

All you need to know about...
The Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist



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What is it and what is the purpose of the Holy Eucharist?

- The Holy Eucharist is described as “the source and summit of the Christian life.”¹ This is because it is at the very centre of the practice of the Catholic faith.
- The Holy Eucharist is the name given to the bread and wine which are transformed into the body & blood of Jesus. This transformation (transubstantiation) takes place during the celebration of the Mass.
- The Holy Eucharist is consumed during Mass by all those eligible to receive it.
- Through the celebration of the Mass we commemorate the Last Supper and enter in to Jesus’ sacrifice at Calvary and his glorious resurrection. This is more than a remembrance: we become part of that event.
- In receiving Holy Communion we are united with Christ in a physical way and we enter more fully in to the Body of Christ. The more we receive Christ the more Christ-like we become.
- The Holy Eucharist is one of the seven Sacraments of the Church. As “the source and summit” of our faith the other sacramental celebrations lead us to the Eucharist.
- It is one of the three Sacraments of Initiation into the Church which are necessary for people to become full members of the Church. The other two Sacraments of Initiation are the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation.
- The Holy Eucharist derives from a Greek word which means ‘thanksgiving’.
- The Sacrament of The Holy Eucharist is also referred to as Holy Communion, Corpus Christi, the Blessed Sacrament, the Blessed Eucharist and the Precious Blood.

How did the Sacrament of The Holy Eucharist originate?

- The Holy Eucharist was instituted by Jesus. This happened at the Last Supper (Matthew 26:26-28, Mark 14:22-24, Luke 22:14-15) when Jesus was possibly sharing the Passover Meal with his disciples.
“While they were eating, Jesus took a piece of bread, gave a prayer of thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples. ‘Take and eat it,’ he said; ‘this is my body.’
Then he took a cup, gave thanks to God, and gave it to them. ‘Drink it, all of you.’
He said, ‘this is my blood, which seals God’s covenant, my blood poured out for the many for the forgiveness of sins.’ ”

These are the words and gestures now used by the priest who, in the person of Christ presides over the Holy Eucharist during the consecration.

- The transformation of the bread and wine takes place during the Eucharistic prayer after the ‘epiclesis’ when the Holy Spirit is called upon the gifts to become the Body and Blood of Christ.
- The bread eaten at the Last Supper was unleavened bread shared as part of the Passover Feast which Jesus and his disciples were possibly celebrating. This celebration remembers the events told in the Old Testament Book of Exodus where the Jewish people escaped from slavery in Egypt. Their departure from Egypt was so rapid that God instructed them to take no leavened bread (bread with yeast) with them. Thus, since the Exodus, as part of their observance of the Passover, people of the Jewish faith do not eat leavened bread.
- During his ministry Jesus gives many indications of what is to come: not only that he will die and rise again but that through this act of sacrifice he brings us eternal life. He tells us that we can be further strengthened and nourished by receiving him in a tangible way through the Eucharistic Feast. He also uses imagery and metaphors and performs miracles which all signpost towards this momentous event.

Jesus the Bread of Life (John 6:35-36): Jesus declares himself as the ‘Bread of Life.’ The discussion which takes place at this time makes reference to another event in the Old Testament: Manna in the desert (Exodus 16:1-18). Having escaped slavery in Egypt Moses led the Jewish people in to the desert where they remained for 40 years. God provided them food by sending them manna (bread from heaven) each day. Manna could not be stored and therefore had to be collected daily. Jesus describes himself as bread which will give eternal life and not just daily sustenance.

The Wedding Feast at Cana (John 2:1-11): Jesus transforms water into wine. This is his first miracle and, having witnessed it, Jesus’ disciples ‘believed in him.’

Jesus Feeds Five Thousand (Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:30-44, Luke 9:10-17, John 6:1-13): in this miracle Jesus not only transforms five loaves and two fish which feeds the entire crowd but afterwards there are twelve baskets of bread left over.

¹ Lumen Gentium referenced in the Catechism www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c1a3.htm

Jesus Feeds Four Thousand (Matthew 15: 32-38, Mark 8:1-10): A similar account is repeated in these two Gospels.

Jesus' teaching about prayer (Matthew 6:9-13, Luke 11:2-4): In teaching his disciples Jesus prays the prayer now commonly known as the Our Father or The Lord's Prayer. In this prayer we pray "Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Thus linking the idea of Jesus, whom we receive in the form of bread, to the forgiveness of sins.

The Road to Emmaus (Luke 24: 13-35): following the Resurrection it is only when Jesus says the blessing and breaks the bread that the disciples recognise him and realise he has risen from the dead.

