



How Catholics Pray



Section 4:

The Eucharist



To Luke E. Hart, exemplary evangelizer and Supreme Knight from 1953-64, the Knights of Columbus dedicates this Series with affection and gratitude.

*The Knights of Columbus presents
The Luke E. Hart Series
Basic Elements of the Catholic Faith*

THE EUCHARIST

PART TWO • SECTION FOUR OF
CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY

*What does a Catholic believe?
How does a Catholic worship?
How does a Catholic live?*

Based on the
Catechism of the Catholic Church

*by
Peter Kreeft*

General Editor
Father John A. Farren, O.P.
Catholic Information Service
Knights of Columbus Supreme Council

Nil obstat
Reverend Alfred McBride, O.Praem.

Imprimatur
Bernard Cardinal Law
December 19, 2000

The *Nil Obstat* and *Imprimatur* are official declarations that a book or pamphlet is free of doctrinal or moral error. No implication is contained therein that those who have granted the *Nil Obstat* and *Imprimatur* agree with the contents, opinions or statements expressed.

Copyright © 2001-2021 by Knights of Columbus Supreme Council. All rights reserved.

English translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Modifications from the Editio Typica* copyright © 1997, United States Catholic Conference, Inc. – Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

Scripture quotations contained herein are adapted from the *Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, copyright © 1946, 1952, 1971, and the *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, copyright © 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, and are used by permission. All rights reserved.

Excerpts from the *Code of Canon Law*, Latin/English edition, are used with permission, copyright © 1983 Canon Law Society of America, Washington, D.C.

Citations of official Church documents from Neuner, Josef, SJ, and Dupuis, Jacques, SJ, eds., *The Christian Faith: Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, 5th ed. (New York: Alba House, 1992). Used with permission.

Excerpts from *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, New Revised Edition edited by Austin Flannery, OP, copyright © 1992, Costello Publishing Company, Inc., Northport, NY, are used by permission of the publisher, all rights reserved. No part of these excerpts may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means – electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without express permission of Costello Publishing Company.

Cover: Juan de Juanes (ca. 1510-1579), *The Savior*. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain. © Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. Write:

Catholic Information Service
Knights of Columbus Supreme Council
PO Box 1971
New Haven CT 06521-1971
www.kofc.org/cis
cis@kofc.org
203-752-4267
800-735-4605 Fax

Printed in the United States of America

A WORD ABOUT THIS SERIES

This booklet is one of a series of 30 that offer a colloquial expression of major elements of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Pope John Paul II, under whose authority the *Catechism* was first released in 1992, urged such versions so that each people and each culture can appropriate its content as its own.

The booklets are not a substitute for the *Catechism*, but are offered only to make its contents more accessible. The series is at times poetic, colloquial, playful, and imaginative; at all times it strives to be faithful to the Faith.

The Catholic Information Service recommends reading at least one Hart series booklet each month to gain a deeper, more mature understanding of the Faith.

PART II: HOW CATHOLICS PRAY (WORSHIP)

SECTION 4: THE EUCHARIST

1. *Its importance*

The sacraments are the crown of the Catholic Faith, and the Eucharist is the crown of the sacraments. Why are the sacraments the crown of the Faith? Because the God we *believe* in the Creeds and *obey* in the Commandments, we *meet* and *receive* in the sacraments. Why is the Eucharist the greatest of the sacraments? Because “... in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself...”¹³⁵ (CCC 1324).

The *Catechism* says that “the Eucharist is ‘the source and summit of the Christian life’”¹³⁴ (CCC 1324). Why? Because the Eucharist is both the origin and the end of that supernatural reality which is the point of everything in the Catholic religion. That reality, called by many different names, such as “salvation,” “eternal life,” “sanctifying grace,” “the Kingdom of God,” and “the Christian life,” consists in *participating in the very life of God*.

The Eucharist is the *origin* of that because it does more than merely symbolize that: it actually *gives* us that.

*CCC= *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

And the Eucharist is the *culmination* of that, of the Christian life, of man's life in relation to God, because it is the culmination of God's life in relation to man, at least while we are on this earth. It is both the greatest thing God does to man and the greatest thing man does to God. "The Eucharist... is the culmination both of God's action sanctifying the world in Christ and of the worship men offer to Christ and through him to the Father in the Holy Spirit"¹³⁶ (CCC 1325).

2. *Its relation to the creation of the universe*

Let us look at the Eucharist in its most fundamental context. Why did God institute it? To answer this question, we must begin where the whole *Catechism* begins, which is where all reality begins.

