

What is the Holy Eucharist?

While you are reading this page, somewhere in the world a group of Christians is gathering to celebrate the Holy Eucharist, the Holy Communion, the Mass, the Lord's Supper. This service may be held in a great cathedral, in a tiny chapel, or outdoors under a tree. It may be in Polish, or Japanese, or a language you never heard of. But the core will be the same. Here Christians gather with their priest to obey the command of Jesus, to offer bread and wine in his name and to eat and drink them "in remembrance of him." The Eucharist is the central act of worship for the Christian community, and is also at the very heart of the individual Christian's communion with God.

At his Last Supper with his followers, Jesus said prayers of blessing, shared bread and a cup of wine with those present, and commanded them, "Do this in remembrance of me." The actions themselves were nothing new, but were the normal way a rabbi and his pupils, or a group of friends, would celebrate a fellowship meal together. What was new was the meaning Jesus gave to these actions. He associated the sharing of this bread and wine with his coming arrest, death, and resurrection, and with the inauguration of a new Kingdom. As St. Paul wrote a few years later, "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (I Cor. 11:26). Christians from the earliest times have obeyed this command and have met regularly for this sacrificial meal. Today, in the Episcopal Church as in most others, the Holy Eucharist is the normal and principal service of worship every Sunday and on feast days, and in many places it is celebrated every day of the year.

The order for the Holy Eucharist follows a set pattern, which can be found in the *Book of Common Prayer*. It is something like a play: there are a script and cast, props and costumes, and even rehearsals. But this drama is not a kind of pretending. Those who share in it really enter into

the events they are commemorating, and share in a very special way in the mighty acts of God for our salvation. There are several slightly different forms of the liturgy in common use in American Episcopal churches today, but the basic outline is the same in all of them. The service may be short, quiet, and quite simple, or longer and more elaborate, with a lot of music.

Who takes part in this service?

The Holy Eucharist is the *Liturgy*, a word which means "the work of the people." Every member of the congregation has an active part. It is definitely not a spectator event, where a small group performs and everyone else watches (even if sometimes a particular service gives this impression). However, the congregation is not just a crowd. There are definite roles for individuals. Some of them are reserved for the clergy and some are open to lay people, and there is an orderly way for them to carry out these roles.

The "presiding officer" is the *celebrant*, who must be a bishop or priest, given the authority at his ordination to act in the Name of Christ in administering the sacraments. (Longstanding tradition throughout Christendom teaches that bishops and priests must be male. This is based on what Scripture says about the roles of men and women and the language it uses about God.) The celebrant is often assisted by other priests and by deacons and lay servers. Lay men and women are often assigned to read lessons, lead the prayers of the people, and present the offerings. The rest of the congregation, the "chorus," has the very definite role of participating actively in the prayers and hymns, saying the responses, and of course of sharing in the offering and of taking part in the Holy Communion. If you bring a friend to church, or notice a stranger there, it is kind to offer that person help in following the service.

What happens in this service?

The service is divided into two parts. The first half, the Liturgy of the Word, consists of Bible

reading, instruction, and often hymns. Two or three lessons are read from the Bible, one of them always from one of the Gospels, interspersed with Psalms and hymns. There is usually a sermon or homily, which ought to be an instruction or reflection based on the readings which have just been heard. Then, at least on Sundays, the congregation says or sings all together the Nicene Creed, which is a summary of the Christian faith. This part of the service ends with the Prayers of the People, a series of prayers of intercession for the Church and for the world.

A prayer of group confession of sin is usually said at some point in this service, often after the intercessions, and is followed by the priest's declaration of God's forgiveness. Then follows "The peace of the Lord be always with you," when the people greet one another in the name of the Lord. This is a liturgical action, not a social one; social cheer belongs rather to the coffee hour after the service!

The second part of the service turns from word to action, and is the Liturgy of the Sacrament. The basic parts of this liturgy are the Offertory, the Great Thanksgiving, and the Communion. These commemorate the four actions of Jesus at the Last Supper: he *took* bread, he *gave thanks*, he *broke* the bread, and he *gave* it to his followers.

At the Offertory, several people from the congregation (or sometimes just a server) take the bread and wine provided for the service, and any other offerings, and present them to the celebrant, who places them on the altar. This action shows that all the people are offering what they have, and therefore themselves as well, to God. The "Great Thanksgiving" prayer which follows, beginning with the singing of the *Sanctus*, is the heart of the Eucharist. In it the celebrant, speaking to the Father in the Name of Christ, gives thanks to God and praises him for creation and for the redemption of the world in Christ. He recalls Jesus' actions at the Last Supper, repeating his "Words of Institution," "This is my Body," "This is my Blood."

Then, after the Lord's Prayer, the celebrant breaks the consecrated bread. He and his assistants distribute the consecrated bread and wine to those who come forward for Holy Communion, uniting them with Jesus' sacrifice and death and with the power of his risen life. After Communion the service ends quickly with a prayer of thanksgiving, perhaps a hymn, and a blessing. The members of the congregation are sent forth to "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord," taking the presence, power, and love of Christ into the streets and into their homes, shops, and offices.

What is Holy Communion?

The term "Holy Communion" is sometimes used for the whole service, but it also refers specifically to receiving the consecrated bread and wine. Scripture and Christian tradition teach the "Real Presence," that is, that the Lord Jesus Christ is truly present in this sacrament. In Holy Communion we are brought into living and intimate contact with him. Therefore, receiving Holy Communion is a solemn and important act. A communicant must have been baptized, and should prepare for Communion by praying for God's grace, examining his conscience, and repenting sincerely of his sins. A long tradition teaches that one should fast from food before Communion for at least a few hours, but services today are held at such varied times that this fast will vary too.

It would be rather irreverent to "go up for Communion" just because "everybody else is doing it," without any thought of preparation. Also, since some Protestant traditions do not teach this doctrine of the Real Presence, it is a courtesy to tell a visitor just what we do believe. Because the Holy Communion is such an intimate union with Christ and such a powerful source of grace, growing in the habit of regular, frequent, and well-prepared Communion is an important part of the Christian life.

Why all the fancy clothes and trimmings?

We are sacramental beings, composed of both body and spirit, and it is right to worship God with beautiful things and actions. A church is a holy place specially set apart for the worship of God. The special clothes, or *vestments*, serve to stress the role the priests and other ministers are fulfilling rather than their own personalities. The use of music, bells, incense, and movements such as processions or standing and kneeling involves our whole bodies and all our senses in the worship of God.

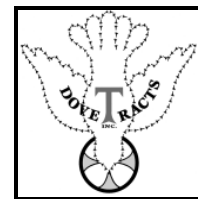
Styles vary in different cultures, from the very formal often used in city churches, to a folk or perhaps a Caribbean idiom. It is perfectly possible, and sometimes appropriate, to celebrate the Eucharist in someone's living room, in a hospital room, or at a campsite, with no special ceremonies at all. But at their best these things all combine to give glory to God and to sanctify the worshipers in every aspect of their lives.

Great music of many kinds has been written for the Holy Eucharist, from folk hymns to Bach's *B Minor Mass*. A well-loved English hymn sums up the inner truth of this service:

*And now, O Father, mindful of the love
That bought us, once for all, on Calvary's
tree,
And having with us him that pleads above,
We here present, we here spread forth to
thee,
That only offering perfect in thine eyes,
The one true, pure, immortal sacrifice.*

William Bright, 1874
Hymnal 1940, #189;
Hymnal 1982, # 337.

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