Breakfast on the Shore (John 21: 1-14): This is the third occasion on which Jesus appears to the disciples following his resurrection and again, the narrative describes Jesus taking bread and sharing it with them.

- Following Jesus' resurrection and ascension in to Heaven the members of the Early Church focus upon the sharing of bread as being an intrinsic part of their communities' life.

Pentecost (Acts 2: 41-42): The conclusion to the Pentecost account describes how the believers share in the life of the Church.

St. Paul's Visit to Troas: (Acts 20:7-11), *The Storm at Sea* (Acts 27: 35-37) are examples of how the sharing of the meal were part of the lives of the newly established Church.

I Corinthians (10:16-17) St. Paul describes how, through Holy Communion, we are united as a Church.

I Corinthians (11:23-26) St. Paul retells the story of the Institution of the Sacrament and its significance for the Church.

When does the Sacrament of The Holy Eucharist take place for the first time?

- Communicants can receive the Holy Eucharist for the first time any time after they have reached the age of reason, seen by the Church as aged seven. The bishop or archbishop of each Diocese makes the decision as to when. In the Archdiocese of Birmingham children receive Holy Communion during the year in which they are 7 years old (Y3).
- The Holy Eucharist is usually received within the context of the celebration of the Mass.
- Traditionally First Holy Communion is celebrated in the summer either during the Season of Easter or on or around the Feast of Corpus Christi.
- Adults who are received in to the Church generally receive Holy Communion for the first time during the Easter Vigil Mass celebrated on Holy Saturday night.
- First Holy Communion is seen as a Parish celebration and it is usual for the children of the parish to receive the Sacrament together. In some Parishes this will take place at one of the Sunday Masses or at an additional Mass. Alternatively this may be spread over a number of Masses to accommodate all those wishing to participate in the celebration.

When does the Sacrament of The Holy Eucharist take place?

- The sacrifice of the Mass which makes the Holy Eucharist present is celebrated every day except on Good Friday and Holy Saturday before the Easter Vigil.
- The Holy Eucharist is usually received within the context of the celebration of the Mass. However, in some circumstances where a priest is unavailable to celebrate a weekday Mass, a Eucharistic Service may take place instead (Please note, that Eucharistic services should not take place instead of a school Mass).
- Those who are ill or too frail to attend Mass may receive Holy Communion at home or in hospital. Holy Communion is brought to them by a priest or deacon or an Extraordinary Minister of the Eucharist.

Where does the Sacrament of The Holy Eucharist take place?

- Mass is usually celebrated in Church. This is because the Church is the meeting place where the community comes together and it contains everything which is required for the celebration of Mass.
- Mass can also be celebrated in other buildings such as school halls and hospitals as well as outdoors. Some buildings such as hospitals have a chapel within them.
- Most churches and some chapels will have a tabernacle inside them where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved. The presence of the Blessed Sacrament is indicated by the Sanctuary Lamp being lit close to the tabernacle.

Can anyone receive the Holy Eucharist?

- Only baptised Catholics who have also received the Sacrament of Reconciliation may receive Holy Communion.

- Those wishing to receive Holy Communion must be in a state of grace. This means they are free from mortal or serious sin.
- You can only receive Holy Communion if you have upheld the Eucharistic Fast which means you have neither eaten food nor drink an hour prior to receiving.
- Holy Communion can also be received at a Eucharistic Service. Here the host has already been consecrated and therefore the celebration is not a Mass.
- Those who are unable to attend Mass can still receive Holy Communion brought to them by Eucharistic Ministers.

How many times can you receive the Holy Eucharist?

- Members of the Church can attend Mass and receive Holy Communion every day if they wish.
- However, the precepts of the Church require Catholics to go to Mass every Sunday (or the Saturday Vigil Mass) and all Holy Days of Obligation. Sundays are the day upon which Christians celebrate Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Attending a weekday Mass cannot replace the requirement to attend Sunday Mass.
- You can receive Holy Communion twice in the same day.

Who can celebrate Mass?

- Only an ordained bishop or priest is able to consecrate the bread and wine during the celebration of Mass.

Who has to be present at the Sacrament of the The Holy Eucharist?

- A priest can celebrate Mass on his own although this should not be the norm.
- All members of the community should participate in the celebration of Mass as required by the precepts of the Church (Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation).
- Other people may carry out other specific ministries as part of the celebration of Mass e.g. Deacon, altar servers, readers, Eucharistic Ministers.
- Non-Catholics can also attend Mass. They may be invited to receive a blessing at the time of Holy Communion.