

Journey of Faith



In Short:

- Catholic teaching on the Eucharist is based on Jesus' words and actions.
- Catholics believe in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.
- Christians are called to imitate Christ by being bread for others.



The Sacrament of the Eucharist

Some Scripture scholars believe that what most scandalized and infuriated the Jewish leaders about Jesus was that he ate meals with outcasts. He welcomed the despised tax collectors and sinners into table fellowship with him.

Centuries of tradition had given all formal meals among devout Jews a religious significance. Meals became symbols of the past when God had rescued their Hebrew ancestors from slavery and formed a covenant with them. Meals also symbolized the future when the faithful would share in a heavenly banquet.

Seeing Jesus sharing meals with outcasts, the chief priests and elders objected. They asked, *How could he not know who these people are? Doesn't he realize that by eating with them, he's offending God?*

Jesus was well aware of those he was eating with. The official list of "sinners" included not only thieves, murderers, adulterers, extortionists, and

prostitutes, but another group even further down the list—those Jews who worked for Gentiles (like swineherds and tax collectors). By eating with them, Jesus was, in essence, welcoming these outcasts back into the community.

The conviction that God was on their side was what upheld the Israelites in the midst of many afflictions. Then Jesus came along, claiming they were mistaken about God's attitude toward those same people they refused to tolerate. Jesus constantly demonstrated how wrong they were by living out what he taught. It was clear that Jesus ate with these outcasts not just for private motives but in the name of the kingdom of God!

No wonder they were angry enough to have him executed.

"Some scribes who were Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors and said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?' Jesus heard this and said to them [that], 'Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. I did not come to call the righteous but sinners.'"

Mark 2:16–17

- What significance do you connect with sharing a meal?
- What kinds of outcasts would you invite to share a meal with you?



The Eucharist as Meal

The meals Jesus shared with sinners and outcasts add to the significance of his farewell meal with his apostles.

During this Last Supper, Jesus spelled out how the Father's forgiveness and the New Covenant, the promise of eternal life in Christ, would come about. He spelled it out by *word*, saying, "This is my body.... This is my blood of the covenant" (Mark 14:22, 24). He spelled it out in *action* through the sharing of bread and wine.

He also spoke of the price to be paid for the New Covenant to take place. This meal was a powerful message for the apostles. If they truly heeded his words and actions, if they lived up to what this meal required of them, they, like Jesus, should be ready, if necessary, to lay down their lives for others—as Jesus would do.

"While they were eating, Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and giving it to his disciples said, 'Take and eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins.'"

Matthew 26:26–28

The Eucharist as Sacrifice

The meaning of sacrifice to people in biblical times is foreign to our culture and experience. A Jewish family coming to the Temple to offer sacrifice didn't bring gold but something connected with life, such as a living animal or fruits of the harvest. The sacrifice occurred when the priest put the fruits or blood on the altar and the people made an internal offering of *themselves*. The most important part of the sacrifice was what happened in people's minds and hearts—the offering of their lives to God.

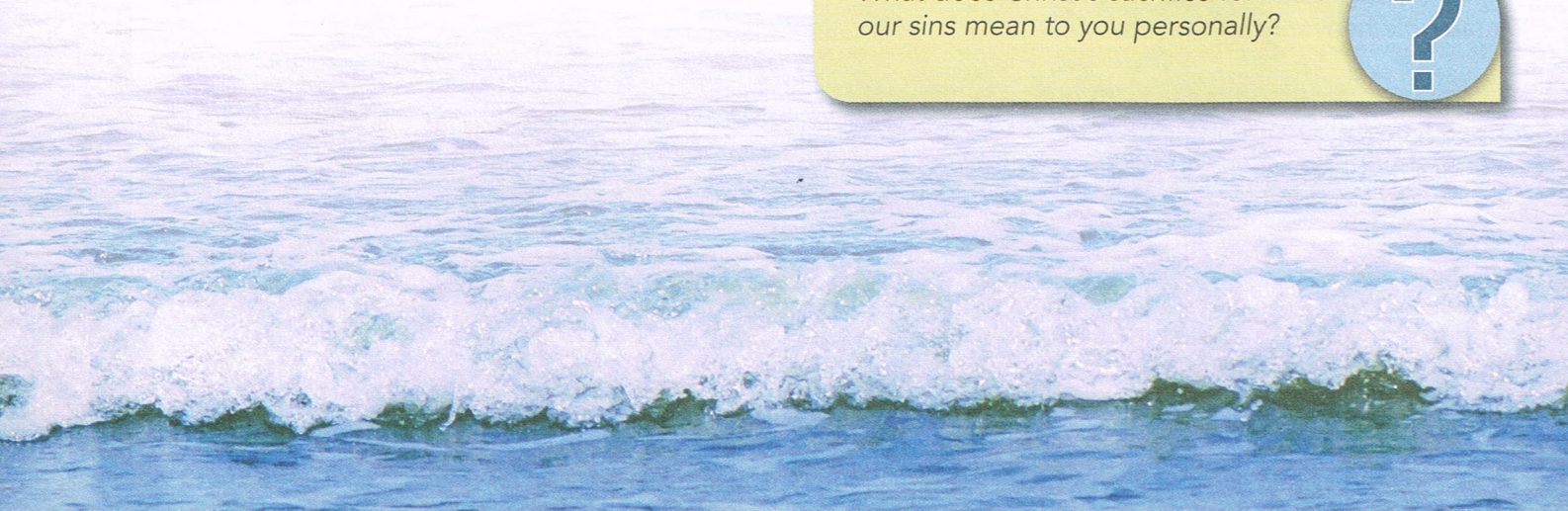
Jesus' death on the cross was the greatest of all sacrifices. Jesus made an offering of himself. The Mass is the free sacrificial offering of Jesus.

