



SESSION 11

The Body and Blood of Christ



Triumph of the Eucharist,
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SESSION OBJECTIVES

- To see the Eucharist as a fulfillment of the Jewish Passover celebration
- To understand, through faith, Christ's unique, Real Presence in the Eucharist
- To gain familiarity with the Mass and an appreciation of it
- To appreciate the Church's teaching on how Christ is present in the Eucharist and how it helps us hold fast to Christ's words about his Body and Blood

STEP 1: Begin

OPENING PRAYER

Divine Savior,
we come to Your sacred table to nourish ourselves,
not with bread but with Yourself, true Bread of eternal life.
Help us daily to make a good and perfect meal of this divine food.
Let us be continually refreshed by the perfume of Your kindness and goodness.
May the Holy Spirit fill us with His Love.
Meanwhile, let us prepare a place for this holy food by emptying our hearts.

— *Prayer before Communion*, by Saint Francis de Sales

INTRODUCTION

At the Last Supper...our Savior instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice of his Body and Blood. This he did in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the cross throughout the ages until he should come again, and so to entrust to his beloved Spouse, the Church, a memorial of his death and resurrection: a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a Paschal banquet "in which Christ is consumed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us." (CCC 1323, citing *Sacrosanctum concilium*, no. 47)

"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). Simon Peter responds to Jesus' hard teaching about the Eucharist with an affirmation of faith. But his response almost has an air of resignation about it: we don't really have much of a choice. In a way, that's true. Faith in Christ means believing the things he says—all of them. If we pick and choose, then all we really have is faith in our ability to sift out the words of Christ we like from the ones we don't.

The sense of resignation might also point in another direction: what makes the teaching on the Eucharist hard is the magnitude of the gift! It truly is a banquet: "Christ is consumed, the mind is filled with grace, and pledge of future glory is given." But God also demonstrates his humility by remaining with us in a hidden way. And deep down we have a hard time accepting a love that is at once so great and so humble. We want God's love, but does God really have to go to such lengths? Maybe Peter is coming to terms with a God whose marvelous ways are not our ways.

We reflect in this session on God's way of love and humility, exemplified in the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. How can we understand Christ's gift, this "memorial of his death and Resurrection"? What does it mean to receive Jesus' Body and Blood in Holy Communion? How should we understand and participate in the sacrifice of the Mass? Jesus promises eternal life to those who receive him in the Eucharist, and so we seek to prepare our hearts and minds to welcome lovingly this great sacrament.

STEP 2: Learn

SETTING THE STAGE

Christ the King Chapel at St. John Vianney Seminary in Denver, Colorado—a beautiful church is meant to draw us into the worship we offer to God in the Holy Mass. From the altar to the kneelers to the baptismal font—in all the artwork and symbols—every architectural detail points to some aspect of Christian worship. From the smallest and simplest to the largest and most extravagant, churches are places where the faithful can gather to worship and celebrate the sacraments, the most central of which is the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Christ.

The Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life. But even in the Gospel the disciple's consider this a "hard saying" of Jesus (John 6:60). How should we approach this challenging and marvelous teaching? How can Scripture and Tradition aid us in growing to love Christ present in the sacrament? What really happens at Holy Mass? This session considers the scriptural roots of the Eucharist and the

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The Second Vatican Council rightly proclaimed that the Eucharistic sacrifice is “the source and summit of the Christian life.” “For the most holy Eucharist contains the Church’s entire spiritual wealth: Christ himself, our Passover and living bread. Through his own flesh, now made living and life-giving by the Holy Spirit, he offers life to men.” Consequently, the gaze of the Church is constantly turned to her Lord, present in the Sacrament of the Altar, in which she discovers the full manifestation of his boundless love.

— Pope Saint John Paul II, *encyclical letter Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (citing *Lumen gentium*, no. 11, and *Presbyterorum ordinis*, no. 5)

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doctrine that the Church has drawn from Scripture to help us grow in knowledge and love of this mystery. Christ’s sacrifice is made present in the Eucharist; by participating in the liturgy, and receiving Holy Communion worthily, we share in the fruits of his redemption.

