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# The Eucharist as Memorial Sacrifice

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# **The Eucharist as Memorial Sacrifice**

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## **The Feast of Corpus Christi**

June 2, 2013 Sunday Readings for Cycle C:

Gn 14:18-20; Ps 110; 1 Cor 11:23-26; Lk 9:11-17

### **THE EUCHARIST AS MEMORIAL SACRIFICE**

*Lawrence E. Frizzell*

As we watch people enter and leave a Catholic church, do they show an understanding of the Eucharistic presence of Christ in their midst? Do *my* attitudes and actions manifest a deep faith in Emmanuel, God-with-us? "Pastors have the duty to expound upon the parts of the Mass and to explain aspects of the mystery of this sacrament" (Council of Trent, *Session 22*). Almost three hundred years earlier (1264), this feast celebrating Christ's gift of himself at the Last Supper and on the cross was instituted for the same purpose of enhancing Christian faith in the Eucharist.

The Greek term "Eucharist" (Thanksgiving) situates the work of Jesus within the millennial tradition of the Jewish people. The many manifestations of the Father's bounty deserve a response in blessing that includes gratitude for the gift and praise to the Giver. God's goodness is the source of life itself and divine providence preserves the faithful from danger. The Book of Genesis describes the victory of Abram over enemies who had taken his nephew Lot into captivity. A mysterious and benevolent ruler of Jerusalem offered a priestly act of thanksgiving on behalf of the patriarch. Abram gave a tithe of the spoils to Melchizedek (king of righteousness) as a sign of appreciation for his intercession. Did the bread and wine constitute a sacrificial offering? The text does not make this precision nor does the Epistle to the Hebrews (chapters 5-7) interpret it to foreshadow the Last Supper. The theologians of the early Church did develop this point, but even the sharing of a meal is significant as the completion of a blessing or act of thanksgiving.

When David's conquest of Jerusalem (2 Sm 5:6-9) enabled him to offer sacrifices there, he was saluted as a (non-Levite) priest "according to the order of Melchizedek" (Ps 110:4). While the early Christians acknowledged that Jesus was the royal Messiah, son of David, they rejoiced that his suffering constituted a priestly sacrifice. How could a member of the tribe of Judah qualify to be a priest? "He was designated by God as high priest according to the order of Melchizedek" (Heb 5:6).

As mediator of the divine gifts of life and forgiveness to the people in a covenant with God, the priest must be compassionate with human weakness and needs (see Heb 4:14-15). When Jesus fed the hungry crowds, he wanted to alert his disciples to the mission of mercy that they would continue in his Name. But physical hunger was satisfied so that people would come to know Jesus as the one who brings them even greater gifts from the heavenly Father. After the resurrection the disciples came to recognize that the multiplication of loaves was a sign of the Eucharistic gift bestowed at the Last Supper.

Early Christian communities celebrated the Lord's Supper, probably in the context of a meal, just

as the Jewish people integrated the symbols of the Passover into a banquet. The very selfishness of some Christians in Corinth became a "happy fault" because it led St. Paul to record the tradition of the Eucharistic words. The nuances in today's second reading that differ from the Gospel narratives bear witness to a liturgical experience that emphasized the "memorial" even more strongly than the Synoptic tradition.

"Do this in remembrance of me!" This command involves more than recalling the past as one remembers an anniversary. The memorial or commemoration in Jewish worship involves the *re-*presentation of the spiritual realities experienced in a key historical event. Thus the Passover Meal brings every generation into union with the mercy, goodness and power of God who delivered their ancestors from Egyptian oppression (see Exodus 13:8). Jesus wanted each community of the faithful to have access to the benefits flowing from the unique event of the Paschal Mystery (his death-and-resurrection).

Hence the Mass, the Lord's Supper, is at same time and inseparably: a sacrifice in which the sacrifice of the cross is perpetuated; a memorial of the Lord's death and resurrection...; a sacred banquet in which through the communion of the Lord's Body and Blood, the people of God share the benefits of the Paschal Sacrifice... and in faith and hope foreshadow and anticipate the eschatological banquet in the Father's Kingdom, proclaiming the Lord's death until his coming. (*Instruction on the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery*, May 25, 1967 #3)

All of these dimensions of Eucharist must be maintained for the integrity of our faith. Because the intention of Christ, priest and victim in his human nature, perdures from Calvary to the heavenly court, he continues to intercede for the Church and all the world until the consummation of history. The sacramental act of remembering links us to the unique sacrifice of the cross and brings its benefits to us through the very gift of his presence under the symbols of nourishment. Bread and wine are transformed so that the signs convey the Realities which strengthen us for the pilgrimage to the new Jerusalem.