

THE EUCHARIST

The sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation are considered initiation rites. As sacraments they not only signify, but actually bring about our unity with the Church and as such are moments in which we celebrate and experience salvation. In other words, if salvation is a process that includes people gathering together in a peaceful relationship, then Baptism and Confirmation signal that a person has now become a member of a group dedicated to following Jesus who preached and lived a life of peace.

Throughout these chapters we have pictured salvation as a process of overcoming that alienation from self, others, the world and God which we each experience and to which the Scriptures refer to as the wages of sin. This alienation or sinful state is overcome by a process of establishing peace, that right relationship with self, others and God. This establishment of peace means turning away from a life which destroys peace (sin). We believe that this is possible, but only possible with the help of God whose “creative movement” towards us calls and empowers us to live a new life of peace. This power to overcome sin and alienation is God’s gift (grace). It is a free and unmerited gift.

We believe that this was God’s purpose for our creation that we might live in this peace. In the Sunday Eucharist (Mass) we find this hope expressed in the Eucharistic prayer: “Lord, may this sacrifice, which has made our peace with you, advance the peace and salvation of all the world”. So when we do physically gather together for the Eucharist we experience a moment of salvation, a moment of peace. Brought together by the invitation of the Lord, we make the Church visible and ritually act out our faith that we were created to be a family under God -- we eat together. The sacred meal in which we partake is not meant to be simply a personal, individual experience, but a common meal to strengthen the Church, i.e., those called together by the Lord.

We need to gather often to celebrate this meal because salvation is a process, a process that unfolds in the moments of our daily lives. We need to come often into the presence of Jesus in this unique experience, because His presence in the Eucharist is a personal presence and personal relationships develop over time. They require personal contact. They require time to grow. And that is why the Church is so insistent that we come together to celebrate the Sunday Eucharist.

Note: We use two terms interchangeably when describing our celebration of the Lord’s Supper, i.e. the Mass and the Eucharist. Most older Catholics grew up with the term “the Mass”. This is a word which came from the old Latin dismissal rite: “*Ite, missa est*”, translated “Go, the Mass is ended” more literally “Go it is dismissed”. Just how this came to be a proper noun, I am not sure. Eucharist is the Greek word for “thanksgiving”. In Paul’s and Luke’s account of the Last Supper, Jesus first “gave thanks” and then proceeded with the meal. Early in the history of the Church it was used to describe the entire ritual surrounding the sacred meal celebrated as a “memorial of the Lord”. Baptism and Confirmation initiate us into the Church and welcome us to the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the final step in the initiation rite. In the ancient Church when Baptism and Confirmation were part of a single rite, (as they are now for adult converts), the

newly baptized emerged from the water, were sealed with the Holy Spirit and were welcomed immediately into the congregation to celebrate the Eucharist. This was their final moment of initiation or acceptance into the Church.

Understanding the Symbols of the Eucharist

If we in our day and age are to fully participate in the Eucharist, it is important that we understand the meaning of the Eucharistic rite, its history and especially its symbols. From the beginning, the Church understood the Eucharist as the celebration of the New Covenant established by Jesus at the Last Supper, a meal celebrated within the context of the Passover celebration.

The Old Covenant had established a relationship between the Israel and Yahweh, their God. In this new relationship God revealed Himself as a God who would save them from Egypt (the Exodus), make them into a new people and be with them throughout their history. The Israelites were to obey the Covenant Law -- to live a life in accordance with the will of God. Moses then ratified or sealed this Covenant on Mt. Sinai with a sacrifice involving blood and a meal. (explained more fully below)

It is important to remember that in the Last Supper, that final meal with the apostles, Jesus actually combined and commemorated these two foundational events in the history of Israel - the Exodus and the sealing the Covenant by Moses on Mt. Sinai. The Passover meal commemorated the Exodus, but during the meal Jesus transformed the ritual of the traditional breaking of the bread and the final cup of wine to communicate a radically new event - a New Covenant that was now being established and likewise a new Exodus was taking place.

Throughout their history, the Israelites had repeatedly broken the Covenant. Even in the best of times they could never succeed in doing the will of God completely. It was only in Jesus that we find one who always did the will of His Father -- "The Father and I are one".

So this New Covenant (Testament) was sealed not with the blood of bulls or in eating their flesh, but in the flesh and blood, that is, *the life of Jesus*. And now Jesus is sharing His life through a transformation of the symbols of the Passover Meal and the sealing of the Old Covenant.

The Church was later to recall this fact in the Epistle to the Hebrews. The author reminds us that the Old Covenant had been sealed with the blood of oxen and a common meal. But at the Last Supper Jesus had announced that a New Covenant, an everlasting covenant was now sealed by His life, death and resurrection, for the offering of His "body and blood" was the offering of Himself, the totality of His life.

In the Exodus the people believed that they had experienced salvation by the power of God, a God who saved them from slavery in Egypt and made them into a people, His own people. This was the event they celebrated annually in the Passover meal. In Jesus

we now experience a new kind of salvation a salvation from sin and death - a “new Exodus”. As the twelve tribes of Israel became the people of the Old Covenant, the twelve apostles were the symbolic foundation of the people of the New Covenant and it is this which we celebrate and make present again in every Eucharist.