I. The Holy Mass is so much more than meets the eye

II. Salvation History: We access the central event of human history—Christ’s Paschal Mystery

- A. In the Mass, we enter into the Paschal Mystery
 - 1. Jesus is the new Paschal Lamb—his sacrifice atones for sin and grants divine life
 - 2. The Mass celebrates and re-presents this mystery, and we share in it sacramentally
- B. Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist under the appearances of bread and wine
 - 1. His presence reveals God’s merciful love, allowing us to receive him daily
 - 2. Jesus told us many times that he would give us this Eucharistic gift
 - 3. The eyes of faith marvel at this mystery of God’s love and condescension

III. Pilgrimage: The Holy Mass

- A. In the Mass, the most important event in history and the person who performed it both become present
- B. Christ performed the one perfect act of worship; we can participate in and live from it
- C. At the Offertory, we place ourselves—our desires, sacrifices, and weaknesses—on the altar
- D. The words of Consecration are Jesus’ words, spoken by the priest in the person of Christ
- E. The priest offers the perfect sacrifice to the Father; we respond with the Great Amen
- F. The Father then gives us his Son to receive in Holy Communion—a precious moment
- G. Receiving him transforms us into him, and then we are sent forth to bring him to the world

IV. Catechesis: Applying the “medicine of immortality” (Saint Ignatius of Antioch)

- A. We speak of medicine, a sacred meal, the tree of life, the wedding feast of the lamb
- B. These would be mere images if the bread and wine were not truly his Body and Blood
- C. Transubstantiation and the mystery of the Eucharist
 - 1. The substance—what it is—is changed into the Body and Blood of Christ, but the accidents (appearances) of bread and wine remain
 - 2. This doesn’t explain away the mystery; we still see dimly in faith
 - 3. Christ’s word and the power of the Holy Spirit working through the priest bring this sacrament about

V. *Lectio divina*: Exodus 16:1–21

- A. Saint Paul refers back to the Exodus to show how God prepared for the gift of the Eucharist
- B. The bread from Heaven, or manna, indicates the source of this nourishment: God
- C. The daily routine of gathering manna shows our need to seek God's grace every day

WORD MEANING:

Transubstantiation

The unique change, brought about when the priest speaks the words of consecration, of the entire substance of bread into the substance of Christ's Body and of the entire substance of wine into the substance of his Blood, while the appearances or "species" of bread and wine remain (see CCC 1373–1377).

Because the Lord walked here below in his flesh, he gave us this flesh for our salvation; no one, however, eats that flesh if he has not first adored it...and not only do we not sin when we offer adoration to it, but moreover we sin by not adoring it.

— Saint Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, 98, 9

STEP 3: Engage

- 1) The Church teaches with Scripture that Christ's sacrifice was once for all (see Hebrews 10:10). Not only that, but Christ's unique sacrifice on the Cross was sufficient to merit salvation for all. So how should we understand the sacrifice of the Mass? What does it mean to say that Christ's sacrifice is re-presented but not repeated? What is the point of the Eucharist re-presenting the one Paschal Mystery?

This question aims to foster an open-ended discussion about how the Eucharist doesn't repeat or add to Christ's sacrifice, but instead makes that one sacrifice present on the altar. A couple helpful avenues can be taken. First, as with the Jewish Passover celebration, the Eucharist memorializes a past event but in a way that is more than merely remembering it. The Eucharist actually makes present God's saving action. Second, although Christ's sacrifice is perfect and sufficient, we have to wrestle with what Saint Paul says about "complet[ing] what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church" (Col 1:24). It isn't that Christ's suffering lacked anything in itself, but it still needs to be applied to the Church. What Christ the Head accomplished needs to "spill over" into his Body, which comprises many members, including each of us. The Eucharist brings about this fulfillment and application of Christ's once-for-all

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sacrifice. In other words, what Christ perfectly accomplished is made present during the Mass, so that the grace of this redemptive work can touch each member who participates fully and worthily in the Church's central mystery, i.e. the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Other examples that might add to the discussion include the manna in the desert, given daily as part of God's plan for his people; various Jewish feasts or memorials and how these shed light on the Mass as memorial; Christ's desire to remain with us in an intimate way, even after his Ascension; etc.

