

Holy Eucharist

The Holy Eucharist is called the “sacrament of sacraments” in the Orthodox tradition. It is also called the “sacrament of the Church.” The Eucharist is the center of the Church’s life. Everything in the Church leads to the Eucharist, and all things flow from it. It is the completion of all of the Church’s sacraments—the source and the goal of all of the Church’s doctrines and institutions.

As with baptism, it must be noted that the Eucharistic meal was not invented by Christ. Such holy ritual meals existed in the Old Testament and in pagan religions. Generally speaking the “dinner” remains even today as one of the main ritual and symbolic events in the life of man.

The Christian Eucharist is a meal specifically connected with the Passover meal of the Old Testament. At the end of his life Christ, the Jewish Messiah, ate the Passover meal with his disciples. Originally a ritual supper in commemoration of the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, the Passover meal was transformed by Christ into an act done in remembrance of him: of His life, death and resurrection as the new and eternal Passover Lamb who frees men from the slavery of evil, ignorance and death and transfers them into the everlasting life of the Kingdom of God.

At the supper Christ took the bread and the wine and ordered his disciples to eat and drink it as his own Body and Blood. This action thus became the center of the Christian life, the experience of the presence of the Risen Christ in the midst of his People (see Mt 26; Mk 14; Lk 22; Jn 6 and 13; Acts 2.41–47; 1 Cor 10–11).

As a word, the term Eucharist means thanksgiving. This name is given to the sacred meal—not only to the elements of bread and wine, but to the whole act of gathering, praying, reading the Holy Scriptures and proclaiming God’s Word, remembering Christ and eating and drinking his Body and Blood in communion with him and with God the Father, by the Holy Spirit. The word Eucharist is used because the all-embracing meaning

of the Lord's Banquet is that of thanksgiving to God in Christ and the Holy Spirit for all that he has done in making, saving and glorifying the world.

The sacrament of the Eucharist is also called holy communion since it is the mystical communion of men with God, with each other, and with all men and all things in him through Christ and the Spirit. The Eucharistic liturgy is celebrated in the Church every Sunday, the Day of the Lord, as well as on feast days. Except in monasteries, it is rarely celebrated daily. Holy Communion is forbidden to all Orthodox Christians on the week days of Great Lent except in the special communion of the Liturgy of the Pre-sanctified Gifts (see below) because of its joyful and resurrectional character. The Eucharist is always given to all members of the Church, including infants who are baptized and confirmed. It is always given in both forms—bread and wine. It is strictly understood as being the real presence of Christ, His true Body and Blood mystically present in the bread and wine which are offered to the Father in his name and consecrated by the divine Spirit of God.

In the history of Christian thought, various ways were developed to try to explain how the bread and the wine become the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharistic liturgy. Quite unfortunately, these explanations often became too rationalistic and too closely connected with certain human philosophies.

One of the most unfortunate developments took place when men began to debate the reality of Christ's Body and Blood in the Eucharist. While some said that the Eucharistic gifts of bread and wine were the real Body and Blood of Christ, others said that the gifts were not real, but merely the symbolic or mystical presence of the Body and Blood. The tragedy in both of these approaches is that what is real came to be opposed to what is symbolic or mystical.

The Orthodox Church denies the doctrine that the Body and the Blood of the Eucharist are merely intellectual or psychological symbols of Christ's Body and Blood. If this doctrine were true, when the liturgy is celebrated and Holy Communion is given, the people would be called merely to think

about Jesus and to commune with him “in their hearts.” In this way, the Eucharist would be reduced to a simple memorial meal of the Lord’s last supper, and the union with God through its reception would come only on the level of thought or psychological recollection.

On the other hand, however, the Orthodox tradition does use the term “symbols” for the Eucharistic gifts. It calls, the service a “mystery” and the sacrifice of the liturgy a “spiritual and bloodless sacrifice.” These terms are used by the holy fathers and the liturgy itself.

The Orthodox Church uses such expressions because in Orthodoxy what is real is not opposed to what is symbolical or mystical or spiritual. On the contrary! In the Orthodox view, all of reality—the world and man himself—is real to the extent that it is symbolical and mystical, to the extent that reality itself must reveal and manifest God to us. Thus, the Eucharist in the Orthodox Church is understood to be the genuine Body and Blood of Christ precisely because bread and wine are the mysteries and symbols of God’s true and genuine presence and manifestation to us in Christ. Thus, by eating and drinking the bread and wine which are mystically consecrated by the Holy Spirit, we have genuine communion with God through Christ who is himself “the bread of life” (Jn 6.34, 41).

I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh (Jn 6.51).