To understand the meaning of the Eucharist it necessary to understand the implications of its historical setting. The Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke depict the Last Supper as a Passover meal, the Gospel of John does not. John speaks of a meal, but not a Passover meal. In any event, since the first three Gospels portray the Last Supper as a Passover meal, it was thus interpreted as the new Passover meal initiating a New Exodus, as a passage from a life threatened by sin and death into a new life, a sharing of the life of Jesus who conquered sin and death. The Eucharist is thus seen as the Passover meal now transformed with new meaning by Jesus.

Origins of the Passover Meal

After the Exodus the Israelites had combined and transformed the meaning of two feasts to commemorate their Exodus. These two formerly distinct feasts, passover (*pesah*) and unleavened bread (*massot or mazzoth*), may have been celebrated by their ancestors many years before the Exodus or were developed after their arrival in Canaan. In any event, they were to be reinterpreted and given new meaning in light of the Exodus experience.

Pesah (Passover) was originally a feast of a semi-nomadic people. In the area around Palestine there is no rain from April until October. When the rain ends in April, the grass turns brown and the herds must be moved up river beds and to other sources of water. Thus in April they had a feast as they began to move their flocks. They offered a newborn lamb or goat to God for the fertility of the flocks and praying that they would find pasture. This was called the feast of passover. The blood of the lamb or goat was smeared on the tent posts to ward off unseen evil spirits, then the lamb was eaten in a common meal as an act of community (*peace*) between the tribe and their God.

The Feast of the Unleavened Bread was also an April feast. As the people became settled in the Promised Land, agriculture became more important. Thus the Feast of the Unleavened Bread marked the beginning of the barley harvest. The seeds had been planted on October when the rains came and could be harvested sometime in April. For seven days the new grain was eaten as unleavened bread to break with the leaven of the previous year and to herald the beginning of the new. The grain was offered to God in thanksgiving for fertility.

Since both feasts occurred at nearly the same time in the Spring of the year, over time they were combined into an eight day feast. The actual process of this combination and celebration is complex, but the important point is that elements of these feasts were combined. They were used to celebrate the Exodus (Deut.16:1-8). The old rites were to be celebrated with new meaning and symbols and that meaning those symbols were explained in the story of the escape from Egypt as related in Chapter 12 of Exodus.

In the first centuries of Israelite history, the Passover was a family celebration. The lamb was slain by the father of the family and the ritual meal was eaten in the home. It was the father who explained to the family the meaning of the feast and its symbols. Later, by the seventh century, the lambs were killed only at the Temple in Jerusalem by Levites and the blood thrown before the temple altar by the priests. Now, not strictly a family feast, the Passover was celebrated by mixed groups of ten to twenty people. Guests were to bring four cups of red wine. The meal included bitter herbs to be dipped in sauce, unleavened cakes and the lamb. A blessing was said over the first cup of wine, followed by ritual washing of the hands and a prayer. At the passing of the second cup, the youngest son asked of the father the meaning of the feast. The father explained the unleavened bread as the bread taken by the people in their haste to leave Egypt and told the story of the lamb and blood as God had commanded on that first Passover. The father then said a blessing, broke the bread and gave it to the family, after which the lamb was eaten. Next a psalm was sung followed by grace over a third cup of wine. The fourth cup was accompanied by a final psalm. With a prayer of *peace*, the meal ended.

By the time of Jesus many in the great crowds that filled Jerusalem ate their meals apart from the temple area in homes of friends or in the large camps surrounding the city. But in all this the great sign was unity, the unity of the people brought about by the saving love of God in the Exodus and sustained over the centuries by the covenant love of God. *It was not a mere celebration of the past event*, but an act of faith, ritually expressing the belief that God was present even *now* making them His people. In and through the celebration of the ritual of the feast they participated in a special way in the unifying power of God which had brought them into being as a people and had sustained them throughout their history. It was the sacramental making present of the Exodus in their own lives.

The Meaning of Sacrifice in the Old Testament

Before we proceed further, some explanation of the meaning of sacrifice is necessary. The word sacrifice is connected with many important events in the OT and is sometimes used in the NT to describe the life and death of Jesus. We use it today in describing the Mass as a sacrifice. Unfortunately in modern times, the common understanding of the word bears little, if any, resemblance to its OT meaning. The results have been at best confusing and at worst devastating, especially in interpreting the meaning of the life and death of Jesus.

In popular modern usage the word sacrifice usually denotes something of value surrendered by an individual to attain some goal. We may think of human sacrifice where a person is said to “sacrifice his life for his country”. Or perhaps we think of such things as the Aztec rituals of human sacrifice where the beating heart of the victim was cut out and offered up to assuage the anger of the gods in what was called a “flowery death”. In any case, the object of sacrifice is often thought of as lost or destroyed through death. Because of the notion of loss and death, sacrifice evokes a note of sadness or suffering. This act of giving up or destroying is done because it is calculated that something of more

value will be obtained than what is lost. We say, for example, that a soldier may sacrifice his life to defend his country or a person may be willing to “sacrifice” a promotion to live in a community which is judged to be better for raising a family.

This common understanding is very nearly a complete contradiction of the original meaning of OT sacrifice. With this misunderstanding, the way we think of sacrifice in the OT and the sacrifice of Jesus in the NT can become distorted. Because ancient sacrifice could sometimes involve the offering of an animal, who in fact gave up its life, the essence of sacrifice was thought to be the act of “giving up”, which included the death of the victim.

