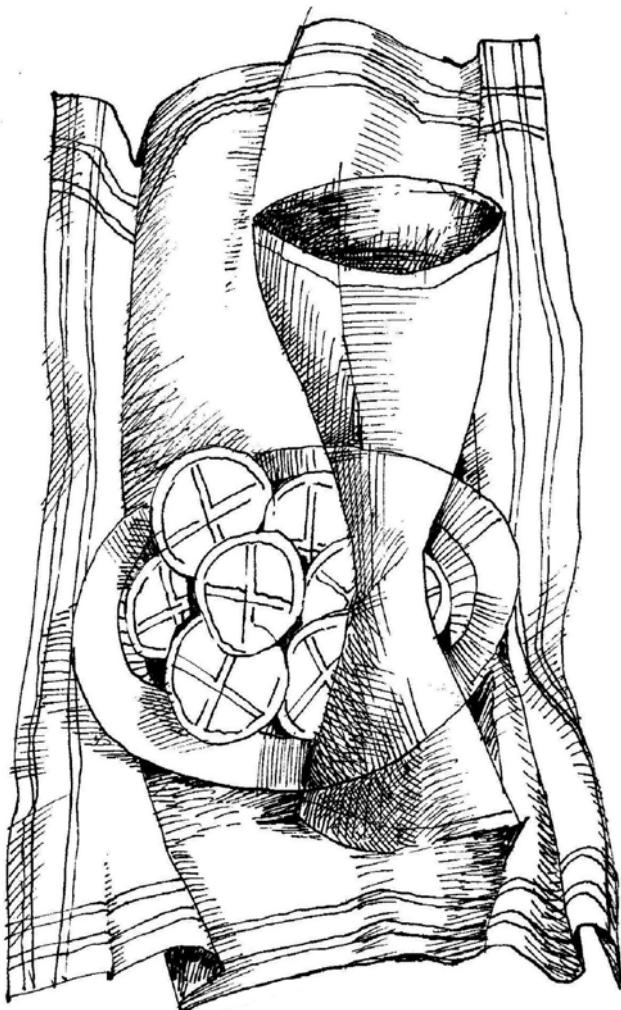




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A Short History of the Eucharist



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The following article was edited from an adaptation of a book called "A Short History of the Mass" by Rev. Alfred McBride, O. Praem., who is a priest of the Norbertine Order. The unedited version of this article can be found at the following webpage:

<http://www.americancatholic.org/newsletters/cu/ac1006.asp>

Pope John Paul II, in the final year of his life wrote:

"I have been able to celebrate Holy Mass in chapels built along mountain paths, on lake shores and sea coasts; I have celebrated it on altars built in stadiums and city squares. This varied scenario of celebrations of the Eucharist has given me a powerful experience of its universal and, so to speak, its cosmic character. Yes, cosmic! Because even when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always in some way celebrated on the altar of the world. It unites heaven and earth. It embraces and permeates all creation (The Church of the Eucharist, 8).

SIX STAGES IN THE HISTORY OF THE EUCHARIST IN THE WESTERN CHURCH

1. From Passover to Eucharist

Jesus asked his disciples to prepare a room so that they could celebrate the Passover meal. The apostles would have seen a short-legged table surrounded by cushions where they would sit. On the table was a bowl of saltwater, a dish of bitter salad recalled their crushing slave days, a container of mashed apples, raisins and plums coated with cinnamon looked like the bricks they made. Platters of unleavened bread and a roasted lamb stood next to the large cup filled with wine. Of course all of these foods and drink were deeply symbolic of the Exodus for the Jews.

Jesus opened the meal with a psalm that praised God, he then took the bread, gave thanks for it and, breaking tradition, followed this with new words: "Take and eat. This is my body that will be given up for you." This bread was now his body. It would be given up, that is offered on the cross. Jesus had broken with the Jewish traditions by breaking the bread – and so this was the first celebration of the Eucharist in history.

At the end of the meal, Jesus took the cup filled with wine and instead of making the usual toast he again broke tradition and said, "Take and drink...This is my blood. . . It will be shed for you and for all for the forgiveness of sins." As they drank of the one cup and ate of the one bread they experienced their unity in Christ. Finally, Christ gave them and their successors the power to celebrate Eucharist: "Do this in memory of me." They all sang a psalm and Jesus went forth to his saving death and resurrection. In this event Jesus gave us the sacrament of the Eucharist.

2. From Meal to Worship

Gradually the apostles and their successors developed the Eucharistic celebration into the structure that endures to this day. They first named it the "Breaking of the Bread" but soon they saw the need to separate the rite from a meal, both because of abuses at meals (1 Cor 11:17-22) and because they wanted a more prayerful setting for this act of worship. Eucharist

was moved to Sunday in memory of Christ's resurrection. In place of the meal the early Christians created a Liturgy of the Word somewhat that included readings from Scripture, singing of psalms and an instruction. Around the words of institution they added prayers of thanksgiving, praise and intercession. By the year 150, St. Justin Martyr tells us that the basic structure of the Mass was already in place. These Eucharist celebrations were held in people's homes up until the year 313. On Sunday there were two readings by a lector, a homily by the priest, then the Eucharistic Prayer and the distribution of Communion. And yes, there was a collection—for widows, orphans and others in need! It is clear that the basic form of the Eucharist occurred very early and has remained remarkably durable for 2,000 years.

