

Session I

Common Ground for Understanding the Eucharist: Scripture Basics

Opening Prayer : Priest or leader of the group may lead a prayer of choice.

Faith-Sharing focus:

This weekend is devoted to gaining a deeper understanding of the Eucharist and the power it has and can have in our lives. This session is designed to give the pilgrims a common understanding of the basic concepts and scripture passages pertaining to the Eucharist so that we can move forward together as the One Body of Christ to a richer and more meaningful participation in this Pilgrimage and in each and every Eucharistic celebration hereafter.

Pretest:

Which of the following do you believe: When you receive the Eucharist:

1. You are really and truly receiving the body, blood, soul and divinity (eternal life) of the Lord Jesus Christ under the appearance of bread and wine.
2. You are receiving bread and wine that symbolize the body and blood of Jesus;
3. You are receiving bread and wine in which Jesus is also present.
4. You are receiving what has become Christ's body and blood because you personally believe. You don't know what that really signifies or why you should or do believe it.

Faith Sharing

Eucharist: The Real Presence

The Catholic faith teaches that the Eucharist is the literal body and blood of Christ while virtually all of the 33,000 different Protestant denominations believe Christ is only present symbolically in the Eucharist.¹ The early Church Fathers (before the reformation) believed in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. That is what we still believe today. Even Martin Luther affirmed the doctrine. What does it mean to believe in the Real Presence of Christ? It means that when we go to mass on Sunday, we go to meet our God personally and intimately. He enters into our body and permeates our whole body. His flesh is chewed and ingested just like any other life-sustaining food. His body and blood is carried by our blood and dispersed throughout our whole being. His flesh is incorporated into our flesh, and we become One. But we are not just incorporating his flesh and blood. We also receive his spirit and divinity. Through the Eucharist, He shares with us, once again, his body, blood, soul and divinity.

¹ Beginning Apologetics 1, How to Explain and Defend the Catholic Faith, Fr. Frank Chacon and Jim Burnham, San Juan Catholic Seminars, 1993-1998, p. 7.

In the beginning Adam and Eve shared in God's divinity and enjoyed his real presence. They were allowed to eat freely from the tree of life until they disobeyed God. They (and we at the same time) lost the eternal life which God intended us to have. Jesus cleared the path for us to share in God's divine life. In order to share in His divinity again, we must again consume the food given to us by God. Jesus was very clear on this point. We must eat Christ's flesh and drink his blood. John, Chapter 6 contains what is known as the Bread of Life Discourse. Here, Jesus begins to prepare his disciples to understand how he would be with them always even after his crucifixion. The meaning of the words about the bread and eternal life were clarified by Jesus later at the Last Supper and then made real after the resurrection.

- ***The Bread of Life Discourse***

While reading these passages, imagine that you are one of the disciples, listening to Christ without the benefit of the New Testament and 2000 years of theology. What would you have thought if you heard Christ speaking these words? The Bread of Life Discourse, as it is called, came the day after Jesus had multiplied the five barley loaves and two fish into enough food to feed five thousand. The night before, they had seen Him walk on water. So they knew that he could do amazing things. They weren't really clear on who he was though. Some called him a prophet, some "rabbi," some the Holy One of God. Jesus withdrew from the crowd because he "knew that they were going to come and carry him off to make him a king..." (John 6:14-15) They weren't sure who he was, but they believed that God had sent him. (John 6: 69)

[Optional: You may choose to have participants take parts and read the Discourse. See Appendix]

Jesus asked them to eat his flesh and drink his blood. The only logical conclusion at that juncture was that he was asking them to be cannibals. "*Eat my flesh.*" You can tell that they were shocked by his words. "*Does this shock you?*" Yet he does not soften his words or change them. He does not say that he was just speaking symbolically. He could have. The disciples who turned away would have likely stayed. He did mean, in fact, that we would have to eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to gain eternal life.

- ***At the Last Supper (Refer to Appendix for Text of Scripture)***

Fortunately for us, at the Last Supper, he showed the apostles the form which his flesh and blood would take after his death and resurrection. We have four different accounts of the words used by Christ at the last supper when he instituted the sacrament. (Cf. Matthew 26:26-30, Mark 14: 22-26, Luke 22:14-20, and 1 Corinth 11: 23-29).

