

Introduction to Catholic Doctrine On The Eucharist

In commemoration of
the Eucharistic Revival

Fr. Tom Knoblach

June 2022

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION: WHY THE EUCHARIST?	1
A) THE PERFECT FAREWELL GIFT.....	1
B) THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOKLET	2
I. THE GREATEST GIFT	3
A) TITLES FOR THIS MYSTERY	4
B) THE EUCHARIST AS SACRAMENT	5
C) THE EUCHARIST AND THE CHURCH.....	5
II. SALVATION HISTORY AND THE EUCHARIST	6
A) THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES	6
B) THE NEW PASSOVER	8
C) HISTORY AND RITUAL.....	9
D) FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY	10
III. THE MYSTICAL BODY OF CHRIST: UNITY IN LOVE	11
IV. THE FRUITS OF THE EUCHARIST.....	12
V. SACRIFICE AND THANKSGIVING.....	14
A) THE EUCHARIST AS PRAYER.....	15
B) THE EUCHARIST AND THE ORDAINED PRIESTHOOD	16
VI. THE REAL PRESENCE.....	17
VII. THE EUCHARIST AND LITURGY.....	19
A) THE THREE-FOLD MISSION OF CHRIST	19
B) LITURGICAL PARTICIPATION: FULL, CONSCIOUS, AND ACTIVE.....	20
VIII. PRACTICAL MATTERS	21
IX. THE EUCHARIST IN THE WORDS OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL: A SUMMARY	27
CONCLUSION.....	27

“In the Eucharist, God has given us everything. Although God is all-powerful, He is unable to give more; though supremely wise, He knows not how to give more; though vastly rich, He has not more to give.”
Saint Augustine

+++++

Introduction: Why The Eucharist?

“I will not leave you orphaned; I will come back to you.” John 15:18

A) The Perfect Farewell Gift

Imagine that you had to say good-bye to those you love very deeply, and they did not know whether they would ever see you again. What would be the best possible farewell gift you could give them?

Perhaps all of us will face this situation in our lives at some time. The emotions are strong. The memories of the time we have shared come flooding in. We wish for just one more day, one more hour, with those we love. In our sorrow at parting, love promises to provide a bond across the miles and across the years. So we rely on pictures, treasured gifts, letters ... and in our modern era, e-mail and Web pages. Perhaps occasionally we are even able to pay a visit. While this is a great gift, we also know the same anguish of parting all over again.

What would be the best farewell gift, the ideal expression of our abiding promise of love, support, and fidelity? It would be somehow not to go ... to somehow remain personally present even across the miles, across the years.

“Anyone who loves Me will be true to My word; and My Father will love him; we

will come to him and make our dwelling place with him. John 14:23

“Know that I am with you always, until the end of the world!” Matthew 28:20
As He prepared to leave this world to go to His Father through the sacrifice of His life for us on the Cross, Jesus left us that greatest of all possible farewell gifts. He remains with those He loves until we are reunited with Him in the perfect life of glory. This farewell gift is the Eucharist.

Through this life-giving mystery, we receive with adoration and joy the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The same Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh through Mary, is with us. Now risen from the dead and glorified, He is truly and substantially present under the forms of bread and wine. Through the Eucharist, Jesus remains faithful to His promise to be with His Church always, until the end of time.

Jesus invites: ***“Come to Me, and I will give you rest”*** (Matthew 11:28). He gives us a share in His own divine life through this Bread of Life and Cup of eternal salvation. In sharing in the Eucharist, we already share in the worship that is constantly being offered to God in heaven. “We join the angels and the saints in the unending hymn” of God’s praise. Through this mystery, we already begin to share in the eternal life to which we are called.

B) The Purpose of this Booklet

“I came that you might have life, and have it to the full.” John 10:10

***“I am the Bread of Life. ...
I myself am the living bread come down from heaven.
Anyone who eats this bread shall live forever.”*** John 6:48.51

Because the Eucharist is Jesus Christ Himself, truly present, it is the source and the summit of the life of the Church, which is His Body, and reflection on this gift will never find the last word.

This booklet was originally written as part of a series for the Diocesan Council of Catholic Women for the Jubilee Year of 2000, and revised for the Year of the Eucharist in 2005. With some updates, I present it here as one of many resources to assist with the Eucharistic Revival established by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, beginning with the Solemnity of Corpus Christi in 2022.

This booklet does not pretend to be a complete presentation of Eucharistic doctrine. It will not focus on specific liturgical norm, practices, or rites. While these are important issues, the goal is a more general understanding of the Eucharist as a sacrament. Nor does it consider all the various, rich reflection on the Eucharist that is such a part of our Catholic heritage in theology, art, music, literature, and spirituality.

Instead, this booklet is meant to be a **basic review of the Eucharistic faith of the Latin rite of the Roman Catholic Church**. It seeks to share the beautiful and hope-filled truths of our faith, guided especially by the doctrine of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and enriched by other documents from the Magisterium.

In this booklet, I invite you to reflect on this great mystery of our redemption as it is understood by the Church. As I offer this summary of Eucharistic teaching, we trust in the Holy Spirit, Whom Jesus promised to us: ***“He will instruct you in everything and remind you of all that I told you”*** (John 14:26).

Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift! II Corinthians 9:15

I. The Greatest Gift

**“O sacred Banquet! in which Christ is consumed,
the memorial of His passion is recalled,
the mind is filled with grace,
and a pledge of future glory is given to us.”**

St. Thomas Aquinas, hymn *O Sacrum Convivium*;
Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* §47

The Mystery of the Eucharist is the greatest gift Jesus Christ has given to His Church. It is that perfect farewell present that allows Him to truly remain with us until the end of the world. It is the most perfect expression of God's love and mercy we could imagine.

All time is somehow contained in the Eucharist. The *past, present, and future* come together in Jesus, the Alpha and the Omega. The loving sacrifice of our Savior on Calvary's Cross *almost 2000 years ago* is made present to us; we are united with Christ and one another to truly become His living Body *here and now*; and we receive a pledge of *future* life and glory with Him in heaven.

