

LET US PRAY - REFLECTIONS ON THE EUCHARIST

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During this Year of the Eucharist, I offer a series of articles on Eucharistic Spirituality:
Source of Life and Mission of our Church.

Article #2 – Eucharist and Church

A friend of mine told me that, when she was doing graduate work at the Notre Dame Center for Pastoral Liturgy, she was given this task in one of her courses: go visit three local parishes for Sunday worship, and then write down, from what you observe, the values that each parish believes in.

We express what we believe by the way we pray in common. The quality, the values, the ideals that a parish holds most dearly come out in the way it does eucharist Sunday after Sunday.

To reflect on the spirituality of eucharist, then, we must begin with the church. For the church and the eucharist are integrally connected. St. John Paul II had this in mind, in the opening part of his Encyclical on the Eucharist where he makes the equation that eucharist builds the church, and the church makes the eucharist.

He reminds us that it is *this celebration* that *constitutes* us as church, making us who we are: God's holy People, washed with water and the Holy Spirit, anointed a royal and priestly people with holy chrism, nurtured with both the word of God and the sacred bread and wine, and sent on mission and witness.

Prior to the Vatican Council, we had thought of church as a kind of clerical pyramid, with the pope at the top, and then the bishops, and then priests, and then women and men religious, and then finally, at the bottom, the people (who, as some preconciliar folks loved to quip: "prayed, paid, and obeyed").

Vatican II was a Copernican revolution in its recovery of the ancient biblical image of God's People, united in baptism and renewed in the Spirit to be a tangible sign of God's egalitarian love in our world.

Eucharist makes us this sign. Eucharist forms us as this People of God. It's at the heart of our lives and mission as God's faithful People. Not just *central* to who we are and what we do, it is *constitutive* of what we are and do.

Richard Gaillardetz puts it well: "When the faithful gather at the Lord's Table, the reception of the Body and Blood of Christ effects as well the transformation of the gathered community into the ecclesial Body of Christ. (*Crux*, 6/3/20)

What this means is something affirmed from the very beginning: no church without eucharist; no eucharist without church. Nathan Mitchell amplifies that this way: "Just as the *church* is constituted by the full, active participation of all God's people in the same eucharist, in one

prayer, at one altar, so the *eucharist* is never to be regarded as anything less than the act of the *whole* church, head and members.” It is not a private experience. It is never “Father’s Mass.” The Vatican’s Council’s landmark document on the church, *Lumen Gentium*, proclaimed the eucharist as “the source and summit of Christian life.” (No. 11)

We surely all have sensed this in our lives. We hunger for eucharist because it nourishes us and makes us who we are. Our personal prayer, our service in ministry, our ability to work through advancing years and through suffering and pain in our lives – all that finds its source and summit in the eucharist.

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them,” Jesus said. (Jn. 6:56) Life in Christ – our commitment to be church, our journey of faith in this community of believers – as individuals, our personal and corporate prayer, our own living out of our faith in our distinctive spiritualities that make us who we are both individually and as vowed members of religious communities – life in Christ has as its foundation the eucharistic banquet.

Eucharistic dining unites us to Jesus and to all of Jesus’ sisters and brothers. It deepens and strengthens these bonds of communion, already achieved in our baptism.

Eucharistic dining commits us to be a church with an inclusive love as expansive as is God’s mercy. It leads us to rejoice in celebrating God’s creative Spirit in which we are ‘churched’. “A church,” one commentator noted, “with no room for innovation, no creative means of resolving conflict, and no tolerance for diversity and difference among its members becomes a very stagnant and unfriendly place indeed.”

Eucharistic dining commits us to be a church, and individuals, of hospitality. A people, and individuals, that say: “We have space for you in our lives and we welcome you in.”

Eucharistic dining means we never come to liturgy as private persons, that we relish our role as members of the assembly (the most significant symbol in worship!), and that we enter into eucharist as *our* action, *our* way of praising God. Such dining commits us to the poor, and to the quest for making our communities of faith (both those where we worship and those where we live) inclusive, nonjudgmental, and nondiscriminatory.

Eucharistic dining commits us to work for the unity of Christians and to seek understanding and respect with non-Christians and non-believers. It forms us to be a community of reconcilers in our personal lives. And eucharistic dining commits us to live in hope.

