

Instructed Holy Eucharist

St. Columba's Episcopal Church

Part 1

We are going to celebrate the Eucharist together, but in an unusual way. At four points – now, after the Peace and announcements, before the Eucharistic Prayer, and at the end – we will stop and consider the meaning of what is taking place. To make time for these explanations, we will leave out the homily.

First, a brief word about vestments and church furnishings. Priests, deacons and lay ministers wear an alb, a long white garment. “Alb” comes from the Latin word for white, “albus”. This garment reminds us of the white baptismal robes worn by the newly baptized in the early church. The stole is worn only by ordained clergy: deacons, priests, and bishops. Deacons wear stoles over the left shoulder, and priests and bishops wear stoles hanging straight down. The stole symbolizes the yoke of Christ. The chasuble – a kind of cloak, originally a hooded garment – may be worn by priests and bishops for the celebration of the Eucharist.

The colors of vestments as well as the church furnishings – the hangings at St. Columba's – change with the seasons of the church year and on certain special days and occasions, such as funerals. The colors associated with the seasons are traditional. In the Episcopal Church they are: white for Christmas, Easter, and other “feasts” or festival days, as well as marriages and funerals; purple/violet or royal blue for Advent; purple/violet for Lent; red for Holy Week, the Day of Pentecost, and at ordinations; green during the season of Epiphany and the “Ordinary Time” after Pentecost Sunday.

At the beginning of our service we sang a hymn. Though not always part of a celebration of the Eucharist, music is usually included because it helps set a tone for the service, as well assisting us to express our faith and communicate our feelings. Singing together helps unify the congregation. The canons (or rules) of the national Episcopal church indicate that only hymns authorized by the church may be used for worship. These hymns, such as those found in the Hymnal 1982 and “Wonder, Love, and Praise,” have texts that have been approved by the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music because the words are theologically acceptable.

The Eucharist has been a part of Christian worship since the very beginnings of the Christian church. In his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul speaks about the Eucharist as something very familiar to the people there. Historically the Eucharist has been the central act of worship for Roman Catholics and for Orthodox Christians. The Protestant Reformation led some churches to celebrate the Eucharist less frequently (because of what the early Reformers saw as abuses), but today, it is regularly celebrated in many churches – Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and others.

Different churches hold different views of the meaning of this celebration. Those views are, to some extent, reflected in the common names for the service. It is the Lord's Supper for those who see it as a memorial, a commemoration of the meal that Jesus shared with his close followers on the night before he died. It is Holy Communion for those who emphasize the strengthening of our ties with God through Jesus, and within the community, so that the congregation's fellowship is enhanced. It is the Eucharist for those who see it as an act of worship, of praise and thanksgiving to God. It is the Mass for those who see it as a sharing in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, when he died on behalf of a world that was estranged from God. It is the Divine Liturgy for those who see it as an anticipation of the heavenly banquet that the people of God will share in when all is made new in the Kingdom of God.

The good news now is that all these views – a memorial, a fellowship meal, thanksgiving, a sacrifice, and the great Supper of the Kingdom – are parts of a whole, and the services in many churches, including the Episcopal Church as reflected in the Book of Common Prayer, include all of them in one way or another.

The Episcopal Church has settled on using the title "Eucharist" for this celebration, thereby emphasizing the idea of thanksgiving. The way to say "thank you" in Greek is to say, "I give *charis*" – thanks, and "*eu-charis*" is "good thanks." We will be reminded often during the service that we are thanking God for particular gracious acts. This service is something that we do together. "Liturgy" means "work of the people," and the people must participate for the liturgy to be complete. We participate with our souls, minds, and bodies – all gifts of God.

The Eucharist invites us to live in the past, the present, and the future. We live in our past as a community, as a part of the faithful people who go back to Jesus and his followers, and before that, through Jesus the Jew, to the people of Israel; and we also live in our individual pasts, our own stories of how we got here. We live in our present as the people that we are and as members of this community, in this time and at this place, as well as part of the larger community of faithful people all over the world who are doing what we are doing. We live in our future as we anticipate the coming shape of our individual lives and also our communion with all faithful people at the end of all things, in the new creation being brought forth by the love of God in Jesus Christ. So, this service has a kind of "triple vision" built into it: we are here doing this now, but we are also remembering and reliving significant moments in the past, and we are looking forward to the final triumph of the kingdom of God.