A) Titles for this Mystery

The great richness of this sacrament is reflected in the variety of names by which it is known:

- ***Eucharist***, meaning “thanksgiving”;
- ***the Lord’s Supper***, in remembrance of its institution the night before Jesus’ death (I Corinthians 11:20) and in anticipation of the wedding feast of the Lamb in the heavenly Jerusalem (Revelation 19:9);
- ***the Breaking of Bread***, a term that is connected with the Jewish Passover meal; with the miracles of the multiplication of the loaves which foreshadow the overflowing richness of the Eucharist; with the recognition of the Risen Christ by His disciples; and with the early Christian term designating their Eucharistic assemblies in which they were united as one Body with the Lord;
- ***the Holy Sacrifice***, used since it makes present the one, eternal sacrifice of the Lord on the Cross and also includes the Church’s self-offering to the Father;
- ***the Sacred Mysteries***, along with similar terms, remind us that the Eucharist is the central act of the Church’s supernatural life and worship;
- ***the Most Blessed Sacrament***, which again highlights the central place of the

Eucharist among all the sacraments and works of the Church;

- ***Holy Communion***, because we are united as one Body in Christ through our reception of the Eucharist;
- ***Holy Mass (Missa)***, because as Christ was sent by His Father, so are we sent forth (“*missa est*”) to continue the mission of Christ in our daily lives.

B) The Eucharist as Sacrament

The Eucharist is the greatest of the sacraments. All seven of these visible signs of grace were instituted by Jesus to share the grace of redemption with us. It is Christ Himself Who shares His divine life with us in Baptism. It is Christ Who sends His Spirit in Confirmation. It is Christ Who forgives in Penance and heals in the Anointing of the Sick. It is Christ in Whom a woman and a man become one in love in the life-long bond of Christian Marriage as an image of His love for the Church. It is Christ Who conforms those He chooses to His own public ministry of salvation in Holy Orders.

All the other sacraments, like all the works of the Church’s apostolate and ministries, are actions that Christ does. They are living signs of His grace among us, and as such have their own dignity. But the Eucharist is Christ Himself, His own Body and Blood. He is truly and personally present in the Eucharistic species. The celebration of the Eucharist makes present to us the one sacrifice of the Cross. This sacrifice is the source of the redemptive grace shared in the other sacraments, in the sacramentals, and in the Church’s ministry. For these reasons, the Church calls the Eucharist “the most eminent sacrament.”

By Christ’s own action, the miracle of “transubstantiation” occurs. In this miracle, the substance of bread and wine are truly and wholly changed into the Body and Blood of Jesus. Only the appearances (sometimes called the “accidents,” those aspects that are accessible to our bodily senses) of bread and wine remain.

C) The Eucharist and the Church

The Eucharist is thus the “**source and summit of the life of the Church**” (Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §11; Pius XII, *Mediator Dei*, §201; John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, §3). As the sacrifice of Calvary and the Real Presence of the Savior, it is the source of the life of the Church, which is Christ’s Body. As the means of our union with the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit, it is the summit of that life of grace.

The Church is most fully itself in the celebration of the Eucharist. Here the unity of God’s people is signified and brought about. We are sent forth from the Eucharistic assembly to bring that life of Christ into our homes, families, neighborhoods, workplaces, schools ... in every place and aspect of human life.

Christ has united the whole of the human family and the whole of the human condition to Himself in the Incarnation. So His command to “***Do this in memory of Me***” (Luke 22:19) can also be thought of as a mission for each of us. He tells us to imitate His selfless, sacrificial loving service to one another. When He washed His disciples’ feet at the Last Supper, He told them clearly: “***As I have done, so must you do. ... Once you know all these things, blest will you be if you put them into practice***” (John 13:15.17).

In every parish community, then, the altar is a kind of center of the life of the Church in that community. From the altar we receive the grace we need to allow the life of Christ the Servant and Redeemer to work in every facet of our lives. To the altar we bring ourselves – our successes and failures, our joys and sorrows, our hopes and fears – and offer them to the Father along with Christ as members of His Body.

II. Salvation History and the Eucharist

***“I will renew with you the everlasting covenant,
the benefits assured to David ...”*** Isaiah 55:3b

A) The Hebrew Scriptures

There are many foreshadowings of this supreme gift in the Scriptures. These sacred

writings are the Word of God, telling us the history of salvation. It is a history of covenants between God and humanity, as He gradually prepares a people for Himself. Each of these covenants has a promise, a sign, and a condition on our part.

In creation, the covenant was with all humanity, through Adam and Eve. Its promise was life. Its sign was the food they were to eat. The condition on the part of our first ancestors was that they were not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (Genesis 1-3).

After the Fall (the rejection of the life of grace at the beginning of human history, recounted in Genesis 3), a new covenant was made with Noah. The promise was that God would not devastate the earth by flood again. The sign of this covenant is the rainbow. Our condition was to avoid violence and murder, respecting the gift of life from God (Genesis 9:1-17).

As sin increased, God chose a people for Himself through Abraham, to whom He promised land, a long life, and many descendants. This people was not chosen to the exclusion of the rest of the human family. Rather, they were to be representatives of the human family who, by their fidelity to the covenant, were to be a light to all nations (Isaiah 42:6). The sign of this covenant with Israel was circumcision; the condition therefore was that all the males among the people must be circumcised (Genesis 17).

Yet the book of Genesis tells us that the people were unfaithful to the covenant, and so they became slaves in Egypt. God made a new covenant with Israel through Moses, with the same promises. The sign of this new covenant was the Passover meal. In this meal, the chosen people were to eat the Paschal lamb, whose blood would save them from the destruction to come upon the first-born of Egypt. The condition was their obedience to the Ten Commandments (Exodus 12).

