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THE EUCHARIST AS A MEAL

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THE EUCHARIST AS A MEAL.
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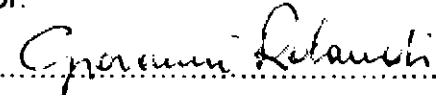
I, the undersigned, declare that this long essay is my original work achieved through my personal reading, scientific research method and critical reflections. It is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Ecclesiastical Degree of Baccalaureate in Theology. It has never been submitted to any other college or university for academic credit. All sources have been cited in full and acknowledged.

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INTRODUCTION.

The Eucharistic meal is the **sacramental celebration of the Paschal mystery of Christ**. It is a miraculous meal understood only with the help of the Holy Spirit. It is a sacred meal in the form of **bread and wine**.

Often we talk of the Eucharistic meal as the **source and summit** of our life. The **source** because it is the only way we nourish our spiritual life forever. No other food can make us more Christ-like than this sacred meal on the altar. And it is the **summit** because everything starts and ends in that very living bread and wine. Our whole spiritual life depends entirely on that living food given to us as a gift. The Holy Eucharist therefore is Christ himself coming to us in the form of bread and wine.

In the Old Testament, bread and wine were offered as a sign of grateful acknowledgement to the creator. This offering was a type of the Eucharist to come. In the offering, the taking of bread and wine symbolized God's union with his people.

For instance, every Jewish meal was a sacred event, a time when the family would give thanks. These meals followed customary laws and brought people together. Not only did the meal bring them together, but it also created bonds, strengthening relationships and later became covenant meals. In this period, these meals had religious tones as God's blessings were asked before eating.

Every Jewish meal was a ritual and followed its customs. No meal was eaten without prayers and thanksgiving. The host or elder breaks the bread and gives thanks. And therefore, the promises and covenant given to them by God are truly expressed in their celebration together. These meals portrayed the ways in which God had liberated them from slavery and other problems affecting them.

Our Eucharist comes from this Jewish heritage. Christ grew up as a Jew and respected the Jewish way of life. He followed the same way when starting the Eucharist. He followed the same customary rules to be followed by a Jewish elder or host. He himself was the host of this meal. The Eucharist grew from the Last Supper, the sharing of Christ's body and blood. It became a sharing in the paschal event of Christ.

This was a new ritual in the life of the Christian community, because Christ attached a new meaning to the existing ritual, that of his remembrance, whenever we celebrate the Eucharist.

The Eucharistic celebration grew out of this context as Christ shared his Passover meal with his disciples. Though Christ was with his disciples in this meal, it was at the time when the Jewish communities were praying for the coming of the messiah.

This has become the departing point for all the Christian Eucharistic rituals. This was the starting point of his ministry and his presence amongst his people as a sacrificial victim. Everything we do and celebrate today in the Holy Eucharist is a remembrance of the Last Supper, where he gave up his life for the world.

A sacrifice is an external and social offering of some acceptable gift made to God by an authorized representation of the community. Its purpose is to unite persons with God, their creator. It implies an immolation of a victim, which suffers and dies. The immolated victim has to express an intimate relationship between God and man.

Likewise Christ offered himself for the world's liberation from the bondage of sin. This idea of sacrifice has been passed down from ages past. For example, in the Samburu culture, sacrifices have been offered to God in order to cement that relationship between God and his people.

The Eucharistic meal is a visible sign, which communicates God's love and care for us in Jesus Christ. In the Eucharistic celebration we participate actively in the act of receiving Christ. This act is a meeting point with Christ's Spirit who gives life to our spiritual bodies. When we receive Christ, it is not we who transform Christ into ourselves, but Christ transforms himself into us, by incorporating or uniting us into his own mystical body. This incorporation is realized when we allow Christ to live within us under the form of bread and wine. This is a mysterious way in which Christ is the very center of our Christian life.

This meal is taken in union with Christ, and becomes our soul's food. This is our divine food, which is the very body and blood of Christ. The soul is really and truly fed on this food. It is a real food because it nourishes and gives eternal life.

This meal starts a new relationship between God and his people, now to be celebrated as a banquet. We believe that the body and blood of Christ is present in the consecrated bread and wine. We don't say the Eucharist is like the body and blood of Jesus, but it *is* the body and blood of Christ. This was affirmed by Christ himself when he said '**this is my body... this is my blood**' (Mk 14:22-24). What this says is that the real presence is a mystery. What appears to be bread and wine is in its very substance the body and blood of Christ. The entire Christ is present in his whole human and divine being in the form of bread and wine.

I chose the topic "Eucharist as a meal," because of its richness and similarity with our daily food for survival. For us to survive we have to eat, and for our souls to survive we have to eat too. It is against this background of how important food is for our life, that

I decided to use the topic “Eucharist as a meal” for its importance as food for the soul and the source of our lives as Christians.

The other reason is the value we Africans attach to our food as the source of our love for our visitors. Whenever you go to somebody’s house, the first thing is to be welcomed and being asked ‘Tea or Beer?’ and not ‘What can I do for you?’

This paper is an attempt to put the Eucharistic meal in the context of real food for our souls. Some comparisons where it is appropriate have been made with the Samburu community, which is found in the Northern Part of the Great Rift Valley of Kenya. All the Biblical citations are from the **African Bible**. The paper itself is a research work done in Nairobi.

CHAPTER I.

SACRIFICIAL MEAL

Any meal we take has to come from somewhere. For example, our ordinary bread, which we prepare for our sustenance comes from the garden. We have to plant the seedlings, take care of the plants and finally harvest the produce. We then have to prepare our harvest to fit our consumption on the table. For instance, if we want to eat goat's meat, the goat must be available for slaughter and then we roast, fry or boil the meat, and enjoy it.

