

# Eucharist

## *A Sacrifice of Thanksgiving*

Br. Eldridge Pendleton, SSJE

FOR ME IT ALL STARTED WITH A RED LIGHT when I was nine years old. That summer I was spending two months with my aunt Grace at her home on the Texas Gulf coast. One day I was playing outside with Sharon, my cousin who was my age, and Judy from next door, when the two of them started arguing about whose church was best, resuming the religious wars of 500 years ago. Sharon was a Presbyterian and Judy a Roman Catholic. Both sides slung abuse, but in the midst of it, Judy, realizing I had never seen a Catholic church and ever the missionary, offered to take me to Saint Mary's some afternoon.

The first thing I noticed through the gloom of the unlighted interior was a red lamp hanging above the altar. When I asked, she said that Jesus was there in that box behind the altar, and that at every mass he hosted a meal for everyone. He fed them on bread and wine which he mysteriously changed into his body and blood. In that way, he forgave them, strengthened them, nourished them, protected them, and answered their prayers. No one could see him, but he was always there. You could feel his presence. Furthermore, Sr. Mary Agnes, her teacher, said he lived in every Catholic church.

That was my first exposure to the Christian teaching that Christ is present in the Eucharist, and it made an indelible impression. I went away that afternoon thinking that grape juice in shot glasses and crumbled crackers did not compare to what she had, and resolving that one day I would be a regular at those suppers where Jesus fed everyone.

According to the Catechism of the *Book of Common Prayer*, “the Holy Eucharist is the sacrament commanded by Christ for the continual remembrance of his life, death, and resurrection, until his coming again” (BCP, p. 859). It is one of the two dominical sacraments actually instituted by Jesus during his ministry. On the last day of his life, at supper he took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to his disciples saying, “Take, eat: This is my body, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.” As the Great Thanksgiving, spoken during the Eucharist, narrates the scene: “After supper he took the cup of wine; and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and said, ‘Drink this, all of you: This is my Blood of the new Covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, do this

for the remembrance of me” (BCP, p. 363). According to Matthew and Luke, he did this at a Passover meal, and the prayers that accompanied it were thanksgiving for Israel’s liberation from bondage in Egypt. Later, as the Apostles and those attracted to the Way (as Christianity was first called) gathered for worship they “broke bread” as Jesus had commanded them, and in that way he became mystically present, the host of the supper. A number of his resurrection appearances also occurred during the course of a meal (Mark 16:14; Luke 24:42; John 21:9-14). The pilgrims to Emmaus only recognized the stranger who had walked with them as Christ when he broke bread with them (Luke 24:30).

From the accounts of Paul’s missionary efforts in the Acts of the Apostles we have an idea of how early Christian worship was structured. Keep in mind most of the early Christians were Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah. Paul had done his early proselytizing in the synagogues of cities and towns in Asia (modern day Turkey), Macedonia, and Greece in the middle years of the first century CE. When driven from these synagogues by Jews outraged by his message, he set up rival Christian synagogues, using the synagogue liturgy of teaching and prayer, and adding to it the breaking of bread. By the end of the first century CE, even after Christianity had become dominated by gentile believers, the liturgy remained true to its Jewish origin. There was a structural division to the worship service; the liturgy of the Word, because it centered around the reading of Scripture, preceded the table liturgy, the communion service. Both sections had four parts. The liturgy of the Word was made up of Collect, the Epistle, the Gospel, and Creed. At the Last Supper Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it, so the liturgy for communion, the second part of the Eucharistic service consisted of the Offertory, the Consecration, the Fraction and the Communion. For the next 1,600 years of Christian history, when communities gathered for worship, this was the form it took. This is still true for Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics, and Anglicans.

Originally, when the first Christians “broke bread,” they brought bread and wine from home and gave it to the priest who blessed it, broke it, and then gave it to the worshipers. They understood that, through the consecration of these elements, using the same words Jesus had used at the Last Supper, bread and wine were changed into Christ’s body and blood. At that time, only baptized Christians received communion. Since they were mystically incorporated into his body by the sacrament of baptism and fed on him through the Eucharist, they became a part of his ongoing sacrifice of love to God the Father. This is a sacrifice of thanksgiving, just as the Temple sacrifices had been for the Hebrew people. (*Eucharistos* is the Greek term for thanksgiving.)

Here we must remember the spiritual dynamic of the Trinity. God is love and God is continually pouring out love on his Son and those who believe in him, for all

eternity. At the same time the Son is pouring out his total being in love to the Father, as he had done on the cross. This is a mutual exchange, a mutual indwelling through the Holy Spirit, and when we participate in the Eucharist we are caught up in it, we become a part of Christ's gift of love. A prayer of the Eucharistic liturgy of the *Book of Common Prayer* presents this dynamic most tellingly:

*Here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee; humbly beseeching thee that we, and all others who shall be partakers of this Holy Communion, may worthily receive the most precious Body and Blood of thy Son Jesus Christ, be filled with thy grace and heavenly benediction, and made one body with him, that he may dwell in us, and we in him.*  
(BCP, p. 336)

To join with Christ in this sacrifice of love, as a part of this divine action, it is necessary that we also repent our collusion in the sin of the world through the General Confession.