"God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness, freely created man to make him share his own blessed life. For this reason...God draws close to man" (CCC 1). Out of the pure and unselfish love that is his very essence, God created the universe so that we could exist and enjoy his love forever. To this end, he revealed himself to the whole world through a "Chosen People," established a covenant of love with them, revealed his law to them, sent them prophets, and, finally, fulfilled his covenant by sending his eternal Son, who was born, lived, died, resurrected, and ascended so that we could be saved from sin and united to God. Jesus Christ the Son of God continued his presence and work among us by appointing apostles and establishing the Church, his "Mystical Body." God did all this for one reason: for the love-union with us that is achieved most perfectly in this life in the Eucharist.

The universe is a gigantic cathedral. We can understand the point and purpose of the universe by looking at a cathedral. Every detail in the great medieval cathedrals was for the Eucharist.

They were built first of all for the Eucharist: to celebrate the Eucharist and to house the Eucharist. Similarly, the whole Church on earth is the “House of Bread” (the meaning of “Bethlehem”) that Christ established for the Eucharist. This is his love’s ultimate aim, for love’s aim is union, and the Eucharist is the most intimate union between us and Christ that exists in this world. God created the universe for this purpose, for this love-union. He made the universe to house the Church, and he made the Church to house the Eucharist; so it is true to say that the ultimate reason, in this life, for the creation of the universe is the Eucharist.

3. *Its hiddenness*

In the Eucharist God is both *truly present* and hidden. Not only in the Eucharist, but in all of life, God both reveals himself and at the same time conceals himself. Why?

To elicit our free response of faith and trust. Even human lovers do not *prove* themselves to each other, or demand guarantees. He gives just enough light for lovers, who can find him when they seek him, but not so much as to compel non-lovers and non-seekers to find him against their will. The lover respects the beloved’s freedom.

The greatness of the Eucharist is known only to faith, not to the feelings or the senses or the sciences. Its *being* (reality) is far greater than its *seeming* (appearances). “The presence of Christ’s true body and blood in this sacrament cannot be detected by sense, nor understanding, but by faith alone, which rests upon divine authority” (Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, 75, 1), not on human experience.

Many “once in a lifetime” experiences in this world *feel* more heavenly to us than what happens every Sunday: our reception of the Eucharist. Many experiences move us to tears of joy and

remain in our memory throughout our lives: births, deaths, weddings, honeymoons, reunions, sunsets, even sports triumphs. In contrast, most of us usually feel very little when we receive the very Body of God incarnate, even though this reality is infinitely greater than anything else in our lives.

This is normal, and God-ordained, for a reason. God does not give us heavenly feelings when we receive the Eucharist for the same reason he does not give us heavenly *sights*. We neither feel nor see Christ as he really is so that faith, not feelings or seeings, can be exercised, trained, and emerge triumphant.

The Eucharist doesn't look like Christ; thus, it tests not only our sight but also our faith: do we believe God's word or our human senses?

"Sight, taste, and touch in Thee are each deceived;
The ear alone most safely is believed:
I believe all the Son of God has spoken:
Than Truth's own word there is no truer token"
(*Adoro Te Devote*, Saint Thomas Aquinas).

Just as the Eucharist doesn't *look* like Christ to our outer senses, it doesn't *feel* like Christ to our emotions. Here again it tests our faith. A faith that does not go beyond human feelings is not faith at all, just as a faith that does not go beyond seeing – a faith that says, "seeing is believing" – is no faith at all.

Sometimes God sends us special graces that can be felt when we receive the Eucharist. But he usually does not – not because he is stingy and unloving but because he knows exactly what each of us needs, and most of us need to exercise more faith, not to "hanker after sensible consolations," as the saints put it. Feelings are like sweets. They are not our food. Christ himself is our food. Feelings are our jelly, Christ is our bread. We must learn to continually turn our faith around and focus not on

ourselves and our own feelings but on Christ, who is faith's proper object.

4. *Its names*

"The inexhaustible richness of this sacrament is expressed in the different names we give it. Each name evokes certain aspects of it. It is called:

- [1] "Eucharist, [thanksgiving] because it is an action of thanksgiving to God" (CCC 1328). It is a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving for the work of creation. In the Eucharistic sacrifice the whole work of creation loved by God is presented to the Father, all that God has made good, beautiful, and just in creation and in humanity. In the little round Host is offered up the entire universe.
- [2] "The Lord's Supper, [1] because of its connection with the supper which the Lord took with his disciples on the eve of his Passion [when he instituted the Eucharist – 1 Corinthians 11:20] and [b] because it anticipates the wedding feast of the Lamb in the heavenly Jerusalem"¹⁴³ (Revelation 19:9)....
- [3] "The *Breaking of Bread*, because...it is this expression that the first Christians will use (Acts 2:42)...;¹⁴⁷ by doing so they signified that all who eat the one broken bread, Christ, enter into communion with him ['You are what you eat'] and form but one body in him"¹⁴⁸ [1 Corinthians 10:16-17]
- [4] "The *Eucharistic assembly (synaxis)*, because the Eucharist is celebrated amid the assembly of the faithful, the visible expression of the Church."¹⁴⁹
- [5] "The *memorial* of the Lord's Passion and Resurrection."

