

Going Deeper in Understanding Eucharist

(An Idea for Parent Meetings)

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Our theology of Eucharist has grown and deepened immensely since the Second Vatican Council. When parents gather during the year of preparation for a child's First Eucharist, they may be coming from various places and stages in their own faith development. Some of them may not yet have been touched deeply by the renewal called for by Vatican II.

Parent sessions might address some of the deepened ways of understanding, appreciating and celebrating the Eucharist today. They might be approached as "Some things Overheard on the way to Church" followed by an explanation of how our renewed liturgy takes us a little further.

**"I NEED TO GO TO MASS BECAUSE I HAVE ALL THESE THINGS TO ASK GOD FOR.
I HAVE LOTS OF NEEDS AND PETITIONS."**

It is certainly true that intercession, petition, and seeking God's strength and help is a crucial part of all prayer, and part of our liturgical celebration. Yet, we understand today that the main purpose of liturgy is thanksgiving. Eucharist comes from a Greek word meaning thanksgiving. Listen to the words of the Eucharist; listen for how often we give thanks.

That's not the way of our culture. Every commercial, almost every media message tells us the things that we lack: that we could be more popular, more successful, more complete if we just had this one more thing.

We all have needs. We know God is our Creator and we are dependent upon God for life, for strength; but we already have a lot (if we stop to take the time to remember it). That's what Eucharist calls us to once a week: to be thanks-givers, to be so aware of all that we have that our only response is one of gratitude ... because we can't pay God back any other way.

Living a life of gratitude has the power to change us. It can bring us a different outlook on life and empower us to change the world. Isn't that what Eucharist is all about?

**"I LOVE MASSES THAT ARE QUIET AND QUICK: NO SINGING, NO FUSS, JUST ME AND GOD,
NO SIGN OF PEACE OR CONNECTION WITH ALL THOSE OTHERS."**

That is not what our Eucharistic liturgy is all about. Liturgy is a celebration; liturgy is a community celebration. The Mass is meant for active participation. As the primary actor in the Eucharist, God invites us to respond. We do that by participating. The participation of the people in the pews – the assembly – is not extraneous to worship, but is at its core.

Birthdays are celebrations; birthdays are community celebrations. If there were no singing, no fuss, no connection with others, would it be a celebration? Would we go to a

birthday party or wedding reception and sit in a corner reading a book? The Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Liturgy* says that the faithful are to "take part knowingly, actively, and fruitfully." Anything less is not in the spirit of worship as understood by the Church today.

One of our liturgical documents, *Music in Catholic Worship*, reminds us: "Faith grows when it is well expressed in celebration. Good celebrations foster and nourish faith. Poor celebrations may weaken and destroy it."

Liturgy (and all sacraments) are community experiences, not something happening just to the individual. This is true in two ways: first, those celebrating the sacrament need the support of the whole community; and second, the whole community is affected when sacraments are celebrated. As something new happens to the individual, it also affects the celebrating community. Each celebration of the Eucharist should affect all of us, whether or not we are present. We should be a more reconciling community, because the Sacrament of Reconciliation has been celebrated. There should be more commitment and fidelity because the sacrament of Marriage has been celebrated within our local community.

This is easily understood if we think about how St. Paul described the Church: the Body of Christ. Paul called it a body. If a part of the body, for instance a tooth, feels bad, it affects the whole body. That's a negative example, but if that is true, so is the opposite: all good things that happen affect all of us. Celebrations of sacraments touch all of us.

Another dimension of the community aspect of sacrament and liturgy is that we are all celebrants. We do not come to attend Mass. We come to celebrate. We come to do something. The priest is not the celebrant; he is the presider who gathers us all together as a celebrating community.

