

# How the Eucharist evolved

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## PART 1

Frank O'Dea SSS looks at how the Eucharist developed and what it might mean for our Eucharist today.

### The Beginning

The disciples were devastated at the death of Jesus but were greatly comforted and encouraged by his appearances after his resurrection when he ate and drank with them. I like to think Jesus was teaching them that when they had a meal together to remember him, then he was with them as the risen Christ.

The Last Supper was probably a rather bewildering event for the disciples and there was little time to reflect on it as it was followed immediately by his betrayal, suffering and death. When he revealed himself in the 'breaking of bread' to the two disciples at Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) and when he provided a barbecued breakfast of bread and fish for the disciples on the shores of Lake Galilee (John 21:1-14), perhaps he was teaching them in a very visual way that when they had a meal in memory of him, then he would be with them as the Risen One.

What provoked the disciples to begin celebrating a meal in memory of Jesus is a 'missing link' in the history of the Eucharist in the early Church

Perhaps after the coming of the Holy Spirit, one of the disciples was inspired with the memory of Jesus' instruction at the Last Supper, and said to the others, *Do you remember that when we had that last meal on the night he was betrayed, after he broke the bread and blessed the cup, he said, 'Do this in memory of me? Come on, let's do it.*

The disciples began to celebrate the Eucharist very soon after Pentecost. Immediately after he tells us about the coming of the Holy Spirit and Peter's preaching to the people, Luke writes, 'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.' (Acts 2:42)

Does the breaking of bread mean the Eucharist? This undoubtedly refers to more than ordinary meals. The presence of the resurrected Jesus is noted at the 'breaking of the bread' in Luke 24:35. Luke emphasizes the connection between meals and Jesus' presence (Luke 24:41-42; Acts 1:4, 10:41). The ritual is noted again in 2:46; 20:7, 11. (Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p.58, Sacra Pagina Series, 1992)

Paul in 1 Corinthians 11 and Matthew, Mark and Luke in their gospels tell us about the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. These accounts were written 25 to 60 years after the event, during which time what actually happened would have been partly lost and each community remembered the event in the way it had been passed on to them. It would be natural for the authors to write into their story of the Last Supper the way the Eucharist was celebrated by the communities at the time of writing.

We would like to know the details of the early Eucharists but, alas, the writers have not provided them.

*One of the major difficulties faced by scholars with regard to the origin of the Eucharist is the question of how far the accounts of the Last Supper may be treated as reliable descriptions of an actual historical event and how far they have been affected by the later liturgical practices of the first generation of Christians.* (Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*, Oxford University Press, 2002, p.61)

The earliest Eucharists were home Masses (Acts 2:46 says 'they broke bread at home') with small numbers and one could safely presume they would have been very simple. Elaborate ceremonies would develop only later.

Yet these early Eucharists were establishing the traditions or should we say 'Traditions' with upper case 'T'. When we want to be truly 'traditional', we are looking not at the Church of the 1950s or the Middle Ages but at the very early Church of the first few centuries.

As the good news spread beyond the borders of Israel, there were Gentile converts and these too learned to remember Jesus' death and resurrection in the Breaking of Bread. Luke tells us of Paul at Troas: 'On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread..' (Acts 20:7-12)

This is the only account we have in the New Testament of a specific celebration of the Eucharist, and again it gives no details.

Note that they met 'on the first day of the week', that is, Sunday, the day of the resurrection, so these early Christians changed the day of meeting from Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, to Sunday.

### Eucharist with a Meal

Each community would have developed its own way of celebrating the Eucharist and for this reason we cannot generalise about how the ritual was performed. At least in some places such as Corinth, the Eucharist, here referred to as 'the Lord's Supper', was celebrated together with a community meal. We know this because Paul rebukes this community for not sharing their food as they should.

*When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk.* (1 Corinthians 11:20-21)

Paul is quite severe towards the Corinthians and he asks them to recall how Jesus gave himself so unselfishly when he instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper. He repeats for them the words that Jesus used: *This is my body that is for you...* Paul then tells them that when they do not share generously, they are eating and drinking 'in an unworthy manner' (v. 27) and not 'discerning the body' (v. 29), that is, the assembly of followers.

