Celebrating the Mass

Teacher Background

**Eucharist**

Vatican II described the sacrament of Eucharist as, among the liturgies of the Church, ‘the source and summit of the Christian life’ (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, I, 10). The primary elements of the Eucharist are bread and wine, symbolic of basic nourishment for life. These core symbols, however, require the necessary interrelationship of the other symbols of the Eucharist: the presider, the Word and the gathered community. By invocation of the Holy Spirit, Jesus, who is the Bread of Life, is present sacramentally. Christians are fed at this table of the Lord. The first fruit of their sacramental nourishment is a closer union with Christ. ‘Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them’ (John 6:56). Consequently, through Communion, one is bound more closely in charity to all who form the mystical Body of Christ. One is fortified against sin and strengthened to meet the challenges of the Christian life.

Not to be neglected is the nourishment received from the word of God that is proclaimed and broken open during the Mass. ‘The Eucharistic table set for us is the table both of the Word of God and of the Body of the Lord’ (Vatican II). When the Scriptures are proclaimed in the community, Christ is present as God’s Word, nourishing our minds and understanding and deepening our faith.

The structure of the Eucharist, or parts of the Mass, are: the *Rite of Gathering* (Introductory Rite) at which the congregation gathers and prepares; the *Liturgy of the Word*, focused on listening and responding; the *Liturgy of the Eucharist*, focused on sharing and giving thanks and the *Rite of Dismissal* (Concluding Rite), where the congregation is exhorted to go forth and proclaim their faith in word and action.

The word ‘Eucharist’ is derived from a Greek word meaning ‘thanksgiving’. This key concept of thanksgiving is at the heart of Eucharist. It is linked to the Jewish feast of Passover, when the people of Israel gathered as community to remember God’s presence in their history, Yahweh’s compassion for them in their suffering, their oppression and their persecution and particularly during their liberation from slavery in Egypt and their Exodus and journey through the desert to the Promised Land. Jesus and his disciples ate a Passover meal together before Jesus passion and death and elements of thanksgiving, memorial, sacrifice, community and presence, characteristic of the Passover Meal, have taken on renewed meaning and significance in the Eucharist, focused as it is on the celebration of the Paschal Mystery, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So in the Eucharist, as a Christian people, followers of Jesus Christ, we give thanks.

Jesus at the Last Supper said “Do this in memory of me” and in the Eucharist as memorial we call to mind Christ’s life, death and resurrection. The *presence* of Jesus, the risen Christ, is in the Eucharist in the bread ‘broken’ and the wine ‘poured out’. Jesus is present in the Scriptures, the Word of God proclaimed. Jesus is present in the community of his followers gathered together. Finally, Jesus is present in the person of the priest presiding at the celebration of Eucharist. The understanding of Eucharist as sacrifice calls to mind Hebrew understandings of sacrifice in the Old Testament where blood on the altar and on the people signified God’s life. Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, the pouring out of his blood, represented the total giving of his life in love for humankind.

The Christian concept of sacrifice is life giving and relational. The sacrifice of the Mass confronts us all with the real cost of becoming the community of Christ in today’s world. It is the sacrificing of ourselves on behalf of others. The Hebrew people powerfully experienced the presence of God in community. Having been delivered from slavery, they committed themselves to live together as a...
just and unified nation. Eucharist as community is best reflected in service of others and in seeking justice. In the Gospel of John the Last Supper is focused on Jesus washing the feet of the disciples. Jesus says: “So, if I your Lord and teacher have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” (John 13:14). The story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand (Mark 6:30-44) highlights the need for to be alert and responsive to the needs of others.