But, the Scriptures tell us, the people were still unfaithful to the covenant. During their wandering in the desert on their way to the land of Israel, God sustained them with manna; "He gave them bread from the heavens to eat" (Psalm 78:24; Psalm 105:40; John 6:31.49-50).

God also sent them prophets, like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and many others. The prophets called the people back to covenant faithfulness by reminding them of God's word: "Thus says the Lord." Through the prophets, God promised a new covenant and new hearts for His people (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27). They were to abandon the worship of idols and truly belong to the one true God in fidelity, mercy, justice, and love (Hosea 2:21-22). God would provide a feast of the finest food and wine for His people, and destroy death forever (Isaiah 25:6-8).

B) The New Passover

***"Christ our Passover has been sacrificed.
Let us celebrate the feast ... with the unleavened bread
of sincerity and truth."*** I Corinthians 5:7-8

It is in Jesus Christ that all these promises of the Old Testament, and every longing of the human heart, are fulfilled. God's own Son took on our human nature to reconcile all humanity to God. He promises us everlasting life. The effective sign of this "new and everlasting covenant" is the Eucharist. Our conditions for sharing in this eternal life are Baptism into Christ and striving to follow Him Who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6).

Salvation from the power of sin and death are achieved through the redemptive sacrifice of the Son of God on our behalf. Jesus offered His life on the Cross in loving union with the will of His Father. He recreated human nature in the divine image and restored to us the life of grace that had been lost through sin.

Through His words, His deeds, and His very Person, Jesus is the perfect revelation of God. In His parables, His miracles, and His reconciliation of sinners, Jesus leads us to understand His true mission from the Father. This mission is to reconcile all of us in one Body to God through His sacrificial death and glorious resurrection.

As the Evangelists record in the Gospels, the Last Supper Jesus celebrated with His Apostles was linked with the annual Jewish celebration of the Passover meal. Each year the Jewish community would recall the event of liberation from slavery through God's intervention in the Exodus. The Gospels teach us that Jesus is the

true Lamb of God, Whose blood saves us from eternal death (John 1:29.36). As He is about to lead the new and perfect Exodus, the true Passover from death to life, Jesus gives us the new commandment: ***"Love one another as I have loved you. There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you"*** (John 15:12-14).

Through the gesture of washing His disciples' feet, Jesus showed them that love, service, and the Eucharist are intimately linked in His Kingdom. In His command, ***"Do this in memory of Me,"*** Jesus established the apostles as priests of the New Testament in His blood and so instituted the sacrament of Holy Orders. This sacrament of Orders exists for the sake of the Eucharist. As mentioned, He commissions all His Church to imitate the love we celebrate in the Eucharist, with each person fulfilling his or her own role in the Body of Christ (Romans 12:4-8; I Corinthians 12:4-11).

God had given Moses the Passover ritual by which the community of faith was to remember each year God's intervention in their history to bring salvation. This ritual was given before the Exodus event actually took place (see Exodus 12:1-20). In the same way, Jesus instituted the sacrament of the Eucharist at His Last Supper the night before the historical event of salvation took place with the sacrifice of Calvary on Good Friday afternoon. The Catholic Church has celebrated this new Passover in the Eucharist, without interruption, for almost twenty centuries, in obedience to the word of Jesus: ***"Do this in memory of Me"*** (Luke 22:19; I Corinthians 11:22-26).

C) History and Ritual

The Eucharist makes present in space and time the actions of the eternal Son of God done almost twenty centuries ago in a specific culture and time. Therefore, we are bound to certain specifics in our celebration of His mysteries. For instance, Jesus used unleavened bread and grape wine at the Last Supper. So we also use unleavened bread and grape wine as the elements which are transformed by the action of Christ Himself into His Body and Blood.

It is certainly true that the Church has changed some aspects of the *rituals*

celebrating the sacraments down through the centuries. One such series of changes took place after the Second Vatican Council, although there have been many changes throughout the history of the Church. However, the *essence* of the sacraments, established by Christ, does not change.

The liturgy is a vital source of the unity of the Church. Therefore, only the supreme authority of the Church (the Pope), under the guidance of the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus, may establish liturgical changes. The Church herself provides options for variations within the rituals. These options may be chosen at the discretion of the celebrant, again with the purpose of assisting a particular congregation to celebrate the mysteries of Christ more fully.

The liturgy is the solemn repetition of what Jesus Himself has done for our salvation. So liturgical change is never done just for the sake of novelty or variety. Rather, it is undertaken carefully in order to make the timeless mysteries of Christ more accessible and understandable in the changing conditions of human history and cultures. This is aimed at fostering the unity for which Christ prayed at the Last Supper (John 17:21). In other words, the *ritual* of the celebration can be changed by the authority of the Church to help people appreciate the *essence* of what is being celebrated.

D) Food for the Journey

**The Eucharist, as Christ's saving presence
in the community of the faithful and its spiritual food,
is the most precious possession which the Church can have
in her journey through history.**

(John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n. 9)

Salvation history as well as the life of the Church culminate in the Eucharist. The Eucharist is truly Jesus Christ Himself, present in His Body and Blood, soul and divinity. Through the ministry of the priests of the new covenant, empowered by Him sacramentally to celebrate His mysteries, the one perfect and all-sufficient sacrifice of the Cross is made present in the created world throughout space and time. It is an abiding consolation for us on our pilgrim journey, giving us strength

to persevere in faith, hope and charity on our pilgrimage of faith. This pilgrimage is the final Passover of the Church to the promised land of heaven, where one day we hope to meet the Lord face to face (I Corinthians 13:12). Pope John Paul wrote (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n. 20):

The Eucharist is truly a glimpse of heaven appearing on earth. It is a glorious ray of the heavenly Jerusalem which pierces the clouds of our history and lights up our journey ... it spurs us on our journey through history and plants a seed of living hope in our daily commitment to the work before us. Certainly the Christian vision leads to the expectation of “new heavens” and “a new earth” (*Rev* 21:1), but this increases, rather than lessens, our sense of responsibility for the world today. I wish to reaffirm this forcefully at the beginning of the new millennium, so that Christians will feel more obliged than ever not to neglect their duties as citizens in this world. Theirs is the task of contributing with the light of the Gospel to the building of a more human world, a world fully in harmony with God's plan.

