

Ask Fr James

What do we Catholics believe differently about the Holy Eucharist?

The debate among leading Protestant, Orthodox and Roman Catholic scholars has always been whether the Eucharist is a sacrament of Christ's real presence ("this is my body") or just a memorial of his death and resurrection ("do this in remembrance of me"). We Catholics believe both while most of the other Christians faith traditions believe the latter. The Catholic argument is that it is not either/or. "Memorial" and "real presence" go hand in hand. By real presence is meant that at every Mass, Jesus Christ is substantially present on the altar ("this is my body") and we come to meet him there. Real Presence is the reason we kneel during the consecration because, truly aware of the holiness and divinity of the sacrament we approach it with great reverence and holiness.

The Eucharist as "memorial" is not to be understood as a pleasant recollection of something that happened "back then" but as a way of making the reality of God's saving act in Christ newly present at each Mass we celebrate. The memorial we celebrate is Christ who gave himself on the cross for the sake of the world and whose presence we encounter in the Eucharist. In the Eucharist we celebrate the self-giving of Christ and we share in the life God has offered us through him. This biblical idea of the Eucharist is celebrated by God's people in every liturgy and is present in this anamnesis (memorial), granting us communion with himself.

Our third understanding of the Eucharist is 'Eucharist as communion.' It means that we are in Holy Communion with Jesus and with one another at Mass. At the table of the Lord we experience the 'vertical' and "horizontal" dimensions of Communion. St Paul calls it the two-fold dimensional - (a) participation in (fellowship or communion with) Christ (vertical), and (b) mutual participation in (fellowship or communion with) the community of believers (horizontal).

Such fellowship with Christ, says St. Paul, is experienced most directly in the sacramental life of the church, and especially in the Eucharist. "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a sharing (communion, participation, koinonia) in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?" (I Cor. 10:16). This understanding of Holy Communion calls us not only to a sharing in the Body and Blood of Christ but also to sharing in one another's suffering (Col. 1:24) and tribulations (Phil. 4:14), a sharing in times of consolation (2 Cor. 1:7), an offering of active assistance in times of need (2 Cor. 8 and 9), a community of mutual service (1 Pet. 4:10) and of loving participation in the life of others (Acts 2:42-47).

At every Mass, we encounter Jesus and the Eucharistic communion with Christ nourishes the life of the Church and at the same time nourishes the communion within the body of Christ which is the Church. The sharing of one bread and the common cup demonstrates and effects the oneness of the sharers with Christ and with their fellow sharers. To be united with Christ in this meal is to be united with the members of his body. Thus the Eucharistic celebration demands reconciliation and sharing among all those regarded as brothers and sisters in the one family of God.