THE EUCHARIST THROUGHOUT HISTORY

BY VLADIMIR MAURICIO-PEREZ

A recent Pew survey found that two-thirds of Catholics do not believe that Christ is truly present in the Eucharist, but that it is a mere symbol. This serves as a wake-up call for better formation, not assuming that people know the basics of the Catholic faith.

To showcase the importance of the Eucharist in the Christian faith through history, we have created a timeline that highlights some of the key moments that prepared the way for the Eucharist in the Old Testament, its institution in the New Testament, and its practice and deeper understanding in subsequent centuries.

This timeline contains key words that repeat throughout the Scriptures, such as, lamb, bread, wine, blood, sacrifice, offering, etc. These key words all unite in the Eucharist and bear witness to the fact that Jesus literally meant that the bread and wine would become his Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity.
Old Testament

Foreshadowing

“Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was a priest of God the Most High, And he blessed [Abram]” (Gen 14:18-19). He is said to foreshadow Christ’s priesthood, who also offered bread and wine: “[Melchizedek] is without father or mother or genealogy, and has neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever” (Heb 7:3). St. Jerome wrote in the 5th century. “Just as Melchizedek had done, the priest of the Most high, when he offered bread and wine in the prefiguration of him, he [Christ] too would present it in the truth of his own body and blood (Commentary on Matthew IV).

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It is in Jesus’ death and resurrection that these references come to fulfillment, and ultimately in the way he chose to stay “until the end of time,” that is, in the Eucharist. For this reason, the priest uses John the Baptist’s very words during the Last Supper: “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29). John the Baptist refers to Jesus with these words, drawing on the importance of the lamb in the Old Testament. It is in Jesus’ death and resurrection that these references come to fulfillment, and ultimately in the way he chose to stay “until the end of time,” that is, in the Eucharist. For this reason, the priest uses John the Baptist’s very words during the Last Supper: “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29). John the Baptist refers to Jesus with these words, drawing on the importance of the lamb in the Old Testament.

To deliver the Israelites from Egypt, God commands Moses to tell his people: “Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male... they shall take some of the blood and put it on the doorposts... They shall eat the flesh that night” (Ex 12:5-8). St. Paul writes: “For Christ, our Paschal Lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor 5:7). Jesus is identified with the Passover lamb, and the eating of the lamb with the eating of Jesus’ body, as Jesus says: “For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed” (Jn 6:55).

1. THE TREE OF LIFE

After eating the fruit from the forbidden tree, Adam and Eve are denied the fruit of the Tree of Life. Many Church Fathers saw the Tree of Life as a prefiguration of the Cross, and the fruit of the Tree of Life as a prefiguration of the Eucharist, the Body of Christ, which hung from the Cross. Revelation says that God will grant people to eat from the Tree of Life (Rev 2:7). Pseudo-Hippolytus writes around the 4th century, “So in place of the old tree, [Christ] plants a new one... For me the cross is the tree of eternal salvation; from it I nourish myself, from it I feed myself” (On the Pasch, L-I). Also, St. Augustine says, “We too are fed from the Tree of Life” (On the Creed, 23).

God tests Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his “only-be-gotten son Isaac” (Gen 22:2s). Isaac asks his father why there is a fire but no lamb for a burnt offering. Abrahams responds: “God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering.” Jesus is the “Lamb of God” (Jn 1:29) offered in sacrifice for men, and a he’s also the “only-be-gotten Son” of God (Jn 1:18).

2. MELCHIZEDEK

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3. ISAAC

Jesus himself made it clear that he was not speaking metaphorically when he said, “I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh” (Jn 6:51). When the Jews take this to be ridiculous in the literal sense — “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (6:53-55). And to extinguish any type of confusion, he adds a new word, “he who eats [Greek: trogon] me will live because of me” (6:57). In Greek, “trogon” means “chew” or “gnaw” and not just “eat.”

Many of his disciples could not accept this clear teaching, “drew back and no longer walked with him” (6:60,66).

4. UNLEAVENED BREAD

5. PASSOVER LAMB

In preparation for the Passover, God also commands his people to eat “unleavened bread” (Ex 12:15s), which was meant to symbolize the hurry with which they were fleeing Egypt — they did not have time to let it rise. According to Matthew and Mark, Jesus instituted the Eucharist on “the first day of Unleavened Bread” (Mt 26:17; Mk 14:12). In the Latin Rite, the Church still uses unleavened bread for the Eucharist, and sees the origin of this tradition in the Passover.

New Testament

Institution

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Jesus himself foreshadowed the Eucharist before instituting it in order to prepare his disciples to receive it. In the feeding of the five thousand, he performs the same four actions he will use during the Last Supper: “taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke, and gave the loves to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds” (Mt 14:19). During the Last Supper, Matthew also writes, “Jesus took the bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body’” (26:26).

In the Gospel of Matthew, a unique word stands out during the Our Father prayer: “Give us this day our daily (Greek: epiousios) bread” (Mt 6:11). Epiousios is not used anywhere else in the Bible, except in Lk 11:3, in the same prayer. St. Jerome’s translation of Matthew into Latin is more literal and translates this word as “supersubstantial.” Supersubstantial means above all substance or superior to all things. Therefore, many Church Fathers understood the petition for “our supersubstantial bread” to refer to the Eucharist.

