

chapter two



THE EUCHARIST IN THE EARLY CHURCH

*From Apostolic Times to the
Middle of the Third Century*

On Holy Thursday we walk with
Jesus to the Cross. On Corpus
Christi we walk with Jesus to the
Resurrection.

—POPE BENEDICT XVI

In apostolic times, the Upper Room was the shrine where the Eucharist was born on Holy Thursday and the church was born at Pentecost. Jesus had commissioned the apostles to continue celebrating the Eucharist. After receiving the Holy Spirit, they were faced with the question of how to respond to Christ's call. Their Jewish faith and forms of prayer centered on the temple. Synagogue and Sabbath meals influenced the way they would celebrate Eucharist.

THE MEAL

In the beginning the setting of a meal was foremost, since the Eucharist began at a Passover meal. Simply repeating this supper with the addition of Christ's words of institution was not feasible because it was designed to be held only once a year—and only in Jerusalem.

In terms of our culture that would be similar to celebrating Thanksgiving (with turkey and trimmings and the whole family gathered from all over) every Thursday, obviously something neither practical nor desirable. Guided by the Holy Spirit they realized that this celebration should be held on a weekly basis.

Early Christians had another model to draw from: the Jewish family meal on the eve of the weekly Sabbath. This meal normally began with a prayer of praise over the bread at the beginning of the meal and another one over the wine at the end. It concluded with this dialogue:

Host: Let us praise the Lord.

All: The name of the Lord be praised now and forever!

Host: Praised be our God because we eat of his gifts and live by his favor.

All: Praised be he and praised be his name.

The host followed this exchange with praise of God the creator who is faithful to the covenant by giving them their land and dwelling among them. Very likely, the apostles adapted these praise prayers for the bread and wine to apply to the Eucharist and linked them to the words of institution.

The New Testament references to the “breaking of the bread” in Luke 24:13–25 and Acts 2:42, 46 and 20:7, 11 as well as to the “Supper of the Lord” in 1 Corinthians 10:14–17 and 11:17–34 persuade us that the apostles adopted a meal setting for Eucharist. Pope John Paul II confirmed the link between the “breaking of the bread” passages and the Eucharist:

The “breaking of the bread”—as the Eucharist was called in earliest times—has always been at the centre of the Church’s life....The account of the Risen Jesus appearing to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus helps us to focus on a primary aspect of the Eucharistic mystery...: *The Eucharist is a mystery of light!*...When the disciples on the way to Emmaus asked Jesus to stay “with” them, he responded by

giving them a much greater gift: through the Sacrament of the Eucharist he found a way to stay “in” them.⁶

As the years passed, the apostles and their successors began to separate the Eucharist part of the assembly from the meal. The two texts of institution were brought together as they are seen in the Gospels. Saint Paul notes that the Corinthians met to eat at their own tables apart from Eucharist. The custom of dining before Eucharist was accepted at first, but the emergence of cliques eating with each other, of the rich not sharing their food with the poor and the existence of drunkenness was a scandal that led church leaders to remove the Eucharist from the setting of a meal.

When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? . . . If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation. (1 Corinthians 11:20–21, 34)

Removing the Eucharist from the meal setting also had the advantage of focusing the celebration on the original intent of what happened on Holy Thursday. That evening Jesus did not simply say, “This is my body” and “This is my blood.” He added, “which is given for you” and “which is poured out for you.” He explained the sacrificial meaning of what he offered them to eat and drink. The Eucharist was a sacrament that made present his sacrifice that would be offered for everyone’s salvation. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: “The Mass is at the same time, and inseparably, the sacrificial memorial in which the sacrifice of the cross is perpetuated and [is] the sacred banquet of communion with the Lord’s body and blood” (CCC, 1382).

The ominous mood on Holy Thursday night indicated by Christ’s prophecies about the betrayal of Judas, the denial of Peter and the scattering of the apostles because the shepherd would be struck might

have caused the apostles to connect the Eucharist with suffering and death. The sorrowful mysteries soon to be lived out by Jesus would teach them what “given” for you and “poured out for you” actually meant. In the weeks and years ahead, they would relive the mystery of the Passion of Christ at each Eucharist. Saint Paul put it succinctly for them, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26).

