Holy Eucharist

The Holy Eucharist is a sacrament and a sacrifice in which our Savior Jesus Christ, body and blood, soul and divinity, is contained, offered and received under the appearance of bread and wine.

Christ instituted the Holy Eucharist at the Last Supper, the night before He died. The Apostles were present. Eucharist in Greek means thanksgiving. The sacrament is so called because when Christ instituted it, He gave thanks. Today, it is the chief means by which we give thanks to our heavenly Father, through the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

The Holy Eucharist is also called the Blessed Sacrament, because it is the most excellent of all sacraments. It gives us Christ Himself (Prov. 8:31).

It is called the Sacrament of the Altar, because it is consecrated and reserved upon an altar. It is offered up on the altar in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

The Holy Eucharist is called Holy Communion when it is received, usually in church. It is called Holy Viaticum when it is received during a serious illness, or at the hour of death.

How Christ instituted the Holy Eucharist

Christ instituted the Holy Eucharist in this way: He took bread, blessed and broke it, and giving it to His Apostles, said: "Take and eat; this is My body"; then He took a cup of wine, blessed it, and giving it to them said: "All of you drink this; for this is My blood of the New Covenant which is being shed for many unto the forgiveness of sins"; finally, He gave His Apostles the commission: "Do this in remembrance of Me."

When our Lord said, "This is My body," the entire substance of the bread was changed into His body; and when He said, "This is My blood," the entire substance of the wine was changed into His blood.

In the Holy Eucharist, we find the 3 essentials of a sacrament. The institution was at the Last Supper. The matter is bread and wine; the form consists of our Lord's words. The grace is a nourishing grace coming from the very body and blood of Christ, helping us to be more closely united to God and our fellowmen in supernatural charity.

After the substance of the bread and wine had been changed, only the appearances of bread and wine remained. By the appearances of bread and wine we mean all those outward forms and accidentals, like color, taste, smell, weight, shape, and whatever else that appears to the senses. This is the double miracle of the Holy Eucharist: the changing from bread and wine into Jesus Christ, and the existence of the appearances of bread and wine without their substance.

We believe that Christ changed bread and wine into His own Body and Blood, because:

1) His words clearly say so. At the Last Supper He said: "This is My Body," not "This is a symbol of My Body," or "This represents My Body" (Matt. 26:26-28).

2) Previously, on the day after the first multiplication of the loaves and fishes, our Lord had promised to give His flesh to eat and His blood to drink. On this occasion, it is clear that the Jews took our Lord's words literally. Many of the disciples left Jesus because they could not believe such a thing as He promised. But Jesus, although very sad at their leaving, did not take back His words or explain them differently (John 6:48-57).

3) The Apostles understood that Christ meant His words at the Last Supper to be literal (1 Cor. 10:16; 11:27).

4) It has been the continuous belief of Christians from the beginning of Christianity. St. Augustine (354-430) said, "Our Lord held Himself in His own hands, when He gave His Body to the disciples." St. Ignatius of Antioch (50-107) said, "Those abstain from the Eucharist who do not confess that it is the eucharistic flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ which suffered for our sins and which the Father in His goodness has raised from the dead." St. Justin (100-165) said, "We do not take this as common bread and common wine; but as Jesus Christ our Savior was made flesh by the Word of God, and had real flesh and blood for our salvation, so we are taught that this food, which the very same Word blessed by prayer and thanksgiving, is turned into the nourishment and substance of our flesh and blood, and is the flesh and blood of the incarnate Jesus." Again St. Augustine said, "What you see is bread and wine. Sanctification come to it, and that bread will be the body of Christ and that wine will be the blood of Christ. The name of Christ, the grace of Christ, effects this, and so you will see what you did and yet its power then will not be as its power now; for previously if it was eaten it filled the stomach, now when it is eaten it builds up the mind."

The strong belief of the infant Church in the real presence of its living Lord in the Eucharist is also reflected in the prayers the early Christians used at Mass. Canon One, the old Roman canon, asks God that "as we receive from this altar the sacred Body and Blood of your Son, let us be filled with every grace and blessing." Canon Two, which is of even earlier origin, asks that the bread and wine may become "the Body and Blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ."