II. The Mystical Body of Christ: Unity in Love

In the human nature that He united with Himself, the Son of God redeemed humankind. He made possible the transformation of each person into a new creation by overcoming death through His own death and resurrection (*Galatians* 6:15; *II Corinthians* 5:17). Our first entry into this new life takes place through Baptism into Christ. As we are given to drink of the one Spirit through Baptism (*I Corinthians* 12:13), we truly die to our old selves and rise into the new life of Christ. We become that new creation in Him. For each of us, Baptism is our personal sharing in the Paschal Mystery, where we pass from death to life and are made anew in the image of our Redeemer (see *Romans* 6:3-11). In Baptism, we are “incorporated” into Christ – literally, made a part of His Body, which is the Church, the continuation of the Incarnation throughout space and time. The Church is a Mystical Body animated by the Holy Spirit and made one in the love of God.

The Eucharist is then both a sign of the unity of the people of God and truly brings it about. The bread and wine we use, in commemoration of the Last Supper, are

themselves signs of both nourishment and unity: many grains of wheat and many grapes go to form this “one bread and one cup.” As we are each united to the Lord in His Body, we are also united to one another through this Holy Communion. As mentioned, Jesus had prayed at the Last Supper “*that all may be one*” (John 17:21). This unity is the eternal plan of God the Father, realized through the saving work of His Son, united in love by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

IV. The Fruits of the Eucharist

In Holy Communion, we are made one with Christ through His sacred Body and Blood. This is what the word “communion” means: “one with.” Through this sacred Communion, we are drawn more deeply into the divine life of the Trinity, first given to us in Baptism. The life of the Holy Spirit grows within us, and so we are renewed in the fruits of the Spirit: “*love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faith, mildness, and chastity*” (see Galatians 5:22-23).

1) Growth in Virtue: The reception of the Eucharist makes us grow in faith, hope and charity; and in particular, charity. The Eucharist is the Sacrament of Love. The perfect love of Jesus was shown in His saving self-sacrifice on the Cross. He offered His life to bring salvation and mercy to all. Thus, in sharing in the life of our Savior, we grow in charity, the selfless love that wills the good of another person as if it were our own. Charity is the love meant when Jesus said, “*Love your neighbor as yourself*” (Matthew 22:39).

2) Called to Service: Sharing in the Eucharistic banquet gives us both the reason and the means for serving our brothers and sisters in need, for fulfilling our vocations in life, and for living in holiness and goodness. With the Christ-life strengthened within us, we are to strive to imitate Him as closely as possible in our daily living, including service to the poor and needy. This communal dimension of the Eucharist is a vital part of its meaning. Pope John Paul pointed this out in a striking passage in *Mane Nobiscum Domine* (n. 28):

Can we not make this *Year of the Eucharist* an occasion for diocesan and parish communities to commit themselves in a particular way to responding with fraternal solicitude to one of the many forms of poverty present in our world? I

think for example of the tragedy of hunger which plagues hundreds of millions of human beings, the diseases which afflict developing countries, the loneliness of the elderly, the hardships faced by the unemployed, the struggles of immigrants. These are evils which are present – albeit to a different degree – even in areas of immense wealth. We cannot delude ourselves: by our mutual love and, in particular, by our concern for those in need we will be recognized as true followers of Christ (cf. *Jn* 13:35; *Mt* 25:31-46). This will be the criterion by which the authenticity of our Eucharistic celebrations is judged.

Similarly, Pope Benedict stated in his homily for Corpus Christi in 2011:

Those who recognize Jesus in the sacred Host, recognize him in their suffering brother or sister, in those who hunger and thirst, who are strangers, naked, sick or in prison; and they are attentive to every person, they work in practice for all who are in need.

3) Unity in Diversity: The virtue of charity establishes a relationship of unity in love. Because the Eucharist recalls and makes present to us the most perfect act of charity, the Eucharist is ultimately directed towards unity. After St. Paul has discussed the institution of the Eucharist in I Corinthians, he reminds the Christian community in Corinth: *“The body is one and has many members, but all the members, many though they are, are one body; and so it is with Christ”* (I Corinthians 12:12). To the Christians in Rome, Paul wrote: *“Just as each of us has one body with many members, and not all the members have the same function, so too we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually members of one another”* (Romans 12:4-5).

Although we have diverse gifts and different roles in the life of the Church, we are brought together in the one Spirit of Christ to build up His Body on earth as we offer our gifts and fulfill our roles for the common good of the Church and of the human family.

4) Transcendent Unity in Grace: The unity brought about through being joined to Christ in the Eucharist transcends even space and time. As the Prefaces of the Mass instruct us: “We join the angels and the saints” in praise and thanksgiving to God. At the Mass, prayers are always offered for those who have died as well,

since by His glorious Cross, Christ has won salvation for all.

5) Remission of Venial Sin: Reception of the Eucharist with sincere contrition remits venial sins, as Christ fills the soul with His presence. This grace also assists and strengthens us to resist sin in the future. However, because serious or “mortal” sin breaks the unity to which the Eucharist is directed, any such grave sins must first be forgiven in the Sacrament of Penance before the individual may worthily share in the Eucharist as one in the state of grace.

6) Strength of Soul: Countless Catholic men and women across 2,000 years would tell us with joy and fervor the great consolation they have received from Jesus in the Holy Eucharist. Many of the saints have handed on to us the solace and strength they gained through the presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament; multitudes of other believers also shared in the same heavenly food. He Who is the Bread of Life invites us to His Eucharistic table; there, He feeds us with His own Body and Blood. He Who is our Lord and Savior is also our spiritual food and drink that we might have strength for the journey of life (see I Kings 19:5-8). Receiving our Lord in the Eucharist is the closest possible union with Him while on earth. Pope John Paul put it strikingly: “We can say not only that *each of us receives Christ*, but also that *Christ receives each of us*” (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n. 22).