1. BETHLEHEM

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, which in Hebrew means “House of Bread.”

2. MIRACLE OF THE LOAVES

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After the Israelites left Egypt, God sent them the manna, or bread from heaven, in the desert: “I will rain bread from heaven for you” (Ex 16:4). Jesus is the fulfillment of the manna, as he himself states: “Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died... I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever” (Jn 6:49-51).

God commands Moses to build a Tabernacle and place the Ark of the Covenant in it, so that he may “dwell in their midst” (Ex 25:8). He then commands him: “And you shall set the bread of the Presence on the table before me always” (25:30). Later on, David ate this bread, which was given to him by the priest Abimelech: “So the priest gave [David] the holy bread, for there was no bread there but the bread of the Presence” (1 Sam 21:6). Jesus alludes to this episode and says, “Have you not read what David did, when he was hungry... how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence... I tell you, something greater than the temple is here” (Mt 22:7-8). He who is greater than the temple became the true bread of the Presence.

In Acts of the Apostles, the apostles and disciples celebrated the Eucharist: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). As previously mentioned, the “breaking of the bread” referred to the Eucharist, as Christ instituted it at the Last Supper: “This chalice which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Lk 22:20).

In the Book of Revelation, John shows that the Eucharistic worship corresponds with and finds its fulfillment in the heavenly worship, “the marriage supper of the Lamb” (Rev 19:9). John provides powerful images that correspond to the Mass, showing that Christians already partake in the heavenly worship. In Rev 4-5, John describes the Passover Lamb, the elders — presbyteros — who offer sacrifice, the bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus. Many scholars have considered both the Todah and the Passover sacrifices as foreshadows of the Eucharist.

St. Paul asserts that the Eucharist is truly the body and blood of Christ, and there are consequences for those who partake in it unworthily. “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?” (1 Cor 10:16). He also writes to the Corinthians saying, “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor 11:27).
Church History
Practice & Understanding

Also known as “The Lord’s Teaching Through the Twelve Apostles to the Nations,” this Early Christian writing from the first century mentions the importance of confessing one’s sins before receiving communion and talks explicitly about the Eucharist. “But every Lord’s day [Sunday] gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure” (XIV). “Now concerning the Thanksgiving [Eucharist], thus give thanks. First concerning the cup... And concerning the broken bread...” (IX).

Ignatius of Antioch, who had been a disciple of St. John, said regarding those who held “heterodox opinions,” that “...they abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, flesh which suffered for our sins and which the Father, in his goodness, raised up again” (Letter to the Smyrnaeans 6:2, 7:1).

“Not as common bread or common drink do we receive these; but since Jesus Christ our Savior was made incarnate by the word of God and had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so too, as we have been taught, the food which has been made into the Eucharist by the Eucharistic prayer set down by him, and by the change of which our blood and flesh is nourished... is both the flesh and the blood of that incarnated Jesus” (First Apocalypse 66:1-20).

“Do not, therefore, regard the bread and wine as simply that, for they are, according to the Master’s declaration, the body and blood of Christ. Even though the senses suggest to you the other, let faith make you firm” (Catechetical Discourses: Mystagogic 4:22:9).

In the Early Church, the adoration of the Body and Blood of Christ was restricted to the Eucharistic celebration and communion, and Fathers such as Augustine and Ambrose encouraged an attitude of adoration during Mass. However, in hopes of repairing for the controversies and blasphemies of some against the Eucharist, faithful such as St. Juliana of Liege, requested in the 13th century a greater adoration outside of Mass. This request, coupled with the Eucharistic miracle of Bolsena, Italy, in 1264, led Pope Urban IV to institute the Feast of Corpus Christi (“The Body of Christ”).

Feast of Corpus Christi
Thomas Aquinas gave the greatest theological explanation of the meaning of transubstantiation. In addition, he was commissioned to write the hymns for the Feast of Corpus Christi. He wrote such hymns as Pange Lingua, Tantum Ergo and O Salutaris Hostia.

Pope Pius X would come to be known as the “Pope of the Blessed Sacrament” by many. Other than restoring the practice of Gregorian Chant, he promoted daily communion, assuring that it is the shortest way to Heaven. He also lowered the age of First Communion from 12 to 7 years old, which was considered the “age of discretion.”

The Second Vatican Council was held to address the relation between the Church and the modern world. Among the modifications established, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy sought to reform and promote the liturgy. Some of these reforms included a wider use of the vernacular language during the liturgy and a greater participation of the congregation. It’s implementation has been the subject of much discussion, and for many, various changes associated with it were never intended by the Council Fathers.

Over 35 years after the Missal was updated in 1970, following the Second Vatican Council, Pope Benedict XVI allowed priests to celebrate the Tridentine Mass – often referred to as the Traditional Latin Mass – using the 1962 Missal, with a group of faithful “who, of their own will, asked to be admitted.” The Pope assured that the “old rite,” last published in 1962. Instead, he said they must be seen as a “twofold use” of the same rite.