Sharing a meal at the same time as celebrating the Eucharist fell out of use, though it seems a natural thing to do, and many parishes today have morning tea after Sunday morning Mass.

### Evolution of Different Rites

The particular way of celebrating the Eucharist, that is, the sequence of events, the texts, the symbols are called 'rites'. In the East, many different rites evolved and these are still in use such as the Coptic, East Syrian, West Syrian, Byzantine and Malabar rites. Several different rites evolved in the West but the Roman Rite is the one used almost universally now.

### Language

We could safely assume that when the 'Breaking of Bread' was begun in Jerusalem, the participants would have used their own language, Aramaic, and the Greek speaking people among them (the Hellenists) would have used Greek. As the gospel spread beyond Israel, the local language of the area was used, and people of the Eastern rites still use these languages. In the West the language of the common people, Koine Greek, was used but Latin became the favoured language.

'In the second half of the second century, however, Latin also appeared as the language of Christians (in North Africa),

and from that time on it was used more and more widely in the west.’ (Herman Wegman, translated by Gordon W. Lathrop, *Christian Worship in East and West*, Pueblo Publishing Company 1985, p.65)

Latin prevailed in the West until the Council of Vatican II in the 1960s. This transition from Latin into the vernacular languages for the Mass was a momentous step in the 1960s. I wonder whether there was as much trauma in the change from Greek to Latin in the late second century as there was in the recent change from Latin to English!

**Fasting**

Jews had rules for fasting and the early Christians continued this practice by fasting from midnight until the celebration of the Eucharist. Fasting meant nothing to eat and nothing to drink, not even water – a very difficult practice, especially for priests in hot countries like Australia when they frequently had to travel long distances between Masses on horseback. This obligation was only relaxed after Vatican II. Today the fasting is one hour prior to the time of receiving communion.

**Roots in Judaism**

Because Christianity has its roots in Judaism, it was natural for the early prayers to be adaptations of Jewish blessings and prayers. The prayers we use now at the presentation of the bread and wine clearly show their Jewish origin with the opening line, ‘Blessed are you Lord, God of all creation’. Likewise, it would have been natural for the early Christians to continue the practice of reading the scriptures, including the gospels, at their gatherings. To this practice was added the reading of the letters of the founders of their communities: Paul, Peter, John and others. We now call this the Liturgy of the Word.

**Sign of Unity**

One of the major concerns of the early Church was for the Eucharist to be a sign of unity, especially when persecution threatened to divide the assembly. Eating from the same loaf, drinking from the same cup, gathered around the same table – these were symbols of a united people. This sense of belonging is still very important today.

In the early Church, unity with previous assemblies and with congregations in

different parts of the city was considered important. In Rome the pope placed a piece of the bread from a previous Mass into the cup at the Breaking of the Bread to symbolise unity with earlier gatherings, and pieces of bread from the pope’s Mass were taken to other churches in the city where the ‘Breaking of Bread’ was being celebrated..

**Justin Martyr**

A very important document comes from around 155 when Justin Martyr (100–165) describes the form the Mass took at that time:

- Readings from Old and New Testament ‘for as long as time permits’.



- The president of the assembly gives a homily.
- Prayers and intercessions.
- Kiss of peace.
- The president ‘offers prayers and thanksgivings according to his ability’.
- Communion taken to the sick and the absent.
- Collection for those in need. (Refer John F. Baldovin S.J. *Bread of Life, Cup of Salvation*, Sheed and Ward, 2003, p.41)

When Justin says the president ‘offers prayers and thanksgivings according to his ability’, he is referring to the Eucharistic prayer which the presider composed spontaneously as there was nothing fixed in writing at that time—a very significant difference between Mass then and Mass today.

Apart from this concession to spontaneity, note how closely the Eucharist at the time of Justin Martyr corresponds to the present-day Eucharist. See also the importance given to taking communion to those unable to be present to let them know they are not forgotten by the assembly – again the concern for unity.

Notice also the differences. What is missing is the introduction, penitential rite, opening prayer, the creed, prayer over the gifts, prayer after communion and the dismissal. These were added in later centuries.