***“Come to Me, all you who are weary and find life burdensome,
and I will refresh You. Take My yoke upon Your shoulders and learn from Me,
for I am gentle and humble of heart.
Your souls will find rest, for My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”***

Matthew 11:28-30

V. Sacrifice and Thanksgiving

The summit of the Church's life and worship, therefore, is the celebration of the Eucharistic Liturgy, often simply called the "Mass." The faithful who have been baptized into Christ are called to be a Eucharistic people. In the words of Saint Paul, they are to “*give thanks always and for everything*” (Ephesians 5:20). This exhortation is affirmed in the Preface of every Mass: “*Father, all-powerful and ever-living God, we do well always and everywhere to give you thanks through*

Jesus Christ, our Lord.” The word "eucharist" comes from the Greek *eucharistein*, meaning literally "thanksgiving." And so, we come to the Eucharistic mystery to celebrate our redemption. Our celebration is as rich and fruitful as our awareness of God's love in our lives, and our capacity to “give thanks always and for everything.”

As we come to the Eucharist, we are thankful for all things, but primarily for the gift of salvation and new life in Christ. In Him all things are made new (Revelation 21:5). In the Eucharistic liturgy, therefore, we offer ourselves in sacrifice along with Christ to the Father. In turn, we receive from the Father through Christ the gift of an ever-greater share in divine life.

A) The Eucharist As Prayer

The Mass is the greatest prayer of the Church. It contains within itself not only the Lord's Prayer, taught to us by Jesus Himself, but also all five of the types of prayer. The Mass is in its entirety a prayer of Thanksgiving. It contains many prayers of Petition for ourselves and Intercession for the Church and the world. It expresses Contrition for our sins. And finally, it is a prayer of Love and Adoration for God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Since the Eucharist is such a prayer, its worthy and adequate celebration requires that the participants be truly prayerful people. This spirit of prayer is fostered and nourished by a regular, daily pattern of prayer and devotion in one's life. A well-ordered prayer life, like the Church's own celebrations of liturgy and devotion, flow from the Eucharist and lead us back to it.

Thus private prayer, praying with the Scriptures, the Rosary, meditation on the lives of the saints and the writings of spiritual authors, spontaneous prayers from the heart, or just spending time in quiet with the Lord, are great helps to Eucharistic devotion. They are never alternatives or substitutes for participation in the Eucharistic liturgy, but serve to increase our hunger and thirst for the One Who alone satisfies the human heart. In this way, too, the Eucharist is absolutely central to the life of the Church, the Body of Christ.

In particular, John Paul invited us movingly to contemplate the Eucharist through the eyes of “Mary, Woman of the Eucharist” (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, ch. 6). Mary anticipates each believer’s “Amen” in receiving Communion by her “fiat” to the angel Gabriel – “Let it be done as you say” – in order to welcome the Incarnate Son of God into her person. She was the first “tabernacle” as she bore the Word made flesh in her womb. Her obedient faith allowed her to share in her Son’s mission by her compassion, even to the point of standing by the Cross, as we do sacramentally at every Mass. The Body of Christ we receive in the Eucharist is the same body, now glorified, that Mary held in her arms in Bethlehem at His birth, and again on Calvary after His death. John Paul writes:

What must Mary have felt as she heard from the mouth of Peter, John, James and the other Apostles the words spoken at the Last Supper: “This is my body which is given for you” (*Lk 22:19*)? The body given up for us and made present under sacramental signs was the same body which she had conceived in her womb! For Mary, receiving the Eucharist must have somehow meant welcoming once more into her womb that heart which had beat in unison with hers and reliving what she had experienced at the foot of the Cross.

B) The Eucharist and the Ordained Priesthood

The Church founded by Christ is by its very nature a sacramental Church. The sacramental system has its foundation in the Incarnation, in which the Eternal Word of God took flesh. This mingling of the divine and the human, of the supernatural and natural orders, is prolonged in the sacraments. Natural realities (bread and wine, water, oil, words, gestures of touch) are used to communicate realities entirely beyond the power of nature: the gifts of grace.

Christ Himself continues this saving work in a public way through the ministry of His priests. Through the sacrament of Holy Orders, they are conformed to the very Person of the Son of God and are forever changed. The specific functions or roles of those in Holy Orders are secondary to this new identity and sacramental conformity to the Person of Jesus, the one true Priest. While the whole People of God is made sharers in the mission of Jesus as Priest, Prophet, and King, those receiving the sacrament of Orders are dedicated to the public ministry of Christ in the Church. They are given a share in Christ’s priesthood that differs not only in

degree, but in kind, from the common priesthood of all the faithful. This difference is a call to a specific identity with Christ, Who came not to be served, but to serve (Mark 10:45).

The sacrament of Orders has three degrees: bishops, priests and deacons. Bishops and priests as their assistants are especially empowered, in the Name of Christ, to forgive sins, to heal the sick, and to make present the sacrifice of Christ sacramentally in the Eucharist. As mentioned, this sacramental power was given in His command to the Apostles at the Last Supper: ***“Do this in memory of Me.”*** This sacramental power is handed on in Holy Orders to those chosen by Christ for public ministry as priests in His Church. This “doing” is not their own; it is Christ, conforming them to Himself, working in them. As He reminds the apostles: ***“It was not you who chose Me, it was I Who chose you to go forth and bear fruit”*** (John 15:16).

The Eucharist is absolutely central to the life of the Church. Since only a priest has the power from Christ the High Priest (Hebrews 7:17-28) to make Christ sacramentally present in the Eucharistic species, the sacramental priesthood is essential to the life of the Catholic Church. Like all other aspects of the Church’s life, Holy Orders too exists for the sake of the Eucharist.