In the same line, our sacrificial meal has to come from somewhere, and it is Christ himself offering his own flesh and blood. This is a divine banquet, where the Lamb of God, who has replaced the old lamb to bring a new covenant within our life, nourishes all of us. Here Jesus Christ is the new lamb, which is offered on the altar for many. He is the true Lamb of God who will be received in place of animal sacrifices. It is on the cross that Jesus gave up his life for the church. It is in the Eucharist that we remember his death and the outpouring of his love for us. It is in the same Eucharist that he gave himself as the Lamb of God for the Universe. As Gilby writes: "Once Christ was sacrificed in his very self, yet daily is he sacrificed in the sacrament."¹

a) CHRIST AS THE LAMB OF GOD.

In the Samburu community, union with God and society is an important aspect in life. The offering of sacrifice brings home this union. Usually an animal is offered to God and to the spirits. This animal is carefully selected, for it has to be of certain colour and age. In this community the animal has to be completely white, a sign of purity, and

¹ Gilby, Thomas, (*St. Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologia Vol 59*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1975) 135.

usually a male goat of middle age. . As Mbiti writes: "Such animals are carefully chosen to make sure that they are acceptable to God...of one colour and have to come from an upright owner."²

The person to offer it is usually a well-known elder, whom people respect and who is upright. Before offering sacrifice, the person has to perform some ritual blessing by sprinkling the animal with milk. Then the animal is killed by suffocation in line with a belief that blood is not to be shed, since it signifies life, and only God can take it or give it back.

The ritual action involving blood implies the presence of a living being whose blood is offered as a symbolic expression of basic religious attitudes. Therefore, in any sacrificial act, God's sovereignty was affirmed as the one who created and owns the whole world. Any gift offered to God was simply returning to him that which already belonged to him in joyful acknowledgement and gratitude. Through this sacrifice, people surrendered themselves to God and re-established an essential life giving relationship between God and themselves.

After the killing, the animal is roasted on an open fire. When ready, the best part, which is a steak and the liver, is given to God by placing it on a sacred place set aside for that purpose. The members present communally share the other parts. As Ray writes: "The sharing of the victim's flesh confirms the spiritual bond between the worshippers and God or the spirits to whom a portion is also given."³ After the sharing (as a symbol of unity and togetherness), the same elder gives thanks and all depart in such a way that the same elder is the last one to leave the place of ceremony.

² Mbiti, S. John (*Introduction to African Religion*. London: Heinemann, 1986) 59.

³ Ray, C. Benjamin (*African Religions: Symbols, Rituals and Community*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc, 1976) 79.

The Samburu offer a pure white animal to God as a way of creating a closer union with their God. In the same line, God the Father wanted to be so close to his people. Therefore, He gave us his only Son to die instead of our animal sacrifice. As Killgallon writes: "God our Father, has spoken to us, revealing to us the meaning and purpose of our life. He sent his son, Jesus Christ, to redeem us and to teach us the truths by which we are to live as children of God."⁴

In the Jewish tradition the lambs were given in sacrifice. The Jews came together and celebrated as a sign of unity and communal love. Christ came from this tradition, he did not start a new way by giving himself to die on the cross, and he rather took over from the Jewish custom. His death was in line with the Jewish sacrifices. As Kodell writes: "Jesus' death...coincides with the sacrifice of the Lambs in the temple before the Passover meal."⁵ Like in the Jewish background, where God made a covenant with the people, through their action of slaughtering animals, Christ also at the Last Supper was the victim to be slaughtered. As Aiden writes: "He who was nailed to the cross, we are to see slaughtered and sacrificed as a lamb."⁶

From this Old Testament Passover meal, Christ brought in a new meal, the Eucharistic meal, to bind his people with that covenant. Christ became the new lamb sacrificed for our sins. He died on the cross to liberate us from the bondage of sin. Dying on the cross was the only kind of sacrifice to be given in place of other sacrifices. As we read in the Catechism of the Catholic Church: "This sacrifice completes and surpasses all the sacrifices of Old covenant."⁷ Indeed it was a sacrifice par excellence.

⁴ Killgallon, James (*Life in Christ*. Chicago: Acta Foundation Press, 1976) 3.

⁵ Kodell, Jerome (*The Eucharist in the New Testament*. Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991) 53.

⁶ Aiden, Nicolas (*The Holy Eucharist*. New York: Veritas Publication, 1991) 49.

⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994) 1330.

It is the man Jesus who sacrifices himself. This sacrifice of the cross is always renewed in the Holy Eucharist. As Schmaus writes: "For the Eucharist is an actualization of the sacrifice of the cross that has a saving effect in many other ways, in that it is at work in all the events of the life of the church as the body of Christ."⁸ This food is Christ himself, who comes to us and makes us partakers in his own life. We come and share Christ so that our souls are made pure and clean. As Merton writes: "The effect of the sacrifice of Christ is to cleanse our souls of sin and to bring us once again into the friendship of God."⁹ We are made God's friends when we receive Christ in the Holy Eucharist.

Our communion is with Christ as a sacrificial victim, who is being offered continually on the altar in the form of bread and wine. As Sokolowski writes: "There is only one central sacrifice, the one that was offered by Christ as a bloody sacrifice on the cross..."¹⁰ Christ's sacrificial offering as a victim was materialized through death on the cross, which was a choice made by God the Father. It was to bring about God's love for our freedom from the bondage of Satan. It was with this action of overcoming Satan that Christ offered himself as a sacrifice. This was at the Last Supper when he gave up his body and blood for the world. As Tad writes: "The real Jesus took real bread and identified himself with it."¹¹ By the fact of **take and eat ... take and drink**, Christ is replacing the animal sacrifice with his own body. He is the new lamb, who will unite all people together.

