

The Mass (Part XVIII)

by Fr. Tim Church

THE EUCHARIST

We will never exhaust the treasure that the Eucharist is for us. Even if we wrote about all that we know, we would spend a lifetime recording the words. And then, there is the realm of mystery for which words fail. So, we will say a little, with the qualification that it will be completely inadequate.

As we have said, the Mass is composed of two major parts, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. While we are reminded over and over again of the importance of both of these parts, when we come to speak of the Eucharist, we know we are stepping into the heart of what our relationship with God means. For here it is that we will participate in the sacrifice of the Son of God. Now that we know, we approach that table of perfect love with a trembling anticipation.

The origin of the Eucharist is in our Jewish roots, both in the Passover meal, and the table prayers of the Jewish family. The more familiarity we have with these, the more significance we come to see in the Mass. Of course, the Passover meal was a celebration of the Exodus, the freeing of the slaves in Egypt and the journey to the Promised Land. This is the center of Jewish history, the reference point that gives meaning to everything else. The meal was a ritual of remembering. The account of the Exodus was read or summarized, hymns of victory were sung and ritual food was shared.

Three food items were the most significant: unleavened bread, wine and a lamb. Each of these was both practical and symbolic. The unleavened bread was made quickly, the bread of haste for those on an urgent mission. The wine represented the joy of being recipients of God's protection, and the confidence that they shared in the future promises that he offered them. The lamb was sacrificed for them. Its blood was placed on the door of their houses to identify that they were members of the People of God. The blood saved them from the last plague, the death of the firstborn.

The roots of the Mass can be seen in the Jewish Passover. The symbolic characteristics of bread, wine and the lamb are all important for the Gospel. The bread becomes the Body of Christ, food for our journey through life as we move toward our destination of freedom in the Father's Kingdom. Wine becomes the Blood of Christ, which washes away our sin in preparation for our future judgment and our entrance into the eternal life of the Father's kingdom. We look forward to this with great joy. The Lamb is Christ sacrificed for us. Here, of course, is the center of the meaning of the Mass. Jesus gives himself to the Father on behalf of sinful humanity. The Passover, the Cross and the Mass are all intimately connected.

Even with its ritual elements, the Passover was a meal. And while the Mass has almost lost its obvious connection to a real meal, the institution of the Mass shared, with the Passover, its context in a meal. It is also called the Last Supper to help remind us that it was in a Jewish ceremonial meal that Christ gave

us the Mass. Now, it is also the “supper” of the Church in which we receive the gift of Jesus. He took bread and wine and made them the way in which he would give himself to us, his Body and Blood.

“At the Last Supper, Christ instituted the Paschal Sacrifice and banquet by which the Sacrifice of the Cross is continuously made present in the Church whenever the priest, representing Christ the Lord, carries out what the Lord himself did and handed over to his disciples to be done in his memory.”
(General Instruction of the Roman Missal, #72)