On the other hand, the joyful exultation in the mystery was also relived in the celebration of Eucharist. The sacrament made present both Christ’s death and resurrection. The Risen Christ becomes indeed the living bread of life.

At eucharistic gatherings, the apostles and disciples would speak of this as the paschal mystery. Just as the Passover lamb must die before it is eaten, so the Lamb of God must die before rising to new life and becoming the Communion feast for our souls. It is a mystery because it is a work of God that can only be perceived and accepted by faith. It is called “paschal” because Christ embraced a death and resurrection in order for salvation to happen. Saint Paul preached this to the early church. “For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed” (1 Corinthians 5:7).

SUNDAY, THE LORD’S DAY

Once the Eucharist was separated from the meal, it was judged that the celebration no longer needed to be held at night, nor on the Jewish Sabbath (Saturday). Very early, the apostles had decided that the Christian Sabbath would be Sunday, the day of the Lord’s resurrection and the weekly remembrance of God’s creation of the world. The Easter narratives start just before dawn on Sunday. “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb” (John 20:1). With this in mind, the custom developed of having Eucharist early on Sunday morning.

Sunday was filled with special memories of Easter and Pentecost.

Sunday invited early Christians to live again the experience of the two disciples who walked with the Risen Christ on the road to Emmaus, where their hearts burned with love and their eyes beheld their Lord in the breaking of the bread. On the night of Easter Sunday itself, Jesus appeared to the apostles and gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit and the power to forgive sins. “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:22–23).

On the following Sunday Jesus appeared again to the apostles, including Thomas, to whom Jesus made himself known by showing him the signs of his Passion. Fifty days after the Resurrection, on Pentecost Sunday, the Holy Spirit was given to 120 disciples. This marked the formal beginning of the church.

The leaders of the church called Sunday the Lord’s Day because on it Jesus rose from the dead, an event upon which Christian faith is founded. Seen with faith, the resurrected Jesus was historically witnessed by more than five hundred people (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:5–6). From apostolic times, Sunday has been honored as the Lord’s Day and the new Sabbath. It was common practice by the time the book of Revelation was written (around the year 90). John testified, “I was in the spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet...” (Revelation 1:10).

The Risen Christ and the Holy Spirit had consecrated Sunday by events that formed the faith of the church forever and led the early Christians to hallow Sunday as the Lord’s Day on which they would always thereafter celebrate the Eucharist. Besides the evidence of Scripture, we have an interesting reference by a Roman writer about the Christians’ worship. Father Joseph Jungmann tells us:

When about 111–113 A.D., Pliny the Younger, Legate of Bithynia, had arrested and examined a number of Christians, he established the fact that they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before dawn...and of singing in alternate verses a song to Christ their God.⁷

In pondering this development of the eucharistic celebration, we need to recall the truth of faith that the Eucharist causes the growth of the church. The development is not simply a rational common-sense action, though some of that is present. How does the church grow? What causes the interior insights that expanded the vision of the faith of the apostles—and enlightens our own as well? It is produced by the power of God.

The core source of this divine energy is in the Holy Eucharist. The apostles were doing more than merely arranging ceremonies and rituals; they were experiencing the mystery of light that flowed from their contact with the Eucharist. The cumulative impact of consistent encounter with the graces of the death and resurrection of Christ in this holy sacrament brought them the effects of redemption.

The whole Christian community of their time also was profoundly affected by being fed with the Eucharist. The unifying power of the Eucharist made them strong in mind, heart and soul. The Body of Christ in the Eucharist built them up into the body of Christ as church. “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Corinthians 10:17).

The creative imagination of the early church of this period was stirred by the divine food and drink that was itself the origin of creativity. In the Upper Room, the apostles accepted Christ’s invitation to enter for the first time into sacramental communion with him. That primordial moment marked the beginning of the process by which the church is built up into the body of Christ until the end of the age. Whatever we say about the history of how the Mass grew and flourished is connected to the nourishment that emanates from the Body and Blood of Christ in the holy sacrament.