Thus, the bread of the Eucharist is Christ’s flesh, and Christ’s flesh is the Eucharistic bread. The two are brought together into one. The word “symbolical” in Orthodox terminology means exactly this: “to bring together into one.”

Thus we read the words of the Apostle Paul:

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed took bread, and when He had

given thanks, He broke it, and said, "This is My body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of Me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. Do this, as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death, until He comes. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread and drinks the cup in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord (1 Cor 11.23–26).

The mystery of the holy Eucharist defies analysis and explanation in purely rational and logical terms. For the Eucharist—and Christ Himself—is indeed a mystery of the Kingdom of Heaven which, as Jesus has told us, is “not of this world.” The Eucharist—because it belongs to God’s Kingdom—is truly free from the earth-born “logic” of fallen humanity

The Eucharist is...

By Fr. Alexander Schmemmann

The Eucharist is a mystery, the very mystery of joy, the mystery of all mysteries, the mystery of the Church.

The Eucharist is a joyful gathering of those who are to meet the risen Lord, and they enter with him into the bridal chamber.

The Eucharist is an action, by which a group of people become something corporately, which they had not been as a mere collection of individuals. It is the essential attitude, and the essential act of the Church, which is the new humanity, restored by Christ, one transforming act, and one ascending movement.

The Eucharist is a procession of the Church following the ascension of Christ.

The Eucharist is a journey of the Church into the dimension of the Kingdom.

The Eucharist is a real separation from the world. We always want to make Christianity understandable and acceptable to the mythical modern man on

the street, and we forget that the Christ of whom we speak is not of this world, and that after his resurrection, he was not recognized, even by his own disciples. We do not realize that we never get anywhere because we never leave any place behind us.

The Eucharist is an entrance of the Church into the joy of its Lord, and to enter into that joy so as to be a witness to it in the world, is the very calling of the Church, its essential ministry, the mystery by which it becomes what it is. It is an entrance into the risen life of Christ, the very movement of the Church, as passage from the old into the new, from this world into the world to come.

The Eucharist is a manifestation of the Word of God. God will speak to us. His eternal Word will be given to us, and we will receive it.

The Eucharist is a movement, the movement that Adam failed to perform, and that, in Christ, has become the very life of man—a movement of adoration and praise, in which all joy and suffering, all beauty and all frustration, all hunger and all satisfaction, are referred to their ultimate end, and become finally, meaningful. It is real life, a movement of love and adoration toward God, the movement in which, alone, the meaning and value of all that exists can be revealed and fulfilled.

The Eucharist is an offering. It is our offering to him of ourselves, of our life, and of our whole world, “to take into our hands the whole world, as if it were an apple,” said a Russian poet.

The Eucharist is a sacrifice, but it the most natural act of man, the very essence of his life. Man is a sacrificial being. Because he finds his life in love, and love is sacrificial, it puts the value, the very meaning of life, in the other, and gives life to the other, and in this giving, in this sacrifice, finds the meaning and joy of life. It is, indeed, a sacrifice offered on behalf of all, and for all.

The Eucharist is Christ, himself. The Eucharist is his Eucharist, and he is the Eucharist. It is he who offers, and it is he who is offered. Christ is the perfect man, who stands before God. Christ, alone, is the perfect Eucharistic being. He is the Eucharist of the world. In and through this Eucharist, the whole creation becomes what always was to be, and yet, failed to be.

The Eucharist is the memorial of Christ. It is the mystery of cosmic remembrance. It is, indeed, a restoration of love as the very life of the world. Remembrance is an act of love. God remembers us, and his remembrance, his love, is the foundation of the world. In Christ, we remember. The church, and its separation from this world, on its journey to heaven, remembers the world, remembers all men, remembers the whole creation, and takes it, in love, to God. We remember his life, his death, his resurrection, one movement of sacrifice, of love, of dedication to his father, and to men. This is the inexhaustible content of our remembrance.

The Eucharist is the lifting up of our offering, and of ourselves. The Eucharist is the ascension of the Church to heaven. We have entered the Eschaton, and we are now standing beyond time and space. It is because all this has first happened to us, that something will happen to bread and wine. It is our ascension in Christ.

The Eucharist is the state of perfect man. When man stands before the throne of God, when he has fulfilled all that God has given him to fulfill, when all sins are forgiven, all joy restored, then there is nothing else for him to do, but to give thanks. When a man stands before God, face to face, when he has been accepted into his presence, when his sins are forgiven, and he has recovered his pristine beauty, the Eucharist, thanksgiving, adoration, worship, is truly the ultimate and the total expression of his whole being. It is the divine element, the image of God in us, the life of paradise, the one essential relationship with God, the only full and real response of man to God's creation, redemption, and gift of heaven. It is a new style of life, the only real life, of creation with God, and in God, the only true relationship between God and the world. In sin, man has lost that pure Eucharist. He has directed his life, his love, his care, toward other objects. He has become incapable of Eucharist, thanksgiving, which is the state of man in paradise.