- 2) The Mass is divided into two major parts: the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Within each we find various other parts and patterns. This order can lead us to think of the Mass as highly structured. What might be some advantages of structure for communal worship? What are some of the dangers? Talk through the parts of the Mass that might be familiar to you, and discuss how they relate to one another and how they contribute to fruitful participation in Mass and reception of the Eucharist.

Because the structure or “choreography” of the liturgy can pose challenges for some, participants may find it helpful to consider the point and value of liturgical form and structure. With regard to communal prayer, structure obviously fosters unity—if everyone does his or her own thing, then each person might be praying *next* to others, but no one will really be praying *with* the others. Various roles and tasks also give shape and unity to a community: from the priest to the lector, to the choir, and so on. Familiarity can also be helpful in this context, allowing us to focus less on the structure itself and more on what the structure is directing us towards, namely, the worship of God and participation in the Eucharist. Of course, familiarity has its dangers, too. Like any prayer, the Mass can become routine, lifeless, a mere duty, at least subjectively speaking. Structure can also be valued for its own sake rather than for the sake of true worship. When this happens, structure becomes an idol. But when we understand the structure and what it's there for, then it enriches our prayer and worship. The basic division of the Mass into the Liturgies of the Word and of the Eucharist, and then the order of readings within the Liturgy of the Word directs our attention to Christ: the Gospel is the culmination of the readings and the other readings prepare for and deepen our encounter with Christ in the Gospel. After that, the Liturgy of the Eucharist makes that same Christ present on the altar, in the Holy Eucharist. Through the power of the Holy Spirit and the ministry of the priest, Jesus' saving work—prepared for by the first reading, foreshadowed in the psalm, and spoken of in the Gospel—is memorialized in a way that makes it actually present. This basic dynamic is enriched by other parts of the Mass as well. The Holy, Holy, Holy, for example, taken from Isaiah 6:3, reminds us of the holiness and mystery of the Mass. The sending forth at the end (*Ite missa est*, in Latin) galvanizes us to bring the mystery we have encountered and received to the whole world, as Jesus commands in the Great Commission (see Matt 28:18–20). The key to appreciating the place of liturgical structure and to avoiding its becoming stale is to understand its meaning more profoundly and to actively appreciate this meaning during the Mass.

- 3) Christ's Real Presence in the Eucharist is both beautiful and challenging. What would our lives look like if we understood and appreciated our Eucharistic Lord more profoundly? Consider the example of the saints and their devotion to our Lord in the Eucharist. One reason we have the saints is to vivify our imagination of what it looks like to follow Christ more wholeheartedly.

Growing in knowledge and love of Christ present in the Eucharist—Body, Blood, soul and divinity—the work of a lifetime. This little reality check at the beginning can help to avoid being disappointed with where we are in our Eucharistic devotion. Saints like Mother Teresa and Padre Pio can teach us some of the basics of Eucharistic piety: going to Mass more frequently, receiving the Eucharist more frequently and more fervently, and spending time in Eucharistic Adoration as a natural outgrowth of piety and a preparation for receiving the Eucharist at Mass. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux tells a beautiful story of her first Holy Communion, which was for her a significant moment of conversion; for us, too, the Eucharist always has the power to inflame charity in our hearts (it is, after all, called “the sacrament of charity”). Many other saintly stories could be mentioned. A humble and simple form of loving the Eucharistic Lord is to make the Sign of the Cross when driving by a Catholic church, to reverence our Lord in the tabernacle; simply popping into a church or chapel to say a quick hello to our Lord can be a beautiful sign of growing in love for his Real Presence in the Eucharist. Other ideas might include making a spiritual communion on days when we aren't able to go to Mass, confessing our failure to respect or to appreciate the Eucharist; reading books about the Eucharist, so that our faith can seek understanding; etc. The discussion will be both more helpful and more practical if it can focus on little things or changes that we can imagine. Big things can be important, too, but love for the Eucharist tends to grow in smaller steps and stages. Concluding the discussion with a commitment to one or more of the ideas raised would be ideal.

STEP 4: Conclude

Like Peter, we must “resign” ourselves to the gift of the Eucharist. We are invited to listen in faith to our Lord's words, trusting him and believing him when he says that there is more to the Eucharist than meets the eye. From her earliest traditions and liturgical practices, the Church has honored Christ's words and the apostles' testimony about the Eucharist. By offering the sacrifice of the Mass through the centuries, she has made Christ's saving work present and effective in the world. Today, the Church does the same and invites us to receive our Lord in the Eucharist and to bear fruit for the life of the world. We are invited to resign ourselves to this great gift. And when we do, resignation grows into appreciation, and appreciation sprouts forth into joy, and joy blossoms into eternal life.



