

THE EUCCHARIST THROUGHOUT HISTORY

BY VLADIMIR MAURICIO-PEREZ

A recent Pew survey found that two-thirds of Catholics do not believe that Christ is truly present in the Eucharist, but that it is a mere symbol. This serves as a wake-up call for better formation, not assuming that people know the basics of the Catholic faith.

To showcase the importance of the Eucharist in the Christian faith through history, we have created a timeline that highlights some of the key moments that prepared the way for the Eucharist in the Old Testament, its institution in the New Testament, and its practice and deeper understanding in subsequent centuries.

This timeline contains key words that repeat throughout the Scriptures, such as, lamb, bread, wine, blood, sacrifice, offering, etc. These key words all unite in the Eucharist and bear witness to the fact that Jesus literally meant that the bread and wine would become his Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity.



Old Testament

Foreshadowing

“Melchizedek king of Salem brought out **bread** and **wine**; he was a **priest** of God the Most High. And he blessed [Abram]” (Gen 14:18-19). He is said to foreshadow Christ’s priesthood, who also offered bread and wine: “[Melchizedek] is without father or mother or genealogy, and has neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a **priest** forever” (Heb 7:3). St. Jerome wrote in the 5th century, “Just as Melchizedek had done, the priest of the Most high, when he offered bread and wine in the prefiguration of him, he [Christ] too would present it in the truth of his own body and blood (*Commentary on Matthew IV*).

To deliver the Israelites from Egypt, God commands Moses to tell his people: “Your **lamb** shall be *without blemish*, a male... they shall take some of the **blood** and put it on the doorposts... They shall eat the **flesh** that night” (Ex 12: 5-8). St. Paul writes: “For Christ, our Paschal Lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor 5:7). Jesus is identified with the Passover lamb, and the eating of the lamb with the eating of Jesus’ body, as Jesus says: “For my **flesh** is food *indeed*, and my **blood** is drink *indeed*” (Jn 6:55).



MELCHIZEDEK

2.

PASSOVER LAMB

4.

1.

THE TREE OF LIFE

After eating the fruit from the forbidden tree, Adam and Eve are denied the fruit of the Tree of Life. Many Church Fathers saw the Tree of Life as a prefiguration of the Cross, and the fruit of the Tree of Life as a prefiguration of the Eucharist, the Body of Christ, which hung from the Cross. Revelation says that God will grant people to eat from the Tree of Life (Rev 2:7). Pseudo-Hippolytus writes around the 4th century, “So in place of the old tree, [Christ] plants a new one... For me the cross is the tree of eternal salvation; from it I nourish myself, from it I feed myself” (*On the Pasch*, L-LI). Also, St. Augustine says, “We too are fed from the Lord’s Cross... when we eat his body” (*On Psalm 100:9*).

3.

ISAAC

God tests Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his “only-begotten son Isaac” (Gen 22:2s). Isaac asks his father why there is a fire but no **lamb** for a burnt offering. Abraham responds: “God will provide himself the **lamb** for a burnt offering.” Jesus is the “**Lamb** of God” (Jn 1:29) offered in sacrifice for men, and he’s also the “only-begotten Son” of God (Jn 1:18).

5.

UNLEAVENED BREAD



In preparation for the Passover, God also commands his people to eat “unleavened **bread**” (Ex 12:15s), which was meant to symbolize the hurry with which they were fleeing Egypt — they did not have time to let it rise. According to Matthew and Mark, Jesus instituted the Eucharist on “the first day of Unleavened **Bread**” (Mt 26:17; Mk 14:12). In the Latin Rite, the Church still uses unleavened **bread** for the Eucharist, and sees the origin of this tradition in the Passover.

New Testament

Institution

“Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29). John the Baptist refers to Jesus with these words, drawing on the importance of the **lamb** in the Old Testament. It is in Jesus’ death and resurrection that these references come to fulfillment, and ultimately in the way he chose to stay “until the end of time,” that is, in the Eucharist. For this reason, the priest uses John the Baptist’s very words during the Mass as he elevates the consecrated Host: “Behold the **Lamb of God**, behold him who takes away the sins of the world.”