However, the ancient meaning of sacrifice distinguishes itself from our modern concepts on nearly every point. In the OT, sacrifice always denotes a giving *to*, not a giving up. Of course there was something offered or given up, but the focus was not on the act of giving up something, but rather on the act of giving to or sharing something. Sacrifice was offered to God by the community, and was not necessarily only offered to receive something in return, but also to give thanks for gifts received, to celebrate joyful occasions and in instances where a meal was involved it provide a powerful, symbolic way to establish unity with God and with one another. Never sad, sacrifices were occasions of great communal joy and festivity. Not all sacrifice involved animals, but when the death of an animal was involved, the death or killing of the animal was not part of the sacrifice as such, but only a remote, necessary preliminary to the offering or meal. The “fact” of the death of the victim had no significance in any sacrifice.

Death itself was no more a part of the meaning of sacrifice, than it is a integral part of our Thanksgiving dinners or a steak dinner we might have for friends. Death in itself never effectuated anything. The stress on this point is intended, because it is central in efforts to correct certain erroneous notions of sacrifice, especially the sacrifice of Jesus considered in itself and in relation to its ritual memorial in the Lord’s Supper or Eucharist celebration.

Our English word sacrifice derives from the Latin. Any object that has been ritually given to a god was called *sacer*. It described persons, places, things, times, etc. set aside for use in worship. This process was called *rem divinam facere* (to make a thing belong to a god) or *sacrificare* (*fico* - to make, *sacer* - a gift to a god), i.e, to make gift to a god. Things so set apart were *sacra* or holy. *Sacrificium* referred to objects for the gods, especially vegetable and animal foods. Simply put, sacrifice meant to give something to god and, like all gift giving, it was a symbolic way of giving oneself to another, in this case to god. In OT thought, sacrifice was a way of having communion with God -- a way of establishing unity, that right relationship implied in the OT concept of *peace* (shalom).

There are two sacrificial traditions interwoven in Chapter 24 of Exodus. It is clear, however, that in the ratification of the covenant a blood ritual and a peace offering were the rituals symbolically used to express the meaning of the covenant and to make it binding. In Exodus 24:5, Moses orders the burnt offering and the peace offering (both animal sacrifices) to be prepared by the young men. As in all such animal sacrifices,

there was a special ritual for the disposition of the blood. Moses took half the blood and threw it against the altar. Then he again read the words of the covenant (the law) and the people repeated their pledge to do all these things that the Lord has commanded. Following this Moses sprinkled the remaining blood on the people.

To grasp the meaning and the power of these ritual acts, we must first realize that blood was regarded by the Old Testament people with awe and reverence - blood was holy. They understood blood as the “life of the flesh” as illustrated in Leviticus 17:14 - “for the life of every creature is the blood of it” (see also Gen 9:4 and Deut. 12:23). Blood was the symbol of life. For the ancient Semites blood and life were synonymous. Since God is the author of life, the blood belongs in a special way to God and, out of reverence, man must not eat of it.

The blood poured on the altar, (over which the presence of God “hovered”), did not signify death as a penalty paid to God for sin, but life liberated and offered or returned to God its author, which in turn established a life relationship with God. When sprinkled on the people, it was to signify that the partners to the covenant now share a common life, they become in a real sense blood brothers and sisters.

Moses announced that a new blood (life) relationship was now established between God and His people and the people with each other, so that they now became a family, a nation. It was a moment in which they experienced becoming one with God and with each other, it was therefore a moment of unity, of *peace* or *salvation*, the establishment of right relationships with God and with each other. The ancient greeting *shalom* was more than a hello, it was like a blessing, expressing a wish that the one addressed would experience the gift of *peace*. In later years the final authors of Genesis would depict this situation of *peace* as the state of Paradise intended by God for mankind from the moment of creation. The establishment of this *peace* in a world broken by sin was a moment of *salvation* experienced in the concrete.

Following the blood ritual, seventy representatives of the people ate a *peace offering* banquet together in the presence of the Lord. In this sacrifice, after the proper disposition of the blood, the choice parts of the animal were burned on the altar and thus given to God, while the remainder of the animal was consumed by the worshipers in the presence of God, which again symbolized the covenant union of *peace* with God and with each other.

In the ancient East the meal was a powerful sign of the sharing of life and creating or reinforcing the bonds of friendship. A stranger invited to a meal was, by that fact, under the protection of the host. Such invitations were not given lightly. Sharing food was truly a sharing of life, especially in the days before refrigerators. And so it was an experience of *peace* - the establishment and reinforcement of right relationships between the participants, which included God. In the OT faith it was, like the blood ritual, a moment of the experience and the celebration of *salvation* -- a unity among the people and with God. Certainly we too have all experienced such moments of unity, based on love, expressed and experienced in a meal.

The Eucharist in the Synoptic Gospels - The Last Supper

It was in the Passover setting that Jesus called His disciples together for the meal. As the Exodus experience had given a new symbolic meaning to the ancient feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread, so now Jesus, in like manner, would give new meaning to the familiar symbols of the Jewish meal within the context of the Passover.

As the meal progressed, Jesus evoked the new meaning and power of this meal. He began the meal proper with the traditional blessing at the breaking of the bread. Usually, the bread was passed from hand to hand in silence, everyone waiting for the head of the house to begin eating. But in this meal, the traditional silence was broken. As the bread passed from hand to hand, the voice of Jesus broke in: "This is my body, which is for you; do this as a memorial of me". And after all had eaten Jesus took up the final cup, the "cup of benediction". The meal was about to be ended. After saying the traditional blessing, Jesus gave this cup to His disciples and said, "This cup is the new covenant sealed in my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this as a memorial of me". The eating and drinking was a communion, a sharing together, in the sacrifice present before them -- the person of Jesus. Jesus was the perfect sacrifice in which they now partook in a sacramental way through the eating and drinking of the New Passover meal, the banquet of the New Covenant.

