

The Eucharist: our joyful commitment to be the body and blood of Jesus

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Patrick Kempton writes about the Eucharist based on his Grad Dip Theol. studies.

The Eucharist, (the Greek work for thanksgiving) as celebrated today, is structurally the same as that described in the Gospels and that described by Justin Martyr (100 – 165CE). However, its appearance and focus is often much different. Justin Martyr describes the Eucharist:

On the day we call the day of the sun, all who dwell in the city or country gather in the same place. The memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets are read, as much as time permits. When the reader has finished, he who presides over those gathered admonishes and challenges them to imitate these beautiful things. Then we all rise together and offer prayers for ourselves ... and for all others, wherever they may be, so that we may be found righteous by our life and actions, and faithful to the commandments, so as to obtain eternal salvation. When the prayers are concluded we exchange the kiss. Then someone brings bread and a cup of water and wine mixed together to him who presides over the brethren. He takes them and offers praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and for a considerable time he gives thanks [the word used by Justin here is the word we translate as 'Eucharist'] that we have been judged worthy of these gifts. When he has concluded the prayers and thanksgivings, all present give voice to an acclamation by saying: 'Amen'. When he who presides has given thanks and the people have responded, those whom we call deacons give to those present the 'Eucharisted' bread, wine and water and take them to those who are absent (1st Apologia 65-67).

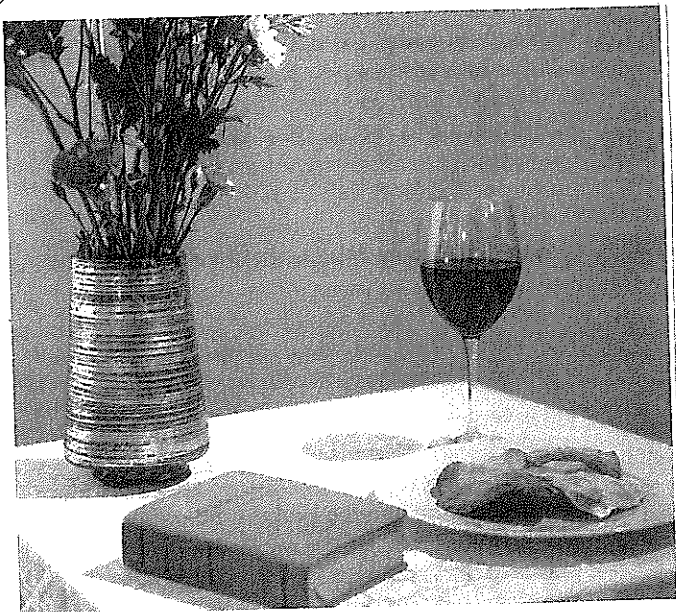
In the time of Justin Mátyr the Eucharist would, most likely, still have been celebrated as part of a meal as is indicated in Paul's letter to the Corinthians (1Cor 11:17-33).

While the essence of the Eucharist has remained the same since Jesus' final meal before his death, the theology, rituals and symbols have changed greatly over the centuries. The intended emphases have been lost to most communities. The writings of some theologians seem to fail to refer to the complete testimonies of Jesus at the Last Supper. Commentaries

fail to acknowledge a critical section. Jesus does not simply say this is My Body this is My Blood, but this is my Body given, broken, for you, and this is my blood poured out for you. It is these complete statements, which Jesus asked of his followers to do as a memorial of him, that is, to be body broken and be blood poured out for others.

In the account of the last supper the author of John's Gospel seems to have this understanding (Jn 13: 3-17). He tells not of the details of the meal as in the gospels according to Matthew (Mt 26: 26-28), Mark (Mk 14: 22-24) and Luke (Lk 22:

Jesus' body which was given for all and in His blood which was poured out for all, that is, the community must do just that, in memory of Jesus.



14-20), but importantly highlights the complete giving of self in that Jesus, like a servant washes the feet of those present at the Last Supper. John's Gospel seems to be saying to readers that this Eucharistic meal is a commitment to selfless service of others – body (bread) broken and blood (wine shared) poured out for others.

A sharing in the body and the blood

Paul supports this contention: 'The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread we break is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?' (1Cor 10:16) Paul is not saying simply that this is the blood and this is the body of Christ but very significantly saying it is a sharing in the blood and body of Christ. This means the community must share in

Vatican II has established the path back to the Scriptural notion and that of the Apostolic Tradition regarding the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, one of the early documents of Vatican II, made it clear that Jesus is



present in the Church gathered, in His word, in the person of His minister (the priest presiding) and especially under the Eucharistic species.

How Jesus is present

The presence of Jesus is far broader than the consecrated bread and wine, named the sacred species. But even the bishops of Vatican II found it hard to accept that Jesus' presence, wherever it is, is the same, whether in the home where two people have gathered in His name, or in the His word, or under the Eucharistic species. In other words Jesus is either fully and really present or He is not. It seems that, because there had been in the past such a profound emphasis on the presence, in many cases the physical presence of Jesus in the bread and wine, the bishops of Vatican II had to use the word "especially" in referring to Jesus' presence under the Eucharistic species. This begs the question: what does "especially present" mean?

Accepting the understanding that Jesus' real and full presence exists in every aspect of the celebration of the Eucharist takes away the distracting emphasis on the consecrated bread and wine and opens

up the ability to focus appropriately and equally on the function of each part of the Eucharistic celebration.

At the Last Supper Jesus took, blessed, broke and shared bread with his friends saying this is my body broken for all and took, blessed and shared the cup of wine saying this is my blood poured out for all. This represented His complete unconditional giving of Himself in love. Jesus as the Gospels relate had lived life to the full. He brought the good news to the poor; proclaimed release to the captives; recovery of sight to the blind, and let the oppressed go free. (Lk 4:19)

While the Eucharist is imbued with the presence of Jesus there is deeper action going on. Bernard Cooke in *Sacraments & sacramentality* (1994) explains that one of the earliest words used in relation to the celebration of the sacraments was the Greek word 'mysterion'. Including the Eucharist, "The celebration of the sacraments were celebrations of the ultimate 'mysteries' revealed in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth."

Cooke then goes on to say, very significantly, that the sacraments bring 'men and women into a world beyond the purely human, into the realm of the

sacred, into contact with divine power and, it was hoped, divine mercy and grace'. Thus, not only is Jesus present during the Eucharist but those participating are caught up into the realm of the divine.

Justin Martyr refers to the 'Eucharisted' bread and wine. That is to the bread and wine representing those present and their gift of self and other physical gifts to be given to those in need. This crucial aspect of the consecrated, or Eucharisted bread and wine, has been often overlooked but wonderfully described by Frank Andersen in *Eucharist: Participating in the mystery* (2008).

He writes: 'in the early Church the small amounts of bread and wine, now on the table ... are but a token of all the gifts of the community that had been stored for distribution during the week (the clothing, the oils, the wax, and so on)'. Andersen goes on to say "To consecrate the gifts of bread and wine is to consecrate the assembled community: it is the community – and its gifts of bread and wine – that become the fullest extension of the Real Presence of Jesus'.

The Eucharist is our joyful commitment to be the body and blood of Jesus, broken and poured out for each other. ☪