**The Institution Narrative in the Eucharistic Prayer**

We take for granted that in every Eucharist we hear the story of the Last Supper which contains the words of Jesus, ‘Take and eat, this is my body given up for you... Take and drink, this is my blood poured out for you.’ We refer to these as the ‘words of consecration’. In the missal they are printed in bold type and bells and incense were used. These words were considered absolutely essential.

However, research shows that the earliest Eucharistic prayers did not contain the story of the Last Supper, hence they did not contain what we call ‘the words of consecration’.

*So there is not a single pre-Nicene eucharistic prayer that one can prove contained the Words of Institution, and today many scholars maintain that the most primitive, original eucharistic prayers were short, self-contained*

*benedictions without Institution Narrative or Epiclesis, comparable to the Didache and the papyrus Strasbourg. (Robert F Taft, Mass Without the Consecration? Worship 77, 6 Nov 2003, p.483; italics, upper case and lower case in original). [The Council of Nicaea took place in 325 AD, the Didache was written between 50 and 100 AD, Strasbourg is the title of an ancient document]*

In the early Church the Last Supper story with the ‘words of consecration’ was not part of the liturgy. The focus of Taft’s article is the Eucharistic prayer of Addai and Mari used in the Assyrian Church of the East and which does not contain the story of the Last Supper, hence it does not have the ‘words of consecration’. He refers to an ‘audacious agreement’ between the Assyrian Church and the Vatican in which the Holy See states that Catholics of the Chaldean Church may receive communion

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in the Assyrian Church when the Eucharistic prayer of Addai and Mari is used even though the 'words of consecration' are not there. This document (*Guidelines for Admission to the Eucharist between the Chaldean Church and the Assyrian Church of the East*) was approved by Pope John Paul II and promulgated on 26 October 2001. Its aim is to enable the faithful of the two 'Sister Churches' to receive the benefits of the Eucharist when their own ministers are not available.

Catholics have grown up with the idea that it is at the moment when 'the words of consecration' are pronounced that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ.

In the early Church, however, the whole of the Eucharistic prayer was considered to be the words of consecration, there was no one instant that was singled out as *the* moment. Thus the early Church did not think of the consecration as 'consecration by formula' or of 'the moment of consecration'. This has important implications for our understanding of the presence of Christ in the bread and wine.

### Who Presides at Mass?

A big difference between the early Church and today's Church shows up in the question of 'who presides?'. Today, in the Western Roman Church, only an ordained male celibate can preside at Mass, except for the situation when a priest from another denomination who is already married and becomes a Catholic is then ordained as a Catholic priest. This is likely to occur more often since Pope Benedict XVI in 2009 invited Anglicans to join the Catholic Church in groups or parishes. On the other hand,

'Who was ordained, how, and why does not seem to have been a major preoccupation in the very beginning.' (John F Baldovin S.J., *Bread of Life, Cup of Salvation*, Sheed and Ward, 2003, p.42)

It may not have been a major preoccupation then, but it certainly is now as controversy rages fiercely over the ordination of married men and of women. Ordination was available to married men in the Western Church up until the eleventh century.

Over time an extraordinary mystique developed about priesthood with its accompanying status and privilege which does not seem justified from what we know about the early Church. Raymond Brown, a highly respected Catholic scripture scholar, says,

*Nowhere in the New Testament are church presbyters or bishops called priests; that*

*development came for bishops in the second century, and later for presbyters. It is interesting that 1 Peter speaks of a general 'royal priesthood' (2:9) and of 'presbyters' (5:1) but makes no connection between them. (The Church the Apostles Left Behind, Paulist Press, New York, 1984, p.80 footnote)*

There is much food for thought here!

### Bread: Leavened or Unleavened?"

In the early centuries ordinary bread which has yeast to make it rise was used for the Eucharist. The gifts that were brought to the altar to be given to the poor included bread, and some of this ordinary bread was used in the Mass.

In Jewish practice, unleavened bread was known as "bread of affliction" but the early Christians wanted to celebrate the memorial of Jesus' death and resurrection as a joyful event so unleavened bread was not appropriate. They drew on the sacrifice of *todah* for their inspiration. This was a sacrifice offered when death seemed to be inevitable due to sickness or danger. Meat, leavened bread and unleavened bread were offered in thanksgiving when the person's life was spared.