- [6] “The *Holy Sacrifice*, because it makes present the one sacrifice of Christ....
- [7] “The *Holy and Divine Liturgy*
- [8] “The *Sacred Mysteries*
- [9] “The *Most Blessed Sacrament*
- [10] “*Holy Communion*
- [11] “The *bread of angels*,
- [12] “*bread from heaven*,
- [13] “*medicine of immortality*,¹⁵³
- [14] “*viaticum*,
- [15] “*Holy Mass*” (CCC 1329-32).

5. *Its origin*

The Eucharist rests on the authority of Christ, who instituted it (Luke 22:14-20). “Faithful to the Lord’s command the Church continues to do...what he did...” (CCC 1333). Those who reject what the Church teaches and does, whether they know it or not, really reject what Christ teaches and does; for the Church’s creed, cult, and code – her theology, liturgy, and morality – are all in his name, who said to the apostles, “he who hears you, hears me” (Luke 10:16).

The Eucharist has always been controversial and divisive, as was Christ. This is supremely ironic, for the Eucharist is the sacrament of *unity* with Christ and, through him (the “one bread”), with his whole Body the Church (the “one body”). Yet, like Christ himself, the Eucharist divided and offended men from the beginning. “The first announcement of the Eucharist divided the disciples, just as the announcement of the Passion scandalized them: ‘This is a hard saying: who can listen to it?’¹⁶⁰ [John 6:60]. The Eucharist and the Cross are stumbling blocks. It is the same mystery, and it never ceases to be an occasion of division. ‘Will

you also go away?’¹⁶¹ [John 6:67]: the Lord’s question echoes through the ages, as a loving invitation to discover that only he has ‘the words of eternal life’¹⁶² [John 6:68] *and that to receive in faith the gift of his Eucharist is to receive the Lord himself*” (CCC 1336).

6. *Its history*

“From the beginning the Church has been faithful to the Lord’s command. Of the Church of Jerusalem it is written: ‘They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers....’”¹⁶⁸ (Acts 2:42; CCC 1342).

“From that time on down to our own day the celebration of the Eucharist has been continued, so that today we encounter it everywhere in the Church with the same fundamental structure. It remains the center of the Church’s life” (CCC 1343).

“If from the beginning Christians have celebrated the Eucharist, and in a form whose substance has not changed despite the great diversity of times and liturgies, it is because we know ourselves to be bound by the command the Lord gave on the eve of his Passion: ‘Do this in remembrance of me’”¹⁸³ (1 Corinthians 11:24-25; CCC 1356).

7. *Its essential elements*

“The liturgy of the Eucharist unfolds according to a fundamental structure which has been preserved throughout the centuries down to our own day. It displays two great parts that form a fundamental unity:... the liturgy of the Word [and] the liturgy of the Eucharist....” (CCC 1346)

Within these two, the *Catechism* more specifically mentions four parts: “The Eucharistic celebration always includes: [a] the proclamation of the Word of God; [b] thanksgiving to God the

Father for all his benefits, above all the gift of his Son; [c] the consecration of bread and wine; and [d] participation in the liturgical banquet by receiving the Lord's body and blood. These elements constitute one single act of worship" (CCC 1408).

8. *Its participants: who is part of the Eucharistic celebration?*

- 1) God the Father, to whom the sacrifice of Christ the Son is offered, and who accepts it.
- 2) "At its head is Christ himself, the principal agent of the Eucharist" (CCC 1348). Christ gave the Eucharist (himself) to us for our salvation so that we could offer it with him to God the Father for our salvation.
- 3) The Holy Spirit, who energizes it.
- 4) Christ's whole Body, the Church. "*The whole Church is united with the offering...*" (CCC 1369).

"To the offering of Christ are united not only the members still here on earth, but also those already *in the glory of heaven*" (CCC 1370). And "the Eucharistic sacrifice is also offered for *the faithful departed* who 'have died in Christ, but are not yet wholly purified'..."¹⁹³ (CCC 1371). So in the Eucharist are united: the Church Militant on earth; the Church Triumphant in Heaven; and the Church Suffering in Purgatory.

And the Church on earth includes both clergy and laity, who are equally necessary but with different roles: "It is in representing him [Christ] that the bishop or priest, acting *in the person of Christ the head...* presides over the assembly..." (CCC 1348). But "[a]ll have their active parts to play...readers, those who bring up the offerings, those who give communion, and the whole people whose 'Amen' manifests their participation" (CCC 1348).