The frequency with which the sacrament is depicted in the art of the catacombs is yet another indication of the centrality it had in everyday life.

How our Lord created Eucharist

Our Lord was able to change bread and wine into His body and blood by His almighty power.

If God made the universe out of nothing, He certainly could change bread and wine into His Body and Blood. Christ Himself changed water into wine at the marriage feast of Cana (John 2:5-11), by a mere act of His divine will.

The Real Presence

Christ gave His priests the power to change bread and wine into His body and blood when He made the Apostles priests at the Last Supper by saying to them: "Do this in remembrance of Me" (Luke 22:19). Thus He commanded them and their successors to renew till the end of time what He had just performed. This change of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ continues to be made in the Church of Jesus Christ, through His priests.

Priests exercise their power to change bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ by repeating at the consecration of the Mass the words of Christ: "This is My body ... This is My blood" (Matt. 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20).

At Mass, at the words of consecration, Transubstantiation takes place; that is, the entire substance of the bread and wine is changed into our Lord's Body and Blood. After the words of consecration, there is no longer any bread or wine on the altar, for they have been changed into Christ's Body and Blood. If it be asked how transubstantiation can possibly be effected, we reply, "By the almighty power of God."

The appearance of bread and wine remain. The consecrated Host continues to look like bread, tastes and feels like bread; but it is not bread, for the entire substance of bread is changed into Christ's Body. The same is true of the consecrated wine.

Jesus Christ is whole and entire both under the appearance of bread and under the appearance of wine. In the Holy Eucharist Christ is present wholly, Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity.

Christ is whole and entire under the appearance of bread or wine. As Christ's Body is a living body, and a living body has blood, so Christ's Blood is there wherever His Body is. Where Christ's living Body and Blood are, there also must be His soul, for the body and blood cannot live without the soul. And where Christ's Soul is, there also is His Divinity, which cannot be separated from His humanity.

Christ is whole and entire in each part of the Host and in each drop in the chalice. When the Host is broken, the Body of Christ is not broken, but He exists whole and entire in each fragment. Christ's Body and Blood are present in the consecrated species as long as the appearances of bread and wine remain. When, therefore, we receive Holy Communion, we bear within us, as long as the appearances of bread remain, the living Christ, Son of God.

That is what makes St. Paul's teaching on the Eucharist so important: "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not the sharing of the blood of Christ? And the bread that we break, is it not the partaking of the body of the Lord?" (1 Cor. 10:16). And to show that the consecrated Host is Jesus Himself under the appearance of bread and wine, St. Paul instructs his spiritual children thusly: "For as often as you shall eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord, until He comes. Therefore whoever eats this bread and drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily, will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man prove himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of the cup; for he who eats and drinks unworthily, without distinguishing the body, eats and drinks judgment to himself" (1 Cor. 11:26-29).

Why did Christ give us the Eucharist

Christ gave Himself to us in the Eucharist for the following reasons:

- To be offered as a sacrifice commemorating and renewing the sacrifice of the cross (1 Cor. 11:26);
- To be received in Holy Communion (John 6:51-52; 54-58); and,
- To remain ever on our altars as a proof of His love, and to be worshipped by us (Matt. 11:28).

We are bound to render the Holy Eucharist the same adoration and honor due God Himself. When the Blessed Sacrament is in the tabernacle, it is covered with a curtain or veil, and a sanctuary lamp is kept burning before it. When we enter or leave the church, we should genuflect towards the tabernacle, as a sign of adoration.

This is why the tabernacle is the most precious part of a church. Special care should be taken to keep the altar linen clean.

When we pass by a church where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, we should bow our heads as a sign of respect, and say a few words of love in honor of our Lord.

We should also visit a church whenever possible and pray before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament that is kept in the tabernacle. Why? The following short verse can help:

"Whenever I go by a church
I always stop to visit.
So when they carry me down the aisle
God won't ask, 'Who is it?'"

A Eucharistic Miracle

Around the year 700 A.D., a priest in Italy who had begun to doubt the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist held up the Host during Mass one day and saw it change into flesh, while the liquid in the chalice became clots of blood. This treasure was guarded by monks until 1970 when Church authorities gave a team of scientists permission to study the substances. After taking samples and putting them through a variety of tests, the scientific team concluded that the flesh was really human and the clots were human blood. The team found no trace of any preservative or embalming agent, yet the flesh and blood were just as fresh then as they were 13 centuries earlier.

