

UNDERSTANDING THE MASS, PART V: A MEAL LIKE NO OTHER

The bread and wine of the Eucharist actually become what they symbolize and transmit what they contain, the body and blood of Christ, for our transformation. The Mass is both sacrifice and meal at the same time.



The Eucharist is a meal. It's the Lord's Supper, as well as a holy sacrifice. It has to be both. Christ becomes present so that we can not only see Him under the appearances of bread and wine, but also receive Him into ourselves. Very tangibly, He becomes our food.

Food is very important in Christianity. I'm happy about that, because as an Italian, food is important to me! But even those of us who deeply appreciate food might wonder why the Lord chose to make Himself present in this particular way. Why bread and wine?

Bread is our basic daily nourishment. The Our Father's "give us this day our daily bread" is a petition for all our needs and necessities. The Fathers of the Church also understood it as a prayer for the spiritual nourishment we need on a daily basis — the Eucharist and the word of God.

If you want to understand the Eucharist, slowly read and pray your way through the sixth chapter of John's Gospel. That's where Jesus tells the crowd, "I am the bread of life," presenting Himself as the bread "which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world" (John 6:35, 33). His words connect the Eucharist with the manna that God rained down from heaven to sustain the people of Israel on their Exodus journey. Manna, too, has a deeper spiritual significance, because God provided it for more than the people's physical survival. The book of Deuteronomy says it was also to show them that "man does not live by bread alone," but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (Deuteronomy 8:3). Bread, then, is the sign of our daily nourishment, both physical and spiritual.

Wine is the blood of the grape, obtainable only by crushing the grape. It symbolizes the cup of suffering; the price Jesus paid for us so that we might be free. From this cup we too must drink, if we are to be His disciples. Remember the mother of James and John who requests a favor for her sons? "Hey Jesus, can you honor them with a special place on your right and left?" she wants to know. Jesus responds by asking the two a sobering question: "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?" (Mark 10:28). Whatever seating assignment they end up with, He assures them, they will not escape this cup of suffering.

Wine also symbolizes the cup of joy. In both Old Testament and New Testament times, wine was associated with festivity and special celebrations. "Wine cheers gods and men" and serves to "gladden

the heart of man” (Judges 9:13; Psalm 104:15). The wedding feast of Cana is a good example. By evoking suffering, wine points back to Jesus’ death on the cross; by evoking joy, it points forward to the messianic banquet in heaven.

The symbol of wine — the blood of the grape that becomes the Blood of Jesus — is even richer in light of the Old Testament. There, blood is equated with life. It’s not seen as sustaining life; rather, for the Jew, blood is life, and it belongs to God alone. It’s for this reason that the Mosaic Law forbids drinking blood or eating any animal that still has blood in it. Even today, Jews who keep a kosher table only eat animals that have been appropriately butchered and drained of all blood.

In the Eucharist, Jesus gives us a share in God’s divine life by giving us His own blood. His plan for us goes way beyond making us into decent folks who are scrubbed up and clean of gross immorality. Jesus came so that we might share in everything He has and become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4).

What is this divine nature? Essentially, it’s the inner life of the Trinity: three Persons eternally pouring themselves out in self-giving love for each other. This is agape, or charity, and drinking Jesus’ Blood gives us an opportunity to share in it. “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly,” Jesus assures us (John 10:10). Let’s not settle for just a tiny taste!

In order for us to stay alive, every cell in our body needs to be bathed with the blood that nourishes, cleanses, and purifies our system. Similarly, taking the Blood of Christ in Communion will bring us to full spiritual vitality. It will strengthen and cleanse our entire being — spiritually and even physically, if it be God’s will.

The One we take upon our lips and into our bodies in the Eucharist is the same Jesus who raised Lazarus and healed the man born blind. Do we think about this enough? At Communion we receive Jesus, the risen Lord who will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. Do we come to Him with faith that He can totally transform and heal us? When I go to Communion, I’m conscious of the spiritual sickness in my life and sometimes of physical needs, and I ask Jesus to heal and change me. I beg Him not to let me walk out of church the same person as I walked in.

In every culture I know, sharing a meal with someone is a way of expressing and deepening a relational bond. The Eucharist does this in a way no other meal can. We eat with God, He gives Himself as our food, and we’re transformed into Him. When we receive Him and consume Him under these signs of bread and wine, we become Him. What intimacy! What mystery!

The Eucharist is a great deal. Consider the exchange we’re invited to make. We come forward, put our humble gifts on the altar — our little sacrifices, imperfect good works, our need and brokenness — and what do we get back in return? We receive the Lord’s own life, bursting with power to heal and transform us.

In the Eucharist Jesus holds absolutely nothing back from us. He gives us His entire self. May we, in the Eucharist, learn to return the favor and give Him both everything we have and everything we are.

This article is Part V of a Five Part Series adapted from Marcellino D’Ambrosio’s book “Exploring the Catholic Church” (Servant, 2001)