

Eucharist: A Sacrament of Initiation

The story is told of a wise professor who constantly probed the knowledge of his class by asking questions and seeking responses. It would not be uncommon for the professor to ask a student to explain a concept. On one occasion when the professor posed a question to a student, the student began a response by saying, "The way in which you should understand this is." The professor interrupted the student, "The way I should understand? I assure you, I already understand. Give an explanation in a way that others may understand."

In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Part Two, Article Three, can be found a variety of ways to explain the Eucharist. It is known as the Lord's Supper because of the connection with the supper which the Lord took with his disciples on the eve of his passion. But it is also called the Breaking of Bread because Jesus used this rite when he blessed and distributed the bread to the disciples at the Last Supper. It is the Memorial of the Lord's Passion and Resurrection since we gather on the day of the resurrection and recall how Jesus gave his life for us. It is referred to as the Eucharistic Assembly because it is celebrated amid the assembly of believers. It is identified as the Holy Sacrifice because it makes present the one sacrifice of Christ offered once on the cross which completed and surpassed all other sacrifices. It is the Holy Mass since the liturgy in which the sacred mystery is celebrated concludes by sending us forth to accomplish the will of God in our daily lives. Because by this sacrament we unite ourselves to Christ who makes us sharers in his body and blood to form a single body, it is named Holy Communion.

The terms found in the catechism have enabled countless people to express what they believe and to speak what they have come to know. Such ways to describe and explain the Eucharist are a treasured part of our faith and have become words that are very precious to all who cherish this great gift of love from the Lord Jesus. However, these are explanations from the church and not from our hearts. They are explanations rich in meaning and steeped in history, but there may be other words that have deeper meaning. The professor wanted the student to offer an explanation so that others would understand. How would you explain the Eucharist? What does it mean to you in your life?

Maybe welcoming the Lord sacramentally is truly communion because for that moment when you cradle the Lord of Glory in your hands you feel a bond with the Lord that cannot be described any other way. But in that moment you also recognize that the Lord who comes to you is the same Christ who comes to people in war torn Iraq and violent Kenya. It is the same Christ who comes to people who hunger for peace in the Middle East and long for a drug-free neighborhood in Baltimore. It is Christ who draws you into a communion not only with him, but also with people the world over.

Maybe the Eucharist for you is that moment when you welcome your Savior into your life. Yes, it is Jesus who saves you from your sins, but it is Jesus who saves you from being too materialistic, too insensitive and uncaring, too involved in your work and neglectful of your family, too focused on success and indifferent to the methods used to achieve it, too concerned about impressing others and not on life with Christ. There is so much that Christ saves you from, you know how much you need his presence in your life.

Maybe the Eucharist is your peace. That time in the presence of the Lord is the only time you have to focus on him during the week. No traffic, no cell phone, no interruptions, just an opportunity to be with the Lord. It is a time of deep inner tranquility that cannot be experienced in any other place.

“Give an explanation so that others may understand” was the demand of the professor. How would you explain the Eucharist in your life?

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This is the second in a series of articles about the six-week spring session of Why Catholic?