

Eucharist: Meal or Sacrifice?



In the period before the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), Catholic Mass was often called “the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.” The altar was viewed as a place of sacrifice. Church vocabulary for the Eucharist was filled with expressions like “sacred victim,” “unbloody sacrifice,” and “Christ the priest”—phrases hallowed by the Council of Trent.

The Second Vatican Council reminded Catholics, however, that the Mass is also a meal. Our church vocabulary began to include expressions like “the feast of the Eucharist,” “gather at the table of the Lord,” and “sharing the paschal banquet.” So popular was this, in fact, that people began to wonder if the idea of sacrifice was becoming outmoded. If the Eucharist is a gathering at a dining table, how can it also be a sacrifice on an altar?

These two themes—sacrifice and meal—bring up different associations. *Sacrifice* calls to mind things that are hard, scary, distant. Blood, guts, fear. *Meal* brings associations that are warm, convivial, ordinary. Food, drink, family. In the background of a meal, you see women with rolling pins. In the background of a sacrifice, you see men with knives. So which one is it? Is the Eucharist a sacrifice or a meal?

THE WRONG QUESTION

The problem with these alternatives, however, is that they are not really alternatives. What we have before us is a both/and situation, not an either/or. The Eucharist is both sacrifice and meal. To worry about which one takes priority is to miss the point. We need both.

Our understanding of the Eucharist must hold together both sacrifice and meal for three reasons. First, the origins of the Eucharist in the life of Christ demand both. Second, the two ideas belong together in human life and sacred history.

Third, we need both of them to ground us in the reality of God’s work here on earth today. Let us look at each in turn.

ORIGINS IN THE LIFE OF CHRIST

At every Mass, we recall what Jesus did at the Last Supper. He gave his disciples his Body and Blood as food and drink. Yet the Mass is not a memorial of the Last Supper. It is the death and resurrection of Christ that we remember and encounter in the Mass.

If Jesus had not died on Calvary and risen again, no one would even remember that meal in the upper room. Similarly, if Christ had died for us on the Cross but never instituted the Eucharist, we would have no dining ritual like the one we actually have. Jesus himself linked his suffering with a meal. That’s why we do the same, in memory of him.

HUMAN LIFE AND SACRED HISTORY

Sacrifice and meal are also linked in nature. We may not like to be reminded of it at the dinner table, but every delectable roast was once a live animal. Even vegetarian meals involve cutting down or pulling up some living thing so we can eat it. There is death-for-the-sake-of-life in the background of every meal, no matter how safe and serene the setting may be.

Beyond this, the sacred history of the people in the Old Testament brings together sacrifice and meal in a crucial

way. God saved his people from the tenth plague in Egypt by having them sacrifice a lamb and paint its blood on the doorposts of their houses. The angel of death would “pass over” the houses marked by the blood of the lamb. No one within would be harmed. This same sacrificed animal then became the main dish of the meal they would eat as they prepared for the Exodus.

The lives of the Chosen People were safeguarded by the blood of the lamb. Its flesh, shared as food, nourished them for the journey that lay ahead—the journey from slavery to freedom. Both meal and sacrifice are necessary parts of the story.

GOD'S WORK ON EARTH TODAY

As the story of the Passover suggests, there is a purpose to the signs God uses in dealing with his people. The slaying of the Passover lamb, and the eating of it, are part of the great story of the Exodus. The people were being led into freedom. They were on their way to the Promised Land.

For Christians, the sacrifice of Jesus and the sharing of bread and wine are also part of a great story—the story of our redemption. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ leads to resurrection and eternal life. We eat the bread of life and drink the cup of salvation to strengthen us for the journey of faith. Even death cannot harm us when we are signed with the cross of Jesus.

But that's not all. Living for others, as Christ taught us—outside of Mass—is both a sacrifice and a feast. We give ourselves in sacrifice when we love, labor, and suffer to do what is right and good every day. We prepare a meal of justice and peace when we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and share the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ in our world.

REFLECT

Are you willing to make sacrifices in your everyday life, for love of God and neighbor? Sometimes a sacrifice means going out of your way to help somebody, or taking a humble attitude, or doing something good when it's inconvenient. Think about the week that just passed. What opportunities were presented to you? How did you respond?

ACT

Make time to share a meal with someone. Maybe invite a family member whom you don't see often, or a friend or colleague you've put off because of your busy schedule. Make it delightful. Let “living the spirit of Eucharist” be the hidden agenda of the meal.

PRAY

Jesus, you are the true Lamb, whose blood consecrates the homes of all believers. Thank you for giving your life for me. You are the Good Shepherd, who spreads a banquet before us. Thank you for feeding me. How can I bring you to this hungry world? Show me the way!

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