As Moses had sealed the Old Covenant with the blood ritual and a ritual meal (peace offering), Jesus now announces a New Covenant sealed with His blood (life) and with His body (life) presented as bread to be consumed in a ritual meal that brings unity (peace) between God and His people. The bread and wine of the Passover meal are now transformed and become the sacraments of His life-giving presence to those who believe.

By His words and actions, Jesus signaled that a new and everlasting Covenant was now being sealed between God and man. The people of Israel had constantly broken the Covenant with God and with each other, but now one man, Jesus, was the faithful one who always did the will of the Father and who lived the covenant to perfection. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus was the new sacrifice which sealed the New Covenant.

The following are the New Testament accounts of the Last Supper as translated in the New English Bible. They include St. Paul, Mark, Matthew and Luke. We begin with perhaps the oldest account given to us by St. Paul, written somewhere around 54 AD:

For the tradition which I handed on to you came to me from the Lord himself: that the Lord Jesus, on the night of his arrest, took bread and, after giving thanks to God, broke it and said: 'This is my body, which is for you; do this as a memorial of me.' In the same way, he took the cup after supper, and said: 'This cup is the new covenant sealed by my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this as a memorial of me.' For every time you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes. (1 Cor. 11:23-25)

During supper he took bread, and having said the blessing he broke it and gave it to them, with the words: 'Take this; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and having offered thanks to God he gave it to them; and they all drank from it. And he said, 'This is my blood, the blood of the covenant, shed for many. I tell you this: never again shall I drink from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.'
(Mark 14:22-24)

During supper Jesus took bread, and having said the blessing he broke it and gave it to the disciples with the words: 'Take this and eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and having offered thanks to God he gave it to them with the words: 'Drink from it, all of you. For this is my blood, the blood of the covenant, shed for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, never again shall I drink from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in the kingdom of my Father.' (Matthew 26:26-29)

Then he took the cup, and after giving thanks he said, 'Take this and share it among yourselves; for I tell you, from this moment I shall drink from the fruit of the vine no more until the time when the kingdom of God comes.' And he took bread, gave thanks, and broke it; and he gave it to them, with the words; 'This is my body.' (Luke 22:15-19)

(other ancient witnesses, i.e. Codex D, Old Latin, continue with verse 19b-*which is given for you . Do this in remembrance of me.* and in v. 20 the following: *In the same way he took the cup after supper, and said 'This cup, poured out for you, is the new covenant sealed by my blood.'*)

So when Jesus is saying that this is the blood of the New Covenant, he is saying that the new relationship with God has now been made possible not by the blood (life) of animals, but by His own blood (obedient life). Jesus is the link between God and man -- "The Father and I are one". And so when Jesus says "This is my blood," He is saying this is my life, you must drink my blood, i.e., you must take on my way of living which I offer you. To share the life of Jesus is to share the life of God and man united in the everlasting bond of love, which even death cannot conquer.

And when Jesus said, "Take and eat this is my body," it was at the moment in the Passover liturgy when the head of the house broke and distributed bread as a symbol of how he provided for his family. Jesus provides not bread but Himself for his followers. The word body in Greek (*soma*) does not mean simply the material body, but one's entire life, the whole human being with all of his history.

He is saying again, take on my way of living. A life of friendship and love which builds up a community of people sharing a life of ever-developing peace. The actual word which Jesus no doubt spoke in Aramaic is best translated "flesh", rather than the Greek

word body. Aramaic does not have the word “body”. In Aramaic, the term “flesh and blood” meant simply human life. This expression is used in John’s Gospel and we still use this expression today - “my children are my flesh and blood”.

It is also interesting to note that by the time of Jesus, Judaism had developed the idea that the most pleasing sacrifice to God was a life of obedience to will of God. And that absolute fidelity to God, even to the point of martyrdom, could be a source of salvation for others. Jesus would have been aware of this tradition. This is probably the best way to understand the term “sacrifice” in the context of the Last Supper.

With the twelve apostles as the representatives of the twelve tribes of the Old Covenant, Jesus was forming a new people, the Church. And the new law was to be his teaching, summarized in the two great commandments of the love of God and the love of neighbor. Again we see God acting in a powerful way to bring about a unity of people based on the bond of love. This is the constant “creative movement” of the Spirit of God in the lives of His people, a movement of reconciliation. A powerful call to turn from sinful destructive ways and live a new life of unity with others and with God.

The Eucharist in the Gospel of John

While all three Synoptic Gospels contain words of Jesus giving new meaning to the bread and wine of the Last Supper, John’s Gospel does not. In John’s version of a final meal or “last supper” (Ch 13), the definitive action of Jesus is the “washing of the feet”. It is suggested by some that John gives this emphasis on service as a reminder to the early Church that the celebration of the Eucharistic meal was not an end in itself, but was meant by Jesus to transform the lives of his disciples into a life of service to others as His life had been.

However there is a rich Eucharistic tradition in John’s Gospel. Chapter 6 describes several events which have also influenced how the Church understands the “real presence”. John begins by noting that the feast of Passover was near (v.4), thus placing what follows in the Passover context, much like the Synoptics. Next he recounts what has come to be called the “miracle of the loaves and fishes” (vs.5-13). In this event he writes: “Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks (eucharist), he distributed them to those who were seated.” Jesus fed the multitude with five barley loaves and two fish.