THE SYNAGOGUE LITURGY

Now that the Eucharist was separated from the context of a meal, the question arose as to what would replace the supper. More would be needed than the words of institution. Since most of the first Christians

were Jewish, they already had the experience of synagogue worship to work with. Luke's description of Christ's first sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth gives us an idea of what would occur (see Luke 4:14–30).

A synagogue was a simple meeting room designed for prayer and religious teaching. People sat around a platform on which were a table, some chairs and a lectern. In the wall behind this was an enclosure usually covered with a veil of precious cloth. Inside was a copy of the scrolls of Scripture, especially the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) and the Prophets. The men sat on benches and the women looked on from a space behind wooden latticework. Generally, the building was modest in size.

The synagogue was managed by an administrator or president. The reader of Scripture and giver of the sermon need not be a rabbi or other professionally trained religious leader. Guests could be invited to perform this task, which was what occurred to Jesus that day. After a prayer, the administrator handed Jesus a scroll that contained chapter sixty-one of the book of Isaiah. Jesus unrolled the scroll and read the passage in Hebrew.

He then recited the passage again, this time in Aramaic, since many people did not understand classical Hebrew. Jesus rolled up the document and gave it back to the president. He proceeded to give a homily on the text about the coming Messiah and applied the words to himself. His words provoked anger and the assembly broke up. In less controversial circumstances, his talk might have stimulated a moderate discussion with some life applications. The service would have ended with a closing prayer.



Ruins of an ancient synagogue at Capernaum, in Israel.

The structure is clear: prayer, reading of Scripture, sermon, discussion and closing prayer. Nothing in this scene mentions singing the psalms or having several readings, though that may have been customary at special times. Saint Paul, during his mission journeys, took advantage of the custom of having guest preachers in synagogues to give his talks on Christ and appeal for converts.

The leaders of the early church adapted this model of synagogue liturgy to the Eucharist, becoming in effect a liturgy of the Word that led up to the prayers of blessings, thanksgiving and words of institution. What texts were read? We can only imagine exactly what they did, but there are reasonable inferences we can make. Until the early 50s, when Saint Paul's letters began to be circulated, the only available Scriptures were from the Old Testament. They could read from the Prophets, especially those passages dealing with the Messiah. They could also choose texts concerned with the covenant and apply them to the new covenant with Christ.

They would have chosen the creation narratives that included the creation of Adam and Eve and their life in paradise followed by the temptation and fall and the promise of a redeemer that could be employed for their obvious application to the salvation Christ accomplished for them.

At the same time, the apostles' and disciples' memories of Christ's words and deeds eventually fixed in oral tradition would have been part of the celebration. In an oral culture, memories were strong, cultivated and admired. By the year 80, the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke and all the letters of Paul were written and would be used. John's Gospel would have been available by the year 90.

DIDACHE

Beside the development of the liturgy of the Word influenced by the synagogue ritual, there was also a growth of prayer surrounding the words of institution. It became known as the prayer of thanksgiving, or the Eucharistic Prayer. We have an example of this from the *Didache*,

or the “Teaching of the Apostles,” a document written some time around the year 60. Chapters nine and ten of the *Didache* provide prayers to be used for “thanksgiving” (the Eucharist):

With regard to the prayer of thanksgiving (*eucharistia*), offer it in this fashion. First, for the cup: “We thank you, our Father, for the holy vine of David, your servant....Glory be yours through all ages! Amen.” Then for the bread broken: “We thank you, our Father, for the life and knowledge you have revealed to us through Jesus your servant. Glory be yours through all ages! Amen. Just as the bread broken was first scattered on the hills, then gathered and became one, so let your church be gathered from the ends of the earth into your kingdom, for yours is glory and power through all ages! Amen.”⁸

By the year 150, the general structure of the eucharistic liturgy had been established. In its fundamental structure, it remains the same to the present time. As we watch its progress through history, we will see a number of accidental additions and subtractions, but what we have now is substantially what a mid-second century Christian would have experienced.

There will be language changes, variations in the way people participated in the Mass, undue expansions—even intrusions—of

*Come together on the Lord's day,
break bread and give thanks,
having first confessed your sins so
that your sacrifice may be pure.
Anyone who has a quarrel with his
fellow Christian should not gather
with you until the two are
reconciled....*

—*Didache*