But the Mass is not trying to replicate either the ancient sacrifices of the Temple ritual or the bloody event of Jesus' death. The ritual gestures performed by the priest at Mass aren't a stylized reenactment of the slaying of Jesus. The Lord could die only once; he will never die again. Rather, it's in celebrating this family meal, which we call the Mass, that we unite ourselves with Jesus' act of will and offer ourselves to God, mirroring the self-dedication Jesus had when he died on the cross.

"This sacrifice of Christ is unique; it completes and surpasses all other sacrifices. First, it is a gift from God the Father himself, for the Father handed his Son over to sinners in order to reconcile us with himself. At the same time it is the offering of the Son of God made man, who in freedom and love offered his life to his Father through the Holy Spirit in reparation for our disobedience."

CCC 614

- What does Christ's sacrifice for our sins mean to you personally?



The Real Presence of Christ

Catholics believe that when Jesus said, “This is my body...This is my blood,” he meant exactly what he said. For Jews, body meant the person, and blood was the source of the person’s life. So Jesus was saying over the bread and cup, “This is myself,” and we believe the consecrated bread and wine truly become the very person of Jesus.

The New Testament bears witness to the reality of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist. Chapter 6 of John’s Gospel is devoted to Jesus as the “Bread of Life”:

- Jesus multiplies loaves and fish, a miracle that foreshadows his ability to “multiply his presence” in the Eucharist (see John 6:1–15).
- When he walks on water, he shows his divine power over nature, a power capable of changing bread into his Body (see John 6:16–21).
- Jesus teaches what is called his “Bread of Life Discourse” (see John 6:22–59).

“Jesus himself tells us: ‘I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day.’”

John 6:51, 54

Many disciples found these words about eating Jesus’ flesh and drinking his blood intolerable and left him. But Jesus didn’t say, “Wait, I meant that the bread *only represents* my body.” Instead, he asked the Twelve, “‘Do you also want to leave?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life’” (John 6:67–68).

Since the twelfth century, the Church has used the word **transubstantiation** to describe the change from the *substance* of bread and wine to the *substance* of the flesh and blood of Christ.

The *appearances*—the outer aspects like taste, color, and weight—remain just as they were before the consecration, but the deep realities have been changed into the Body and Blood of the living Christ.

When we receive holy Communion, we *receive the whole person of Christ*, as he is at the present moment—risen Lord, with his glorified body and soul, and his full divinity.

“Dying for us did not satisfy you. You had to give us this sacrament as a companion, as food, as a pledge of heaven. You had to become a tiny baby, a poor laborer, a beaten criminal, even a morsel of bread. Only a God who loves us deeply could conceive such ideas!”

St. Alphonsus Liguori

- How does Jesus in the Eucharist call to you? How do you feel about sharing in the Eucharist?



Living the Eucharist

When St. Paul heard of abuses among the Christians in Corinth, he reproached them for celebrating the Eucharist (which means “thanksgiving”) without recognizing the body of Christ—the poor who go hungry while the rich get drunk (1 Corinthians 11:17–34). They were trying to remember Christ without remembering his body, which includes the poor. They wanted to celebrate the head without the body—a risen and glorified sacramental Christ separated from his actual body now.

Paul reminds us of an awesome responsibility. Those who come forward at Mass to receive holy Communion promise to treat all men and women as Christ would treat them, indeed, to treat them as Christ. The Eucharist is a celebration of Real Presence, a celebration that brings about unity and reconciliation in the whole body.

Saint Augustine said: “We must be what we have eaten.” We must be bread for others just as Jesus is bread given for us—broken and shared as nourishment for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Read Chapter 6 in the Gospel of John. Respond to the following questions in your journal:

- What message of hope, comfort, or challenge do you find in this reading?
- Choose one line from the Bread of Life Discourse (John 6:22–59) and explore its meaning for your life.



- In what ways do you see the Eucharist bringing unity and reconciliation to your local parish community?



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