⁸ Schmaus, Michael (*Dogma 5: The Church as Sacrament*: London, Sheed and Ward, 1992) 128.

⁹ Merton, Thomas (*The Living Bread*. New York: Straus and Cudahy, 1987) 24.

¹⁰ Sokolowski, Robert (*Eucharistic Presence: A Study in the Theology of disclosure*. Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994) 27.

¹¹ Tad, W. Guzik (*Jesus and the Eucharist*. New York: Paulist Press, 1974) 1.

Social sacrifice is offered in the name of the community. It expresses the worship of all the members in that community. One elder, the leader of the community, mostly offers it. In the same line, Christ offered himself because he was the leader of our spiritual life. He offered himself on the cross out of his free will so that he could nourish our hearts. That one man hanging on the cross and crying, **‘Father forgive them’**, became our spiritual food for the ages to come. This food does not cease to be as long as we are on this earth, because it is Christ himself and He will never cease to be.

The Last Supper involved sacrificial imagery and so does our Eucharistic celebration today. Jesus’ words recalled the bloody ritual of the sacrifices of the Passover lamb and the covenant. Through this Eucharistic banquet, we offer ourselves with Jesus through the bread and wine as his Body and Blood.

Jesus Christ offered himself for our freedom to be cleansed and become children of God. In the Gospel of John we read: ‘Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.’ (Jn 1: 29) This is why the priest holds up the host and says to the people, **“This is the lamb of God who takes away our sins”**¹². We are saying that Jesus Christ is the bread of life, the unleavened bread of God, which came down from heaven. Christ, through the Holy Spirit, makes himself available as the Lamb of God to be consumed. He continues to feed us in the Eucharistic celebration. In it we remember his death and resurrection as we share the cup and bread. In this celebration the priest holds Christ and says **“do this in Christ’s memory”**¹³.

¹² *The Sacramentary: The Roman Missal* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1985) 564.

¹³ *The Sacramentary: The Roman Missal, Eucharistic Prayer II* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1985) 549.

(b) MEMORIAL.

When you recall either a striking incident you had personally or an interesting story told by a friend, always memories of the actual event come into your mind. For example, I recall when I was young, looking after our goats and cattle, a large pack of wild wolves came along and killed five of our goats. I was scared and did not know what to do, but to run for my dear life. Whenever I go home and see our goats, that memory comes into my mind.

Though we were not on the Calvary, our memories of Christ crying on the cross come to us whenever we celebrate the Holy Eucharist. It was on that cross at Calvary that Christ gave himself to us once and for all. It is on the cross that we come to remember what Christ has started during the last meal he had with his disciples. As Kodell writes: "The Eucharist is a commemoration or re-enactment of the Last Supper, in which the risen Lord Jesus is present..."¹⁴ When we recall what Christ has done on the cross, we fully participate in the life and ministry of Christ both present and future as being united by the celebration. This action is not just an imitative ritual action, but also a remembrance of the deeper meaning of Jesus' life and death on our behalf as we unite ourselves to his death.

The Eucharistic meal has to remind us about the deeds of Christ and our intimate union with him. This remembrance of Christ's union with his people has to go beyond the limits of time, for he is beyond time. This union is realized in the Eucharistic banquet where the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ comes alive. As we read from the Catechism of the Catholic Church: "...the memorial is not merely the recollection of

¹⁴ Kodell, Jerome (*The Eucharist in the New Testament*. Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991) 12.

past events but the proclamation of the mighty works made by God for men....”¹⁵

Christ’s memory is not something past or yet to come, it is a living reality within our lives. When Christ said ‘**Do this in memory of me**’, he was telling his disciples how to remember him for the rest of their lives. He was going to leave them physically, but (sacramentally) he would continue to be present in the Eucharistic celebration. He gave a norm to be followed in order to recall all that he had done for them. As Witte writes: “Christ commanded his disciples thus to remember and encounter him in this sacramental meal.”¹⁶ So remembrance is a command, not a choice to be made, we have to do it in honor of Christ.

The source of our Christian prayer is the memory of Christ’s way of prayer. He taught us how to pray and this comes alive when we recall his suffering as we celebrate it on the altar in the form of a meal. This sharing and remembering the Lamb who was slain as the source of that food, brings us a clear picture of how Christ’s love is manifested among us. When we do this, we are taking an action, doing something for ‘Christ’; specifically recalling his death and resurrection. We are proclaiming his death, which becomes a reality when the separate consecration of bread and wine takes place, to become the body and blood of Christ.

Christ’s remembrance is an action of love, which bears fruits for those who receive it. We do this (memory) as we receive Christ’s body and blood in Holy Communion. Through this remembrance, our love flows to others and Christ manifests himself in us through his own love and nourishment in the Eucharistic meal. Christ gives us his own flesh and blood as we offer him on the altar. As Galot writes: “Jesus does not

¹⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994) 1363.

¹⁶ Witte, Nelly, ed., *(Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry: World council of Churches*. Geneva: Bookman, 1982) 10.

want to be remembered after his death for his own personal satisfaction... what he wants is to be able to give himself as food and drink by means of this remembrance.”¹⁷ As we remember him in the Eucharistic celebration, we become participants in his own life.

As we celebrate this memory, we are doing what Christ left us to do. We are taking the same action, which Christ took on the night he was about to die. We re-enact that action of Christ, of breaking bread and giving the cup for our spiritual nourishment. This is a feast where Christ brings the kingdom of God closer to us. We do it first following a command and then as Christ’s promise to be with us for all ages.