5) In the Eucharist the whole creation is presented to God through man, the mediator and priest of all creation, just as all

mankind is presented to God through Christ, the mediator and High Priest of man. As Christ is priest for all men, man is priest for all creation. Christ restores man to the priestly role given to Adam by God and perverted by sin. “In the Eucharistic sacrifice the whole of creation, loved by God, is presented to the Father...” (CCC 1359). The Eucharist is cosmic.

Every thing in the universe and every thing in our lives can be offered and transformed in the Eucharist. We can bring our whole selves to the Eucharist and lay them down on the altar – all of them, nothing held back. For the Eucharist is Christ, and whatever we give to Christ, we get back perfected and transformed. To the extent that we give ourselves up, to that extent we get our true, Christ-transformed selves back. Nothing in our lives should remain outside the Eucharist. “The lives of the faithful, their praise, sufferings, prayer, and work, are united with those of Christ and with his total offering, and so acquire a new value” (CCC 1368).

9. *Its identity: Christ really present*

As a sacrament, the Eucharist has a double aspect: it is both a sign and the reality signified by it, both a *remembering* of the past and a *making-really-present*: “When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, she commemorates Christ’s Passover, and it is made present: the sacrifice Christ offered once for all on the Cross remains ever present”¹⁸⁵ (CCC 1364).

Here the three meanings of “present” come together: Christ in the Eucharist is 1) present, not absent, but really *here*; 2) present, not past, but happening *now*; and 3) presented as a gift (a “present”), really given; offered, not withheld.

Christ is “present in many ways to his Church” (CCC 1373) but “[t]he mode of Christ’s presence under the Eucharistic species [forms, appearances] is unique. It raises the Eucharist above all

the sacraments as ‘the perfection of the spiritual life and the end to which all the sacraments tend’²⁰¹ [Saint Thomas Aquinas]. In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist ‘the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, the whole Christ is *truly, really, and substantially* contained.’²⁰² ‘...[I]t is presence in the fullest sense... Christ, God and man, makes himself wholly and entirely present’²⁰³ (CCC 1374).

10. *Its relation to the Cross*

Christ offered himself once for all on the Cross. He said, “It is finished!” (John 19:30). The Eucharist does not *repeat* this sacrifice, but *re-presents* it to the Father. The sacrifice that was *accomplished* on Calvary is *offered* again in each Mass. It can be offered now only *because* “it is finished,” perfected, “a perfect offering.”

“In the Eucharist Christ gives us the very body which he gave up for us on the Cross, the very blood which he ‘poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’”¹⁸⁸ (Matthew 26:28; CCC 1365). We know this is true because Christ said so: “This is my body which is given for you,” and “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:19-20).

The Eucharist is not merely an *image* or symbol of Christ’s sacrifice; it is Christ’s sacrifice. “The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are *one single sacrifice*: ‘The victim is one and the same: the same [Christ] now offers through the ministry of priests, who then offered himself on the Cross; only the manner of offering is different.’ ‘...in the Mass, the same Christ who offered himself once in a bloody manner on the altar of the Cross is contained and is offered in an unbloody manner....’”¹⁹⁰ (CCC 1367)

Christ on the Cross of Calvary 2000 years ago and Christ on the altar of your local Catholic church today are *the same person*.

The Christ we meet today in the Mass is the Christ of history, for he is “Jesus Christ; the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). Christ is not divided by time.

Christ is also not divided by space or limited by matter. “Christ is present whole and entire in each of the species [consecrated bread and wine] and whole and entire in each of their parts, in such a way that the breaking of the bread does not divide Christ”²⁰⁷ (CCC 1377).

The practical consequence of this fact is that we can and should have the same attitude to the Eucharist that we would have to Christ himself if he were visibly present as he was to his Apostles: the same attitude we would have had if we were standing under the Cross as he was offering his life blood for our salvation.

And what attitude is that? It is accurately summed up by von Balthasar: “Everything that I am (insofar as I am anything more on this earth than a fugitive figure without hope, all of whose illusions are rendered worthless by death), I am solely by virtue of Christ’s death, which opens up to me the possibility of fulfillment in God. I blossom on the grave of God who died for me” (*The Moment of Christian Witness*, pp. 26-27).

11. *Transubstantiation*

God performs a miracle in each Mass. In fact, there has never been a miracle as great as this anywhere on earth for 2000 years. And it happens in every Catholic church every day!

“It is not man that causes the things offered to become the Body and Blood of Christ, but he who was crucified for us, Christ himself. The priest, in the role of Christ, pronounces these words, but their power and grace are God’s. This is my body, he says. This word transforms the things offered”²⁰⁴ (Saint John Chrysostom; CCC 1375). “This change is not like natural changes, but is

entirely supernatural, and effected by God's power alone" (Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, 75, 4).

Such a miracle is beyond the power of man, but not beyond the power of God. "...Could not Christ's word, which can make from nothing what did not exist [Genesis 1], change existing things into what they were not before?..."²⁰⁵ (Saint Ambrose; CCC 1375).