When the celebrant calls down a blessing on the bread and wine, a spiritual reality alters, a real change takes place which is not limited to the bread and wine. All who take part in the Eucharist are transformed as well because Jesus is present. As we partake of his body and blood, in a mysterious way we become his body and blood. Christ lives in us and works through us for the transformation of the world. We do not presume to know how this happens, but we believe it does. This is a sacred mystery. Bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus. Materially they remain unaltered, but the inward reality becomes the means through which our souls are fed by the divine life of Christ. Northern European mystics of the Middle Ages believed the more we feed on Christ, the more we desire to do so.

Most of us, most of our adult lives, hunger for intimacy. We long for someone to share life's joys and sorrows. In the sacrament of the Eucharist we find that longed-for intimacy with Christ. Through it we have a foretaste of the Kingdom of God. According to the SSJE Rule, the Eucharist "is the meal which intensifies our union with Christ, draws us together as a community, and nourishes us with the grace needed for our transformation and mission. It is the mystery through which we are caught up into the communion of saints on earth and in heaven . . . It is the gift through which we experience a foretaste of the life to come" (Ch. 17). At every celebration of the Eucharist with those we see and know, there is also a great cloud of witnesses, men and women who have testified with their lives to the Truth in past ages and are now a part of the Communion of Saints, standing around the altar with us. Love is our reason for being, and in the sacrament of the Eucharist we are caught up in an interchange of love with God that is ongoing and unending.

In many churches and chapels the light of a red lamp indicates that, near the altar in a tabernacle or aumbry, the consecrated bread and wine of the Eucharist are reserved so that not only will the community have a means to communicate the sick, but there will also be a sign of Christ's abiding in our midst. Strangers, encountering the lamp's light for the first time, sense they are in the presence of holiness. Here they encounter Christ. It makes an unforgettable impact.

## Resources for Further Reflection

### Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament

Charles Grafton, one of the founders of SSJE, was responsible for bringing the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament to America and making its ministry popular. More than any other organization or movement, the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament – an Anglican devotional society founded in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century – is responsible for the Eucharist being the “principal act of Christian worship on the Lord's Day and other major Feasts . . . appointed for public worship in [the Episcopal] Church” (BCP, p. 13). Devoted to Eucharistic teaching and intercessory prayer, the Confraternity is still flourishing today. So, one might claim that the responsibility for making the Eucharist the principal act of worship in the Episcopal Church lies with Charles Grafton and the early work of SSJE in America. The Confraternity's website offers devotional materials around the Holy Eucharist, among them prayers from saints of the church like the two printed below.

### Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, 41-42

“We offer the world and ourselves to God. But we do it in Christ and in remembrance of him. We do it in Christ because he has offered all that is to be offered to God. He has performed once and for all this Eucharist and nothing has been left unoffered. In him is Life – and this Life of all of us, he gave to God. The Church is all those who have been accepted into the Eucharistic life of Christ. And we do it in remembrance of him because, as we offer again and again our life and our world to God, we discover each time that there is nothing else to be offered but Christ himself – the Life of the world, the fullness of all that exists. It is his Eucharist, and he is the Eucharist. As

<sup>10</sup> *Further Letters*, 268-9.

<sup>11</sup> *Book of Common Prayer* 1979, 174.

<sup>12</sup> Romans 6:4.

<sup>13</sup> Romans 6:5.

the prayer of offering says – it is he who offers and he who is offered . . . the only Eucharist, the only offering of the world is Christ.”

### Ronald Rolheiser

The clearest and most complete explanation of Jesus’ admonition “unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you will not have life in you” is found in Ronald Rolheiser’s *The Holy Longing*, pages 96-99. For Rolheiser, the mystery of Real Presence is far more inclusive than popular understanding contends. In the Eucharist Christ is present in the consecrated bread and wine and the gathered worshipers, even the disruptive ones we would ignore, who give us grief.

Br. Eldridge Pendleton, SSJE (1940-2015) met members of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist (SSJE) when he was twenty-one. Later, after teaching at several universities and directing a museum in Maine, he joined SSJE in 1984. Eldridge served in many capacities, including archivist, Senior Brother of Saint John’s House in Durham, North Carolina and Director of the Fellowship of Saint John. He was a life member of the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament. Despite many health challenges in recent years Eldridge remained full of vigor and in 2014 he published, *Press On, The Kingdom*, a biography of Charles Chapman Grafton, one of the founders of the Society. Eldridge loved recounting stories of the founding brothers of the Society and their enthusiasm for the religious life and God in the hope of inspiring future monastics.

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*A Sacrifice of Thanksgiving*

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*Transformation in Love*

Incarnation

*Behold what you are*

Intercession

*Carried Close to the Heart of God*

Living in Rhythm

*Following Nature's Rhythm*

Living Intentionally

*A Workbook for Creating a Personal Rule of life*

Reconciliation

*Preparing for the Sacrament*

Resurrection

*Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!*

Time

*Redeeming the Gift*

Transfiguration

*To Bear the Beams of Love*

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