The Eucharist is the breakthrough that brings us to the table in the Kingdom, raises us to heaven, and makes us partakers of the divine food.

The Eucharist is the end of the movement. We are at the Paschal table of the Kingdom, the end of the journey, the end of time. It is the arrival at a vantage point from which we can see more deeply into the reality of the world.

The Eucharist is the mystery of unity and the moment of truth, the very expression and edification of the Church. Here, we see the world in Christ, as it really is, and not from our particular, and therefore, limited, and partial, points of view.

The Eucharist is communion with the whole Church. It is the supreme revelation of the communion of the saints, of the unity and interdependence of all the members of the Body of Christ. It is judgment and condemnation to people who do not see Christ in the Church, but see in it merely human pride and arrogance, selfishness, and the spirit of this world. It is the breaking of the bread, the one source of life that brings all to it, and redeems the unity of all men under one head, Christ, the mystery of forgiveness, the mystery of reconciliation achieved by Christ, and eternally granted to those who believe in him. It is the essential food of the Christian, strengthening his spiritual life, healing his diseases, affirming his faith, making him capable of leading a truly Christian life in this world, the gift of eternal life, an anticipation of the joy, peace and fullness of the Kingdom, a foretaste of its light. It is both partaking of Christ's suffering, the expression of our readiness to accept his way of life, and sharing in his victory and triumph—a sacrificial meal, and a joyful banquet. His body is broken, and his blood is shed, and partaking of them, we accept the cross. Yet, by the cross, joy has entered the world, and this joy is ours when we are at the Lord's table. It is given to me, personally, in order to transform me into a member of Christ, to unite me with all those who receive him, to reveal the Church as a fellowship of love.

The Eucharist is the mystery of the Kingdom, the fullness and manifestation of the Church as the age to come.

The Eucharist is our secret joy and certitude, the source of inspiration and growth, the victory that overcomes evil, the presence that makes our whole life, life in Christ.

The Eucharist is the beginning, and things that were impossible are again revealed to us as possible. The time of the world has become the time of the Church, the time of salvation and redemption.

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The Church Fathers On the Holy Eucharist

By Fr. Joseph Bittle

The Church has always believed that Our Lord Jesus, by the action of the Holy Spirit, is truly and wholly present when the bread and wine have been consecrated to be His Body and Blood.

This is such that, after this change during the great prayer of offering called the Anaphora, we must be willing to say, without equivocation, that what we see and partake of is the Body and Blood of Christ. Certainly, most of the Protestant denominations have attacked this as being "unbiblical," but witness of the Holy Scriptures is forthright in declaring it (see, for instance 1 Cor. 10:16–17, 11:23–29; and, of course, John 6:32–71).

The early Church Fathers also witness to the Church's unchanging tradition regarding this true, full, yet mysterious reality. As respected historian J. N. D. Kelly writes: "Eucharistic teaching, it should be understood at the outset, was in general unquestioningly realist, i.e., the consecrated bread and wine were taken to be, and were treated and designated as, the Savior's body and blood." (Early Christian Doctrines, 440, emphasis added)

Professor Kelly is certainly correct in his assessment, but perhaps it would be most helpful to let the early Church Fathers speak for themselves, noting carefully the early dates of their writings:

St. Ignatius of Antioch

"I have no taste for corruptible food nor for the pleasures of this life. I desire the bread of God, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, who was of the seed of David; and for drink I desire his blood, which is love incorruptible" (Letter to the Romans 7:3 [A.D. 110]).

"Take note of those who hold heterodox opinions on the grace of Jesus Christ which has come to us, and see how contrary their opinions are to the mind of God...They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, flesh which suffered for our sins and which that Father, in his goodness,

raised up again. They who deny the gift of God are perishing in their disputes" (Letter to the Smyrnaeans 6:2–7:1 [A.D. 110]).

St. Justin Martyr

"We call this food Eucharist, and no one else is permitted to partake of it, except one who believes our teaching to be true and who has been washed in the washing which is for the remission of sins and for regeneration [i.e., has received baptism] and is thereby living as Christ enjoined. For not as common bread nor common drink do we receive these; but since Jesus Christ our Savior was made incarnate by the word of God and had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so too, as we have been taught, the food which has been made into the Eucharist by the Eucharistic prayer set down by him, and by the change of which our blood and flesh is nurtured, is both the flesh and the blood of that incarnated Jesus" (First Apology 66 [A.D. 151]).

