

A Meditation on the Holy Eucharist

Eleonore Stump carefully and rightly observes, "there is no one orthodox interpretation of the doctrine of the atonement and no one universally agreed upon interpretation of the Eucharist." Nonetheless, "the general Christian consensus includes the conviction that something about this rite makes a powerful connection between those participating in it and the passion and death of Christ" (*Locating Atonement*, pp 209-210). It is this "powerful connection" that I seek to bring out in what follows.

The Communal Nature of the Holy Eucharist

The Holy Eucharist is a communion with God and with one another. As a corporate activity, the Holy Eucharist is a response of thanksgiving for the work of redemption that Christ achieved for his Church. Because it is corporate, our orientation is not merely vertical as we individually look up to Christ in thanksgiving, but also horizontal and communal as we collectively look out to one another in love. As such, our personal standing with God is not the sole focus of the Holy Eucharist; our communal standing with one another is also in view. As we partake of the one loaf and one cup, we portray our unity with Christ and with one another (1 Corinthians 10:17; Ephesians 2:12-15).

Participating in the Holy Eucharist, therefore, while knowingly experiencing estrangement from other members of our spiritual family would be an instance of partaking in an "unworthy manner" (1 Corinthians 11:27-33). To be sure, the abuse at Corinth was in failing to "discern the body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:29), which likely involved some measure of disregard for other members of their community. To depreciate or dishonor any who are sanctified by Christ is to take what is holy and treat it as if it were profane. The Apostle Paul's charge to "examine" ourselves first at least entails evaluating our solidarity and unity in ways we relate to others who are also members of Christ's body (cf., 1 Corinthians 10:16-17; 11:28).

Collectively remembering and partaking of Christ's broken body and shed blood unites us in a number of ways. First, in approaching the Eucharist we show **our common status** as undeserved recipients of his costly grace. The loaf and cup demonstrate **our common need** for a final and sufficient atonement for sin. In addition, the elements express **our common confession** of Christ as the communal Host for the meal.

To appreciate the depth and extent of the Holy Eucharist, it is important to recall the backstory from Scripture. Passover is the commemoration and celebration of Israel's deliverance from slavery to Egypt and their freedom as a nation. In the tenth and worst of the plagues on Egypt, God instructed the Israelites to mark the doorposts of their homes with the blood of a slaughtered lamb and, upon seeing this, the Lord would pass over these homes and not bring death (Exodus 12:12-13). This led to Pharaoh's release of the Israelite slaves and to their subsequent freedom. The Passover event was to be celebrated annually by the whole community as a common and unifying experience for the nation. In so many ways, it defined the nation of Israel and fixed their identity as a people chosen by God.

Importantly, this Passover event came to mark a season of transitions. The old year transitions to the new (Exodus 12:2), from the rainy season/winter to the dry season/summer. The old leaven is cleared

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out to make way for the new, which symbolically portrays Israel's transition from bondage to freedom, from death to life (Exodus 12:15-20). Doorposts marked with the sacrificial blood of a lamb show the transition from God's judgment outside the threshold to his life-preserving favor inside.

In the New Testament we learn Jesus celebrated the Passover Meal with his disciples (Luke 22:15-20) and no doubt the images of the first Passover were powerfully present to them. Jesus leverages the bread and the wine to portray his impending death. Just as Israel was saved from slavery in Egypt by the death of a Passover lamb (Exodus 12:21), so believers in Christ are saved from slavery to sin by the death of our Passover Lamb (John 1:29; 1 Corinthians 5:7; Revelation 5:12). As with Israel's Passover lamb, Jesus too was without blemish or defect (Exodus 12:5; 1 Peter 1:19). Drinking from one cup and eating from one loaf emphasized the solidarity and identity of Jesus's disciples as God's people (Luke 22:17).

Moreover, the Supper binds us, not just to all those present to us, but also to the invisible Church of God, our eschatological community whose presence we will one day enjoy. In this solemn act of eating the bread and drinking from the cup we declare our transition from death to life, from estrangement to adoption, from solitude to solidarity, and from our bondage in sin to our freedom in Christ. Through these events and symbols, the whole community experiences a common and unifying spiritual experience as we partake of Christ our Passover. All this, and more, are behind and in the Holy Eucharist.

The Sacramental Nature of the Holy Eucharist

How, then, might this spiritual experience in the Holy Eucharist be known? How might God's grace be communicated to us? It is not in the administration of the elements alone, nor the mere mental recollection of all that Christ has done to which the elements point. Neither is Christ's presence localized in the bread or the wine, just as he is not present in the words of Scripture. Instead, we commune with and are nourished by the redemptive presence of Christ when the Holy Spirit unites our faith with those acts of eating and drinking. When we consume the elements representing the mystery of Christ's body and blood, our union with Christ and with one another is manifest and renewed. Furthermore, this repeated experience also elicits perseverance of the saints as God's Spirit makes us aware, again and again, of the depth and extent of God's love shown to us in the cross of Christ. In all these ways and more, the Holy Eucharist is God's way of mediating his grace to us and in us as he continually transforms us after his image into a people called by his Name.

Insofar as we eat the bread and drink the cup in faith, then we not only remember the benefits of Christ's death, but we also reenact our surrender to God's irresistible love shown to us in Christ's death (Romans 5:8). Although this reenactment is a historical reminder of when we first believed, it continually takes place in the current unfolding of our lives and serves to strengthen our resolve to love Christ more. What remains is heartfelt gratitude (hence "eucharist" = "thanksgiving") for so great a salvation that is offered by our Passover Lamb of God. As a people chosen by God's sheer mercy and amazing grace, we proclaim our transition from death to life until one day he comes to feast with us in eternity (Luke 22:18; 1 Corinthians 11:26; Revelation 19:9).