History of Eucharist

Teacher Background

The Early Church

Church tradition teaches how the Eucharist began at the Last Supper and how the early community obeyed Jesus' command to "break bread" in his name (Acts 2:42).

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul describes a Eucharist celebrated in connection with a common supper shared in the homes of the early Christians. This supper included the blessing of the bread and wine, the breaking of the bread, and communion. Paul tells of abuses at this common meal. For example, some people drank too much; others neglected to share their food with the poor in their midst. This shocked Paul because the purpose of the meal was to celebrate the Lord in their midst. Acting selfishly brought a serious warning: "Everyone is to examine himself and only then eat of the bread or drink from the cup; because a person who eats and drinks without recognising the body is eating and drinking his own condemnation" (1 Cor 11:28-29).

Before long, the Eucharist was no longer celebrated at a meal. For example, when St. Justin writes of the Eucharist in 150 C.E. he does not mention a meal. As the numbers of Christians grew, the Eucharist took place independent of a common meal.

Second and Third Centuries

Once the apostolic community was no longer on the scene, the developing liturgy increasingly used, read and reflected on the writings of the first-generation leaders such as Paul. When Jewish-Christians were no longer welcome at the synagogue service, they added its prayers, singing, chanting and homily to the Eucharistic liturgy. Today, we recognise this development as the Liturgy of the Word.

In these early days, the celebrant at the liturgy had considerable freedom to compose his own prayers for the liturgy. Soon, however, standardisation set in as the various communities began to adopt the prayers of their more eloquent celebrants such as Hippolytus (circa 215 C.E.).

Fourth to Eighth Centuries

Constantine's toleration of Christianity (313 C.E.) led to its rapid spread throughout the Roman Empire. This led to significant changes in the celebration of the liturgy.

Latin became the standard language of the liturgy (384 C.E.), as it was now the common language of the Roman world. The increase in the numbers led to a move out of the homes. At first, the assemblies met in basilicas (imperial buildings); later they built and dedicated churches.

The clergy grew in numbers. During this era, they began to wear special clerical clothes. The need for liturgical books grew. At first, the church allowed much variety according to the region one lived in. But in the seventh century Pope Gregory the Great (540 C.E.- 604 C.E.) declared that the Latin Mass in Rome was the standard for the Western church. Pope Gregory's decree, with some changes made by Pope Pius V in 1570, gave the Roman rite its basic form until the reforms of Vatican II.

The sacrificial aspect of the Eucharist grew in importance while the meal symbolism faded into the background. Around this time, the consecrated bread was considered too holy to be touched by lay people and was placed on the tongue. This emphasis on the divinity of Christ prevented people from receiving communion; they felt too unworthy. The Church then legislated that communion be received at least once a year.
The Middle Ages (Ninth-Fifteenth Centuries)

Theologians of this era debated the meaning of the "real presence" of Christ in the Eucharistic bread and wine. They used the term *transubstantiation* to describe the mystery of the bread and wine being changed into Jesus' risen body and blood, although the appearance of bread and wine remained.

Large churches, the stress on the sacrificial nature of the mass and the growing sense that the laity were spectators to a drama unfolding on the altar, all led to a feeling that the Consecration was the high point of the mass. Emphasis fell not on receiving Jesus in communion, but on seeing and adoring Christ in the Bread and Wine. The meaning of Eucharist as meal was all but lost. Since fewer laity were receiving communion, a small round wafer (called host, from the Latin for "sacrificial victim") substituted for a loaf of bread.

Because so few received Holy Communion, the Fourth Lateran Council (1215 C.E.) passed a law that required Catholics to receive communion at least once a year. Practices that focused on Eucharistic devotion sprang up. These included raising of the host and chalice at Mass, Benediction, Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, Forty Hours Devotions, and the feast of Corpus Christi (the Body of Christ).

Reformation to Twentieth Century

The sixteenth century brought about the Protestant Reformation. The Council of Trent (1545-1563 C.E.) convened to correct some of the abuses that had crept into the church. It also defended some Catholic beliefs attacked by the Reformers. In the area of the Eucharist, the church fathers reaffirmed the real presence of Jesus and the adequacy of the theological term *transubstantiation*. They also defended the sacrificial nature of the mass against the Reformers. Most significantly, Pope Pius V published a Roman Missal (1570 C.E.) to bring uniformity to the official ritual. The church used it for the next four hundred years.

Devotion to the Blessed Sacrament continued to flourish, although people rarely received communion until 1910 C.E., when Pope Pius X permitted children who attained the age of reason to receive Holy Communion and encouraged frequent communion by all the faithful.

The Eucharist Today

*Vatican II declared that "the Liturgy…. most of all in the divine sacrifice of the Eucharist is the outstanding means whereby the faithful can express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church" (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, n. 2). This same Constitution recognised that the Eucharist is "the source and summit of the entire Christian life” (n.11).*

Developments in the understanding and celebration of Eucharist sanctioned by church authority since Vatican II have sought to acknowledge both the rich history of the Eucharist and its celebration through 2000 years while acknowledging contemporary emphases on the nature of Church as People of God and on the need to connect Eucharist with the life of individuals and communities.

Changes such as the following reflect contemporary understandings. In some instances these changes represent a recovery of earlier traditions. The Mass, for example is normally now celebrated in the local language so people can understand more fully what it means. The Liturgy of the Word has been given renewed emphasis and its importance along with the Liturgy of the Eucharist re-emphasised.

Renewed emphasis has been given to the community gathered to celebrate Eucharist. The altar now faces the people. This invites a clearer understanding of what is going on at the Eucharist. It also symbolically opens the mass to fuller participation by all those present.

Today’s mass includes the Prayer of the Faithful, which links the Eucharistic worship to the whole church, the world, and the suffering in the community. Active congregational participation is an important feature of the post-Vatican II liturgy. Before, we commonly spoke of “attending Mass.” Today, the emphasis is on “celebrating the Eucharist.” It is public worship in which the community, led by the priest, join in thanking, praising, and adoring God together.