In this Eucharistic meal, we remember Christ’s covenant of love. Out of this love we are broken with Christ who broke himself for us. This love is fully manifested as we remember him in his body and blood, which he shed on the cross for our spiritual life. This remembrance has to awaken our spiritual gratitude and thanks for all that Christ has done and continues to do for us. Then once we have given thanks for the victim slaughtered for our sake, we have to receive him into our hearts. Christ comes to us in Holy Communion and stays with us for eternity.

CHAPTER II.

COMMUNION.

Food is essential in all walks of life. Every person needs to eat for his or her survival. Without food our bodies weaken and eventually die. Our spiritual life too needs nourishment. Just as the physical body dies without food, our spiritual life also dies without Christ. This food is that heavenly God-given food, which is Jesus Christ himself. It is our spiritual nourishment and strength, which keeps us going. Communion is

¹⁷ Galot, Jean (*The Eucharistic Heart*. Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1990) 32.

received under the signs of bread and wine. Of importance in communion are the signs of bread and wine, the norms guiding those who are to receive it, and the actual reception of the sacrament and our gratitude and thanks to God.

a) **SIGNS:**

(i) **BREAD:**

In our modern world, bread has become an important element in our lives, because it satisfies our hunger and gives us more energy to continue with our daily duties.

But bread as the Body of Christ is totally different. As we read in the instruction on the Worship of the Eucharistic: "In that body the life of Christ is communicated to those who believe."¹⁸ It appears bread, but it is no longer bread, it is Christ himself in that form. Once the Eucharistic prayer takes place with the correct elements (minister, wheat bread and grape wine), then we are dealing with a mystery who is Christ himself. What is out there on the altar is purely wheat bread. The mere presence of bread on the altar does not make it Christ's body nor any spiritual nourishment for our union with Christ. The words of institution '**This is my body**' (Mk 14:22) are needed to effect the true presence of the body of Christ. By signifying the body of Christ as food, the institution narratives guarantee the nourishment and union of Christ as truly spiritual.

All the respect that is given to God the Father is given to God the Son in the form of bread and wine: we are no longer dealing with normal bread, but we are dealing with the Son of God, who offered himself to us as food. In the Gospel of Luke we read: '.... And he took bread... gave thanks, he broke it and gave it to them saying, '**This is my body which will be given for you**' (Lk 22: 19). From this step onwards, we are

¹⁸ *Instruction on the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery*, 25 May, 1967, No. 1

celebrating a banquet, which is Christ himself. And there is no room for doubt about the reality of the body of Christ. Our Lord taught and our faith accepts that his flesh is really our food and his blood is really our drink

(ii) WINE:

What is out there is a purely grape wine. Just as we have bread and tea on our tables, we too have the wine which is just wine. The natural symbolism of grape wine cannot represent the blood of Christ. The Eucharistic prayer with the words '**This is my blood**' (Mk14: 24) is required for it to be truly the blood of Christ. But everything changes after the Eucharistic prayer, taking all the elements to be correct (minister and grape wine). Christ said '**Take this and drink from it, this is the cup of my blood which will be poured out for you.**' (LK 22:18-19) That cup is a new sharing in the blood of Christ. We are no longer dealing with ordinary grape wine, we are taking Jesus Christ in his fullness

Our spiritual life has to be nourished and strengthened by his blood. The most important thing to note is Christ himself in that precious blood. It still appears pure grape wine, but the whole substance and essence has changed in a mysterious way to become Christ.

(b) CONDITIONS FOR RECEIVING COMMUNION.

Once we have cooked food and it is done, then it is time to eat it. There are rules on how to eat. One is expected to have table manners, especially if there are visitors at the table. Also not everybody is invited within the village to partake in this meal, only those who have the invitation and are ready to come.

Likewise, once Christ is ready to be received, then only those who have prepared themselves well are invited. There are regulations, which are to be observed before the food is received. The participants should have a strong faith in Jesus Christ and not be in a state of sin. As Schmaus writes: "In order that the reception of communion should be fruitful, it is necessary that there should be a living union with Christ."¹⁹ This implies that all those who take part have been baptized and have a living faith. Those who have sins in themselves are not encouraged to receive Christ unless they are sorry for their sins. As Schmaus writes: "A person who offends in this way is eating and drinking unworthily and is bringing judgment to himself."²⁰ We become responsible for our state of sin and are judged according to our decisions.

The person who is not worthy to receive Christ has to be sorry and repent of his or her sins. Once repentance has taken place, then the person is ready to receive Christ, because he or she is now in union with Christ and the church. Repentance brings that inner and spiritual healing for both the person and the whole community. It is only in that state that one is allowed to receive Christ and benefit out of that nourishing meal, for Christ said, 'I am the bread of life; he who comes to me will never be hungry, he who believes in me will never thirst,' (Jn 6: 35) and so how blessed are those who receive Jesus in pure hearts.

The participants must be Catholics for them to benefit from the sacrament. That is, they must profess a living faith in the Holy Eucharist. As St. Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthians: 'Eating this bread and drinking this cup unworthily makes one guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord.' (1Cor11: 27) This means that those who

¹⁹ Schmaus, Michael (*Dogma 5: The Church as Sacrament*: London, Sheed and Ward, 1992) 127.

²⁰ Schmaus, Michael (*Dogma 5: The Church as Sacrament*: London, Sheed and Ward, 1992) 127.

participate in Holy Communion unprepared or with sins can expect little or no benefit from such participation.

What material food and drink brings to the body (strength and health), Holy Communion does to the life of the soul. For it is our great and joyous meal of love, unity and thanksgiving. For us to benefit from this food, we have to fast before taking part in Holy Communion to help us prepare for it. As Halligan writes: "One who is to receive the Eucharist is to abstain for at least one hour before communion from all food and drink."²¹ Just as one would not spoil his appetite by eating before a special meal, so we sharpen our spiritual appetite for Christ by this bit of self-discipline.