Jesus said, "*This IS my body*" and "*This IS my blood.*" He did not say "This is a symbol of my body and blood." During the Bread of Life Discourse, he fully expected his disciples to understand him literally, and they did. He also expected them to understand

him literally at the Last Supper. He held up the bread and essentially said, “When you see this bread, you see me.”

- ***They recognized Him in the Breaking of the Bread (See Appendix for text)***

After He rose from the dead, he encountered two disciples walking along the road to Emmaus. He accompanied them for some time discussing the events that had just occurred. They did not recognize Him though. It was only in the “breaking of the bread” when the disciples recognized who He was. After he left them, they recounted what happened to the other disciples. While they were still speaking, Christ appeared and stood in their midst. They were afraid because they thought he was a ghost. (Luke 24:37) He assured them he was not and that he was physically present to them. He showed them his hands and feet. “Why are you troubled? And why do questions arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have.” Luke 24:38-39. Then he asked for something to eat! “‘Have you anything here to eat?’ They gave him a piece of baked fish; he took it and ate it in front of them.” Luke 24:41 Spirits have no need of food. The Bible says that he “took it and ate it in front of them.” He clearly wanted to prove to them and to us that he was fully and really present on earth. He had told them that he would return. He had told them that he would not leave them orphans. He is good to His Word.

Notice what happened immediately before the breaking of the bread. Jesus reviewed the scriptures with them. They studied the scripture together and Jesus interpreted to them what scripture said about Him. Their hearts were burning as the scripture was opened up to them. The Word had touched their hearts and prepared them for the breaking of the bread. At mass the Word is read to us. Then, the priest interprets the Word for us. Do our hearts burn within us as we hear the Gospel read and interpreted at mass? The scriptures are read to us at mass to set our hearts afire in preparation for receiving the Eucharist. It was only after the disciples were properly prepared that their eyes were opened and they recognized Christ in the bread. Do we properly prepare ourselves so that our eyes can be opened when we meet Him in the Eucharist or do we show up on Sunday, say a few prayers, receive communion and leave, having fulfilled our “obligation”?

- ***Receiving Christ Worthily***

Paul reminded the early Christians at Corinth of the gift given to mankind by Christ. He also warned them that they needed to prepare themselves to receive Christ. He says that “whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily ***will have to answer*** for the body and blood of the Lord?” According to Paul, we need to receive Him “worthily.” What does that mean? Before receiving communion, we humbly state that we “are not worthy” to receive Him. So how can we receive “worthily” if we are not “worthy?” Paul told them that before receiving they needed to perform an examination of conscience.

Paul did not tell them they needed to be perfect before receiving. Paul's stark warning implies that we should come to the Eucharist making a good effort to work toward holiness. An examination of conscience implies comparison. First we compare ourselves to Christ and how he lived his life (*wwjd*). Then we compare our progress on the path to holiness since we last received. Do you do this before receiving?

We should come to Christ with a pure heart, but if that is not possible, we should come to Him with a repentant heart determined to work toward being more like Him. You can understand the concept by thinking of how things with which we are familiar combine. If you pour milk into a glass with milk, you have pure milk. The two substances are the same. The union is easy and the end result is perfect. If you place flour, eggs, and butter in a bowl and start mixing, it takes a bit of effort to combine and form those elements into a cohesive substance. Moreover, the end result is something different—not like any of the original substances. When we join with God, we want the end result to be like HIM not like US or something less perfect than what God is. Therefore, we must work to become like Christ so that a perfect union can be formed. Just as oil and water do not mix, so too, is it difficult, if not impossible for our sinful nature to unite with God's perfect nature. If we are suffering under a mortal sin, we need to go to confession and be reconciled with God before inviting Him back to us. When we are in a state of mortal sin, union with God is impossible. It is like adding water to hot oil in a frying pan. They just cannot and do not mix! God asks us to become Christ so that we can be in union with Him—so that Christ can live in us and we in Him. He loves us dearly and wants to be in union with us.

- ***Additional Requests***

Christ asked us to see Him in the bread and to ***remember***. Every time we see the Eucharist, we remember the sacrifice He made for us. We should also remember that he asked us to love others as he loved us—sacrificially. We are to give of ourselves, just as he gave of himself for us. (John 14:34, 15:12). He asks us to let him “live” in us. “Living” implies more than just “existing.” Accepting Christ into our life (our body) should indicate an agreement on our part to let him live, act and speak through us in any way he sees fit. “We are God's co-workers.” (1 Corinth. 3:9) We are asked to allow Christ to work through us to transform the world.

