eucharist in ways that bring out its unifying and transforming purpose. Thus, to avoid the Eucharist becoming ‘boring’ or ‘foreign’, efforts should always be made to promote ‘Inculturation’ – to use expressions and symbols that speak the language (ethnic, generational, etc) of those participating. There are many imaginative examples of this in many cultures. Such focuses have even led some to question whether a different ‘species’ (other than bread and wine) should not be permitted in cultures which never eat bread nor drink wine! This illustrates the permanent tension that will always exist as we try to be both ‘local’ and ‘universal’. In the Eucharist we are trying to demonstrate not only our local unity, but our unity with Catholics everywhere in the world, and the chief visible expression of this unity is the bread and wine that Jesus used, which could get lost if the species were replaced. However, this does not prevent us from supplementing this offering with symbols more recognisable to the participating community. This was well-demonstrated at the recent World Youth Day in Cologne, Germany, when the local ‘sausages and beer’ were brought up at the offertory alongside the bread and wine during the opening Mass.

### Sign of Unity or Means to Unity?

Another tension associated with the Eucharist centres around the question of ‘inter-communion’ – the celebration of the Eucharist with people of other Christian denominations or other faiths. This is extremely sensitive, since a refusal to receive communion often scandalises people whose own denomination permits inter-communion, and who thus might feel a sense of rejection. In such cases, the Eucharist can even become a source of deeper division – the precise opposite of what it intends! This illustrates the tension between the experience of the Eucharist as a sign of a unified identity as Catholics, and as a means towards building a unity of all God’s creatures. On the one hand, it makes sense that only those who share a common understanding of the Eucharist - as the real presence of Jesus amongst us – should be allowed to partake. If someone partakes with a different or no understanding, it can cheapen the symbol and diminish its unifying capacity. We are pretending that a unity exists whereas, in fact, it does not. Limiting the participation of those who are not ‘in communion’ therefore becomes a stark reminder of the scandal of our division, which should push us to work harder to discover our unity.

On the other hand, we know that even among Catholics there are different understandings of the ‘real presence’, or that many come to the Eucharist with little or no sense of this. At the same time, many

other Christians believe Jesus is really present despite the dogmatic formulations of their respective churches. This challenges us to clarify the meaning of unity, especially since we experience such diversity even within our own Church. It is useful to remember that Jesus did not intend to found a new religion. He remained part of Judaism, while pointing to a God who was inclusive – who sought a unity of all people – even Gentiles (non-Jews) - centred on his way of love – the way that Jesus himself revealed. To believe in Jesus, therefore, is to desire such a unity with all people, and to resist any temptation to close off one’s community in a sectarian fashion. The Eucharist, therefore, should push us to engage and to dialogue with all other Christians, other religions, and those of no faith who also desire such a unity. It thus becomes a means towards unity! This requires us to be very sensitive to the diversity of those participating – especially to the diversity of religious background and experience within our own movement, to which many non-Catholics voluntarily choose to belong – and not to build new walls between them. However, the key lies in bringing out and demonstrating the real significance of what we are celebrating so that it is clear for all those present. Then, hopefully, they will be able to discern themselves whether or not they can identify with the symbolic actions we perform.

### Conclusion

While debates will continue to rage around the real meaning of the Eucharist, whether we are promoting the Latin Mass or promoting the use of beer and yams as the species, we should never lose sight of its fundamental unifying and transforming purpose in remembering Jesus. Care should therefore always be taken, and maybe a degree of flexibility allowed, to ensure that the celebration of the Eucharist will not provoke discriminatory division nor prevent the conversion and healing of those participating. Hopefully, then, it can be restored as the source and summit of our faith which makes present a Jesus who responds to our deepest desires and our search for meaning. To Archbishop Romero we can apply these words of the Exodus: “I have seen the sufferings of my people .....”. We can also put in his mouth Jesus’ words: “I did not come to be served but to serve”....and “to give my life for my friends”.