Reason says it is *possible*. But faith says it is actual. Faith prays, with Saint Thomas Aquinas:

"Godhead here in hiding, [W]hom I do adore,
Masked by these bare shadows, shape
and nothing more,
See, Lord, at thy service low lies here a heart
Lost, all lost in wonder at the God thou art.

"Seeing, touching, tasting are in thee deceived;
How says trusty hearing? that shall be believed.
What God's Son has told me, take for truth I do:
Truth himself speaks truly or there's nothing true"²¹³
(CCC 1381).

Why do Catholics believe this astonishing fact – that what seems to all human perception to be ordinary bread and wine is in fact the body and blood of God incarnate? Because Christ said so! "Because Christ our Redeemer said that it was truly his body that he was offering under the species of bread, it has always been the conviction of the Church of God, and this holy Council now declares again, that by the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change in the whole substance [being, essence] of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called transubstantiation"²⁰⁶ (Council of Trent in the sixteenth century; CCC 1376).

“The Eucharistic presence of Christ begins at the moment of the consecration and endures as long as the Eucharistic species subsist....”²⁰⁷ (CCC 1377). Since they remain for about 15 minutes in the human body after being swallowed, we should spend this time in prayer, thanksgiving, and adoration, and not quickly turn to worldly occupations.

12. *Worship of the Eucharist*

“The Catholic Church has always offered and still offers to the sacrament of the Eucharist... adoration, not only during Mass, but also outside of it, reserving the consecrated hosts with the utmost care, exposing them to the solemn veneration of the faithful and carrying them in procession”²⁰⁸ (CCC 1378).

If the doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist were not true, this would be the most monstrous idolatry: bowing to bread and worshipping wine! And if it *is* true, then *not* to adore is equally monstrous.

Eucharistic adoration has transformed many lives and parishes. Pope John Paul II has said, “The Church and the world have a great need for Eucharistic worship. Jesus awaits us in this sacrament of love. Let us not refuse the time to go to meet him in adoration, in contemplation full of faith, and open to making amends for the serious offenses and crimes of the world. Let our adoration never cease”²¹¹ (CCC 1380).

13. *The tabernacle*

The most sacred object in the history of the Chosen People was the Ark of the Covenant, kept in the “holy of holies” in the Temple. It was a golden box containing the actual stone tablets on which the finger of God wrote the Ten Commandments, the heart of the Old Covenant. The Ark was a foreshadowing of the tabernacle – the golden box behind the altar in which the

consecrated Host is kept – for this now contains the Eucharistic Christ, the heart of the New Covenant.

“The tabernacle was first intended for the reservation of the Eucharist in a worthy place so that it could be brought to the sick and those absent, outside of Mass. As faith in the real presence of Christ in his Eucharist deepened, the Church became conscious of the meaning of silent adoration of the Lord present under the Eucharistic species. It is for this reason that the tabernacle should be located in an especially worthy place in the church and should be constructed in such a way that it emphasizes and manifests the truth of the real presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament” (CCC 1379). It is the Church’s “holy of holies,” but now open to all since Christ’s death tore apart the temple veil that separated man from God (Matthew 27:51).

Now, through our receiving Holy Communion, Christ actually lives in *another* tabernacle: our souls, and even our bodies, which Scripture calls God’s tabernacles, or temples (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 6:19-20).

14. Eucharist as sacrifice and Eucharist as meal

We are said to “offer” the Eucharist, for it is a sacrifice: the sacrifice Christ made of himself on the Cross. We are also said to “partake” of the Eucharist, for it is our spiritual food. Saint Thomas explains:

“The Church’s sacraments are ordained for helping man in the spiritual life. But the spiritual life is analogous to the corporeal, since corporeal things bear a resemblance to the spiritual. Now it is clear that just as [1] generation is required for corporeal life, since thereby man receives life, and [2] growth, whereby man is brought to maturity: so likewise [3] food is required for the preservation of life. Consequently, just as for the spiritual life there had to be Baptism, which is spiritual

generation; and Confirmation, which is spiritual growth, so there needed to be the sacrament of the Eucharist, which is spiritual food” (*Summa Theologiae* III, 73, 1).

These two aspects of the Eucharist are inseparable. And since it is a banquet meal as well as a sacrifice, the place where it is celebrated is a table as well as an altar. “*The altar*, around which the Church is gathered in the celebration of the Eucharist, represents the two aspects of the same mystery: the altar of the sacrifice and the table of the Lord” (CCC 1383).