After the hymn, the service begins with the Opening Acclamation – the greeting of the people by the celebrant of the Eucharist and the people's response. We continue with a prayer – the Collect for Purity – that asks the Holy Spirit to "cleanse the thoughts of our hearts" in preparation for admitting Jesus into our very being. During most seasons of the church year, we then join together in praise for God by reciting (or singing) the Gloria or another song of praise.

After the Collect for the Day, which is an opening prayer that the clergy and people pray “collectively,” we read the Bible and reflect on the great events of the past that are a part of our history. The Old Testament readings remind us of the story of Israel and of God’s care for the Jewish people, from whom Jesus came. The Psalm connects us with the worship in the Temple at Jerusalem and recalls the Jewish people’s faithful adherence to the word of God and the importance of sacrifice. The New Testament reading, usually from one of the letters, instructs us in the meaning of our faith as it was understood by the early followers of Jesus, and shows us how from the very start the Christian community has had to work to understand its Lord, its faith, and its fellowship. We then stand to hear the proclamation of the Gospel, the account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, reminding us of the importance and meaning of the life of Christ in our own lives. The sermon (or homily) breaks open the meaning of the Scriptures and connects them to our lives here and now.

We then usually recite the Creed, re-affirming our faith in God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and the work of God through our lives in the Christian church. The Prayers of the People are then led by a member of the congregation. We pray for the church, the nation, the welfare of the world, the concerns of the local community, for those who suffer or are in any trouble, and for the departed. We confess our sins before God and receive the promise of God’s forgiveness in the absolution spoken by the priest.

[Service begins and proceeds through the Peace]

Part 2

After we have confessed our sins and been assured of God’s pardon for them, we greet one another in the name of the Lord. The Peace reminds us that the Eucharist is something we do together, as a group. It is not a devotion of isolated individuals, but a “common prayer” that we all pray together. And it is something that binds us together as a community. We ourselves are becoming the Body of Christ, the community of faithful people, during this worship time.

At this point in the service the donations of the people may be collected and offered to God. Usually this is a collection of money for the work of the church and to benefit the world. It may also include a collection of food and other items to be given to people in need, in Jesus’ name. We offer back to God a portion of God’s gifts to us.

We may then sing a hymn to prepare ourselves for the most solemn part of the service.

[Service continues through the Doxology]

Part 3

The Eucharist begins with an ancient exhortation from the celebrant, “Lift up your hearts.” We have prayed that our hearts might be purified; we have unburdened our hearts of sin. Now our hearts – the centers of our being, the place where our thought, emotion, and will are united – are lifted to God’s presence. The celebrant models this lifting of ourselves to God by standing in the ancient posture for prayer: not on one’s knees, which is for penitence, but with the face and palms held out and up towards God. This prayer position is called “*orans*,” from the Latin for “one who is praying or pleading.”

After the opening prayer and response, the celebrant reminds us of the importance of worship at every time and in every place; there is often a “Preface” that is appropriate to the church season. In Lent, for example, the preface is “through Jesus Christ our Lord; who was tempted in every way as we are, yet did not sin. By his grace we are able to triumph over every evil, and to live no longer for ourselves alone, but for him who died for us and rose again.” Then we all pray the Sanctus, the prayer from the sixth chapter of Isaiah – “Holy, Holy, Holy” – the prayer that the angels sing in front of God’s throne. By joining in this prayer, we join not only with other worshipers on earth, but with the whole community of heaven, in acknowledging that God is to be praised.

A very brief word about what is on the altar. The chalice is the cup that holds the wine of the Eucharist. The paten is the plate or shallow dish that holds the bread or wafers. The cruets hold wine and water; a small amount of water is added to the wine before it is consecrated, to symbolize the water that flowed from Jesus’ side on the cross. Water is also used to wash the priest’s hands before the Eucharist, in a ceremony called “*lavabo*,” Latin for “I shall wash.” A shallow bowl to catch the water poured over the priest’s hands is called a lavabo bowl, and the cloth the priest uses to dry his/her hands is called a lavabo towel. The chalice, paten, and the bread and wine to be consecrated are set on a square of cloth called a corporal – from Latin *corpus* which means body. The corporal sits on top of the larger fair linen that covers the altar. This cloth holds any crumbs that fall from the bread, the body of Christ. A piece of cloth used to wipe the chalice after each person drinks from it is called a purificator.