Very few of us will ever have the privilege of witnessing such a miracle. Most of us accept the Real Presence of Christ on faith, that is, we believe it because Jesus, the Son of God, revealed it to us.

The Eucharist

Notes:
In St. Johns account of the Gospels, Jesus said: "I am the Bread of Life ..." (John 6:35-40).

Remember, the people had just seen Him take a handful of ordinary bread and distribute it to each of them in all their thousands at Tiberias. They had seen Him raise the dead, and they had heard Him preach all kinds of surprising things that sounded revolutionary at first but then, when you thought about them, made sense - they fulfilled the laws of Moses, brought them into a new focus, and made their purpose clear. Still, this took them by surprise. "How can this man give us His flesh to eat?," they muttered (John 6:41-53).

So, Jesus did something that He almost never did: He repeated Himself, and to drive the point home, He repeated Himself again (John 6:43-52; 54-59). But some of His disciples still said that this was too hard to believe (John 6:61). They left, and He did not call after them. But He asked the Apostles if they wanted to go, too. St. Peter spoke for the 12 Apostles (John 6:68-70).

The Apostles did not understand this new teaching of the Master, so they took His words to heart on faith, and stayed with ~~Him~~ to the end. And, at the end, at the Last Supper, they received their answer.

At the Last Supper, Jesus went back to the theme of "the Living Bread from Heaven." It was not His words, His teachings, His many miracles, or His pure example of how life must be lived; no, it was His very self. He took the bread and said unequivocally, "This is my body," and then He took the wine and said, "This is my blood. Do this in memory of me" (Luke 22:19-20).

Suddenly, it all made sense. That was how Jesus would give us His flesh to eat and blood to drink: sacramentally, in the Eucharist. That's how He could remain physically present among us all until the end of time.

Questions on the Eucharist

Q. Why does the Catholic Church use bread and wine to become the Body and Blood of Christ?

A. First of all, because that is what Jesus used at the Last Supper, probably because they are elements that are very familiar to people. Second, because of the symbolism involved. Bread, which is prepared with water and wheat flour, is baked with fire. This can be compared with the body of Christ, which was subjected to suffering. Wine, which is the juice pressed from grapes, can be compared to the blood of Christ, which flowed from the wounds in His body.

Q. If Holy Communion is supposed to keep us close to God, how come we still sin even if we receive Jesus often?

A. It is important to know what Communion will not do for us, and what it will do. First of all, Holy Communion will not change our nature as human beings (a nature which is prone to evil because of original sin), nor will it change our particular human tendencies. Holy Communion will elevate our nature, but not replace it with a different sort of nature. The person who has a weakness for alcohol may receive the Eucharist 100 times and still long for a drink. The person who has a weakness for immoral sex may receive Communion 1,000 times without becoming perfectly chaste. This is not to say that God could not perform a miracle through the Holy Eucharist. He certainly could. But God has not promised to do so, and we should not expect it. We have to cooperate with the graces God gives us.

Jesus does not give Himself to us in Holy Communion to make life easy, but rather to make life beautiful. It is a means of reaching heaven, not a means of avoiding all problems. In fact, Jesus has warned us that we will at times have to shoulder crosses and experience difficulties in this life if we are to be His followers. No matter how many times we receive Communion, we will still have urges to lie, to drink too much, to steal, to sin in other ways. But the more we receive Jesus, the more distasteful sinful actions become to us because they are offensive to the Person whom we love.

This is how Holy Communion lessens our evil inclinations. Not by making us less human, but by making us more courageous. Not by eliminating temptation, but by making us more willing to say no. Not by making life easy, but by helping us to fight hard for what is right and good. Not by giving us a different nature, but by raising the nature we have to a supernatural level. When we ate our last meal, the food did not change our body into another sort of body, but rather it strengthened the body we have. The Holy Eucharist does not change us into another sort of creature, but rather it strengthens our soul to live as a friend of Jesus.