The two aspects depend on each other: 1) it is a sacrifice so that it can be a banquet, and 2) it is a banquet *only because* it is a sacrifice:

- 1) “The Mass is at the same time, and inseparably, the sacrificial memorial in which the sacrifice of the cross is perpetuated and the sacred banquet of communion with the Lord’s body and blood. But the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice is wholly directed toward the intimate union of the faithful with Christ through communion” (CCC 1382).
- 2) But it is a banquet because it is a sacrifice, just as any earthly food can be eaten only because it is first killed and “offered” to eat. Whether animal or vegetable, its natural life is ended, given up to nourish the life of the one who eats it. “My life for yours” – this is the law of nature and of grace. It is even the life of glory. Self-donation, the ecstatic coming-out-of-the-self and giving of the self in love, is the essence of our eternal life in Heaven, because that is our sharing in the very inner life of the Trinity.

The “banquet” aspect of the Eucharist is not merely human comradeship, or “fellowship,” or “community,” great as those things are. It is intimate personal union with Jesus Christ, and thus – only

because of that, through *him* – with all Christians, not now merely on a human level but a divine level (see 2 Corinthians 5:16-17), as members – organs – of his Mystical Body, the body that is made by our common union (comm-union) in his Eucharistic Body.

15. *Who may receive the Eucharist?*

Christ intended this holy banquet for everyone, but not everyone is ready (see Christ's parables of the wise and foolish virgins and of the man with no wedding garment in Matthew 25:1-13 and 22:1-14). The *Catechism* specifies four qualifications.

- 1) We must be prepared. There are certainly occasions when one should *not* receive the Eucharist, and Catholics should not be encouraged to receive it as a matter of course, without faith, understanding, or examination of conscience. “[W]e must *prepare ourselves* for so great and holy a moment” (CCC 1385), as we would prepare ourselves deeply and seriously for a wedding (see 1 Corinthians 11:23-29). It is not to be treated trivially, like any other moment. “Bodily demeanor (gestures, clothing) ought to convey the respect, solemnity, and joy of this moment...” (CCC 1387). The sense of the sacred is expressed by distinctions, by differences: this is not *ordinary*, in fact this is not like anything else in the world.

This does *not* mean we must judge ourselves to be holy before we can receive. Just the opposite: the precondition is not worthiness but *unworthiness* and humble acknowledgement of it: “Before so great a sacrament; the faithful can only echo humbly and with ardent faith the words of the Centurion... ‘Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul will be healed’”²¹⁹ (CCC 1386). The Church’s liturgy tells us to say (and to mean) those words before we receive Communion.

- 2) We must be in a *state of grace*. “Anyone conscious of a grave sin must receive the sacrament of Reconciliation before coming to communion” (CCC 1385).
- 3) We must *fast*. “To prepare for worthy reception of this sacrament, the faithful should observe the fast required in their Church”²²⁰ (CCC 1387). In the Latin Church, this is fasting from all food and drink except medications and water for at least one hour before receiving communion.
- 4) We must be in communion with the Catholic Church to receive her Eucharist. At present, intercommunion with non-Catholic Christians in the Eucharist is not possible because union in doctrine and authority is, sadly, lacking. For the Church to offer communion to those who do not believe what she teaches or accept her authority would be a false sign, a lie of “body language.” For this sacrament signifies oneness: union with Christ and with his Church (Saint Paul says we are “one body” because we all partake of this “one bread”). We may not *signify* Church unity when it does not exist; that would make the sign a countersign.

This does not mean that all other churches’ celebrations of the Eucharist are invalid. The Orthodox churches, “‘though separated from us, yet possess true sacraments’” (CCC 1399). “A certain communion *in sacris* [in the sacred things of the Church], and so in the Eucharist, ‘given suitable circumstances and the approval of Church authority, is not merely possible but is encouraged’”²³⁸ (CCC 1399).

“Ecclesial communities derived from the Reformation and separated from the Catholic Church, ‘have not preserved the proper reality of the Eucharistic mystery in its fullness, especially because of the absence of the sacrament of Holy Orders.’²³⁹ It is

for this reason that, for the Catholic Church, Eucharistic intercommunion with these communities is not possible” (CCC 1400). “Only validly ordained priests can preside at the Eucharist and consecrate the bread and the wine so that they become the Body and Blood of the Lord” (CCC 1411). Protestants do not have priests who can consecrate the Eucharist, therefore they do not have the Eucharist – though they have Christ and salvation through faith, hope, and charity. They are Christians, but “separated brethren.”

“The more painful the experience of the divisions in the Church which break the common participation in the table of the Lord, the more urgent are our prayers to the Lord that the time of complete unity among all who believe in him may return” (CCC 1398). Especially in the years since Vatican II, Catholics have been urged by every Pope (and with great passion) to pray and work for reunion with our “separated brethren,” especially the Orthodox Churches. Pope John Paul II frequently refers to the two Churches, Western and Eastern, as the “two lungs” of the one Church.