The next day Jesus tells them not to labor for the food that perishes (v.27), but that which gives eternal life. Mention is made of the manna in the desert as coming from heaven (v.31), but Jesus says “I am the bread of life; he who come to me shall not hunger and he who believes in me shall never thirst” (v.35). Later in the continuing discourse Jesus says:

I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from

heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.” (6:48-51)

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. (6:53-55)

Taken literally by the modern reader the saying is unusual, if not bizarre, even when Jesus goes on to explain that these are words of “spirit and life”(6:63). So what can these words mean? Certainly it is not magic. Certainly the bread and wine are not “changed” into physical flesh and blood. Ours is not the world of parables and symbolic sayings. We must try to understand how Jesus used these ways of speaking, ways somewhat foreign to our modern ears, but important to understand if we are to grasp His meaning.

The outline of Jesus’ teaching is something like this: The Father has life, I have life because of the Father, I am the bread of life and he who eats this bread will live forever.

You can almost hear Jesus saying: “Look, do you want to have life, eternal life? Then you must live as I live -- healing, forgiving, reaching out to sinners, obeying the will of God in every way. *You must make my life your life.* You must take on my life as you would food. Listen! I am the Bread of Life come down from heaven, not like the manna which your father ate and died. I am the Bread of Eternal Life. He who partakes of this bread -- he who eat my flesh and drinks my blood -- will have eternal life. I came for one purpose only, that you might have life. Do you get it?? Jesus had spoken in a similar way of Himself: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his word” (Jn. 4: 34). After the resurrection they understood that the life of Jesus overcame sin and death and that they too could share in this life if they believed and modeled their life after Him.

It is also important to note that when the Synoptic Gospels use the terms “body and blood” they used a Greek expression and a Greek concept. It signifies the *whole person*. Up to the time of Jesus, however, neither Hebrew or Aramaic had a word for “body”. And so “body and blood” was not a Hebrew idiom -- “flesh and blood” was the Hebrew idiom used to describe the whole person. We can recall in Chapter 16 of Matthew when Peter confessed that Jesus was the “Son of the living God”, Jesus replied: “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For *flesh and blood* has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (v.17). Jesus is saying that *no human person* has revealed this to Peter. We even use that expression today in referring to our children -- “they are my flesh and blood”. We understand this as meaning that our children spring from our life. They have received life from us. They are human beings like us.

Many commentators also see another dimension to these words of Jesus. Perhaps Jesus also meant them to understand “bread” as referring to revelation. Earthly bread, even the manna sent by God from heaven, can be eaten, but death still waits. The Word of God (revelation), however, gives eternal life. Even in the OT Moses had told them “...man

does not live by bread alone, but...man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord” (Deut.8:3). The Word of God gives life, and for John, Jesus is the eternal Word of God. Jesus used a variety of symbols when He spoke about Himself being the source of life -- He depicted Himself as the vine which is the source of life for the branches and He told the Samaritan woman that He was the living water. The message is clear, Jesus offers us His life and we must accept it in faith. This is our salvation.

The Eucharist in the Apostolic Church

We know very little about what the celebrations of the Eucharist looked like in the years immediately following the death and resurrection of Jesus. The NT writers recorded the command of Jesus to “do this in memory of me.” However, the exact way in which this was accomplished in the early apostolic community is not known, no complete description of these early memorial meals are left to us.

No doubt the calling to mind of Jesus in the “breaking of the bread” as mentioned in Acts 2:42; 2:46; 20:7 arose within the context of a meal shared by local groups of Christians. All Jewish meals were reverential and included blessings. The Sabbath meal taken on Friday night was especially so and could provide an appropriate setting for the early celebrations of the Eucharist. Sunday is also mentioned in Acts (20:7) as a time for “breaking bread” which could take place in the home (Acts 2:46). We can assume that the usual breaking and distributing of bread and the sharing of the cup of benediction were now transformed by the words and meaning of Jesus and that in them He became sacramentally present in His unifying, life-giving power to those present.

That the Risen Lord now became present to them in the “breaking of the bread” is made dramatically clear in Luke 24. Here Luke presents the women going to the tomb, finding the stone rolled away, and two men telling them that Jesus was risen. When the women told the apostles, the apostles did not believe them. Immediately following this, in verse 13, Luke tells the story of two disciples going to Emmaus. Jesus joined them on the road, but they did not recognize Him. However, when Jesus joined them for a meal and “took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them”, then their eyes were opened. The message is clear. The Risen Jesus is now present in the breaking of the bread.

It is hard for us to imagine how difficult it must have been to integrate the new meaning of old rituals within the spiritual life of the early Church. They were devout Jews. The word Christian had not yet been coined, much less had there developed a distinctive Christian format of worship. In those early years they still attended the synagogue and certainly did not reject their Jewish heritage with its distinctive way of life. That was to come, but not till near the end of the first century, after the death of most of those who had known Jesus during His lifetime.

It was only after the destruction of the Temple and the entire city of Jerusalem by Titus in 70 AD, Christians were forced to leave Jerusalem. This dramatic event and the growing hostility of the Jews toward the followers of Jesus, combined with the rapid expansion of the Church in land of the Gentiles, resulted in the growth of distinctively Christian beliefs and sacred rituals.

