

EUCHARIST AS MEMORIAL

The National Organization for the Continuing Education of Roman Catholic Clergy
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The Priest's Personal Encounter with Jesus in the Eucharist

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Introduction

When Jesus said, “Do this in memory of me,” he issued a command that every priest ever since has followed. As Eucharistic Prayer I puts it, “we celebrate the memorial of the blessed Passion, the Resurrection from the dead, and the glorious Ascension into heaven of Christ.” In fact, after the people sing what is called a “memorial” acclamation all the main eucharistic prayers in the very next words have the priest call the eucharist a “memorial”. It expresses in some mysterious way both the presence of Christ at each eucharist and our presence at his Last Supper.

This year the National Organization for the Continuing Education of Roman Catholic Clergy has chosen as its convention theme, “The Priest's Personal Encounter with Jesus in the Eucharist.” This presentation focuses the theme under the title, “Eucharist as Memorial.” We call ourselves “priests” because we offer the sacrifice of the Mass, which the liturgy itself calls the memorial of Christ. This presentation will examine the ways that the liturgy fulfills the command of Christ when he instituted the eucharist, to do this in memory of him.

The Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy explained the Mass in one dense sentence: “At the Last Supper, Our Savior instituted the Eucharistic Sacrifice of his Body and Blood, by which the Sacrifice of his Cross is perpetuated until he comes again; and till then he entrusts the memorial of his Death and Resurrection to his beloved spouse, the Church” (47). In history, on Good Friday, Jesus died on a cross. In mystery, on Holy Thursday, he instituted the sacrament of his upcoming sacrifice. In love, every day, the Church celebrates the memorial it has received.

The Roman Missal's first preface of the Most Holy Eucharist makes a similar point: Christ “is the true and eternal Priest, who instituted the pattern of an everlasting sacrifice and was the first to offer himself as the saving Victim, commanding us to make this offering as his memorial. As we eat his flesh that was sacrificed for us, we are made strong, and, as we drink his Blood that was poured out for us, we are washed clean.”

The Eucharistic Prayer

The heart of the Mass is the eucharistic prayer, and the heart of the eucharistic prayer is the institution narrative and consecration. Even so, those important sentences are one part of the whole.

From the start of the preface to the end of the doxology, the eucharistic prayer is a seamless garment. It folds and shimmers in beauty, but it is a single

piece of fabric expressing the praise and prayer of the Church. In the opening of the prayer the community gives thanks for the mighty deeds that God has done. One of those deeds is the institution of the eucharist.

As they repeat the words of Jesus from the Last Supper, many priests imagine that they are addressing these to the people in the pews: “Take this, all of you.” However, the priest is still talking to God the Father. In the Eucharistic Prayer for Use in Masses for Various Needs and Occasions, for example, the priest takes the chalice in hand and says, “he took the chalice, [and] gave you thanks.” The priest is describing to God the Father what Jesus did at the Last Supper. When he continues, he repeats the words that Jesus spoke to his disciples, “Take this, all of you.” But even there, the second “you” that refers to the disciples is subject to the first “you” addressing the Father. Throughout the entire, seamless prayer, the priest is talking to God. He recalls the events of the Last Supper as one example of God’s mighty deeds for which he gives thanks.

The institution narrative and consecration take the community right into the mystery of Eucharist as memorial. Even as Christ becomes really present to the assembly, so the people become really present to his Last Supper. Eucharistic Prayer I expresses this in a riveting way. When the priest picks up the physical chalice in front of him, he says of Jesus, “he took this precious chalice in his holy and venerable hands.” Prayer I does not say, “he took his chalice” or “he took the chalice,” as the other prayers do. No, it says, “he took this precious chalice,” the very one that the priest is holding. The contents of the chalice from the Last Supper are the contents of the chalice at this Mass. The eucharist is memorial: Christ is really present to his people at the altar, and the people are present at his final passover table.

Consequently, the priest performs certain dramatic actions during the institution narrative. These are not theatrical; they express the memorial that unites the Last Supper with an individual Mass. For example, when the priest says that Jesus took bread in his hands, the priest takes bread in his hands. When he says that Jesus took a chalice, he takes a chalice. He does not simply talk about what Jesus said; he repeats words that Jesus said. The Order of Mass at this point reminds him that “the words of the Lord should be pronounced clearly and distinctly, as the nature of these words requires.” John’s gospel says that Jesus lifted his eyes to heaven before praying for his disciples at the Last Supper. In Eucharistic Prayer I, when the priest says that Jesus lifted his eyes, the priest lifts his eyes too. All of these dramatic features illustrate the memorial in which the community is taking part. The consecration happens as the priest says these words; that is, as he celebrates the memorial, doing this in memory of Jesus.