Detail from the *Adoration of the Lamb*, Hubert and Jan van Eyck

CALL TO CONVERSION

From the outside, the Mass can seem like a mere ritual, and a complicated one at that. From the inside—for those who regularly go to Mass—the Mass can seem like ... well, also a mere ritual, a routine, even if a familiar one. How can this be the case, and what can we do to get beyond this view?

It's true, of course, that the Mass is a ritual. But even more than that, the Eucharist is a sacrifice, the most fitting and highest worship offered to God. It is most pleasing to God because it makes present the one Paschal Mystery, in which the Father's beloved Son offers himself back to the Father in the Holy Spirit. To witness this prompts in us wonder, awe, and love.

Remarkably, we are invited to be not only witnesses but participants in this mystery, and the way we participate is by joining in the prayer of the Mass. The Mass is a sacrifice, yes, but it's also a prayer. When we enter into the liturgy with our minds and hearts, we participate in this most fruitful prayer. The readings during Mass fill our minds with God's loving plan of salvation and prepare us for the culmination of that plan, which is brought about when the Eucharist is consecrated. The prayers petition God for his aid and mercy, which we need to pray well and to live faithfully. The gestures, sights, and smells at Mass draw our bodies into the prayer and the worship of God, which in turn disposes our minds and hearts to be more attuned to the mystery before us.

So if the ritual of the Mass offers worship to God and is meant to draw us prayerfully into this worship, ask yourself: Are you attentive during the Liturgy of the Word, listening, reflecting, and applying? Do you appreciate the mystery made present during Mass, or do you take it for granted and treat it like a task to get done? What is one concrete resolution you can make to participate more fully in the prayer of the Mass?

DIGGING DEEPER

One of the most famous Eucharistic texts is not a treatise or a book, but rather a hymn composed by Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Adoro te devote*:

O hidden truth, devoutly I adore Thee,
Who truly art within the forms before me;
To Thee my heart I bow with bended knee,
As failing quite in contemplating Thee.

Sight, touch, and taste in Thee are each deceived;
The ear alone most safely is believed:
I believe all the Son of God has spoken,
Than Truth's own word there is no truer token.

God only on the Cross lay hid from view;
But here lies hid at once the Manhood too:
And I, in both professing my belief,
Make the same prayer as the repentant thief....

O thou Memorial of our Lord's own dying!
O Bread that living art and vivifying!
Make ever Thou my soul on Thee to live;
Ever a taste of Heavenly sweetness give....

Jesu! Whom for the present veil'd I see,
What I so thirst for, when will't be granted me?
That I may see Thy countenance unfolding,
And may be blest Thy glory in beholding. Amen.

— tr. E. Caswall, *lightly emended*

Within these short verses, Saint Thomas Aquinas captures the essentials of the Eucharist and the proper posture before such a mystery. The beginning and end of the hymn express the arc of the Christian life: from adoring the “hidden truth” in this life to seeing the divine “countenance unfolding” in glory.

And between these two moments? Christian faith believes in Christ's words in order to enter into his Paschal Mystery, especially by receiving the gift of the Eucharist. This hidden truth invites and strengthens faith; “sight, touch, and taste” are poor guides here, though we normally rely on the senses to understand the world. Only “the ear” is reliable, since “faith comes from what is heard,” and not just by any hearing but “hear[ing] comes from the preaching of Christ” (Rom 10:17). Faith alone grants access to the mystery, but it does not exhaust it. And so devotion, adoration, and love are the most appropriate responses to the Eucharist. Received with faith and love, the Eucharist satisfies our thirst for God and increases our longing to pierce the veil and behold God's glorious “countenance.”

FOR FURTHER READING

Luke 22:1–23, John 6, and 1 Corinthians 10–11

Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 1322–1405

Pope Saint John Paul II, encyclical letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *God Is Near Us: The Eucharist, the Heart of Life*

Edward Sri, *A Biblical Walk Through the Mass*