The fasting is for our benefit to receive Christ worthily in our hearts. We have to show our total respect and honor to Christ whenever we receive communion. We also show that Christ is the most important food we can ever receive in our hearts.

Food must be taken frequently, so our spiritual growth requires frequent reception of the Eucharist. We should have the desire to be united with Christ. We do this by practicing the love of our neighbours in our daily lives and have a desire for an increase of the gift of charity. With our souls properly disposed to receive Christ, we are intimately united with the word of life and filled with spiritual life.

Before one goes forward to receive Holy Communion, one needs to be in the right relationship with the Lord and his mystical body the Church. The Catechism of the Catholic Church quotes St. Justine Martyr: "...we call this food Eucharist and no one may take part in it unless he believes that what we teach is true, has received baptism for

²¹ Halligan, Nicolas (*The Sacraments and their Celebration*. New York: Alba House, 1962) 62.

the forgiveness of sins and new birth, and lives in keeping with what Christ taught.”²²

One has to be in a state of grace and free from sin, as the Church’s tradition states.

Worthy reception of the Eucharist leads to an increase in grace and an increase in God’s love which is needed for our spiritual growth and strength. When we receive Christ worthily, we are proclaiming his triumph over death.

A lack of faith on the part of the person eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ cannot change what these are (body and blood of Christ), but it prevents the person from obtaining spiritual benefits. Reception of Christ is not an automatic remedy. If we do not desire communion with Christ, God does not force this upon us. Rather, we must by faith accept God’s offer of communion with us through Christ and in the Holy Spirit. We have to cooperate with God’s grace in order to have our hearts and minds transformed and our faith and love of God increased.

(c) RECEPTION OF THE EUCHARIST.

Once we have laid down the norms for a true and fruitful reception, then we are prepared both spiritually and psychologically to receive Christ. We receive him not as any physical food, but as Christ, the living Son of God. We invite God himself to come and build our spiritual life and more so to stay with us always. Our posture and behavior at this time should portray the respect we give to God. We are welcoming God into our life and so we do it with the greatest honor and respect. The body and blood of Christ should be received with due honor and showing that we intend to be responsible for what we receive. We have to check our hearts and be Christians truly worthy to receive God in

²² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994) 342.

our hearts, the living food, Jesus himself. As Gilby writes: "But he who eats receives, not only the sacramental species, but also Christ himself who is under them."²³

There are two common methods we use to receive Christ, either on the hand or on the tongue. Whichever form we take, either by hand or tongue, should portray our utmost love and honour to God. The church's ancient way of receiving Christ is on the tongue. This is to protect us against any misuse or dropping of the sacrament. It also protects the sacrament from being taken away, either home or outside the place where it is supposed to be consumed. People might take the Blessed Sacrament and use it as they wish. To prevent this from happening, the more respectable way is on the tongue. As we read from the instruction: "This method of distributing holy communion must be retained...not merely because it has many centuries of tradition behind it, but especially because it express the faithful's reverence for the Eucharist."²⁴

But because of practical reasons, the use of hands has been allowed. Though it is a danger to the sacrament's consumption, it happens and almost every Christian uses it. It has been accepted because of fear of diseases, which the pastor or priest can pass from one person to the other as he gives the sacrament on the tongue. For example, one person might be sick and through the saliva from the minister's hand, the others might be infected.

Eating and drinking the Body and Blood of Christ means accepting and taking him into our very self. Christ becomes part and parcel of our being. We belong to him and he belongs to us. As Barclay writes: "When Jesus said we must drink his blood he

²³ Gilby, Thomas, (*St. Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologia Vol 59*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1975) 47.

²⁴ *Instruction on the manner of distributing holy communion*, 29 May, 1969, pg.150.

meant that we must take his life into the very core of our hearts.”²⁵ Jesus was saying, ‘**This is myself**’. By sharing this meal, Christ is establishing an intimate relationship between those who receive him and himself. Whenever we eat or drink the blood of Christ, we are incorporated into God’s love and life. Christ is God and we are in him as he is in our hearts, in the Holy Eucharist as food. As Delorme writes: “It is the same Christ who gives himself, flesh and blood to the believers as food.”²⁶ What a gracious gift to be given to those who are unworthy to receive it!

Sharing Christ in his body and blood unites us to him now and forever as the risen Lord of glory. In this sharing, Jesus gives us his own very flesh. This sharing of the bread and the cup brings a true participation in the body and blood of Christ. This sharing is a reality, which brings the partakers into believing and Christian living.

On the night when Christ shared his last meal with his followers, he gave up his own body, instead of that of an animal for many. On that very night he became our food. We share him in the Eucharist as a source of life. Sharing his body and blood brings us closer to him. As Kodell writes: “To share a meal with someone was a particular form of intimacy that had to be protected. It meant not only sharing of food but of life.”²⁷ We are not only sharing a meal, but we are being given a new life built by Jesus Christ himself.

People have always expressed their happiness, friendship, thanksgiving and unity by having a meal together. For example, a couple has a wedding meal to celebrate their (life-long) covenant of love, which will last forever, but here we have a richer and more intimate meal, which unites us with God forever.

²⁵ Barclay, William (*The Gospel of Mathew VolII*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975) 224.

²⁶ Delorme, Jean (*The Eucharist in the New Testament*. Dublin: Helicon Press, 1976) 57.

²⁷ Kodell, Jerome (*The Eucharist in the New Testament*. Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991) 17.

In Holy Communion, Christ comes to us in the form of a meal, food which is spiritual. As we must eat to maintain life, to grow and remain strong, so this food is a great means of growing in the life of grace. As a good meal has an immediate effect of strength and satisfaction, so our spiritual food strengthens our inner love for Christ. As Wilhelm writes: "As food builds energy and strength for the future, so Christ here strengthens us for further temptations."²⁸ The greatest thing we should get from the Eucharistic meal is a greater love, not only of God but also of our neighbour.