**"TALKING ABOUT CELEBRATION, THE MAIN THING WE CELEBRATE IN LITURGY IS THAT I LOVE GOD.
LITURGY IS ABOUT MY RESPONSE TO GOD."**

That's important, but it's not the most crucial thing. As humans, it is easy for us to always turn things around and talk about things from our viewpoint. What we celebrate in liturgy (in all sacraments) is that God has first loved us. The primary, fundamental reason for liturgy is all about God – God's action, God's presence with us. Then, secondarily, are sacraments about the response of the Church. On occasion, homilists and religious educators have spent more time on the response side: on what the community does (its songs, readings, prayers, etc.) or what it needs to do beforehand (service projects, retreats, etc.) rather than on celebrating God's love. We need to continually stress the action of God when we talk about liturgy and the sacraments.

St. John reminds us that it is "not that we have loved God - but that God has loved us." One of Scripture's basic messages is that God acts first in our lives. Our role is one of responding and, to the extent that we do, our actions complement and complete God's initiative. In the liturgy, also, God is the primary actor. God – who has been present in our lives during the week - invites us to worship and gathers us together. Then, in the Mass itself, God speaks and acts through words and sacrament and human interaction. Thus, in worship, as in our daily life, we are responding to God's activity.

Our response is important. Sacraments celebrate the love of God as it is experienced in and related to our everyday lives. If this element – how God’s love and action is experienced in our daily lives -- is absent, only magic is left.

The celebration of God’s love is what it is all about. Do we really understand that? Would we have a problem getting people to Mass, if they really experienced God’s love for them? A Protestant friend of mine once said to me, “If I really believed – as you do – that Eucharist is Jesus’ life, you couldn’t keep me away.”

“I AM CERTAINLY GLAD THAT WE HAVE MISSALETES SO I CAN PRAY QUIETLY AND BY MYSELF AT MASS.”

Private prayer is very necessary today – probably we don’t do enough of it. But private prayer should be preparatory to community worship. Because God has called us together as a community, we are called to worship as a group, as the assembled faithful. Other people, therefore, are not in interference in worship but key participants in it.

There is much debate today about the use of missalettes. Many liturgists recommend that they can be very helpful in meditating on the readings outside of the liturgy; but urge against the following the reading of Scripture during the liturgical celebration.

Psychologically, it puts the people using the missalette in a passive role. They are following the lead of the reader. At the same time, they may be placing more concentration on following the text than understanding it.

It also makes us, as the readers in the pews, individuals, rather than one community who is listening together. Would we go to a birthday party and read a book of the person’s life rather than listen to them talk about their past years?

We need to be active listeners who are receiving the Word of God as it is proclaimed by one person of faith to a community of faith. Ideally, what should be occurring in the proclaiming of God’s Word is a solemn handing over of belief. Ideally, one person, in faith, is retelling our sacred history in our midst. Ideally, we, as a community, listen and respond in faith. The missalette can have the tendency to kill this kind of interaction, which is so necessary for the Word of God to be proclaimed and received.

“I GO TO CHURCH TO GET COMMUNION.”

This sentence doesn’t seem to be wrong, but let’s explore a little deeper.

The Eucharist is an activity. Receiving Communion is part of that activity. Liturgy and the sacraments are actions that we do, not things that we receive.

In the early Church, the Christians saw themselves as a “we,” a group of people with a strong common awareness of being one in Christ. Gradually the Church became an “it,” an organization to belong to. When that happened, the sacraments became things which people went to church (the building) to receive.

When the people saw themselves as a “we,” the sacraments were actions that the assembly performed, not just something that they received. The sacraments were something they did rather than something that was done to them.

Most people – when asked what the symbols of Eucharist are – will say: bread and wine. But, in the early church, the original symbols were actions, not things. The original Eucharistic symbols were the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup.

If we think just about the bread and wine, our question becomes: what happens to the bread and wine? The answer is: it is changed. If we think about the action of breaking the bread and sharing the cup, the question becomes: what happens to the people who celebrate with bread and wine? The answer is: we must become what we have eaten. We already are the Body of Christ, but we must become that Body still more. We have to be bread for others, just as Jesus is bread given for us.

We need to move from an emphasis on the elements of bread and wine to the mysteries of Good Friday, Holy Thursday, and Easter Sunday. When we do that, Eucharist will be seen to be “more verb than noun.” This is consistent with our deepened understanding in other areas where, for example, grace is explained in a more active way (the constant and amazing love of the Creator for creation) rather than in a quantitative sense (e.g., some things or object given by the sacraments). Again, more verb than noun; more action than thing.

