A gift of presence and unifying love

Did you know that when you attend Mass you are present — actually present—to the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross? Though you can’t see it, it’s as if you were standing right there at the foot of the cross during the crucifixion.

In his encyclical letter, “Ecclesia de Eucharistia,” (“On the Eucharist in its Relationship to the Church”) Pope St. John Paul II wrote: “When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, the memorial of her Lord’s death and resurrection, this central event of salvation becomes really present and ‘the work of our redemption is carried out.’ This sacrifice is so decisive for the salvation of the human race that Jesus Christ offered it and returned to the Father only after he had left us a means of sharing in it as if we had been present there. Each member of the faithful can thus take part in it and inexhaustibly gain its fruits.

… What more could Jesus have done for us? Truly, in the Eucharist, he shows us a love which goes “to the end” (cf. Jn 13:1), a love which knows no measure.” (EE, n. 11; cf. LG, n. 3)

Each time we go to Mass, right before receiving Communion, we hear the words: “Blessed are those called to the Supper of the Lamb.” How often do we pause to contemplate how blessed we truly are to be receiving Jesus? I heard it said once that if the angels could be jealous of anything it would be of humans’ ability to receive the Eucharist. To be sure, the angels worship constantly at the heavenly altar, and each time we go to Mass, whether we realize it or not, we are joining them in their praise. We are participating in the heavenly banquet!

As sojourners in this place of exile, the Eucharist is the strength and nourishment we need as we journey toward our heavenly home. The Church constantly draws her life from Christ in the Eucharist “not only through faith-filled remembrance, but also through a real contact…” (EE, n. 12). The Blessed Sacrament is the reason why, no matter how dark things get, our days are marked with confidence and hope. The Eucharist stands at the center of the Church — that we do and through it we find meaning, mercy, healing and protection.

We learn from Scripture, that the devil’s work, demonic power, is always about division, scattering and separation — and then destruction. The first mark of the Church is that we are One. In the Eucharist we are in communion — union — with God and each other. It is the Eucharist that makes the Church one with Christ.

Everlasting life is to be in “common union” with God, to be one with him. We are one with him by receiving his body and blood, just as he taught us: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” (Jn 6:56)

God loves us and calls each of us to perfect and everlasting communion with him. He gives us our time on earth as an opportunity to either cooperate with him in achieving this goal or to reject his offer of salvation. In the center of the word “Eu-charis-t,” we find the word “charis,” which, in Greek, means “grace.” It is by the grace of God — a freely given gift — that participation in his divine life is possible and we are truly saved.

The Eucharist also commits us to others, especially the poor. Jesus sacrificed himself for us and we are to lay down our lives for others. At Mass we pray that he makes of us a sacrifice, a holy offering, to God and to others. We read in the first chapters of Genesis that the world was originally created to be in communion with the divine life. Now, through the sacraments, Jesus unites himself to us and makes us all temples of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the fallen world. The Church, the Body of the Christ, in union with Christ the Head, continues his incarnate presence on earth. We grow in sacramental living as Christ lives in us and through us. We are to let God’s love flow through us. We are conduits of his love, sharing it through our humanity.

— David Cooley, Co-director and Office Manager, Office of Catechesis and Evangelization
The Eucharist: The Source and Summit

Father Michael Hennigen

One of my favorite places to go ever since I was young is the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Tennessee. My family and I would always stay in Gatlinburg, and we still go down as a family every year in the summer.

Visiting the Great Smoky Mountains is spiritually uplifting, a kind of retreat for me. Every morning we go to Mass at St. Mary’s in town and then spend the day out in nature. Nature is God’s “first word” to us, showing us that he created us, he loves us and he sustains us. In the Gospels it is mentioned many times that Jesus would go off alone to pray. In the wilderness, up on the mountain alone to pray. Mountains in Scripture are often the place of encounter with God. Psalm 144:5 says, “Lord, incline your heavens and come down; touch the mountains and make them smoke.”

It was about 10 years ago on one of our family trips to the “Smokies” we decided to buy huge inner tubes called River Rats at the Walmart in Pigeon Forge. We went tubing in the Greenbriar and Elkmont areas of the park. We fell in love with this activity and now do it every year. I notice the beautiful mountain streams — the cool, clear, crystal water — and how they keep flowing, they never dry up. The water is refreshing to see, to listen to, and to get in.

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In this Messenger file photo, Father Jordan Hainsey, administrative assistant to the Bishop, prays the Divine Mercy chaplet on Divine Mercy Sunday at the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, April 19, 2020.
Sacred treasure, sacred space

Father Britton Hennessey

To me, one of the most moving aspects of the Easter Triduum is that it accomplishes and acknowledges the sublime celebration of the Paschal Mystery has always been the dramatic changes that happen in the interior of the church. After the conclusion of the Holy Thursday liturgy, the tabernacle in each church building serves various functions. As a repository for the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, a treasure worth more than any amount, it’s often constructed with costly metals and may be adorned with jewels, like at our Cathedral Basilica. For the protection of such a priceless treasure as the Eucharist, the tabernacle is locked. But despite being secured, it is accessible for Mass, for Communion to the sick, and for reserving the Eucharist for Adoration.