In addition to these dramatic features, the priest and people also perform devotional actions. The deacon and the congregation kneel for the institution narrative, out of reverence for the real presence of Christ. As the priest says the words of institution, he bows slightly; he too is showing reverence for what is taking place. He shows the consecrated bread and then the chalice to the people for their adoration. A small bell is not required, but one may be rung each time

“according to local custom.” At solemn celebrations a minister may incense the host and chalice. The priest genuflects each time to show his adoration. These devotional elements demonstrate the faith of the people that the memorial of the Lord is being accomplished: the risen Christ becomes truly present at this time. Even so, the present rubrics simplify the former ones: The priest used to genuflect before and after showing the host and chalice to the people, for a total of four times; now it is two. A minister used to ring the bells three times, but that has been reduced to one, and it is optional. Incense swings have been reduced to three. The rubrics respect the consecration, but they control these devotional practices lest they fragment the framework of the entire prayer. The seamless eucharistic prayer resumes, having paused momentarily for these brief demonstrations of devotion.

The priest introduces the memorial acclamation in a phrase: “The mystery of faith.” The words apparently come for 1 Timothy 3:9, where Paul instructs deacons to be dignified, not deceitful, tipsy or greedy, but “holding fast to the mystery of faith with a clear conscience.” In the previous missal, the priest spoke the words “the mystery of faith” during the consecration of the chalice. They were added in the early Middle Ages. As the deacon holds the chalice at Mass, so, at the consecration of the chalice, all recall Paul’s admonition for deacons to hold the mystery of faith. That mystery is perfectly illustrated in the memorial of the Lord. When Pope St. Paul VI revised the Order of Mass in 1969, he agreed with his consultors that the words “the mystery of faith” could be removed from the consecration of the chalice. However, he reinserted them a few moments later to introduce a new acclamation for the people.

In the first English translation, the priest interrupted his prayer to the Father in order to address the people: “Let us proclaim the mystery of faith.” However, that translation said more than the Latin had in place. The priest was never so deliberately to break his attentive prayer to the Father to talk to the people at this point. He was to slip them a cue so that they could make an appropriate acclamation.

The acclamation is called “memorial” because it concerns fulfilling the command of Christ to do this in his memory. In each of the three options the people proclaim the death of the Lord or call on him for salvation. Throughout the body of the eucharistic prayer, these are the only words not addressed to God the Father; the people address Christ. Surely this is one reason why the rubrics say that the people make the acclamation, not the priest. They are swept up in the moment, aware of Christ present on the altar, and they sing an acclamation to him while the priest pauses in silence. The people make a similar response to the proclamation of the gospel. When it is over, they say, “Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ,” who has just become really present to them in the proclamation of his word. So, too, now that Christ has also appeared under the forms of bread and wine, they sing to him. These are not just words of praise, as they are after the gospel. They are words of memorial. They announce that this community is doing what Jesus asked them to do.

The priest resumes the prayer addressed to the Father, and here he calls the eucharist a memorial. In Prayer II, for example, speaking to the Father about Christ, the priest says, “we celebrate the memorial of his Death and Resurrection.” In a way, it seems as though the priest wasn’t listening to the people. They just sang an acclamation about remembering the Lord’s death and resurrection. However, they were singing to Christ; the priest is addressing the Father. Furthermore, another word that always appears in the priest’s sentence is “offer”, as in Eucharistic Prayer III, “we offer you in thanksgiving this holy and living sacrifice.” Doing this in memory of Jesus implies not just witnessing his real presence but actively offering sacrifice with him.

The Preparation of the Gifts

Working backwards from the Eucharistic Prayer, the full impact of this memorial becomes clearer through a reflection on the preparation of the gifts. As the community gathers to celebrate the sacrifice of Christ, each person offers the sacrifice of himself or herself. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal says that they do this “by their deep religious sense and their charity toward brothers and sisters who participate with them in the same celebration” (95). The very kindness they show other worshipers signifies their offering at Mass. That offering is a climax of other sacrifices in everyday life. By following Christ throughout the week, everyone offers daily service to their family and friends, to clients at work and strangers on the street.