Jesus himself made it clear that he was not speaking metaphorically when he said, “I am the living **bread** which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this **bread**, he will live forever; and the **bread** which I shall give for the life of the world is **my flesh**” (Jn 6: 51). When the Jews take this to be ridiculous in the literal sense — “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (6:52) — Jesus reiterates that he’s not speaking metaphorically: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you... For my flesh is food *indeed*, and my blood is drink *indeed*” (6:53-55). And to extinguish any type of confusion, he adds a new word, “he who eats [Greek: *trogon*] me will live because of me” (6:57). In Greek, “*trogon*” means “chew” or “gnaw” and not just “eat.” Many of his disciples could not accept this *clear* teaching, “drew back and no longer walked with him” (6:60,66).



“THE LAMB OF GOD”

2.

NO MERE SYMBOLISM

4.



1.

BETHLEHEM

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, which in Hebrew means “House of **Bread**.”



3.

MIRACLE OF THE LOAVES

Jesus himself foreshadowed the Eucharist before instituting it in order to prepare his disciples to receive it. In the feeding of the five thousand, he performs the same four actions he will use during the Last Supper: “taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke, and gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds” (Mt 14:19). During the Last Supper, Matthew also writes, “Jesus took the bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body’” (26:26).



THE OUR FATHER

In the Gospel of Matthew, a unique word stands out during the Our Father prayer: “Give us this day our daily (Greek: *epiousios*) bread” (Mt 6:11). *Epiousios* is not used anywhere else in the Bible, except in Lk 11:3, in the same prayer. St. Jerome’s translation of Matthew into Latin is more literal and translates this word as “supersubstantial.” Supersubstantial means above all substance or superior to all things. Therefore, many Church Fathers understood the petition for “our supersubstantial bread” to refer to the Eucharist.

After the Israelites left Egypt, God sent them the manna, or **bread** from heaven, in the desert: “I will rain **bread** from heaven for you” (Ex 16:4). Jesus is the fulfillment of the manna, as he himself states: “Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died... I am the living **bread** which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this **bread**, he will live forever” (Jn 6: 49-51).

MANNA
6.

God commands Moses to build a Tabernacle and place the Ark of the Covenant in it, so that he may “dwell in their midst” (Ex 25:8). He then commands him, “And you shall set the **bread** of the Presence on the table before me always” (25:30). Later on, David ate this bread, which was given to him by the priest Abimelech: “So the priest gave [David] the **holy bread**, for there was no bread there but the bread of the Presence” (1 Sam 21:6). Jesus alludes to this episode and says, “Have you not read what David did, when he was hungry... how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence... I tell you, something greater than the temple is here” (Mt 12:1-8). He who is greater than the temple became the true **bread** of the Presence.

BREAD OF THE PRESENCE
8.

Isaiah 53 is a strong prefiguration of Christ in the Old Testament. It tells of a man who was “afflicted”. “But he was wounded for our transgressions... like a **lamb** that is led to the slaughter... although he had done no violence... he [made] himself an offering for sin.” The servant is compared to a **lamb** and to a **sacrificial offering**, and by his righteousness “will make many righteous.” Jesus is, again, the “Lamb of God,” who, as John says, is the “righteous”, and “the expiation for our sins” (1 Jn 2:2).

THE SUFFERING SERVANT
10.



7.

SPRINKLING OF BLOOD

After receiving the Law from God, “Moses took the **blood** and threw it upon the people, and said, ‘Behold the **blood** of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words’” (Ex 24:8). Jesus picks up this language and institutes a new covenant with his body and blood as the new sacrifice, during the Last Supper: “This chalice which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Lk 22:20).



9.

TODAH OFFERING

Today is Hebrew for “thanksgiving.” A todah sacrifice was a type of peace offering that was offered by someone who had received a great benefit from God. Its elements were **meat, bread and wine** (Lev 7:11-15; Num 15:8-10). Eucharist comes from the Latin *eucharistia*, which also means “thanksgiving.” In the Eucharistic sacrifice, the bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus. Many scholars have considered both the Todah and the Passover sacrifices as foreshadows of the Eucharist.



At the Last Supper, which took part in the context of the Passover, Jesus draws many of the aforementioned symbolisms and unites them in the Institution of the Eucharist. Jesus takes the bread, breaks it, and says, “This is my body which is given for you” (Lk 22:19). He then takes the chalice and says, “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (22:20). He then commands them, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Scholars have noted that although the supper was done in the context of the Passover, no Passover lamb is ever mentioned: Jesus, himself is the Passover lamb (1 Cor 5:7).

