

How the Eucharist evolved

PART 2

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Frank O'Dea SSS looks at how the Eucharist developed and what it might mean for Eucharist today. This is the second article following on from the article in *The Swag*, Spring 2019. This article is based on a chapter from a book by Frank called *Eucharist: the Basic Spirituality* which can be found online at: www.theeucharist.wordpress.com

Communion Becomes Rare

Around the 4th century a most regrettable development occurred, one that would drastically change the Eucharist for over a thousand years and lead to a serious misunderstanding of the Eucharist.

Christians were reluctant to receive the Body and Blood of Christ because a new kind of vocabulary of awe and fear was attached to the sacred mysteries. This situation was not reversed in any significant way until the early twentieth century with the letter of Pius X urging frequent communion. (Baldovin, p.47)

The sense of unworthiness encouraged a mini-penitential rite (*the Confiteor*), inserted just before communion together with the words of the centurion, 'Lord, I am not worthy to receive you...' (Matthew 8:8)

Not receiving the bread and wine was an extremely serious loss of peoples' participation in the mysteries, in some ways a denial of what the Mass is all about. By the thirteenth century the reception of communion had become so rare that the Church made a law that everyone must receive communion at least once a year. That such a law should be necessary indicates how poorly the Eucharist was understood at that time.

Orientation of the Church

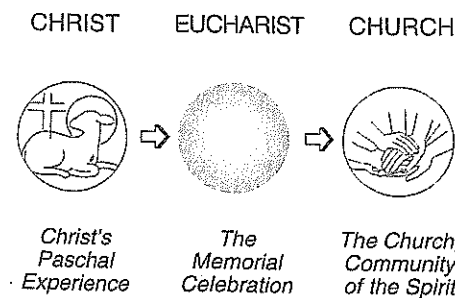
Another development occurred with the priest having his back to the people. When churches were custom built for Mass the altar was placed at the western end so the priest could face the east which was symbolic of the risen Christ. In doing so he faced the people who were on the other side of

the altar to him, facing west. Around the eighth century the altar was moved to the eastern end of the church but the priest still faced east which meant he now had his back to the people. The priest's back prevented the people seeing what he was doing at the altar. The people now just looked on while the priest 'said the Mass'.

One of the most significant changes that were made following Vatican II was to again have the priest facing the people, enabling the congregation to feel they are participating more fully in the Eucharist, and the altar again became a free-standing table instead of a bench against the wall.

The Dynamic Conception of the Eucharist

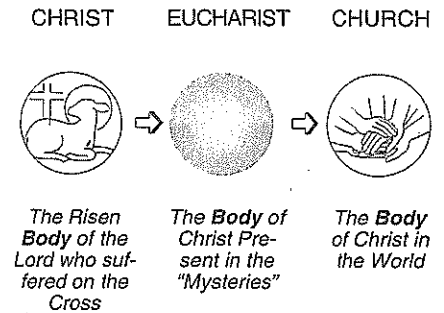
In the early Church it was clearly understood that the Eucharistic celebration was a powerful movement of transformation from dying to rising by remembering the death and resurrection of Jesus. By participating actively in the Eucharist, the people were transformed through the same dying and rising process. We can illustrate this in the following diagram.



(Tony McSweeney SSS, *Together*, no. 76, June 2002, p. 39; *Together* was an international journal of the Blessed Sacrament Congregation)

The death and resurrection of Jesus, the paschal experience, is remembered when we celebrate the Eucharist. This gathering of people becomes the Church. Henri de Lubac S.J. is known to have famously said, "The Eucharist makes the Church and the Church makes the Eucharist."

We could rework the above diagram using the word 'body' to link the three images.



The Eucharist is the connecting link between the risen Christ and the Church. It is by means of the celebration that the dying and rising of Jesus produces the evangelising Church.

This was achieved in the early centuries because the Eucharist focused on the twin events of the dying and rising of Jesus and the faithful participated fully in the Eucharist. Alas, this model crashed during the Middle Ages!

The Emergence of a Static View of the Eucharist

During the Middle Ages, Jesus' suffering and dying became the focus of the spirituality of the faithful while the resurrection was neglected. In fact, the Easter Vigil, the most important ritual of the whole liturgical calendar, was dropped altogether. The principal focus of the Eucharist came to be seen as making the bread and wine into the 'real presence' of Christ which took place at the moment the 'words of consecration' were uttered.

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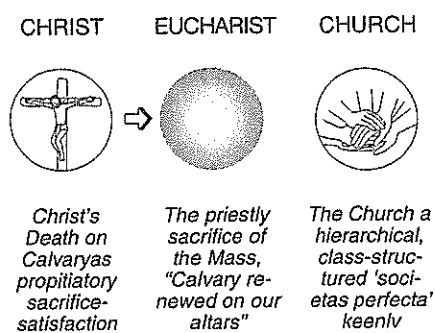
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FEATURES

The focus on the 'real presence' brought about a *static* conception of the Eucharist. Christ is present, no need to proceed any further. Our diagram now looks like this:

The dynamism of the Eucharist that we saw in the first model was completely stalled. It was considered the Mass fulfilled its function by bringing Christ onto the altar.