The dwelling place of the Real Presence of Jesus is sufficient enough to define the tabernacle, but to understand more about its role we have to look to the Old Testament, the 36th and 37th chapters of the book of Exodus. Moses and the Israelites have just arrived at Mount Sinai. The Lord God makes himself manifest to his chosen people (whom he had just delivered from slavery), with flashes of lightning, billowing smoke and peals of thunder. But Moses was to lead the people to the Promised Land, and the Lord desired to accompany them by being present in the ark of the Covenant. In these chapters from Exodus, construction plans are given for the ark and for various other elements of the Lord’s dwelling. The ark was to be made of acacia wood, have every surface covered in gold, and be to be adorned with angels. In later chapters, after the construction was complete, the Lord descended to his dwelling place in the form of the glory cloud, the Shekinah. It was here that bread was placed in the Lord’s presence in sacrifice, was only able to be eaten by the priests, an early prefiguring of the Eucharist. Later in salvation history, Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem and the Lord dwelt there in the Holy of Holies, an area separated by a large veil. Sacrifices were offered to the Lord day and night.

It was important for the people of every generation to face or to be present to the Lord’s presence among us. But also, the sanctuary lamp, a specific and conspicuously placed candle, denotes the presence of the Lord. Finally, like Moses, any amount of light within our souls. Our faces may not glow as Moses’ did, but radiate Christ to the world if we continually place our hearts, our minds and our actions cannot help but be on our minds … to show his love to us and transform our souls. Humanity’s most intimate desire is unity with our Lord and Creator because we are made in his image and likeness and can only be truly fulfilled through unity with him. He continues to sustain us at every Mass through the reception of his very Body and Blood, and makes himself available to us in a real way in every tabernacle in the world. He does this not because he needs us — he does this because he desires us, and he loves us. May we always remember that when the world faces us with adversity, the Lord waits to show us his love face to face.

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The Eucharist: how we should receive this gift

Father Andrew Young

“Let the entire man be seized with fear; let the whole world tremble; let Heaven exult when Christ, the Son of the Living God, is on the altar in the hands of the priest.”

These words from St. Francis of Assisi should give us pause as we reflect upon the reality of the Eucharist. The Eucharist is a sublime gift from God that enables us to enter into a union with Jesus Christ unlike any other. When we receive holy Communion, we are not simply receiving bread and wine. We are really truly and substantially receiving the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ. The awesome nature of this gift is something that should fill us with intense joy and we should act accordingly every time we are in the presence of the Eucharist — because the very same Jesus who was born in Bethlehem, worked amazing miracles, suffered, died and rose from the dead is right there in front of us. All too often, however, we can lose sight of this great reality and we can find ourselves approaching the Eucharist in a routine, nonchalant way that makes it seem like receiving holy Communion is no different from anything else happening in our day. If we find ourselves falling into this category, a look at how the Church says we should approach the Sacrament can be a helpful reminder of the glory in front of us.

Since the Eucharist is the bedrock of our faith, the Church sets certain requirements for one to be able to receive holy Communion. Baptized (or fully received) Catholics who have reached the age of reason (7 years old) and who are not aware of mortal sin and who have observed the Communion fast may receive holy Communion. One who knowingly receives holy Communion while guilty of mortal sin that has not been absolved in confession, receives unworthily and thereby commits the mortal sin of sacrilege. Venial sins do not and should not prevent us from receiving Communion. The grace received in holy Communion forgives our venial sins and fortifies us against temptation to mortal sin. The Communion fast is absolutely necessary as well. All are obliged to not eat or drink, for one hour prior to receiving Communion. Water and medicine are always permitted and do not break the fast. Deliberately not observing the Communion fast and still receiving is a mortal sin. Those who are seriously ill, however, and those who care for such persons are not bound by the fast.

Beyond these basic requirements to receive the Eucharist in a fitting manner, we also must make sure our hearts are properly disposed. What it comes to our prayer lives, our dispositions is of pivotal importance. God hears our hearts are properly disposed. When we approach God, how we prepare ourselves for these encounters with God and how we approach God makes a huge difference in how we lead up to the moment when we step out of our pews and recognize our Lord and God as he is elevated before us in the Eucharist. All of this should unite our own prayers and petitions to the prayers being offered by the priest. We should especially offer our own petitions at the moment of the Offertory and in that most sacred moment of consecration, we should be so plugged-in to the action of the Mass that we can truly recognize our Lord and God as he is elevated before us in the sacred Host and precious chalice. All of this should lead up to the moment when we step out of our pews and prayerfully approach the throne of God, disguised as a ciborium.

When the priest says, as St. Francis of Assisi said, “Let the entire man be seized with fear; let the whole world tremble; let Heaven exult when Christ, the Son of the Living God, is on the altar in the hands of the priest.”

When we receive the Eucharist with the proper disposition and having prepared our hearts for the amazing gift that it is, the Lord’s grace is able to flood our souls and provide us with the strength we need to continue our mission of being true disciples of the Lord in the world. May each of us never lose sight of this precious gift. May we always make every effort to receive the Eucharist in the best possible manner and may we always approach the Eucharist, as St. Francis of Assisi said, with holy fear, trembling and exaltation.

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Study Questions

What are water and blood signs in Scripture? Name some examples from both the Old and New Testament.

How can a tabernacle in every church be compared to the Holy of Holies in Solomon’s temple?

Why is it important to receive the Eucharist with a proper disposition?

Is it fitting that Christ’s Body and Blood become present in the Eucharist under the appearances of bread and wine? Why or why not?