INSTITUTION OF THE EUCHARIST
6.

In Acts of the Apostles, the apostles and disciples celebrated the Eucharist: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). As previously mentioned, the “breaking of the bread” referred to the Eucharist, as Christ instituted it at the Last Supper. There are many other examples: “On the first day of the week [Sunday], when we were gathered together to break bread...” (Acts 20:7).

FIRST CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES
8.

In the Book of Revelation, John shows that the Eucharistic worship corresponds with and finds its fulfillment in the heavenly worship, “the marriage supper of the Lamb” (Rev 19:19). John provides powerful images that correspond to the Mass, showing that Christians already partake in the heavenly worship. In Rev 4-5, John describes the Passover Lamb, the elders — *presbyteros*, which is the Greek word for priests — the proclamation of God’s revelation, incense, songs, angels, prayer, the “Holy, Holy, Holy,” prostration, etc. These elements show that the Mass is not an invention of the Church, but that it is a gift in which Christians already partake in the perfect heavenly worship.

REVELATION
10.

7.

ROAD TO EMMAUS

The last chapter of the Gospel of Luke (24:13-35) gives a brief description of the Mass that the disciples would partake in, highlighting the two parts of the liturgy: The Liturgy of the Word and then the Liturgy of the Eucharist. As two disciples were traveling to Emmaus from Jerusalem on the Sunday after the crucifixion of Jesus, Jesus himself draws near them, though they do not recognize him. First, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to them in all the **Scriptures** the things pertaining to himself” (24:27). When he sat at the table with them, “he took the bread, and blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him.” They went back to Jerusalem and in amazement told the disciples “what had happened in the road and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread” (24:35). The Resurrected Christ is found in the Eucharist.

9.

ST. PAUL

St. Paul asserts that the Eucharist is truly the body and blood of Christ, and there are consequences for those who partake in it unworthily. “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?” (1 Cor 10:16). He also writes to the Corinthians saying, “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor 11:23-29).



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Church History

Practice & Understanding

Also known as “The Lord’s Teaching Through the Twelve Apostles to the Nations,” this Early Christian writing from the first century mentions the importance of confessing one’s sins before receiving communion and talks explicitly about the Eucharist. “But every Lord’s day [Sunday] gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure” (XIV). “Now concerning the Thanksgiving [Eucharist], thus give thanks. First concerning the cup... And concerning the broken bread...” (IX).



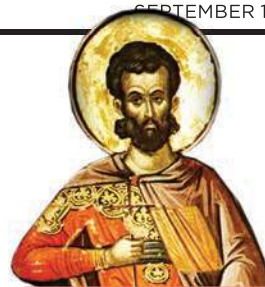
DIDACHE

ca. 60-100

Ignatius of Antioch, who had been a disciple of St. John, said regarding those who held “heterodox opinions,” that “they abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, flesh which suffered for our sins and which the Father, in his goodness, raised up again” (*Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 6:2, 7:1).

ST. IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

ca. 110 A.



“Not as common bread or common drink do we receive these; but since Jesus Christ our Savior was made incarnate by the word of God and had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so too, as we have been taught, the food which has been made into the Eucharist by the Eucharistic prayer set down by him, and by the change of which our blood and flesh is nourished... is both the flesh and the blood of that incarnated Jesus” (*First Apology* 66:1-20).

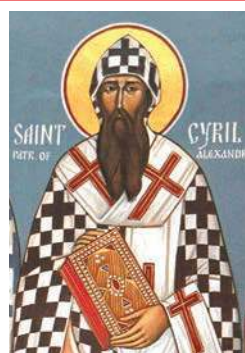
ST. JUSTIN MARTYR

ca. 150 A.D.

“You are accustomed to take part in the divine mysteries, so you know how, when you have received the Body of the Lord, you reverently exercise every care lest a particle of it fall and lest anything of the consecrated gift perish” (*Homilies on Exodus* 13:3).

ORIGEN

ca. 244 A.D



“Do not, therefore, regard the bread and wine as simply that, for they are, according to the Master’s declaration, the body and blood of Christ. Even though the senses suggest to you the other, let faith make you firm” (*Catechetical Discourses: Mystagogic* 4:22:9).

ST. CYRIL OF JERUSALEM

ca. 350 A.D.