(d) EFFECTS OF THE EUCHARISTIC MEAL.

Communion is that part of the Mass in which our union with one another and with Christ is deeply symbolized and increased. We should take part in communion at Mass as often as we can. As we do so, we should realize that we are partaking God's own meal. We can make our reception of this meal more fruitful by a good preparation and a good thanksgiving after receiving communion. Humanly speaking, we grew in our mother's womb. We are fed and nourished through the umbilical cord of our mothers till we are born. Similarly, we can increase our understanding of God's presence during Holy Communion, by imaging ourselves in the womb of God, where we are fed symbolically through the umbilical cord of the Holy Spirit.

For the partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ has no less an effect than to change us into what we have received. The Holy Eucharist increases the life of grace, it builds and maintains our spiritual life. The grace we receive makes us like Christ the giver of it. It communicates to us Christ himself through his grace. Christ comes to us out of his love. He is not mere lifeless bread, which we hunger for, to satisfy the needs of the

²⁸ Wilhelm, Anthony (*Christ Among Us*. New York: Newman Press, 1962) 256.

body, he is the true bread of love and the source of life. As Nicolas writes: "He became this bread through an act of love alone and it is in the flame of this act of love that he comes of his own free will to us and assimilates us into himself."²⁹ We are permanently united with Christ when we receive him worthily.

This permanent union of Christ with the communicant is the entry of Christ into our spiritual life. Christ himself expressed plainly that those who eat his flesh and drink his blood are inviting him to come and live with them. To receive communion is to receive Christ himself who has offered himself for us. Worthy reception of the Eucharist brings us closer to God. As we read in John's Gospel: 'He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.' (Jn 6:56) When we receive Christ, we find our life in its fullness in Christ through the Eucharistic banquet. We become grateful for the offer he has given to us. Just like thanking the host family for a dinner shared, we too thank Christ for his life among us, a life that is eternal and fulfilling.

(e) THANKSGIVING.

When I was ordained a deacon, I was given lots of gifts. These gifts came from my family, congregation and friends and others whom I don't even know. Because of my gratitude and love I had to thank all of them for their generosity and love.

We thank Christ also because he accepted to take upon himself our sins on the cross. We thank him for the care and unconditional love for us all. There is no better way to say 'thank you Jesus' than to receive his blood and body for our strength. The very day he gave us his blood and body for our eternal nourishment, our thanks started to flow to him.

²⁹ Marie-Joseph, Nicolas (*A New Look at the Eucharist*. Glen Rock: Paulist Press, 1964) 77.

Christ has given us his whole person on the cross. He died for our sins. He was not a sinner, nor did he deserve to shed his blood for sinners. But he chose to die in order to take us to his Father. We thank God the Father for his love for us by sending his only Son to die for our sins. We thank his Son for accepting the will of the Father on our behalf.

Following Christ's footsteps of thanking his Father and blessing the needs of the people he came for, we also thank him by prayers and other blessings before we receive him. In today's family life, most of us bless or say grace before food and give thanks at the end. The chosen person says the blessings, often thanking God for giving us whatever we are about to receive. As Kodell writes: "To begin the meal, the head of the household held a piece of bread and said a prayer.... At the end of the meal there was another thanksgiving."³⁰

In the Eucharistic celebration we give thanks for the reception of Jesus Christ as a gift, which is given freely out of love. This love of Christ has been cultivated within our Christian life as we continue feeding on his body and blood. This giving thanks consists in being grateful for Christ's gift of himself.

In the Eucharistic banquet, we are grateful to Christ. When we receive him, we are united with God who created us. As Galot writes: "Thanksgiving...supposes that God and people drew closer together."³¹ We come closer to our God because more emphasis is put on communion and the intimate relationship between God and us. This means entering more closely into the warmth of an offered love. It is taking part in an exchange, which God wished to establish when he came close to us.

³⁰ Kodell, Jerome (*The Eucharist in the New Testament*. Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991) 39.

³¹ Galot, Jean (*The Eucharistic Heart*. Dublin: Veritas Publication, 1990) 69.

The cross was painful, the suffering unbearable, but Christ offered himself, and he suffered and felt pain for us. We thank him for all the suffering, pain and death he underwent on our behalf. We give thanks for the freedom and liberation we received from Christ, out of our sinful nature. We thank him for the spiritual food, which nourishes our life abundantly. There is no more pleasing way to thank him for all these, than in the reception of the Holy Eucharist, his own body and blood. As we continue to thank him in the Holy Eucharist, his presence has to be truly manifested within our hearts. Christ is totally and truly present in the Holy Eucharist.

CHAPTER III.

REAL PRESENCE IN THE EUCHARIST.

When one plants maize seeds, they germinate and become plants. These plants yield crops and therefore food comes out of them. On the cross Christ was planted on the tree and the outcome was his own body and blood. This food remains invisible within the bread and wine, which we receive as our spiritual nourishment. Christ's real presence is connected to the Eucharistic meal, because he is the same person who is in the form of bread and wine. The Eucharistic prayer does not bring another person into the picture, but Christ transforms the gifts into the same person who died and who gave up his very self for us on the cross.

Christ is present in the Eucharistic meal with his whole person. In the Scriptures we read Jesus' words '**Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I in him.**' (Jn 6:57) This clearly sets the importance of Christ's real presence in the Holy Eucharist. On the cross he gave up his life not to leave us, but to be closer to us.