We now begin the most solemn part of the service. The celebrant prays one of the forms of the great Eucharistic prayer. This prayer reminds us first of the past: the creation, how human beings fell away from their close communion with God, the history of the Israelite people in trying to remain faithful, and finally the great act of God in history in the person of Jesus. Second, it recalls for us how that act of God reached its culmination in Jesus’ death and resurrection, and how Jesus left his followers this act of eating and drinking as a reminder of what his death and life meant. Third, it recreates that meal for us today, praying that the bread and wine may be the Body and Blood of Christ for us, and that the same Holy Spirit that sanctifies the bread and wine will sanctify us as well. Fourth, the prayer looks forward to the day when all things are to be reconciled in Christ at the end of the age.

Christians have disagreed about the meaning of “body” and “blood.” The Episcopal Church says that in the bread and wine, Jesus Christ is here with us; this is called the teaching of “real presence.” The Episcopal Church does not find it necessary to explain how God in Christ is present here, only to trust in faith that God is with us. The Episcopal Church teaches that we encounter Jesus Christ as we receive communion, and (if we will it) God in Christ then enters into our lives and actions.

The prayer about this supreme moment includes some form of the words, “On the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus Christ took bread” These words are referred to as “The Words of Institution,” the words of Jesus at the Last Supper recorded in Mark’s Gospel and St. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians. It is 2,000 years ago, and we are in the upper room with the friend we love. He is telling us that he is about to die on the very next day. But this is not a failure. He is breaking bread and pouring wine, and he is accomplishing the greatest thing he can: he is bringing our brokenness – the brokenness of our imperfect humanity – home to the Father, and he is pouring out his life for our spilled lives. But he does not only tell us this; he shows us in the meal he is sharing with us now.

What would first-century Jews understand when another first-century Jew said, “This is my body ...,” “This is my blood ...”? We can look to the writings that Jesus and his friends held as most sacred: the Hebrew Bible, what we call the Old Testament. In the Hebrew Bible, the human being is a unity, a living body. The body enables us to do things: we act in the world by virtue of our bodies. Even when speaking of God, the Hebrew Bible uses “body language”: God’s “right hand” means God’s strength; God’s “face” means God’s presence with us; God’s “inward parts” mean God’s compassion; even God’s “back,” God’s massiveness or weight, means God’s majesty and glory. When Jesus says, “This is my body,” and breaks the bread and hands it around, he is saying, “I am about to be broken for your benefit, and you yourselves are to receive this body and act in the world as this body would act – as I would act.”

In the Hebrew Bible, blood is the life of a human being or an animal. Blood is so sacred that it is returned to God in sacrifice, since God is the only source of life. By pouring out wine and saying, “This is my blood,” Jesus is saying, “My very life is being spent on your behalf. Take that life within you, and spend it in the world, living it as I would live it.”

At the end of this prayer, and before receiving communion, we pray the Lord’s Prayer as a sign of our membership in the kingdom and our hope that God’s will is done here and elsewhere.

[Service continues and concludes]

Part 4

We have been in the room with Jesus, but we do not stay there. We take the gifts of Jesus' acts, of Jesus' life of service, and we bring them back to the world from which we have been gathered here. Jesus makes the sacrifice; we take that sacrifice and make it our own. Jesus offers himself to be broken and poured out for us; and we are to go out into the world and recognize Jesus in the broken world that is waiting for us. We go out as a community, the Body of Christ in the world. We go out in faith, knowing the great deeds of God the Father in Christ on our behalf in the past; in hope, trusting the promises of God in Christ for our future; and in love, acting with the power of the Holy Spirit in the present to bring the love of God in Christ to the world.

Jesus is present to us in the bread and wine; Jesus is present in the world's brokenness, need, and thirst; Jesus is present to the world in us, in our acts, in our giving of ourselves, in our care for others. Jesus is among us, within us, around us; when we take the bread and wine into ourselves, we take in the acts and life of Jesus and make them our own. We have "made our communion" – we are one with one another and with Jesus; but that is not the end. It is the beginning: the beginning of our living for one another as Jesus lives for us.