VI. The Real Presence

Jesus Christ Himself is truly present in the Eucharist. He is present in the Mass in four ways:

- *in the assembly* gathered in His Name. They are members of His Mystical Body, and He Himself said that ***“wherever two or three are gathered in My name, there am I in their midst”*** (Matthew 18:20).
- *in the Scriptures* as they are proclaimed. Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. Thus, all the words of the Scriptures somehow refer to Him, and Christ speaks through them to His people. ***“God’s word is living and effective, sharper than***

any two-edged sword” (Hebrews 4:12). Thus the proclamation of the Scriptures, the inspired Word of God, is integral to the celebration of the Mass. No other writings, no matter how eloquent or moving, can be substituted for the very Word of God.

- *in the person of the priest*, ordained to public ministry of the Church. In the liturgy, the priest acts not on his own behalf, but *in persona Christi capitis* (“in the person of Christ the Head”). Thus the priest can be said to bring Christ to the people, and the people to Christ, in the exercise of his ministry in the Eucharistic celebration.
- *in the Eucharistic species* in a pre-eminent way: Christ is present truly, really, and substantially through the miracle called “transubstantiation.” The very substance of the bread and wine are changed into Christ’s Body and Blood. Christ is present whole and entire, from the consecration of the species until the forms of bread and wine no longer subsist, in each of the species and in each of their parts.

This real presence is not a local presence, as if Jesus were here and nowhere else; rather, the whole Christ is present in every consecrated Host and in every tabernacle throughout the world. Nor is it the same kind of physical presence as we are present in our bodies. The breaking of the bread does not somehow “divide Christ.”

This is a mystery of which the Council of Trent confessed: “*We can hardly find words to express this way of existing.*” Pope Paul VI explained it in these words: “*After the change of the substance or nature of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, nothing remains of the bread and wine but the appearances, under which Christ, whole and entire, in His physical ‘reality’ is bodily present, although not in the same way as bodies are present in a given place*” (Paul VI, *Mysterium fidei*, §45).

The presence of Christ in the Eucharist is not merely symbolic, nor does it depend upon the belief or will of the congregation. Rather, this presence manifests the fidelity of the Lord Who promised to be with us until the end of the world (Matthew 28:20).

Thus the glorified body of the risen Lord is truly and personally present, having transcended all boundaries of space and time. In this way, the same Christ is present everywhere the Blessed Sacrament is. He is wholly present under either the species of bread or the species of wine, or any portion thereof, after they have been consecrated. This Real Presence is a mystery beyond human comprehension. But it is given to us in the certitude of faith by the One Who plainly said: ***“This is My body; this is My blood”*** (Mark 14:22-24 and parallels).

VII. The Eucharist and Liturgy

***“They recounted what had happened on the road
and how they had come to know Him
in the breaking of bread.”***

Luke 24:35

A) The Three-Fold Mission of Christ

As mentioned, the entire Church shares in the three-fold mission of Christ, Who is Priest, Prophet, and King. This mission is fulfilled through the diverse ministries and gifts of the Body of Christ. But it remains true that each member of the Church is called and empowered to offer worship and sacrifice (the priestly role of sanctification); to speak God’s Word of truth in the contemporary situation of the world (the prophetic role of teaching); and to serve the needs of others in love (the kingly role of service).

The Church fulfills its mission of living the holiness of God in the world in many ways: individual and communal prayer, service to the poor and needy, faithful marriage and family life, education, health care, and so on. Unique among these ways of showing forth the holiness of God is the sacred liturgy. Christian liturgy is just that: the exercise of the very priesthood of Christ Himself. Through signs, gestures, and words accessible to our senses, the sanctification of humankind is both signified and brought about. The liturgy is the whole of the public worship of God carried on by the Body of Christ, “Head and members” – Jesus and us.

The celebration of each of the sacraments is a liturgical action. Liturgy also

encompasses the other main form of prayer in the Church, the Liturgy of the Hours, in which all are invited to participate. However, the Eucharistic celebration in which the community of faith (visible and invisible) offers praise to God for salvation in Christ is the pre-eminent form of the liturgy of the Church.

The two main parts of the Mass are the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Christ, the Word made flesh, is present in both aspects. Thus these two parts of the Mass – the table of the Lord’s Word and the table of His Body and Blood – form one act of worship.

B) Liturgical Participation: Full, Conscious, and Active

The word “liturgy” is taken from the Greek word that literally means “work of the people.” Liturgy is not something done only by priests and deacons, lectors and cantors, servers and extraordinary ministers. Liturgy is the responsibility of every person present. In fact, every liturgy is by definition a celebration of the entire Church –not only this congregation, but the whole Mystical Body throughout the world and throughout history.

By its very nature, liturgy demands full, conscious and active participation. “Full” means that each person does all those things, and only those things, which belong to his or her proper role in the liturgical assembly. For each person, regardless of having any particular liturgical function, and more important than any such function, full participation means responding to the prayers, attentively listening to the readings, and above all, having a prayerful disposition at this great mystery. “Conscious” means that we are aware of what we are doing and its meaning. Our attention is to be focused on what we are hearing, singing, saying; that we are present, not only in body, but that our worship is truly done ***“in spirit and in truth”*** (John 4:24).

“Active” means that we can in no way be mere passive spectators. Liturgy is not like a play or concert or sporting event in which we merely view the action. Liturgy demands participation by each person, or it simply is not all it is meant to be. Active participation means joining the public prayers (Creed, Lord’s Prayer, responses); singing the hymns and responses; and being truly, personally involved in the event taking place.

The Church wishes for all of the faithful, if they have the proper dispositions, to receive Communion each time they participate in the Mass. One may receive Communion for a second time if this second reception takes place as part of the person's participation in Mass (*Code of Canon Law*, c. 917). In danger of death, a Catholic may receive the Eucharist for even a third time the same day (*Code of Canon Law*, c. 921 §2).