The unleavened bread was burned and the leavened bread and the meat were eaten in joyous thanksgiving. The person who was saved proclaimed (the verb form of *todah* means *to make known*) God's goodness. This gave rise to some well known psalms such as Psalm 118 with its exultant cry, "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice in it and be glad!"

Gradually this sacrifice moved away from the temple into homes and was celebrated with leavened bread and wine. Rabbis predicted that this sacrifice would continue into the life to come whereas other sacrifices would not.

The practice of using leavened bread continued for 800 years. Then because of an upsurge of interest in the sacrifices and priesthood of the Old Testament (forgetting about the sacrifice of *todah*), unleavened bread began to be used. It was also found that left over leavened bread didn't keep well.

Another influence was that the Germanic tribes which had been converted to Christianity picked up the Arian heresy which said that Jesus was not divine. The church reacted to this aberration by stressing that Jesus was not only God but that he was the judge of all humankind, and a severe judge at that. People then felt they should not touch this divine presence in the host, so receiving on the tongue became the norm, a practice that has lasted

till the present day.

"Requiring the use of unleavened bread, as does the Western Church, certainly has no secure foundation in either institution or tradition. It is not even a rule of early Christian practice but one that was imposed only during the Carolingian age [8<sup>th</sup> century] when Christian sacraments and order were paralleled to the Israelite priesthood and sacrificial ritual." (David Power, *The Eucharistic Mystery, Revitalizing the Tradition*, The Crossroad Publishing, New York, 1992, p.868)

### Song

It's a universal human urge to sing, so we can be sure there was singing during the Eucharist in the early Church. Singing gives colour to a ceremony, touches the heart and allows the right side of the brain to come into play.

Over the centuries, customs and regulations about singing have varied. Gregorian chant, the free-flowing music without a time signature or regular beat, ruled for hundreds of years, especially in monasteries. Gregorian chant is surely one of the most beautiful creations of the human genius and was designed for the Latin language. The simple chants of the early centuries were very beautiful and quite suitable for the people to sing. However, as chant developed in length and complexity, only trained choirs could sing them. Polyphony (part singing) also developed to an extraordinarily high art form.

The model being used for Church music, consciously or unconsciously, was that only the very best was good enough for the worship of the all-holy God. However, this meant the people in the pews became listeners, not participants.

When Vatican II asked for more participation by the people, a new form of music was introduced: more singable, based on scripture and accompanied by guitars and other instruments in common use. Along with other lovers of fine music, I was not impressed. But I had a conversion. At a family gathering an aunt and an uncle spoke enthusiastically about how they could now join in the singing at Mass. I thought, 'If this music gets ordinary people like Auntie Pat and Uncle Bob to sing at Mass, it has a lot going for it.' However, Gregorian chant and polyphony still have a valuable niche to fill in Church music, and I have a great love for the dark but deeply spiritual music of the Eastern Churches.

### Venues for the Eucharist

An important development was the movement from the 'home Mass' of the

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very early Church to the Eucharist of the larger public buildings called 'basilicas' once the emperor Constantine issued an Edict of Toleration for all faiths in 313 and Theodosius declared Christianity as the state religion in 381. The large basilicas allowed for processions for the entrance of the ministers and for bringing up the gifts. Sunday became a holiday, giving more time for Christians to celebrate. Liturgies became longer and more elaborate.

By the fifth century they almost everywhere contained the following elements (not always in the same order):

- Introductory dialogue ("The Lord be with you" etc.)
- Expression of praise and thanksgiving (at times in terms of creation)
- The hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy"
- Continuation of praise and thanksgiving (at times recounting salvation history)
- The narrative of institution: "On the night he was betrayed..."
- A formula of memorial (anamnesis) and offering (that tied the institution narrative to the thanks and praise being given now)
- A petition (epiclesis) for the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the Eucharistic gifts and upon the assembly for its true communion
- Intercessions for the living and the dead
- A concluding expression of praise (doxology) (Baldovin S.J. p.45)

Feast days to commemorate the martyrs and other significant Christians were introduced. This led eventually to daily Mass. ☩