St. Irenaeus of Lyon

"If the Lord were from other than the Father, how could he rightly take bread, which is of the same creation as our own, and confess it to be his body and affirm that the mixture in the cup is his blood?" (Against Heresies 4:33–32 [A.D. 189]).

"He has declared the cup, a part of creation, to be his own blood, from which he causes our blood to flow; and the bread, a part of creation, he has established as his own body, from which he gives increase unto our bodies. When, therefore, the mixed cup [wine and water] and the baked bread receives the Word of God and becomes the Eucharist, the body of Christ, and from these the substance of our flesh is increased and supported, how can they say that the flesh is not capable of receiving the gift of God, which is eternal life—flesh which is nourished by the body and blood of the Lord, and is in fact a member of him?" (ibid., 5:2).

Clement of Alexandria

"'Eat my flesh,' [Jesus] says, 'and drink my blood.' The Lord supplies us with these intimate nutrients, he delivers over his flesh and pours out his blood, and nothing is lacking for the growth of his children" (The Instructor of Children 1:6:43:3 [A.D. 191]).

St. Cyprian of Carthage

"He [Paul] threatens, moreover, the stubborn and forward, and denounces them, saying, 'Whosoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily, is guilty of the body and blood of the Lord' [1 Cor. 11:27]. All these warnings being scorned and contemned—[lapsed Christians will often take Communion] before their sin is expiated, before confession has been made of their crime, before their conscience has been purged by sacrifice and by the hand of the priest, before the offense of an angry and threatening Lord has been appeased, [and so] violence is done to his body and blood; and they sin now against their Lord more with their hand and mouth than when they denied their Lord" (The Lapsed 15–16 [A.D. 251]).

Aphraahat the Persian Sage

"After having spoken thus [at the Last Supper], the Lord rose up from the place where he had made the Passover and had given his body as food and his blood as drink, and he went with his disciples to the place where he was to be arrested. But he ate of his own body and drank of his own blood, while he was pondering on the dead. With his own hands the Lord presented his own body to be eaten, and before he was crucified he gave his blood as drink" (Treatises 12:6 [A.D. 340]).

St. Cyril of Jerusalem

"The bread and the wine of the Eucharist before the holy invocation of the adorable Trinity were simple bread and wine, but the invocation having been made, the bread becomes the body of Christ and the wine the blood of Christ" (Catechetical Lectures 19:7 [A.D. 350]).

"Do not, therefore, regard the bread and wine as simply that; for they are, according to the Master's declaration, the body and blood of Christ. Even though the senses suggest to you the other, let faith make you firm. Do not judge in this matter by taste, but be fully assured by the faith, not doubting that you have been deemed worthy of the body and blood of Christ...[Since you are] fully convinced that the apparent bread is not bread, even though it is sensible to the taste, but the body of Christ, and that the apparent wine is not wine, even though the taste would have it so,...partake of that bread as something spiritual, and put a cheerful face on your soul" (ibid., 22:6, 9).

St. Ambrose of Milan

"Perhaps you may be saying, 'I see something else; how can you assure me that I am receiving the body of Christ?' It but remains for us to prove it. And how many are the examples we might use!...Christ is in that sacrament, because it is the body of Christ" (The Mysteries 9:50, 58 [A.D. 390]).

Bl. Augustine of Hippo

"I promised you [new Christians], who have now been baptized, a sermon in which I would explain the sacrament of the Lord's Table....That bread which you see on the altar, having been sanctified by the word of God, is the body of Christ. That chalice, or rather, what is in that chalice, having been sanctified by the word of God, is the blood of Christ" (Sermons 227 [A.D. 411]).

"What you see is the bread and the chalice; that is what your own eyes report to you. But what your faith obliges you to accept is that the bread is the body of Christ and the chalice is the blood of Christ. This has been said very briefly, which may perhaps be sufficient for faith; yet faith does not desire instruction" (ibid., 272).

Council of Ephesus

"We will necessarily add this also. Proclaiming the death, according to the flesh, of the only-begotten Son of God, that is Jesus Christ, confessing his resurrection from the dead, and his ascension into heaven, we offer the unbloody sacrifice in the churches, and so go on to the mystical thanksgivings, and are sanctified, having received his holy flesh and the precious blood of Christ the Savior of us all. And not as common flesh do we receive it; God forbid: nor as of a man sanctified and associated with the Word according to the unity of worth, or as having a divine indwelling, but as truly the life-giving and very flesh of the Word himself. For he is the life according to his nature as God, and when he became united to his flesh, he made it also to be life-giving" (Session 1, Letter of Cyril to Nestorius [A.D. 431]).

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