VIII. Some Practical Matters

*“Once you know all these things,
blest will you be if you put them into practice.”*

John 13:17

The Mass is the very sacrifice of Calvary to which we are made present, as space and time are transcended. Given this awesome reality, and the need for “full, conscious and active participation,” a few practical ideas can be shared.

A) Recollection: It can be difficult to pray in our busy world. It is doubly hard to “pray on demand,” to be in the proper frame of mind just because it is time for Mass. For this reason, it is important to take some time to be recollected. Some choose to do this by coming early for Mass to pray. Others may do so at home before Mass. Some find formal prayers (like the Rosary or devotion booklets) a help in readying themselves for this great encounter with Christ.

Experiment with various ways to find what works best for you. Even simple things can help greatly: for instance, try reading the readings for the Sunday Mass instead of the Sunday paper before Mass; leave the radio in the car off on the way to church; pray to the Holy Spirit for the gift of recollection. One's personal preparation for participation in the Mass is to be done with courtesy and respect for the preparation of others as well. The greatest help to recollection is a regular, daily prayer life, so that one comes ready to meet Jesus Who is no stranger to us.

B) Dress: Part of this preparation for this great meeting with our Savior involves our dress. Dressing in one's “Sunday best” still has an important part in our

approach to the Eucharist. This is part of the reason for the priest's vestments: to remind us that we are stepping outside of the ordinary routines of our lives for the sacred encounter that gives our life as believers its meaning. As a congregation, our dress, while being comfortable, should reflect reverence and the importance of the event.

Without going into detail, it is perhaps sufficient to consider how you might dress for a meeting with a prospective employer, or for a wedding or a funeral, or some other important and dignified occasion. All in all, good taste and a simple dignity should prevail. This is even more important for those who take a special and visible role in the celebration (lectors, ushers, cantors, musicians, extraordinary ministers, servers).

C) Participation: again, liturgy is not something we simply observe; active participation is necessary. Each person present is to take responsibility for making the liturgy truly prayerful, by singing, responding, and joining in the public prayers. Mass may seem boring if we take no active part in it.

D) Signs of Reverence: When one enters or leaves the church, it is proper to genuflect fully on one knee towards the Lord present in the tabernacle. Those whose physical condition does not allow genuflection make a bow instead. These are signs of reverence to Christ and a gesture of faith in the Real Presence. Some make a Sign of the Cross in addition to this, which is appropriate though not necessary. The genuflection, bow, Sign of the Cross, and any other such gesture of reverence should never be done mechanically or even superstitiously, but rather thoughtfully and carefully, conscious of their meaning as signs of greeting and love for Christ.

A tradition that many Catholics have is uttering a silent prayer at the elevations of the Host and Chalice. At the elevation of the Host, the words of Thomas the Apostle: "My Lord and my God!"; and at the elevation of the Chalice: "My God and my all!" These are not formally part of the rite, but can be helpful professions of faith for some individuals.

E) Reception of Communion: One of the most important signs of reverence is the "Amen" when receiving Communion. Spoken in response to the words, "The

Body [Blood] of Christ,” this “Amen” is a personal profession of faith and love in the Real Presence. It should be spoken clearly and with sincere conviction. In addition, the norm in the dioceses of the United States is for each communicant to make a reverent gesture of a bow of the head at the words, “The Body [Blood] of Christ” before receiving the Eucharist.

The communicant is free to choose to receive either on the tongue or in the hand. In receiving in the hand, one is to hold one palm upward in the other; one should never take the host in the fingers directly from the minister unless a disability requires this; rather, we truly receive the sacred Host as a Gift, with open hands. The Host is to be put reverently into one's mouth whole, not broken in the hand. After receiving the Host, one steps aside and immediately consumes the Host.

In receiving on the tongue, the communicant responds “Amen” and then extends the tongue from the open mouth and remains still and waits for the minister to place the Host on the tongue.

One is also free to receive under both forms, if the Precious Blood is offered to the congregation. This reception of the Lord under both the forms of bread and wine manifests a more complete sign of Communion with His Body and Blood. However, one is not bound to receive under both forms. Nor does one somehow receive “less” of Christ under only one form. Indeed, some individuals may need to receive only under one form or the other for medical reasons. Obviously, one is to be careful that none of the Precious Blood is spilled, as one is diligent not to handle the sacred Host carelessly.

F) The Eucharistic Fast: As a sign of desire for the Bread of Life, individuals normally are to observe a one-hour fast before receiving Communion. This is more fruitful for those who make a conscious choice to create within themselves a longing for Christ to come to fill their emptiness.

This fast requires that one take no food or drink, other than water if necessary, for one hour prior to receiving Jesus in Communion. Though not specifically mentioned, chewing gum and smoking are fitting items for this fast also. At any rate, it is never appropriate to chew gum in church. Medication is excluded from the fast.

Those who are sick and receive Communion at home or in the hospital are not bound strictly by this one-hour fast. They are asked to fast for 15 minutes if possible; however, even this is mitigated in cases of necessity. Those visiting or ministering to the sick may also receive at this time, even if they have not fasted, although they are also free to forgo Communion at this time.

G) Those Who May Receive: The reception of Communion is a celebration of one's belonging to Christ and the Church in a formal way. It is an action that signifies an existing oneness in faith, sacramental life, and worship. It is a testimony that the one receiving believes and accepts all that the Catholic Church believes and teaches. For this reason, non-Catholics generally cannot receive Communion in the Catholic Church.

An exception to this may be made in the case of non-Catholic Christians who meet all of the following conditions: they are in danger of death or in other grave necessity; they cannot approach a minister of their own community; they ask for the Eucharist on their own initiative; they manifest a Catholic faith in the Eucharist; and they are properly disposed (*Code of Canon Law*, c. 844, §4).