3. The Growing Body of Christ

The year 313 was a turning point for Christianity. Persecutions suddenly ended. Constantine gave freedom to Christians and spent great sums of money building basilicas for Eucharistic worship. Modest house churches gradually ceased to exist. Processions, courtly movement in the sanctuary, metered chant and sung litanies that galvanized the voices of thousands, incense and bells, kissing sacred objects and the use of genuflections became a pattern to accompany the ancient structure of the Eucharist. The celebrants wore clothes worthy of a Roman senator. Their robes eventually came to be called vestments, since they were retained long after fashions changed. The simple plates and cups of house worship became elaborate chalices and patens. During this era, important bishops like Augustine developed a theology of the Eucharist – his theme was – "The Body of Christ [Eucharist] builds the Body of Christ [Church]."

4. The Eucharist Becomes Distant for Most

The Medieval times saw a growth in stunning cathedrals right across Europe. Colourful religious processions, pilgrimages to holy shrines, the birth of new religious orders and much more led some to call these centuries the "ages of faith". However, during these times, active participation in the Mass declined. The altar was often hidden from public view. Priests conducted the liturgy without the need for participation of the congregation in the Eucharist. The Mass remained in Latin, even though people began using their local languages for most things in their lives. The people compensated for their estrangement by asking the priest to hold up the host for their view and adoration. Many Catholics had ceased receiving communion so adoration of the Blessed Sacrament became popular. Meanwhile, Berengar of Tours taught that Jesus was not really present in the host, which was only a symbol of his presence. The Church repudiated his views in 1215 by affirming Christ's Real Presence and introducing the concept of transubstantiation (the substance of bread becomes the substance or "being" of Christ) to support this doctrine.

5. Reformation and the Tridentine Mass

It took the Church 28 years to gather to its energies and open the Council of Trent in 1545 to deal with Martin Luther's Reformation of 1517. The Council Fathers called for a renewal of the mass. In 1570 Pope Pius V responded to this call that would be a standard book for the celebration of Mass for the Western Church. The priest would celebrate both the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist at the altar. The people would be devotional rather than liturgical. The Mass text was in Latin. This format of the Tridentine Mass [named for Trent] endured from the 1570s until Vatican II in the 1960s.

In the Tridentine Mass, the priest, with his back to the people was separated from them by altar railings. The altar was placed against the wall, which was lavishly decorated from

floor to ceiling. A soaring pulpit was situated near the middle of the Church indicating the importance of a sermon but not a homily. Most masses were “celebrated” without music and in silence. Catholics turned to new schools of spirituality to satisfy their spiritual longings: the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, the Carmelite schools and that of St. Francis de Sales. Eventually, in the 19th century, it became clear that a return to the sources of the liturgy was needed.

6. Mass in the Era of Vatican II

The first document approved by the Fathers of Vatican II (1962-65) was the Constitution on the Liturgy. But a century before this the stirrings of liturgical change had begun. Benedictines had begun to revive earlier liturgical practices, such as Gregorian chant (from the sixth century), and were studying the roots of Christian liturgy and the ways all Christians once had participated. Pope Pius X (1903-1914) encouraged the use of Gregorian chant, frequent Communion and lowering the age for First Communion to seven years.

In 1951 Joseph Jungmann, S.J., published *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, that revealed the complex history of the Mass. With relatively little debate and very small opposition, the Constitution on the Liturgy was approved by the Council. The sonorous words of the Constitution reached a high point when it declared, “The liturgy is the summit to which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows” (10).

In the last part of the 20th century the application of the document began. A number of changes were introduced. The priest now faced the people. Vernacular languages replaced the Latin. People shook hands at the greeting of peace. The congregation was asked to participate actively in the Mass, to sing and pray at various times. People were invited to receive Communion either in the hand or on the tongue and to stand at its reception. They were offered the chalice so they could communicate under both species, the Eucharistic Bread and Wine. Laity and religious could serve Communion as extraordinary ministers. Entrance processions were added. People brought up the gifts at the presentation of the offerings. Mass readings provided a three-year series of Scripture in which large sections of the Bible would be heard. Homilies, which had become lectures or announcements on most anything, were expected to explain Scripture and apply it to everyday life. Guitar Masses surfaced and new hymns were composed, leading to many arguments about taste and suitability. None of this happened without some anger and discomfort. Some experimentation went over the top. But in fact the amazing thing is how little disturbance actually happened. The dreams of the liturgical movement were fulfilled and expanded upon. People began to realise that they could enrich their spirituality mainly from the celebration of the Eucharist.

EUCARIST: ALIVE AND DYNAMIC

One conclusion we can draw from this sketch of the history of the Mass is that changes in the liturgy, whether large or small, have been occurring since the Last Supper. The basics have never changed, but the details, decisions by Church authority and the attitudes of the participants have undergone modifications and development. In this sense the celebration of the Eucharist is a dynamic and living reality. While a constant diet of experimentation is not healthy or desirable, a loving attention to the quality of the divine celebration is a necessity. We certainly need to avoid frivolity, but we also need to avoid stagnation.

The noble core of the Eucharist from the Upper Room to an urban cathedral or a village church has withstood the tumults of history—and always will.