Q. How many times can a Catholic receive Communion in one day?

A. Those in danger of death may receive the Eucharist more than once a day. Those not in danger of death may receive Communion at 2 Masses in 1 day provided that the person is physically present at each Mass. One cannot, for instance, come into the church only in time to receive Communion. Saturday vigils are a distinct category, so one may communicate at, say, a parish Mass on Saturday morning, a wedding Mass on Saturday afternoon, and again on Saturday evening at the Vigil Mass for Sunday. Thus, one would actually receive Communion 3 times on the same calendar day, but really only twice on the liturgical day since the Saturday evening Mass anticipates the Sunday celebration.

Consecration of the Host

The priest bends over the host and recites silently:

"Jesus, the day before He suffered, took bread into His holy and venerable hands, raised His eyes to Heaven, gave thanks, blessed and broke it, and gave it to His disciples saying: Take and eat you all of this: FOR THIS IS MY BODY."

What I should remember

This is the very heart of the Mass, the moment when the priest changes the bread and wine into the body and blood, soul and divinity of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. At this moment the sacrifice of the Cross is being renewed on the altar. The altar becomes the Cross itself, with the sacred body which was nailed to it and the precious blood which flowed from it. I am in the presence of the of the Lamb who was led to the slaughter, and I adore Him as truly as if I knelt at the foot of Calvary's cross two thousand years ago. As the Host is lifted up at the elevation, I raise my head and look at my Lord, saluting him with the words: "My Lord and my God." The highest and holiest point of the Mass is the Consecration, when Christ becomes present on the altar.

Consecration of the Chalice

The priest bends over the chalice and recites silently:

"Taking the chalice of wine into His holy hands, again giving thanks to You, He blessed it, gave it to His disciples, saying: Take and drink you all of this: FOR THIS IS THE CHALICE OF MY BLOOD: OF THE NEW AND ETERNAL TESTAMENT: THE MYSTERY OF FAITH, WHICH SHALL BE SHED FOR YOU AND FOR MANY UNTO THE REMISSION OF SINS."

What I should remember

The Consecration, first of the bread and then of the wine, reminds us of Christ's death, with its separation of the blood from the body. It tells us that the Mass is really Cavalry, but in an unbloody form. I must never forget that the Mass is a sacrifice. It is not merely a devotion like the Rosary or the Way of the Cross or a visit to the Blessed Sacrament on the altar. Is the unending sacrifice offered by our Lord. In this sacrifice I actually have a part, since it is also my sacrifice. This is how the Mass differs from every other act of divine worship. When the priest lifts the Chalice for the elevation I look up and gaze on it and I say" "My Jesus, mercy."

The Mass is different from any other act of worship because it is a sacrifice of the New Law.

The Eucharist

Transubstantiation is the belief that the real Christ - body, blood, soul and divinity (in other words, Christ Himself) is truly present under the appearance of bread and wine. It was certainly believed by the early Church and by all Christians until the Reformation. Is it Scriptural? I refer you to John 6 which should be read in its entirety. It was prophesied in Malachi 1:11, prefigured in Exodus 16:15, promised in John 6:30-60, instituted in the Last Supper narrative in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. I particularly refer you to 1 Cor. 11: 29 to see what Paul believed.

Jesus Himself certainly was very strong on this point since He allowed his followers to leave Him and also demanded the Apostles do the same if they would could not accept His teaching. If Christ merely meant it as a symbolic eating of bread and wine in which they thought about Him and made Him spiritually present, what would be so hard in believing it? But if He meant it literally, it would be hard to believe.

The real presence in the Eucharist is a mystery like the Trinity or the two natures of Christ, something we must believe without proof but not without reason. Since this teaching was not questioned until the Reformation (even Luther continued to believe it) why did Christ, who promised to be with His Church always until the end of the world, allow false teachings about such a serious matter and wait 1600 years to correct it?

Thoughts on the Eucharist

"We face the sun we become tan... but when we place ourselves in front of the Eucharistic Jesus we become saints." (St. Carlo Acutis 1997-2006)

"If angels could be jealous of man, they would be so for one reason: Holy Communion." (St. Maximilian Kolbe 1894-1941)

"I do not envy the Seraphim their fire, for I have a greater gift deposited in my heart. They admire You in rapture, but Your Blood mingles with mine." (St. Faustina Kowalska 1905-1938)