“It is the true Flesh of Christ which was crucified and buried, this is then truly the Sacrament of His Body. The Lord Jesus Himself proclaims: “This Is My Body” (*On the Mysteries* 9, 53-54).

ST. AMBROSE OF MILAN

ca. 387 A.D.

A great debate arose when in the 11th century, Berengar of Tours assured that it was not necessary to talk about material change in the elements when explaining the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. The **Fourth Lateran Council** reaffirmed in 1215 what the Church had believed for centuries by using a fairly-new term: “Transubstantiation.” While not attached to a specific metaphysics, this term was used to explain that the essence of bread and wine became the true Body and Blood of Christ, even if the appearances of bread and wine remained intact.

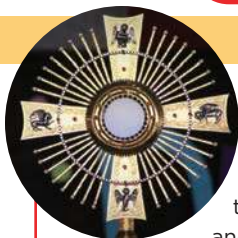
“TRANSUBSTANTIATION”

1215

Thomas Aquinas gave the greatest theological explanation of the meaning of transubstantiation. In addition, he was commissioned to write the hymns for the Feast of Corpus Christi. He wrote such hymns as *Pange Lingua*, *Tantum Ergo* and *O Salutaris Hostia*.

THOMAS AQUINAS

1225-1274



In the Early Church, the adoration of the Body and Blood of Christ was restricted to the Eucharistic celebration and communion, and Fathers such as Augustine and Ambrose encouraged an attitude of adoration during Mass. However, in hopes of repairing for the controversies and blasphemies of some against the Eucharist, faithful such as St. Juliana of Liege, requested in the 13th century a greater adoration outside of Mass. This request, coupled with the Eucharistic miracle of Bolsena, Italy, in 1264, led Pope Urban IV to institute the Feast of *Corpus Christi* (“The Body of Christ”).

FEAST OF CORPUS CHRISTI

1264

The Council of Trent reaffirmed that it was not reasonable to say that the Real Presence was limited to the moment of reception, as Martin Luther held, but that it remained afterward. The fact that the Presence did not depend on the act of reception was evident not only in Tradition, but also in the Gospels. Early Christians frequently took the Eucharist to the homebound or on long journeys, or even received the Blessed Sacrament a couple days after its consecration, as is documented in writings of the Church Fathers. Following Jesus’ words in the Gospels, it is evident that the Body and Blood became so before reception and not because of it.

THE REAL PRESENCE REMAINS

1551

As a practical consequence of Eucharistic Adoration, the practice of making frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament became more popular. St. Alphonsus of Liguori gave a new impulse to this practice through his popular book *Visits to the Blessed Sacrament*, published in 1745, which went through 40 editions in his lifetime. Some religious orders also began practicing perpetual adoration around this time.

VISITS TO THE BLESSED SACRAMENT

1745

Pope Pius X would come to be known as the “Pope of the Blessed Sacrament” by many. Other than restoring the practice of Gregorian Chant, he promoted daily communion, assuring that it is the shortest way to Heaven. He also lowered the age of First Communion from 12 to 7 years old, which was considered the “age of discretion.”

POPE PIUS X

1903-1914

The Second Vatican Council was held to address the relation between the Church and the modern world. Among the modifications established, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy sought to reform and promote the liturgy. Some of these reforms included a wider use of the vernacular language during the liturgy and a greater participation of the congregation. It’s implementation has been the subject of much discussion, and for many, various changes associated with it were never intended by the Council Fathers.

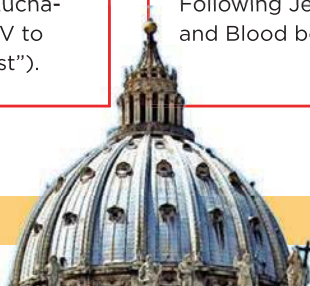
VATICAN II’S LITURGICAL REFORM

1962-1965

Over 35 years after the Missal was updated in 1970, following the Second Vatican Council, Pope Benedict XVI allowed priests to celebrate the Tridentine Mass – often referred to as the Traditional Latin Mass – using the 1962 Missal, with a group of faithful “who, of their own will, asked to be admitted.” The Pope assured that the “new rite” from 1970 did not null the “old rite,” last published in 1962. Instead, he said they must be seen as a “twofold use” of the same rite.

SUMMORUM PONTIFICIUM

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