16. *How often?*

“The Church obliges the faithful to take part in the Divine Liturgy on Sundays and feast days and, prepared by the sacrament of Reconciliation, to receive the Eucharist at least once a year, if possible during the Easter season.”²²⁴ But the Church strongly encourages the faithful to receive the holy Eucharist on Sundays and feast days, or more often still, even daily” (CCC 1389).

“It is in keeping with the very meaning of the Eucharist that the faithful, if they have the required dispositions, *receive communion each time* they participate in the Mass”²²² (CCC 1388).

For “[w]hat material food produces in our bodily life, Holy Communion wonderfully achieves in our spiritual life” (CCC

1392). “As bodily nourishment restores lost strength, so the Eucharist strengthens our charity, which tends to be weakened in daily life; and this living charity *wipes away venial sins*”²³¹ (CCC 1394). “...If, as often as his blood is poured out, it is poured for the forgiveness of sins, I should always receive it, so that it may always forgive my sins. Because I always sin, I should always have a remedy”²³⁰ (Saint Ambrose; CCC 1393).

17. Communion under the species {appearances} of bread alone?

“Since Christ is sacramentally present under each of the species, communion under the species of bread alone makes it possible to receive all the fruit of Eucharistic grace. For pastoral [practical] reasons this manner of receiving communion has been legitimately established as the most common form in the Latin rite. But ‘the sign of communion is more complete when given under both kinds [bread and wine], since in that form the sign of the Eucharistic meal appears more clearly.’²²⁵ This is the usual form of receiving communion in the Eastern rites” (CCC 1390). The explanation offered by Saint Thomas Aquinas as to why the bread and wine are consecrated and received separately helps our understanding here: “In...Christ’s Passion...the blood was separated from the body. And therefore in this sacrament, which is the memorial of our Lord’s Passion, the bread is received apart as the sacrament of the body, and the wine as the sacrament of the blood.”

18. Who can consecrate the Eucharist?

Only validly ordained priests can validly consecrate. This is a great privilege resulting from Holy Orders: ordination gives a mere man the instrumental power to change bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ!

“In the other sacraments the consecration of the matter consists only in a blessing.... But in this sacrament the

consecration of the matter consists in the miraculous change of the substance, which can be done only by God; hence the minister in performing this sacrament has no other act save the pronouncing of the words.... The forms of the other sacraments are pronounced in the person of the minister... as when it is said, 'I baptize thee,' or 'I confirm thee'... but the form of this sacrament is pronounced as if Christ were speaking in person, so that it is given to be understood that the minister does nothing in perfecting this sacrament except to pronounce the words of Christ" (Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, 78, 1).

Therefore the consecration does not depend on the priest's piety. For "the priest consecrates this sacrament not by his own power but as minister of Christ, in whose person he consecrates this sacrament. But from the fact of being wicked he does not cease to be Christ's minister" (*Summa Theologiae* III, 82, 5).

19. *The effects of Communion*

- a) "*Holy Communion augments our union with Christ.* The principal fruit of receiving the Eucharist in Holy Communion is an intimate union with Jesus Christ. Indeed, the Lord said: 'He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him'²²⁶ [John 6:56]. Life in Christ has its foundation in the Eucharistic banquet" (CCC 1391).
- b) "*Holy Communion separates us from sin....* [T]he Eucharist cannot unite us to Christ without at the same time cleansing us from past sins and preserving us from future sins" (CCC 1393). "The more we share the life of Christ and progress in his friendship, the more difficult it is to break away from him by mortal sin" (CCC 1395).

- c) “...{T}he Eucharist makes the Church.... Communion renews, strengthens, and deepens this incorporation into the Church, already achieved by Baptism” (CCC 1396).

20. *The Eucharist and Heaven*

Though there will be no need for sacraments in Heaven, “the Eucharist is also an anticipation of the heavenly glory” (CCC 1402). For “[a]t the Last Supper the Lord himself directed his disciples’ attention toward the fulfillment of the Passover in the kingdom of God: ‘I tell you I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father’s kingdom’”²⁴³ (Matthew 26:29; cf. Luke 22:18; Mark 14:25; CCC 1403).

Saint Ignatius of Antioch called the Eucharist “the one bread that provides the medicine of immortality, the antidote for death, and the food that makes us live for ever in Jesus Christ”²⁴⁹ (CCC 1405). Christ himself said: “I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh” (John 6:51). Let your spirit sink like a diver into the bottomless depths of this saying – in fact, into the whole sixth chapter of Saint John’s Gospel – and you will begin to understand the Eucharist.

Notes from the Catechism in Order of Their Appearance in Quotations Used in this Section

¹³⁵ PO 5.

¹³⁴ LG 11.

¹³⁶ Congregation of Rites, Instruction, *Eucharisticum mysterium*, 6.

¹⁴³ Cf. 1 Cor 11:20; Rv 19:9.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7, 11.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. 1 Cor 10:16-17.