The Eucharist after Apostolic Times

One of the first full accounts of the early celebration of the Eucharist is given to us by Justin the Martyr (100-165). Justin was born of pagan parents in Samaria and converted to Christianity about the age of thirty. He was famous for his defense of Christian practices. In his *First Apology* he describes two kinds of Eucharistic services. First, one that took place annually with the baptism of new converts and secondly, one that was held weekly:

After we have baptized him who professes our belief and associates with us, we lead him into the assembly of those called the brethren, and we there say prayers in common for ourselves, for the newly-baptized, and for all others all over the world....After finishing the prayers, we greet each other with a kiss. Then bread and a cup of water and wine mixed are brought to the one presiding over the brethren. He takes it, gives praise and glory to the Father of all in the name of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, and gives thanks at length for the gifts that we were worthy to receive from Him. When he has finished the prayers and thanksgiving, the whole crowd standing by cries out in agreement: "Amen". "Amen" is a Hebrew word and means, "So may it be." After the presiding official has said thanks and the people have joined in, the deacons, as they are styled by us, distribute as food for all those present, the bread and the wine-and-water mixed, over which the thanks had been offered, and which they carry to those not present.

And this food itself is known amongst us as the Eucharist. No one may partake of it unless he is convinced of the truth of our teaching and is cleansed in the bath of Baptism....For not as common bread and common drink do we receive them; but even as Jesus Christ our Saviour, being made flesh by the word of God, took on flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise we are taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word....is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh. For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have delivered unto us what was imparted unto them; that Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks said: "This do in remembrance of Me, this is My Body"; and that after the same manner He took the cup, and giving thanks He said: "This is My blood"; and that He gave it to them alone.

This description was followed by a similar description of the Eucharist, but it indicates other elements contained our modern celebrations and it is noted that the usual day for the celebration of the Eucharist is now Sunday:

On the Day called the Day of the Sun, all of us who live either in cities or in the country gather in one place for a communal celebration....We hold

our common assembly on the Day of the Sun, because it is the first day on which God, having transformed darkness and matter, created the world; and on the same day, Jesus Christ our Saviour rose from the dead.

And then the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the Prophets are read, as long as time permits. After the reader has finished his task, the one presiding gives an address, urgently admonishing his hearers to practice these beautiful teachings in their lives.(the description continues as presented above.) ...Those who are well-to-do give whatever they will. What is gathered is deposited with the one presiding, who therewith helps orphans and widows...

It is interesting to note that in this early celebration of the Eucharist the chief features of the service have remained fairly constant to this day. He mentions the readings from the Old Testament, a reading from the “Memoirs of the Apostles” or “Gospels”, then a sermon, prayers, the offering of bread and of wine mixed with water by means of a formula in which the idea of thanksgiving (Eucharist) predominates, then communion and the sending of the Eucharist by the deacons to those who are absent. Belief in the real presence, articulated in the words of Jesus as His body and blood, is clearly stated. Finally, it is on the day of the Sun, Sunday, that the liturgy is celebrated in memory of the Lord’s resurrection.

For those interested in the historical development of the Eucharist I would suggest *Doors the Sacred* by Joseph Martos or Jungmann’s classic *The Mass of the Roman Rite*. Both available in the “Carlin Library”.

The Real Presence

Roman Catholic tradition has laid great stress on the “real presence” of Jesus in the Eucharist. Simply put, Catholics believe that in the Eucharistic meal, which includes the words of Jesus at the Last Supper -- “this is my body”, “this is my blood” -- , Jesus becomes really present, albeit sacramentally present, in the elements of that meal -- bread and wine. Before the celebration of the Eucharist we can speak of ordinary bread and wine, however, once this bread and wine becomes part of the Eucharistic celebration, it is no longer correct to speak of bread and wine, but now we speak of Jesus *really* present, not physically present, but really, sacramentally present.

This is not to deny other types of presence in the Eucharistic celebration, as Vatican II taught, Jesus is also present in the Scriptures, in the priest and in the assembled Church. Yet the presence in the bread and wine is unique, since it was specifically involved by Jesus in His reinterpretation of the Passover meal and the Covenant. Furthermore, He enjoins His disciples to “do this as a memorial of me”. This will be a powerful way in which He will become present to them, and throughout history to the Church, after His death and resurrection. The early Church spoke of His special presence in the “breaking of the bread”. He comes to us as food, a powerful symbol of life, the life He offers us which is our salvation.

As the Church has tried over the centuries to express in words (theologize about) the meaning of Jesus from His life and teachings, so too the Church has tried to understand and talk about what Jesus meant by His words at the Last Supper: “Take and eat this is My body”; “Take and drink this is My blood”. The Gospels do not record Jesus Himself giving an explanation. We can only surmise that the apostles and the early Church understood their significance in terms of the Passover and the sealing of the ancient Covenant with blood and a meal. Certainly the words of Jesus were never construed by the apostles or the early Church as a magical formula which changed bread into flesh and wine into blood in any physical sense. In any event, blood was taboo for the Jews and never in their wildest dreams would the apostles imagine that they were being asked literally to drink blood.

So what do we mean by real presence? How, indeed, is Jesus really identified with the bread and wine of the Eucharist? The early Christians did not seek a “logical” explanation as to whether and what kind of change takes place in the bread and wine. They were not Greek philosophers trying to determine the nature of reality, nor were they sacramental theologians. They were missionaries for Jesus, spreading the Good News that Jesus had conquered death and that through faith in Jesus they could share in His life.