The priest has been doing this as well. When he says to the people, “Pray, brothers and sisters, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father,” he’s not talking about the sacrifice of Christ. That is the acceptable sacrifice. The priest is worried about his sacrifice and the sacrifice of his people. He has just prayed silently, “With humble spirit and contrite heart may we be accepted by you, O Lord, and may our sacrifice in your sight this day be pleasing to you, Lord God.” He’s quoting Azariah from the Book of Daniel. The three young men in the fiery furnace refused to practice false religion and were willing to die for it. They sacrificed their lives to God. Yet even in that moment, they did not know if God would find their lives acceptable. They knew their sins and failures. In the midst of the flames that threatened their lives they prayed that their sacrifice would be pleasing. The priest walks through other flames of sacrifice throughout his daily ministry. But even though he does his best, even though his faith is strong, even though he loves his people, even though he has sacrificed much, he still don’t know if he will be acceptable. So after quoting Azariah’s prayer, the priest asks the people for help. Because all have sacrificed throughout the past week, all now pray that God will find that sacrifice acceptable.

This fulfills a command from St. Paul in Romans 12:1. “Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship.” In Prayer I the priest asks God, “accept this oblation of our service.” In Prayer III he prays, “make us an eternal offering to you.”

In certain celebrations, incense is prepared, and the gifts, the altar, the cross, the priest and the people are all wrapped in smoke. Some people do not like the smell of incense, but the liturgy thinks that God does. By sending aloft a pleasing aroma, the incense gift-wraps and ties up the sacrifice of one's life with an aromatic bow.

The procession of the gifts includes bread, wine and the financial gifts for the church and the needy. The bread and wine signify these offerings of the people. The priest arranges them as if he and the people are gifts on the altar as well. The general instruction informs sacristans that "The candlesticks should be appropriately placed... so that... the faithful may not be impeded from a clear view of what takes place at the altar or what is placed upon it" (307). The altar is not the priest's altar; it belongs to the priestly people as well. The priest and people pray that each one's "oblation of ...service" symbolically placed upon that altar will be acceptable to God.

The eucharist is the memorial of the death and resurrection of the Lord, a sacrifice that God found acceptable. At this memorial the priest and the people offer their own sacrifices to God, hoping that by association they will also be found acceptable. In the second Eucharistic Prayer for Masses of Reconciliation, the priest says to God the Father, "accept us also, together with your Son." God is accepting the Son; the priest and the people are trying to hitch a ride.

Holy Communion

This memorial sacrifice reaches its climax as the consecrated gifts of bread and wine are returned to the priest and the people. At communion, the priest is obliged to consume bread and wine consecrated at that celebration of the eucharist to complete the sacrifice. Concelebrants have the obligation too. The general instruction urges the same for the communion of the people: "It is most desirable that the faithful, just as the Priest himself is bound to do, receive the Lord's Body from hosts consecrated at the same Mass and that, in the cases where this is foreseen, they partake of the chalice, so that even by means of the signs Communion may stand out more clearly as a participation in the sacrifice actually being celebrated" (85).

At a typical parish Mass, many of the faithful receive their communion from previously consecrated hosts housed in the tabernacle, rather than the hosts consecrated at the Mass where they have been participating. As they have offered their sacrifices to God, as they have participated in the sacrifice of Christ, so now they receive the fruits of the active offering: the bread and wine consecrated at this Mass. When they do, they participate most fully in the memorial of the Lord.

This helps explain one of the overlooked rubrics in the general instruction pertaining to reverences. If the tabernacle is in the sanctuary, many priests and ministers genuflect to it whenever they pass in front, or enter or leave the sanctuary. But the general instruction says something else: "If... the tabernacle with the Most Blessed Sacrament is situated in the sanctuary, the Priest, the Deacon, and the other ministers genuflect when they approach the altar [at the

beginning of Mass] and when they depart from it [at the end], but not during the celebration of Mass itself” (274). While Mass is going on, the tabernacle recedes. The altar becomes the focus of attention, the center of gravity. According to the Ceremonial of Bishops, the proper reverence for those entering or leaving the sanctuary or passing before the altar during Mass is a low bow to altar (72). The tabernacle is a central focus of worship outside of Mass, but during Mass, the focus shifts to the altar. The general instruction says, “the altar should occupy a place where it is truly the center toward which the attention of the whole congregation of the faithful naturally turns” (299). The altar represents the cross of the sacrifice of Christ; it is the place where the sacrament of this sacrifice is done in memory of Christ; it is the place from which priest and people are to be fed, so that the full meaning of this memorial is alive to them in holy communion.

Virtual Reality

The pandemic spurred many churches to livestream the celebration of the Mass for the benefit of those unable to participate in person. Many people still watch the Mass on their screens, and some of them consider this as good or nearly as good as being there.

Of course, it's not. Some spiritual benefit happens, but it is not the full, conscious, active participation that the Second Vatican Council championed.