The arrow link between the Eucharist and the Church was removed. The Church is no longer perceived as a fruit of the Eucharist; it is constituted juridically by legitimate "institution" and has no perceived need of the sacrament to subsist as Church.



Instead of the Eucharist being seen as an upward movement of praise and thanks to God for his love and his gifts, the Eucharist was seen as a downward movement of Christ onto the altar as a sacrifice to expiate the sins of humankind.

The Eucharist as a 'Devotion'

An emphasis on the presence of Christ in the bread and wine led to devotions such as Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, Benediction, visits to the Blessed Sacrament and the Forty Hours. These are all good in themselves but they became substitutes for receiving communion. An extraordinary devotion for offering Mass for the release of the souls in purgatory grew to such an extent that at the Cologne cathedral a hundred priests spent the whole day celebrating Masses for the dead! Sometimes Masses were celebrated by the priest alone. This was considered acceptable because the Mass was making propitiation for the sins of humankind and appeasing God's wrath whether the people were present or not.

With his back to the people, the priest had to hold the host and chalice up high so they could be seen and adored. It was believed that extraordinary graces would be given when they were thus seen, and to ensure people didn't miss the moment, bells were rung and incense used. People would sometimes call out, "Hold it higher, priest." Some were so keen on this practice they would run from one church to another just to be there for the moment of consecration!

Further Changes

The following innovations also took place:

- unleavened bread in the form of thin wafers made by consecrated people, usually nuns, was used from around the ninth century, and wine was specially made as 'altar wine' (this was making the elements sacred *before* the celebration)
- communion was given on the tongue with the communicant kneeling to show penitence and subservience
- only the priest gave communion and did the readings
- the cup was not given at all to the laity from the fourteenth century
- only a priest could touch the 'sacred vessels' such as the chalice and the ciborium
- the cloths (corporals and purificators) had to be washed three times by a priest and the water poured down the sacarium so that it went into the garden, before the sacristan could wash and iron them
- altar rails were installed to define the sacred area, the sanctuary, where only priests, male ministers and altar servers could be present during Mass
- a white altar rail cloth ran the full length of the altar rails; this was lifted and turned over the altar rails before communion, and the communicants had to place their hands under the cloth and hold it up under the chin to catch any crumbs that may break off the host; as a further safeguard the altar boy had to follow along with the priest and hold a 'communion plate' under the chin of the communicant
- the Eucharistic prayer was recited silently by the priest except for the words of consecration which were voiced a little louder but not so loud as to be heard by the people
- because the people couldn't hear the Eucharistic prayer, and even if they could they would not understand the Latin, many filled in the time by reciting the rosary or other devotional prayers during Mass

I can remember very clearly all of these practices some of which still linger. The result was the people were alienated and moved to the role of spectators while the priest performed every function *for* them but not *with* them.

Need for Reform

By the beginning of the sixteenth century a movement for reform began to take hold. This culminated in the new missal of Pope Pius V in 1570 and became the standard for the Western Church.

Pius V best expressed the spirit of the reform. It was to be a return to the sources, a return beyond medieval liturgical innovations to discover the traditions of the early Church. Pius V was in fact a courageous innovator, and the remarkable paradox is that his name is invoked by those who oppose the similar reform initiated by Vatican II. (Robert Cabie, translated by Lawrence J. Johnson, *History of the Mass*, The Pastoral Press, Washington, 1990, p.88)

Pius V made full use of the understanding of the early Church in so far as it was known at that time.

In his missal there was only one Eucharistic prayer called the Roman Canon, now known as Eucharistic Prayer 1. The Roman Canon was generally considered to be unchangeable. However, in 1962 Pope John XXIII did the unthinkable – he added the name of Joseph, husband of Mary, to the Roman Canon. This may seem to us now as something fairly trivial but at the time it was considered revolutionary because the pope had done what had been considered unchangeable, in spite of the fact that some modifications had been made in 1604, 1634 and 1914.

Further Reforms

Since the reform of 1570, a lot more was discovered about the Eucharist of the early Church and this enabled Vatican II to restore the liturgy more accurately to the traditions that had been lost. Change began with the restoration of the Easter vigil ceremonies in the 1950s and made a mighty leap forward with the reforms of the Council of Vatican II in the 1960s.

The principal changes that Vatican II made are the following:

- the Eucharist is celebrated in the local language
- the presider faces the congregation
- there are responses for the people
- the laity may read and give communion
- the gifts are brought to the altar by the laity
- the chalice is made available to all
- there is a variety of Eucharistic prayers
- the music is better suited to the laity
- some spontaneity is tolerated
- fasting has been reduced to one hour

We are so fortunate to be living at this time in history when we can enjoy the fruits of research and reform! Our spirituality is enormously enriched by the rediscovery and implementation of the genuine traditions of the early Church. ☪