Finally, when we receive, we become One with Christ along with the other members of the community of faith who share in the Eucharist. In addition to making ourselves “right” with God before receiving, we also need to make ourselves “right” with all the other parts of the One Body. As a sign that we are reconciled to our neighbors and ready to join with them in harmony, we offer them the sign of peace before we all approach the Lord's table together.

Conclusion

The fact that Christ is really present in the Eucharist has (or should have) major significance for each of his followers. It means that when we go to mass on Sunday, we go to meet our God directly. He stands before us as we stand before the table of the Lord. God has gone to great lengths to again be present to us here on earth. He comes to

us with his perfect unconditional and sacrificial love. At the same time, He asks us to come to Him properly prepared so that we can unite with Him and other members of the One Body. He asks us to take him with us into the world when we leave the church on Sunday. He asks us to allow ourselves to be transformed and to help Him transform the world. When He comes to live in us through the Eucharist, we once again share in God's divinity.

Sharing Questions:

Time allowed: 10 minutes

1. If you were listening to Christ during the Bread of Life Discourse, how do you think you would have reacted? Which do you find easier to accept: 1) that He would ask us to eat his actual flesh and blood as we know flesh and blood to exist or 2) that He would asked us to believe and understand that when we consume the bread and wine, we are chewing Christ.
2. In the Old Testament, God appeared in a bush that was burning but not consumed; he appeared in a cloud that hovered over the meeting tent of the Israelites; and He appeared in the form of a column of cloud by day and a column of fire by night to lead the Israelites. Do you have any reason to disbelieve the Old Testament witnesses to these events? Do you doubt that God can come to us in any form He wants? Do you doubt that Christ could physically appear right now in our midst if He chose to do so?
3. How would you feel if Christ appeared before us in this room today? What would be your reaction? Is that the way you feel on Sunday when you receive the Eucharist? If not, why not?
4. If God were physically visible to you, lived with you and walked with you every day, do you think your behavior would change? Would having God visibly walking in your midst make you feel uncomfortable?
5. Do you think about Christ's sacrifice during the mass and what that implies for you? Name one specific thing that Christ is asking you to sacrifice so that you can be with him fully now?
6. The disciples on the road to Emmaus only recognized Christ after they were prepared. If you do not recognize Christ's presence, is it possible you may need to prepare a bit more diligently? How often do you read Scripture on your own? How often do you study it? How often do you discuss it with others in an attempt to understand it better?
7. Do you receive God in an acceptable state of grace? Do you conduct a meaningful self examination before receiving? Do you think everyone does? How often do you avail yourself of the sacrament of penance in preparation to join with God. Do you encourage your family members to go to confession?

8. Do you allow Christ to “live” in you or do you stifle him with the way you act during the week and the way you treat others? If Christ were to come live with you today, what kind of a rating would he give you from one to five stars, with 5 being the highest? What do you need to do to be a 5-Star dwelling?

Examination of Conscience

Time allowed: 2 minutes

What might a proper examination of conscience look like? Read the following as if you had authored the words. Reflect silently for a few moments on how you would answer the questions:

In a moment, as unworthy as I am, I will be receiving my God into my body. Are my mind, heart and soul acceptable to receive Him today? He will be truly present with me in every way. How fortunate to have a God who loves me so much and pursues me despite the way I continue to hurt Him with the choices I make. He has asked me to become more like him. Have my acts over the last week made me more like God-- more loving, more forgiving, more kind, more just? He has asked me to sacrifice all of those things which take me farther away from him. Have I done that? When I receive, not only does Christ become one with me, but I become one with Christ. When others look at me, do they see Christ? I also become part of the One Body, along with all the others who partake of his body and blood. He has asked me to care for his other children whom he also loves and for whom he also died. He asks me to forgive others as I want Him to forgive me. He has asked me to care for all parts of the One Body. Have I done that this week? Did I allow the Eucharist received last Sunday to transform me as Christ asks?

Homework: This week, prepare your own personal examination of conscience and use it for the next month as you reflect before receiving communion.

Closing Prayer: To be given by Priest or leader.