In the Scripture, Christ has proved that he had power to do miracles and other mighty actions. In John's Gospel Christ fed the people with loaves and fish. This was to show the signs of his presence in the Eucharistic meal to come. In John's Gospel we read: **'Jesus said...I'm the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.'** (Jn 6:35) Christ himself is the true bread, which is present in the signs of bread and wine. This is our spiritual food, which is Christ himself in our midst forever.

What Jesus is saying is that his flesh and blood are to remain in us as our spiritual food. This true food is only to be received in Holy Communion, where he is present fully. When we receive Christ, we become like St. Peter, saying: 'Lord, to whom shall we go?' (Jn 6: 68), because in the Eucharist we have him fully present in the form of bread and wine. We know, just like Peter did, that Christ is present among us, we receive him in his whole person in the Eucharistic feast.

Christ words **'The bread that I will give, is my flesh...'** (Jn 6:52) prove the real presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist. For it is not bread that we receive in Holy Communion, but Christ's body and blood. What we are saying is that the real presence is the same body that was crucified and the blood drunk is the same blood that was shed on the cross for our sins.

Christ in his totality is truly present in both the species of bread and wine. As Merton writes: "In the most Holy sacrament of the Eucharist, there is contained truly, really and substantially, the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ...."³² We receive Christ whole and entire in either of the species.

³² Merton, Thomas (*The Living Bread*. New York: Straus and Cudahy, 1987) 55.

When reading the scriptural text of what Jesus said about himself, namely, '**This is my body, this is my blood,**' (Mk 14:22-24), we come to appreciate the foundation of Jesus' real presence in the Eucharistic bread and wine. We believe that whenever we celebrate the Eucharist, Christ is present among us.

Jesus is in our hearts in the Eucharistic bread and wine, real food and real drink. He is the true bread, which came from heaven. This true bread is still present as a gift from God for those who believe in him. Jesus, the true bread sent down from heaven, is fully present for any believer in the Eucharistic meal.

The whole point of Christ's presence in the Eucharist is for to make our faith strong. Jesus is present in us that we might live and have life. Without his presence in the Eucharistic meal, we can do nothing. This is when we encounter God in the Eucharistic meal, completely, powerfully and personally. In our world today we speak of people as social beings because they love us and are intimately close to us. In the Eucharist, Jesus wants to be intimately close to each one of us. Christ wants to be and is deeply present to us in love and in compassion.

The real presence occurs and remains in the Eucharistic celebration, when the glorified Christ becomes present under the appearances of bread and wine in a special way, that of consecration. As we read from the instruction on the Eucharist: "For in this sacrament Christ is present in a unique way, whole and entire, God and man, substantially and permanently. This presence of Christ... is called real *par excellence*."³³ In this act of consecration the bread and wine cease to be material bread and wine, but becomes the body and blood of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

³³ *Instruction on the worship of the Eucharistic mystery*, 25 May, 1967, pg 109.

That bread and wine which we see and even touch on the altar, are now the true Christ. As Guzie writes: "The bread and wine on the altar after the consecration are not only a sacramental symbol but the true body and blood of Christ which the priest handles and breaks and which the faithful bite with their teeth."³⁴ In this manner, Christ gives himself to us in a form that employs the symbolism of eating bread and drinking wine. Being present under the appearances of bread and wine, he gives himself to us in a form that is appropriate for human eating and drinking.

In the Eucharist, we have Christ with us as a banquet for spiritual growth. In the Scriptures our faith affirms the real presence as a mystery, which we only receive by faith. As Powers writes: "Thus the presence of Christ, the real presence, the true presence of Christ is absolutely central to the Biblical faith in the meaning and power of the Eucharist."³⁵ It is Christ in his personhood who is present.

Our normal senses can never tell us that the real body and blood of Christ are present. We need our faith to affirm this presence as real body and blood of Christ. This real presence is the perfection of our union with Christ.

Faith deals with unseen realities, and therefore our affirmation of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist is offered by it without doubt. After the Eucharistic prayer, we still see the bread and wine, but our faith affirms that there is nothing other than the flesh and blood of Christ.

CONCLUSION.

Some people enter our lives in such compelling ways that we are never quite the same afterwards. Even in their physical absence we feel their presence. Even if we know

³⁴ Guzie, W. Tad, (*Jesus and the Eucharist*. New York: Paulist Press, 1974) 64.

³⁵ Powers, Joseph (*Eucharistic Theology*. New York: The SeaBury Press, 1967) 62.

we shall never see them again, we cannot act as if they had never been part of our lives. They have left their mark. They have tremendously changed us, for better or for worse, and we cannot act as if they had never been there. They are part of our history and they are inseparable from us in our identity.

In today's world the Eucharist introduces that change into our Christian life. We encounter Christ in this sacrament mainly through our faith. Just as we participate in another's life, we also participate in the life of Jesus Christ when we receive him into our hearts.

The Eucharistic meal is one of the principal sources for understanding the meaning of Christian life. In it Christ is giving himself to all and expressing God's intimacy with his people. This banquet has to express God's openness and love for his people. Having Christ as a meal brings us into an intimate relationship with him. Christ's presence within our hearts gives us a mandate to continue doing what he did in his ministry.

The celebration of the Holy Eucharist is a renewal of Christ's presence in our Christian life. It is our way of thanking God the Father for giving us this food and life. This holy food is so important for our spiritual growth, for it sustains us and makes us grow in our friendship with God. It helps us to become stronger and healthier in Christ Jesus.

Yet there is a difference between taking common food, which changes and becomes part of us when received, and taking Jesus in the Eucharist for he changes us into himself. He makes us become like him. We become Christ like in our spiritual life.