When celebrating the Eucharist, they did not focus simply on the bread and wine. They understood the transformation of the symbols of Passover and Covenant within the entire context of the Last Supper. And they understood *that the real change that was envisioned by the Lord was to take place in their lives*. They understood Jesus as their food, their life. They had been transformed. They wanted others to be transformed. In the words of Paul they had become “the body of Christ”. Their focus was not on what possible change the words of Jesus had effected in the bread and wine, but what change had taken place in their lives, because of the words and life of Jesus which they recalled in the “breaking of the bread”. Their experience was not of bread and wine changing, but of their lives changing when they broke bread as Jesus did. No magic here. No need for “scientifically or philosophically” investigating the bread and wine or the words of Jesus. Just life. New life.

Transubstantiation

However, as time went on an understanding of the implications of the words of Jesus for the bread and wine somehow became a “task” for the theologians of the Church. The focus of study shifted from what Jesus was trying to communicate through His reinterpretation of the Covenant and the Passover meal, to a focus on the elements of bread and wine. It was an effort to understand what “change” might take place in them because of the words of Jesus. The context and symbolism which gave the Last Supper its meaning was largely set aside. Furthermore, the focus of “change” shifted from a change or transformation in the lives of the people, to a focus on the change or transformation of the bread and wine. This change of focus was unfortunate, but it happened.

The history of this effort is too long to recount here. In the seventh and eight centuries competing theologians proposed types of presence ranging from gross physical types (bleeding hosts) to merely symbolic types. Finally, in 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council proposed the concept of *transubstantiation* using Greek philosophy. For medieval theologians, the locus of understanding had shifted from the rich Hebrew symbolism of the Passover and the sealing of the Covenant to the categories of Greek logic and philosophy. The Greek philosopher Aristotle could analyze a tree and make a distinction between what it was, *its substance*, and what it looked like, its *accidents* -- height, color, smell, etc.. The accidents could change, while the substance remained the same, for example, a tree may lose its leaves in the Fall, but it remains a tree.

Applying this to the real presence in the Eucharist, they explained that at the words of consecration (this is my body, this is my blood) a real change took place in the bread and wine, not a change in the accidents -- the appearance of color, taste, weight, etc. --, these were the same, but a change in the substance -- the reality under the appearances. St. Thomas would note that while we can speak of change, this change is only analogous to any “change” we experience in ordinary life (SS TIII, q.76, a.8). In others words we are in the realm of mystery where words ultimately fail us.

Thus, in Catholic theology, it was no longer true to say that this was ordinary bread, for the substance was now the body and blood (person) of Jesus. This was a unique twist. In the world of trees, the accidents could change - leaves change color, etc. - while the substance, tree, would remain the same. Here, however, here the substance was understood to change -- no longer bread and wine, but the body and blood of the Lord -- while the accidents -- taste, weight, color -- remained the same. This became the famous doctrine of *transubstantiation*, which is still the official “explanation” today.

Another Approach

As we mentioned above, the modern mind does not easily refer to the distinctions of Greek philosophy (substance and accidents) to interpret reality in ordinary life. Not that these distinctions are without merit, they simply are not part of our everyday approach to reality. Herein lies the problem: if our theology has no analogy or easy relationship to the experiences of ordinary life, it can lose its power to communicate. How can we understand the words and actions of the Last Supper today? What are our options?

One option or approach (not an explanation) taken by modern theologians examines first, the nature of “personal presence” and secondly, the various ways that this “personal presence” is made real or transmitted through various objects which we encounter in the ordinary and extraordinary moments of our lives. The hope is to make a simple analogy between the way Jesus becomes really present in the Eucharist and the ways that we experience the presence and power of others in our everyday lives.

Personal Presence -- It is obvious that we can become personally present to each other in many ways -- physically, in memory, by phone, by letter, in gifts, photographs etc. These are all modes of personal presence. Often when we speak of someone as personally

present, we tend to assume that this includes being physical present too. Physical presence is only one mode of personal presence and not necessarily the most important one at that. In a crowd of strangers who are physically present to us, we may be very much alone.

However, the personal presence of someone through a phone call, a memory or an object, can be very personal and have a great affect on our lives, even though the other person may be physically far away or even deceased. For example, we may renew an old friendship over the telephone or in a letter. A gift once received from an absent loved one may bring tears to our eyes. So personal presence is in no way limited to physical presence.

Real Presence -- In most cases, the various modes of personal presence can also be described as real presence. However, for our purposes, real will be defined to include the notion of being able to communicate with another. For example, we may be in the personal presence of a person who does not speak our language and, in the sense defined here, the presence may not be real because there is no communication (union with) the other person.

In the Eucharist we speak of a real, personal presence of the Risen Lord which has the power to transform our lives. This presence is personal and real, but obviously not physical in any sense. So how does Jesus communicate His real presence to us? In Catholic tradition we call this a *sacramental presence*. A presence through signs which communicate a real presence to us. To understand this better, we can use an analogy from ordinary life -- the giving of gifts.

The Transformation of Material Objects as Modes of Personal Presence -- How can the inanimate objects of our ordinary world be transformed into modes of personal presence? This happens in a number of ways.