One of the consequences of understanding the sacraments as actions that we do is that we also have to watch our language when we talk about sacraments. Let us use the word that the Church uses: celebrating rather than getting or receiving. “Receiving” Communion (or Confirmation or the other sacraments) makes us very passive. It makes the sacraments and the liturgy things, not actions that we do, realities that we live, especially when we leave the church building.

**“I LOVE THE COMMUNION TIME OF MASS. IT’S SO PEACEFUL.
IT FEELS SO GOOD TO BE ALONE WITH JESUS.”**

Since Vatican II, the Communion time of Mass was never meant to be an “alone time” with Jesus. All that we do at that time of liturgy says we are a community: we sing together, we walk together in procession.

We do need to have alone times with Jesus. That is what some of our prayer time during the week is all about. The Eucharistic liturgy is a community celebration.

Communion should be peaceful; it should be comforting. But it should also be challenging. Jesus comes to us in order to send us forth to live his life, his values in this world. That is a challenge; it can be very discomfoting at times.

Sometimes when we think of Communion as peaceful, we are only thinking of one meaning of the Body of Christ. We have limited our understanding of what Eucharist is. We have remembered the Bread, the Host, but have forgotten the Body of Christ. When we talk about the Body of Christ at Mass, we are not just talking about Jesus’ presence in the bread and

wine. We are also talking about ourselves. We are the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ has two meanings. It is useless to talk about the “real presence” if we forget that we, too, are the Body of Christ.

It is interesting. The early church used two terms. The “real presence” meant Jesus’ presence in people. “Sacramental presence” meant Jesus’ presence in the bread and wine. Today we use both words for Jesus’ presence in the bread and wine (and we should). At the same time, have we forgotten Jesus’ presence in us ... that we, too, are the Body of Christ?

In holding up the host, St. Augustine said, “Be what you see. Receive what you are.” We are the Body of Christ. That is an awesome fact to acknowledge. We could spend weeks meditating on what it means for each of us as individuals. The most challenging part of it, however, is not just what it says about me as an individual, but what it says about us.

Eucharist is about re-minding us; about changing our minds about who we are. The big lie that the world tells us about ourselves is that we are separate individuals. The Eucharist tells us that we are one. No one is excluded from who we are one people. Look at the people who were at Jesus’ meals. Jesus included everyone, usually the most outcast. At times, through the centuries, that has been forgotten. We are still trying to recover it today.

Our challenge today is not just recognizing the bread and wine as the Body and Blood of Christ, but seeing everyone as the Body of Christ.

If we are one, if we are the Body of Christ, there is an implication – a challenge. We have to act like the Body of Christ. We have to act like the bread – that becomes broken for others. We have to act like the wine – that is poured out for others.

When we say “Amen,” we’re not just saying Amen for the gift of Communion. We’re also saying that we believe that we are the Body of Christ, that we have to be broken and poured out for others.

During a homily, the presider pointed to the Chiro on his vestments and asked if anyone knew what it meant. One young child responded that it meant “no parking.” He was right. A Christian can’t park. A Christian is the Body of Christ; a Christian has to be involved with others. Jesus said, “Do this to remember me.” His words were more than a request to remember a meal and repeat the words. What we are to do in memory of Jesus is exactly what he did: be broken and poured out in nourishment and care for others.

**“THEY RAN OUT OF HOSTS SO I ONLY RECEIVED FROM THE CUP.
I DIDN’T REALLY RECEIVE COMMUNION TODAY.”**

Unfortunately, that is a misconception that some people have today. The reality, of course, is that we receive the fullness of Jesus’ life if we receive just the host or just from the cup.

In 1979 the US bishops took another step toward the “full, conscious, and active participation” of the faithful by restoring the practice of celebrating/receiving Eucharist under

both forms. It is not something new (it was for us, because we're not that old), but the Church was restoring what the early Christian communities originally did.