Linda A. Weaver ©2004
MissFire2003@aol.com
312.320.9916

Appendix of Scripture Passages

Bread of Life Discourse: (John 6: 32-69)

Imagine it is a sunny day and you are sitting with the other disciples listening to Jesus.
(F- facilitator, N- narrator, R- reader)

N: So Jesus said to them,

F: "Amen, amen, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

N: So they said to him,

R: "Sir, give us this bread always."

N: Jesus said to them,

"I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst. But I told you that although you have seen (me), you do not believe. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and I will not reject anyone who comes to me, because I came down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me. And this is the will of the one who sent me, that I should not lose anything of what he gave me, but that I should raise it (on) the last day. **For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have eternal life, and I shall raise him (on) the last day."**

N: The Jews murmured about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven," and they said,

R: "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph? Do we not know his father and mother? Then how can he say, 'I have come down from heaven'?"

N: Jesus answered and said to them,

F: "Stop murmuring among yourselves. No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him, and I will raise him on the last day. It is written in the prophets: 'They shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. **I am the bread of life.** Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died; **this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world."**

N: The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying,

R: "How can this man give us (his) flesh to eat?"

N: Jesus said to them,

- F: "Amen, amen, I say to you, **unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life,** and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. **Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.** Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, **so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me.** This is the bread that came down from heaven. **Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever.**"
- N: These things he said while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum. Then many of his disciples who were listening said,
- R: "This saying is hard; who can accept it?"
- N: Since Jesus knew that his disciples were murmuring about this, he said to them,
- F: "Does this shock you? What if you were to see the son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life, while the flesh is of no avail. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe."
- N: As a result of this, many [of] his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him. (John 6: 32-69)

N: The Word of the Lord

* * *

The Last Supper: Institution of the Sacrament

Matthew 26:26-30

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Mark 14:22-26

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.

Luke 22:17-20

Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.

On the Road to Emmaus: (Luke 24:25-37)

In response to their lamentations about all that had happened, Jesus said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?"

Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures. As they approached the village to which they were going, he gave the impression that he was going on farther. But they urged him, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. *And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight.* Then they said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning (within us) while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?"

So they set out at once and returned to Jerusalem where they found gathered together the eleven and those with them who were saying, "The Lord has truly been raised and has appeared to Simon!" Then the two recounted what had taken place on the way and how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread. While they were still speaking about this, he stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." (Luke 24:25-37)

* * *

Paul's warning to the Corinthians about receiving worthily: (1 Corinth. 11:23-29)

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.

Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. A person should examine himself, and so eat the bread and drink the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself. (1 Corinth. 11:23-29)

Answer to Pretest:

According to “Beginning Apologetics 3, How to Explain and Defend the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist,” a 1992 Gallup poll indicates that the majority of Catholics are confused in their beliefs about Christ’s presence in the Eucharist:

- 30% believe they are really and truly receiving the body, blood, soul and divinity (eternal life) of the Lord Jesus Christ under the appearance of bread and wine.
- 29% believe they are receiving bread and wine that symbolize the body and blood of Jesus;
- 10% believe they are receiving bread and wine in which Jesus is also present.
- 24% believe they are receiving what has become Christ’s body and blood because you personally believe. They don’t know what that really signifies or why they should or do believe it.

“Only the first option represents true Catholic teaching. The other options represent various Protestant beliefs. In other words, nearly 70 percent of all Catholics in this country hold erroneous beliefs about Christ’s presence in the Eucharist!

The problem increases dramatically among younger Catholics. According to a more recent New York Times and CBS poll of Catholics *who attend Mass regularly*, the number who accept the Real Presence decreases as age decreases:

- Age 65 and over: 51% believe in the Real Presence
- Age 45-64: 37% believe in the Real Presence
- Age 30-44 28% believe in the Real Presence
- Age 18-29: 17% believe in the Real Presence

70% of this last age group (18-29) believes that the Eucharist is just a symbol. What does this say about how we are passing the faith on to our children? Only one teenager in six accepts the fundamental doctrine of the Real Presence! This loss of faith among young and old alike explains the tremendous lack of devotion, reverence, and appreciation so many Catholics show towards Holy Communion.”

The above is an excerpt from “Beginning Apologetics 3, How to Explain and Defend the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist,” by Father Frank Chacon and Jim Burnham, San Juan Catholic Seminars, 1999.