Let us consider for a moment what happens when we exchange gifts. Suppose a dear old aunt of ours, whom we do not want to offend, presents us with a very ugly vase for Christmas. Would we open it and say "Now that is ugly!" and smash it on the floor? What if we explained to her that it is "only" a piece of plaster and an ugly piece at that? Obviously that would not help much. Of course, in a sense it is true -- it is a piece of plaster. But on another important level this is a personal gift. The vase represents the person and to reject the gift is to reject and/or offend the gift giver. The vase has been transformed into a mode or a medium of the aunt's real, personal presence. All gift giving is an attempt to give ourselves in some way to another. And so in this case we look at our aunt and say "Isn't it lovely" and place it in a prominent spot in the house -- probably to be put away when she leaves and put back when she visits again.

There are many such examples in our ordinary life. If your 5 year old son takes all morning to make you a mud pie, it really is not true to tell him it is "just mud" and not to bring it into the house. It is not just mud. No loving parent would simply take it and throw it out. Because on a personal level the mud has been transformed. He has put

himself into his creation and offers it to you because he loves you - it is a gift, not just of mud, but of himself. A thank you and a hug would be the best response.

And so gifts are an obvious way in which we give new meaning to material objects. On the personal level they are no longer plaster and mud they are modes of personal presence. Of course, on the non-personal level, of physics and chemistry there are indeed plaster and mud and for someone not involved in the process -- the cleaning lady and the garbage man -- they are just that, plaster and mud. Without knowing the aunt or the little boy, these inanimate objects have no power to convey a personal presence. Therefore, the objects - plaster and mud - are not transformed magically, but receive their new meaning on the personal level from the loving intentions of the gift giver - the aunt and the boy - and the loving acceptance of you the recipient.

One last example, one on the darker side of life. Let us say that John takes a knife and stabs Ben. John is brought to trial for the stabbing. In his defense, John says that he did not stab Ben, the knife did. Not much of a defense. Why not? On one level, the level of physics and chemistry it is indeed true that the knife stabbed Ben. However, in this case the issue is on the personal level. The court is dealing with personal relationships. How these personal relationships were communicated are important, but not the heart of the matter. In this case, John took of an inanimate object, a knife, and transformed it into a vehicle of his personal "real, presence" to Ben. So on a personal level it is truer to say that John stabbed Ben, than to say the knife stabbed Ben.

In a way, this is the kind of dual activity which we have seen in all the sacraments. The Risen Lord presents Himself to us under various signs - water, oil, bread, wine, words of Scripture. These signs are transformed and become modes of his real presence. And we accept His presence in faith.

Summary

Neither transubstantiation nor this alternative approach "explain" the real presence of the Risen Lord in the Eucharist. That remains a mystery. A mystery in the sense of an infinite process of coming to "know the Lord". The mystery of the presence of God.

However, perhaps in some way this alternative approach, taken from ordinary life, can help us "understand" that Jesus transformed the celebration of the Passover feast and its elements of bread and wine to provide us with a lasting sacrament of His real, powerful, personal presence to us for all ages. On the level of physics and chemistry (accidents) there was no change in the bread and wine at the Last Supper nor is there now in our Eucharistic celebrations. But on a personal level there is indeed a transformation (substantial), the reality is no longer bread and wine, but the real presence of the Risen Lord. Before Mass is it true to say that it is bread and wine? Yes. During and after Mass is it true to say that it is bread and wine? No. They have been transformed into the real presence of the Risen Lord.

A Final Note

Jesus transformed the symbols of Passover and the elements of bread and wine, not as an end in itself, but that we might be transformed. In the sacrament of the Eucharist Jesus is calling us to take on His life. He is our food. He is the Bread of Life. The focus of the Eucharist is the entire liturgy - word and mean. If we do not come out of the Eucharist with more love in our hearts for self, others, our world and our God then we have not truly received the “body and blood” of the Lord. Of course, coming to know the Lord and to have our lives transformed is a process. For becoming truly, personally present to another human being is itself a mysterious adventure which a lifetime of communication will never exhaust. So too with Jesus, whether present as He was to the apostles or as He is present to us in each other, or in the Scriptures, or in the bread and wine of the Eucharist we are on a life-long journey to come to know the Lord and to be transformed by that encounter.

An ecumenical note

Some Protestant traditions speak of the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist as *consubstantiation*. In Greek philosophical terms this means that both substances - bread and wine and the substance of Jesus - are present together. Catholic theology has objected that two substances cannot occupy the same “space” at the same time.

Other Protestants, especially lay persons, say that they believe that the presence of Jesus in the bread and wine is symbolic. Catholic comment is this: if by symbolic is meant “only or merely symbolic” as opposed to real, then that is unacceptable. However, if symbolic is meant in Paul Tillich’s terms as participating in the reality it symbolizes, then this notion of symbolic is much closer to and probably acceptable as substantially the same as sacramental presence which is used in Catholic thought.

In any event, it is unfortunate that the focus, since the early Middle Ages, has often been on the kind of “change” that takes place in the bread and wine. This misses the point. The focus of the sacrament is not simply a change in the bread and wine, but a change in the people who receive Jesus in this way. Jesus wants to change our lives to be like His. His life is the gift of the Eucharist.

At the Last Supper, Jesus was reinterpreting the great signs that inaugurated the OT people - the Exodus and the Covenant. Jesus was beginning a new People of God who were to live His life in the world. And the message was that the life of Jesus (flesh and blood in Aramaic) was to be their life and He was going to share His life with them so that they could announce and build up the Kingdom of God as He had done. As the disciples reenacted this meal Jesus would become really and powerfully present to them, not physically present, but really present in power.