The Church didn't restore it just because it was the way it was done for the first six hundred years. The Church is seeking good liturgy with the fullest use of symbols. Jesus used bread and wine and asked us to do the same to remember him.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal requires pastors to remind their people that the whole Christ is received under either the species of bread or wine, but the faithful are to be admonished to participate under both kinds "willingly and eagerly" because "Holy Communion has a more complete form as a sign when it is received under both kinds."

Why is the cup important?

- Jesus told us to do so
- Jesus used wine because it was a very prominent part of the Passover Meal
- Wine is pleasing to the taste, a delight, and thereby a real experience of "taste and see how good the Lord is."
- Wine is not meant to be drunk alone; it is a bond of fellowship, celebration, and shared joy
- Wine is a symbol of celebration. All we do in liturgy is a celebration.
- The warmth of drinking wine is a symbolism of the warmth of God's love.
- The primary meaning, of course, is that it is the blood of Jesus. Jesus chose to give us his life under the form of bread and wine. Wine connects us with the sacrificial aspect of the liturgy. Grapes are crushed and wine poured out just as Jesus was crushed and his blood poured out.

**"WHEN IT COMES TIME FOR COMMUNION, THAT'S JUST GREAT
BECAUSE COMMUNION IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF THE MASS."**

Communion is certainly important, but the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us of an important reality explained in a major statement on our Eucharistic liturgy: "The Eucharistic Prayer: with this prayer of thanksgiving and consecration, we come to the core and summit of the celebration."

This tells us what is the core and summit: the entire Eucharistic prayer of thanksgiving and blessing. Too often, in our past, so much emphasis was placed on the moment of reception, that that was seen as the core and summit. The reception of Communion is indeed important, but it is of secondary importance. Communion is our response to the central Eucharistic action. It is God's action which is the core and summit of our liturgy. It is God's action which brings Jesus' real presence to us.

The prayers of the Mass, and in particular the Eucharistic prayer, are the most eloquent expression of what we believe about the Eucharist, and indeed, what we believe about ourselves, our Church, and our God. This central prayer of our Church reveals who we are as a

Christian people. We, the baptized, are the body of Christ and never more the body of Christ than when we are doing Eucharist. Doing Eucharist, we celebrate the body that we know ourselves to be.

Since Vatican II, under normal circumstances (other than for the sick), the reception of Communion does not happen outside of the context of the Eucharistic prayer. Prior to Vatican II, Communion was distributed before, during, and after early weekday Masses. That is not permitted today.

One of today's realities, though, is that there are more and more Communion services, because of the priest shortage. More and more, the question is being asked whether or not we should be doing that. It takes Communion away from the entire community prayer of thanksgiving and consecration. It again makes Eucharist something to get and receive rather than something we do.

"THE EUCHARIST IS THE MOST IMPORTANT SACRAMENT BECAUSE THAT IS HOW JESUS IS PRESENT WITH US."

Eucharist is certainly our pivotal sacrament. We say we are a Eucharistic people. Eucharist is what Catholics do. It is one of the key things that gives us our identity. It is our mission: who we are supposed to be.

But we need to be careful about the reason we give that it is the most important sacrament: that's how Jesus is present with us.

If we say that, are we limiting Jesus' presence with us by only talking about his presence in the Eucharist? The Vatican II documents and an encyclical of Pope Paul VI talk about the real presence of Jesus in several areas: 1) when the church gathers for prayer (in the assembly); 2) when the Church preaches or proclaims the Word (Scripture); and in the Eucharistic Prayer followed by Communion.

**"IF WE ARE TALKING ABOUT IMPORTANT THINGS,
FIRST COMMUNION IS THE MOST IMPORTANT TIME WE GO TO COMMUNION."**

Not really (although some of our practices about it would have us think so). It certainly is important; the beginning of anything is important. But First Communion is important because it is precisely that: the beginning/the first of many. It's an important beginning because what it continues is very important.

Sacramental preparation for children and their families during the year of first Eucharist is not about preparation for one day, for one specific time. It is preparation for life; for deepened incorporation into the Body of Christ which will be celebrated and lived every day for the rest of their lives. What a wonderful and awesome responsibility!