



In Joy and Hope

by

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The Eucharist: The greatest gift

"Do this in memory of me!" This simple request of Jesus at the Last Supper is the magnificent gift that Jesus gave to his disciples and to the Christian community. It is the gift of the Body and Blood of Jesus himself. For almost 2,000 years disciples of Jesus have responded to this command and celebrated the presence of Jesus among us in the gift of the Eucharist. This weekend, we celebrate the feast of Corpus Christi, a time to renew our faith in the Eucharist and to appreciate what the Eucharist should mean to us.

The importance of the Eucharist is more evident today than ever before. The dwindling number of priests in our own local church makes us aware that the Eucharist is a gift we cannot take for granted. We could well find ourselves in the position of making the effort to travel further to be present for the celebration of the Eucharist. The times of celebration might not be as convenient as they once were.

Yet, when we look at history, it is interesting to note that in the Roman Empire of the fourth century, Christians were put to death if they were caught participating in the ritual we call Mass. Many people faced death and defended their actions by saying, "Christians make the Eucharist and the Eucharist makes Christians. Without the Eucharist, we cannot live."

What is the Eucharist?

The Eucharist has its roots in the Passover meal that Jesus celebrated with his disciples the night before he died. The Passover meal had a special significance for the Jewish community. It celebrated the covenant that Yahweh had with the Jewish people and the loving promise of God to be faithful to these chosen people.

Jesus would give new meaning to the Passover meal. Jesus would take bread and transform this bread into his body. Jesus would take wine and transform it into his blood. It is the bread and wine of a new sacrifice that makes holy those who celebrate and receive this gift. The Eucharist is the real presence of Jesus Christ. After Jesus shared this gift for the first time with his disciples, Jesus told them, "Do this in memory of me!"

On the cross at Calvary, Jesus poured out his life so that we might live. Jesus' action was the great sacrifice which we remember when we celebrate Eucharist. Eucharist invites us to participate in the Paschal Mystery, the mystery of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. In Eucharist, Jesus tells us that he is present among us because he loves us and he challenges us to love Him in return.

What should the Eucharist mean to us?

When we gather as a Christian community to celebrate Eucharist, it is important to know what we are doing. Of all the sacraments, the Eucharist unites us with Jesus as the source of divine life. Eucharist remembers and re-enacts Christ's sacrifice on the cross. As a sacrifice, the Eucharist fulfills what the word "sacrifice" means - it makes us holy.

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The Eucharist also creates and celebrates our unity as people of faith. Eucharist is the sign and celebration of our oneness in faith. To celebrate Eucharist is to presume that we are members of a faith community that recognizes our unity with one another and with God. The Eucharist is a constant reminder to us of God's covenant of love with us and his command to love and serve others.

The powerful words of the institution of the Eucharist remind us of this challenge. We are to be like the bread that is broken and the wine that is poured out. We do this best in our service and love of others in imitation of Jesus. At the end of our celebration of Eucharist, we are sent forth to share what has been given to us - the love of a good and gracious God.

There is no more powerful celebration for Christians than to celebrate Eucharist. It is the summit of Christian worship. It is the supreme act of thanksgiving. All the other sacraments relate to the Eucharist. Eucharist gives us our identity as a faith community. It is the responsibility of each one of us to make our celebrations of Eucharist a religious experience that will be life-giving and energizing. We cannot be passive spectators at Eucharist. Eucharist calls for "full, conscious and active participation" of all the faithful.

The need for priesthood

Our faith tradition tells us that priests are essential for the celebration of the Eucharist. Over and over again, Pope John Paul II challenges the Christian community to promote vocations to the priesthood. In 1983, the Holy Father stated: "There is no church without the Eucharist, and there is no Eucharist without priests. How can the church exist without the ordained priesthood?"

An appreciation of the Eucharist becomes a challenge for us here in Western Washington. We need to find ways to encourage men to consider a vocation to priesthood, as we must also encourage men and women to look at the vocation of religious life. A lifetime celibate commitment of service to God's people is indeed a challenge. However, it can also be a life-giving experience for those who respond.

May our faith in the Eucharist encourage all of us to pray for vocations to priesthood and religious life. May that same faith encourage us to invite people to consider a vocation to priesthood and religious life, "Do this in memory of me!" What an incredible gift. May God's grace and peace be yours.