Yet, the way some aspects of the Mass veer from the rubrics is similarly pulling people into a virtual reality instead of a real reality. When people arrive at church, many of them choose a place far from the altar, as if they prefer to watch the Mass as they can at home. The back pews of Catholic churches scandalously fill up before the front pews do. But the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, citing 1 Peter 2:9 and verses 4-5, calls the people “a royal priesthood” who “have a right and obligation [to participate] by reason of their baptism” (14). The general instruction says that the people form a royal priesthood “so that they may give thanks to God and offer the unblemished sacrificial Victim not only by means of the hands of the Priest but also together with him and so that they may learn to offer their very selves” (95). If they are priests, they belong close to the altar, not in the back pew.

Throughout the Mass some churchgoers check their phones, answer texts, take photos and write emails. Such people are really present inside the church for the Mass but virtually present on their devices. Nobody gets a break during Mass. People should especially participate in the dialogues and in all the music assigned to them. Even when people are sitting or kneeling in silence, they are responsible for participating in the memorial of the Lord fully intent on the prayer.

Offering communion to the faithful from previously consecrated hosts in the tabernacle is another common way that the liturgy resorts to virtual reality. The people have arrived at Mass to perform a priestly duty: offering the sacrifice of their lives. When they receive communion from a previous Mass, from someone else's sacrifice, it breaks the authenticity of their real participation in the memorial of the Lord.

One may also encounter a tendency to turn the Mass toward eucharistic adoration. Ministers make extra genuflections to the tabernacle. At the consecration some priests lift the host and chalice higher than the rubrics indicate and for a longer time than the flow of the prayer demands.

Sometimes when the priest hands the communion ministers their vessel, one or more of them turn toward the tabernacle, ciborium full of consecrated hosts in hand, and bow as if the tabernacle is holier than what they are holding. Some of the faithful, upon receiving holy communion, genuflect to the tabernacle or, if it is located outside the sanctuary, walk there and kneel before it for silent prayer, as if the tabernacle is holier than the communion they have just received. Perhaps because so many of the people receive communion from the tabernacle instead of the altar, they have elevated the importance of the reserved Blessed Sacrament instead of the eucharist as the memorial of the Lord.

As communion draws to a close, some ministers and people watch attentively as the remaining hosts are brought to the tabernacle. The minister who places the vessel there usually genuflects, but sometimes other ministers add their own genuflection, while the rubrics invite them to sing the communion song or offer God their thanksgiving in silence. All these actions show reverence for the Blessed Sacrament, but the celebration of the Mass has another primary interest: engaging the participation of the priest and the people in the memorial of the Lord.

Even those who prepared the materials for this NOCERCC conference seem to have missed the distinction. Although the conference is entitled, “The Priest’s Personal Encounter with Jesus in the Eucharist,” and this presentation is called “Eucharist as Memorial,” the graphic on the brochure depicts a monstrance, not an altar. Yes, a priest should have a personal encounter with the risen Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, yes he should take advantage of opportunities for eucharistic adoration, but his first encounter with Christ is at Mass, where no monstrance belongs. He encounters Christ first in holy communion at the memorial of his sacrifice.

Christ is truly present both on the altar and in the tabernacle, but when celebrating the eucharist as memorial, the difference is between reality and virtual reality. Those receiving communion from the altar participate in the real memorial; those receiving from the tabernacle are in the virtual world of the memorial. Ultimately, the priest is responsible for fully engaging the participation of the people.

The Priest

The priest, then, presides at the celebration of the Mass to enter no virtual world, but the super-real world of memorial. He approaches the altar mindful of his unworthiness, yet confidently taking his place. He is not alone. Christ is the true high priest. The sacrifice is his. Just as the eucharist is a memorial of the sacrifice of Christ, so, in a way, the priest is a memorial of Christ. It is Christ who presides, Christ who baptizes, Christ who anoints, and Christ who forgives. A

pastor is called a priest by his participation in the priesthood of Christ. He brings Christ to his people.

The fifth preface of Easter Time proclaims that Christ “showed himself the Priest, the Altar, and the Lamb of sacrifice.” He was all of it: the one who offered, the place of offering, and the victim being offered. A Catholic priest is the same. Each priest offers the sacrifice for the Church, but he is also the altar, the means by which the people of God offer their sacrifices. And in his ministry, he is the Lamb of sacrifice, the one who gives his life, his gifts, his time, and his heart to his people. When a priest brings that ministry to his sacred duties in the sanctuary, he fully enters the mystery of the Mass. Christ is present to him; Christ is present in him because he has become part of the eucharist as memorial. He fulfills what Christ commanded: “Do this in memory of me.”