Given these very specific conditions, a general invitation for an entire congregation of mixed church denominations to come forward to receive Communion (as at a wedding or a funeral, for instance) is not proper. This is not discrimination on the part of the Church. The Eucharist is indeed open to everyone, but not open unconditionally. The Church is simply setting certain conditions for participation in this mystery, as we often do in families, corporations, secular organizations, and society in general.

In setting these conditions on reception of the Eucharist, the Church is also being fair to those who are not Catholic. It spares them the compromise of their own principles and beliefs in saying that they belong to the Catholic Church and believe with Catholic faith when, in fact, they do not.

Those who have made their First Communion are obliged to participate in Mass on every Sunday and holy day of obligation, joining the redeemed community in thanksgiving for salvation and intercession for the world, unless impeded by illness

or other genuinely grave necessity. They are obliged to receive our Lord in Holy Communion at least once per year, preferably during the Easter Season.

H) Penance and the Eucharist: those who are conscious of grave (mortal) sin are not to approach the Eucharist without first having been reconciled with God and the Church through the Sacrament of Penance. In cases of genuine necessity, the person is to make a sincere Act of Contrition with the intention of receiving the Sacrament of Penance as soon as possible.

Those who have missed Mass on Sunday or a holy day of obligation, by their own free choice, whether once or often, are to be reconciled through Penance before returning to the reception of Communion. On the other hand, those who were unable to attend due to illness or truly unforeseen and insurmountable circumstances are not guilty of sin and thus do not need to confess before approaching the Eucharist.

I) On Leaving Early: Without a grave reason, leaving church before the celebrant has exited is inappropriate, as we are present as a community to give thanks to God wholeheartedly. Those whose physical condition necessitates more time and space to safely exit are excepted. Rather than leaving early, it is much more fruitful to remain while the crowd thins out. Take this time to pray a prayer of thanksgiving, or a prayer for vocations, or for peace, or for one's family; there are many intentions for which to pray.

J) Talking and Other Distractions in Church: We come to celebrate our community and our faith in Christ. However, casual conversations about mundane matters before and during the liturgy in the worship area are inappropriate. These should take place in the gathering space or elsewhere. Genuine necessity or exercising liturgical functions are excepted. However, casual conversation is inconsiderate to those around us who are sincerely trying to pray, and a sign of a lack of the recollection necessary to fully participate in the liturgy.

***Lord Jesus Christ, You gave us the Eucharist
as the memorial of Your suffering and death.
May our worship of this Sacrament
of Your Body and Blood
help us to experience the salvation You won for us,
and the peace of the Kingdom, where You live and reign
with the Father and the Holy Spirit,
one God, forever and ever. Amen.***

K) Eucharistic Adoration: The Eucharist is spiritual food and drink; it finds its fullest meaning in the taking of Jesus into ourselves in Holy Communion. However, the Real Presence remains in the elements as long as they retain the “accidents” (appearance, shape, taste, etc.) of bread and wine. The practice of the reservation of the Eucharist began with the need to bring Communion as Viaticum to the dying. (Viaticum literally means “journey with you” in Latin, a reference to Jesus’ assistance to the dying in making their own Passover through death to life.) Since the Eucharist is truly Jesus Christ in His risen, glorified body, it is fitting to adore and worship Him in the Eucharistic species. Solemn exposition and Benediction are formal ways to foster this adoration of the Eucharistic Christ.

Visits to the Blessed Sacrament at other times are strongly encouraged. There, waiting for us, is our loving, merciful, compassionate God. He is full of wisdom, forgiveness, strength and goodness. Even if this visit is only a few minutes, there is no way to calculate its infinite value.

However, we recall that Christ gave us the Eucharist primarily as sacred food: ***“Take this, all of you, and eat it;” “take this, all of you, and drink from it.”*** Important and fitting as it is, adoration cannot replace full, conscious, and active participation in the Eucharistic assembly as the primary meaning of the institution of this great gift. Rather, adoration of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament will increase our hunger to truly share in the Eucharist, the Bread of Life.

IX. The Eucharist in the Words of the Second Vatican Council: A Summary

The doctrine on the Eucharist is simply and elegantly summarized in the “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) composed at the Second Vatican Council:

At the Last Supper, on the night he was betrayed, 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. ... The Church therefore earnestly desires that Christ's faithful, when present at this mystery of faith, should not be there as strangers or silent spectators. On the contrary, through a good understanding of the rites and prayers they should take part in the sacred action, conscious of what they are doing, with devotion and full collaboration. They should be instructed by God's Word, and be nourished at the table of the Lord's Body. They should give thanks to God, not only through the hands of the priest but also together with him, they should learn to offer themselves. Through Christ, the Mediator, they should be drawn day by day into ever more perfect union with God and each other, so that finally God may be all in all.

Sacrosanctum Concilium, § 47

Conclusion

It is never possible to express fully the mystery of the Eucharist. The thoughts and ideas shared in this booklet are admittedly incomplete. Yet it is hoped that they will be an aid to devotion to this great Sacrament of Christ's love, and a motive for growing in relationship with the Savior of the World. Those interested in further reading about the Church's understanding of the mystery of the Eucharist might begin with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, especially §§1322-1419. The

footnotes in the *Catechism*, as well as its index, can direct the reader to other sources as well. In addition, there are many, many other works of theology and spirituality that may deepen one's prayerful appreciation and participation in the Eucharist. To compile such a reading list is beyond the purpose of this booklet.

*We are God's children now;
what we shall later be
has not yet come to light.
We know that when it comes to light,
we shall be like Him,
for we shall see Him as He is.*

I John 3:2

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* concludes its discussion of the sacrament of the Eucharist in these words (§1405):

There is no surer pledge or clearer sign of this great hope in the new heavens and new earth “in which righteousness dwells” than the Eucharist. Every time this mystery is celebrated, “the work of our redemption is carried on” and “we break the one bread that provides the medicine of immortality, the antidote for death, and the food that makes us live forever in Jesus Christ.”