In the eating and drinking of bread and wine, Christ unites us with himself. It is God himself who acts and gives life to those who receive him. When we receive him worthily, our sins are forgiven and we receive eternal life in Jesus Christ. The Holy Eucharist is a mystery, which is made meaningful in our lives by Christ himself with the help of the Holy Spirit. This food is not a gift of death, but a gift of life, the unfailing life of the glorified Lord. It is this life, which is the gift of worship and sacrifice.

In the Holy Eucharist we share in God's life. This means that God reveals himself personally to us in the Holy Eucharist. God pours his grace upon us, who receive him, the reality of this grace is in the sharing of God's life. God comes to us and creates that strong bond which seals our relationship with him. This close relationship is being re-enacted whenever we eat and drink the body and blood of Christ. When we receive Christ, our whole work in this life is to find God. We are not to labour for perishable food, but for eternal food, Jesus Christ.

This eternal food brings us to the word of life and fills us with the ability and the gifts to grow spiritually, for he comes to us in his wholeness. This heavenly food produces in our souls more effects than material food produces in our bodies, for it brings health and strength to our spiritual life.

Therefore receiving Christ in the form of bread and wine, we are not just receiving symbols, but the real mysterious body and blood of Christ. This food contains the saving grace, which is Christ himself. It is a meal of love and union for those who take part in it worthily. When we receive Christ into our hearts, we are always called to do good works, to live honest lives devoted to Christ and to be witnesses of Christ to the world.

Today's Christian belief has been shaped by the Eucharistic development along the ages past. But throughout that long tradition there is the firm belief in the real presence of the risen Jesus and in the centrality of the Eucharist in the life of the church. In the first eight centuries of the Church's life, the Eucharist was people-driven, i.e the people gathered in community to express their praise and thanks to God. In their gathering for the Eucharistic celebration, they were fully aware of Christ's presence amongst them. In the Middle Ages, the Eucharistic celebration was more God-centered than people-centered. It was now understood as God's action amongst his people.

In today's world Christ is calling us to eat his flesh and drink his blood. We have to avoid an overly literal understanding of these words. We do not literally eat flesh or drink blood. Jesus' command to eat his body and drink his blood can only make sense if we understand the words '**body**' and '**blood**' as designating the whole person; the real glorified Jesus, as he exists today. The full meaning of the Eucharist is in the eating and drinking of Christ's body and blood.

The value of Eucharistic food in today's world is of great importance. By baptism we enter the mystical body of Christ, which is the Church. By receiving the Eucharistic body of Christ we are strengthened and built up to be Christ-like. Through the Eucharistic celebration we are sustained and united to Christ as his own members. When we receive Christ worthily we become what we receive: Christ himself. It is only through the Holy Spirit that the gift of the Eucharistic Body of Christ comes to us and that we are joined to Christ and to each other as a family (the mystical Body of Christ).

The celebration of the Eucharist does not just unite us to God as individuals who are isolated from one another. Rather, we are united to Christ together with all the other

members of the mystical Body. The celebration of the Eucharist should thus increase our love for one another and remind us of our responsibilities toward one another. As members of the mystical Body, we have a duty to represent Christ and to bring Christ to the world. We have a responsibility to partake this spiritual food together as children of God.

In the Eucharist the Church both receives the gift of Jesus Christ and gives grateful thanks to God for such a blessing. This thanksgiving is the proper response for, through this gift of Christ himself in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist under bread and wine, Christ gives us the gift of eternal life.

Today we celebrate the understanding of the meal as a metaphor for us to emphasize the importance of the Holy Eucharist. Our present Eucharist is a special instance of the symbols of a meal, which provides a better reflection for us. This Eucharistic meal satisfies our spiritual hunger and thirst. In it we celebrate Christ, who is present among us and through us, in the sharing of bread and wine. At the same time, we also celebrate the mystery and faith of Christ's second coming. This we do in memory of him through a meal with our Lord, by breaking bread and gathering around the table eating his body and drinking his blood. This action satisfies our spiritual hunger, that we may be completely filled, and there will be no more hunger and thirst when we enter into Christ's glory in the world yet to come.

We live the Eucharist by allowing Christ to shine through us in our daily lives. Our faith will only be credible to others if we show forth the presence of Jesus in us. It is this responsibility that we carry forth, from our Eucharistic celebration, branded on our hearts and not on our shoulders.

We have to accept one fact, that the Last Supper was a paschal meal commemorating the liberation of the Israelite people. The Eucharist was to be the core of this paschal meal. It replaced all the ancient rites, which foreshadowed it.

The Eucharistic meal is an earthly meal, which was given to us as a gift of new bread and new wine. There was nothing new about the action of breaking bread and taking the cup, for the Jewish custom required that. What was new was Christ's own offer as he said, '**This is my body...this is my blood.**' (Mk 14:22-24) Before we receive Christ, the priest always says these words: "**This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, happy are those who are invited to this banquet**"³⁶, this is the full Eucharistic meal.

Some questions could still be asked: Why does it make sense for Catholics to believe in what has traditionally been changed from material bread and wine into Christ's own blood and body? Why is it important to say that the Eucharist is a concrete encounter of the community with Jesus and not just a spiritual thing between individuals and God? What does it mean that Jesus Christ is present in the Eucharist under the appearance of bread and wine? How does this happen? Are we cannibals, because we eat and drink the body and blood of Christ? Others say Christ developed the Eucharistic elements (bread and wine) according to the settings of the cultural background at the time, therefore why do we have to stick to that tradition, while living in different cultures? Is it not proper to do inculturation wherever one finds himself or herself? In the light of Christian faith and of this study, we can give different answers to these questions, but one thing remains constant, that the Holy Eucharist is a mysterious banquet. It is a mystery which cannot be fully explained and which finally has to be received in faith.

³⁶ The Sacramentary: The Roman Missal (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1985) 564.

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