149 Cf. *1 Cor* 11:17-34.
 153 St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Eph.* 20, 2: SCh 10, 76.
 160 *Jn* 6:60.
 161 *Jn* 6:67.
 162 *Jn* 6:68.
 168 *Acts* 2:42, 46.
 183 *1 Cor* 11:24-25.
 193 Council of Trent (1562): DS 1743.
 185 Cf. *Heb* 7:25-27.
 201 St. Thomas Aquinas, *STb* III, 73, 3c.
 202 Council of Trent (1551): DS 1651.
 203 Paul VI, *MF* 39.
 188 *Mt* 26:28.
 190 Council of Trent (1562): DS 1742; cf. *Heb* 9:14, 27.
 207 Cf. Council of Trent: DS 1641.
 204 St. John Chrysostom, *Prod. Jud.* 1:6: PG 49, 380.
 205 St. Ambrose, *De myst.* 9, 50; 52: PL 16, 405-407.
 213 St. Thomas Aquinas (attr.), *Adoro te devote*; tr. Gerald Manley Hopkins.
 206 Council of Trent (1551): DS 1642; cf. *Mt* 26:26 ff.; *Mk* 14:22 ff.; *Lk* 22:19 ff.; *1 Cor* 11:24 ff.
 207 Cf. Council of Trent: DS 1641.
 208 Paul VI, *MF* 56.
 211 John Paul II, *Dominicae cenae*, 3.
 219 *Roman Missal*, response to the invitation to communion; cf. *Mt* 8:8.
 220 Cf. CIC, can. 919.
 238 *UR* 15 § 2; cf. CIC, can. 844 § 3.
 239 *UR* 22 § 3.
 224 Cf. *OE* 15; CIC, can. 920.
 222 Cf. CIC, can. 917; AAS 76 (1984) 746-747.
 231 Cf. Council of Trent (1551): DS 1638.
 230 St. Ambrose, *De Sacr.* 4, 6, 28: PL 16, 446; cf. *1 Cor* 11:26.
 225 GIRM 240.
 226 *Jn* 6:56.
 243 *Mt* 26:29; cf. *Lk* 22:18; *Mk* 14:25.
 249 *LG* 3; St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Eph.* 20, 2: SCh 10, 76.

"Faith is a gift of God which enables us to know and love Him. Faith is a way of knowing, just as reason is. But living in faith is not possible unless there is action on our part. Through the help of the Holy Spirit, we are able to make a decision to respond to divine Revelation, and to follow through in living out our response."

– United States Catholic Catechism for Adults, 38.

About Catholic Information Service

Since its founding, the Knights of Columbus has been involved in evangelization. In 1948, the Knights started the Catholic Information Service (CIS) to provide low-cost Catholic publications for the general public as well as for parishes, schools, retreat houses, military installations, correctional facilities, legislatures, the medical community, and for individuals who request them. For over 70 years, CIS has printed and distributed millions of booklets, and thousands of people have enrolled in its catechetical courses.

CIS offers the following services to help you come to know God better:

Individual Booklets

Contact CIS for a complete list of booklets and order the ones you want.

Home Study Course

CIS offers a free, graded home study course through the mail. In ten rigorous lessons, you will gain an overview of Catholic teaching.

On-Line Courses

CIS offers two free on-line courses. To enroll, please visit www.kofc.org/ciscourses.

CATHOLIC INFORMATION SERVICE®

True Catholic Information. Not Mere Opinions.

In the case of coming generations, the lay faithful must offer the very valuable contribution, more necessary than ever, of a systematic work in catechesis. The Synod Fathers have gratefully taken note of the work of catechists, acknowledging that they “have a task that carries great importance in animating ecclesial communities.” It goes without saying that Christian parents are the primary and irreplaceable catechists of their children...; however, we all ought to be aware of the “rights” that each baptized person has to being instructed, educated and supported in the faith and the Christian life.

Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* 34
Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and Mission
of the Lay Faithful in the Church and the World

About the Knights of Columbus

The Knights of Columbus, a fraternal benefit society founded in 1882 in New Haven, Connecticut, by Blessed Michael McGivney, is the world’s largest lay Catholic organization, with more than 1.9 million members in the Americas, Europe, and Asia. The Knights support each other and their community, contributing millions of volunteer hours to charitable causes each year. The Knights were the first to financially support the families of law enforcement and fire department personnel killed in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and to work closely with Catholic bishops to protect innocent human life and traditional marriage. To find out more about the Knights of Columbus, visit www.kofc.org.

Whether you have a specific question or desire a broader, deeper knowledge of the Catholic faith, CIS can help. Contact us at:

Knights of Columbus, Catholic Information Service
PO Box 1971 New Haven, CT 06521-1971
Phone 203-752-4267 • Fax 800-735-4605
cis@kofc.org • www.kofc.org/cis



Proclaiming the Faith
In the Third Millennium