In Memoriam
1920 - 2005

"You — the People of God in Newark and throughout New Jersey — are the “living stones” (1 Pet 2:5) which make up the Body of Christ in the midst of your city and state. Wherever you are — in your families, neighborhoods, places of work or recreation — you are called to build up the Church in faith, hope and love."

Joannes Paulus II

Cathedral Basilica of the Sacred Heart
October 4, 1995

Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him.

WORD ON WORSHIP COMMEMORATES
POPE JOHN PAUL II
BEING AND DOING: DEFINING EUCHARIST

When you hear the word “Eucharist,” what is the first thing that comes to mind? Bread and wine? Sunday morning Mass? Receiving communion? What about things like tables or tabernacles, altars or monstrances? Do you envision Jesus at the Last Supper or the bishop presiding at the cathedral? Do concepts like “transubstantiation” or “source and summit” come to mind? All of these images represent different ways of understanding the Eucharist, reminding us that no single image is sufficient to hold such a great divine mystery. It seems reasonable that the more we broaden our understanding of the Eucharist, while remaining within the spectrum of Church teaching, the better capable we become of authentically celebrating this great sacrament.

The essential question that we are faced with when giving definition to the Eucharist is one of being and doing. Is the Eucharist something that exists or something that is lived? At first glance, one might think that these ideas oppose, but this article will look at how these ideas complement each other. This will be done by first looking at the history of Eucharistic understanding and practice and secondly by addressing the Eucharistic topics of “Lord’s Supper or Last Supper?”

“Action or Object?” and “Sacrifice or Supper?”

BRIEF HISTORY

When the early Christians gathered for Eucharist, they met in homes, ate at a dining room table and baptized people in modified bathing tubs. There were no altars as such and there were certainly no tabernacles. However, there is evidence that the early Christians recognized that there was something different about the bread they consumed in memory of Jesus Christ. Justin Martyr around 150 AD records a Sunday morning celebration of the Eucharist. During communion he notes:

... those whom we call ‘deacons’ distribute the eucharistified bread and the wine... over which the eucharist has been spoken, to each of those present, they also carry them to those who are absent.¹

Clearly this “eucharistified” bread was special to them, or else they could have told the deacons to go to the homes of “those who are absent” and take any piece of bread and give it to them. No, they had to take from the table where they all celebrated together and bring some of that food to the sick. There are also records of Christians taking some of the Eucharistic bread home to eat during the week (this is long before regular daily Masses). Again, it is an indicator that the bread was regarded as somehow changed, somehow different. To consume what one had at home would not be as meaningful as bringing some of the bread from the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist.

Although the early Christians perceived the bread and wine to be different after celebrating the Eucharist, they probably had a deeper understanding of the Eucharist as a meal than as just the sacred food items (transformed bread and wine). In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians², he is greatly concerned over abuses that have crept into the Eucharistic celebration because it occurs in the setting of a meal. He indicates that they should just celebrate the Eucharist when they come together and dine at home to avoid drunkenness or other inappropriate behavior at the Lord’s Supper. This may have been the beginning of a Eucharistic understanding which moved from recognizing Christ’s presence at the meal to seeing Christ primarily in the sacred food items of bread and wine.

Over time, the accent on the bread and wine became so extreme that in the Middle Ages there were some thinkers who confused the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ with the historical Jesus, claiming that what they were eating and drinking was literally the flesh and blood of Jesus. Fortunately, brilliant theologians like Thomas Aquinas helped to resolve some of these questions with concepts like transubstantiation in which it was possible to explain that the Eucharist took on the substance of Jesus Christ, body, soul and divinity, while retaining the appearance (accidents) of bread and wine.

During the Middle Ages, with misunderstandings regarding the flesh of Jesus in holy communion, people became fearful of consuming the body and blood of Christ. In place of eating the Eucharist, they preferred to look upon it. Lay people would go to Mass for the experience of seeing the moment of change in which the bread and wine became the body and blood of Christ. There is even an infamous record of someone yelling “Heave it higher, sir priest!” during the elevation of the elements at Mass in order to get a better view. While the people’s desire to see the Eucharist increased, their level of participation in the Mass decreased.

The desire to see the Eucharist by people who rarely ate it extended well beyond the Mass. Eucharistic exposition, benediction and processions with the Eucharist grew in popularity. Yet, even throughout this period, the Church’s documents were always careful to make connections between Eucharistic devotions and the Mass. In fact, directives for exposition and benediction were normally included in the
Roman Missal itself. It is only in more modern times that separate texts have been published with norms for Eucharistic devotions. In addition, throughout the Middle Ages, the church continued to exhort the people to receive communion, even though fewer people were doing so.¹

Some devotional practices where the object is to look upon the Eucharist as opposed to eat it may seem odd to the modern reader which is due to later developments in the history of this sacrament. During the early 20th Century, Pope Pius X, in an effort to encourage more people to receive communion, lowered the age of first communion to the age of reason (around 7 years old). It can be said that this action on the part of the pope was quite successful as is witnessed by the larger number of people who receive communion today. This move did, however, have the unintended effect of reordering the sacraments of initiation. After the lowering of the age of first communion, children began receiving the Eucharist before they received confirmation. For nearly two thousand years before this change, the sacraments of initiation were received in the order of baptism first, confirmation second, and finally Eucharist.

After Pius X and further liturgical reforms which culminated with the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, there was an increase in the assembly's participation in the Mass. A healthy balance was restored in which the Eucharist was understood as both the transformed elements of bread and wine and as a sacramental meal in which Christ is known, not only in the elements but in the minister, the word proclaimed and the assembly gathered.²

After the liturgical reforms of the 20th Century, the people were able to participate more fully in the liturgy and the church experienced a decline in Eucharistic devotions. In more recent times, there has been a resurgence of Eucharistic devotions such as exposition and benediction. The Holy Father commends these practices: "The worship of the Eucharist outside of the Mass is of inestimable value for the life of the Church... It is the responsibility of pastors to encourage, also by their personal witness, the practice of Eucharistic adoration..."³

However, the pope does not necessarily call for an increased implementation in these practices during the year of the Eucharist, but rather he states:

As I wrote in my Apostolic Letter Novo Millennio Ineunte, "it is not a matter of inventing a 'new program.' The program already exists: it is the plan found in the Gospel and in the living Tradition; it is the same as ever. Ultimately, it has its center in Christ himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated..."³ The implementation of this program of a renewed impetus in Christian living passes through the Eucharist.

In other words, instead of thinking up new things to be done in our churches with the Eucharist, the Holy Father wants us to examine how we are celebrating and living the Eucharist in our Sunday and weekday celebrations as well as devotions. We are urged to make certain that our Eucharistic practices are being done well, according to the rites and practices of the Church.⁴

LORD'S SUPPER OR LAST SUPPER?

Lord's Supper or Last Supper: what's the difference? In brief, the Last Supper is an historical event which took place two thousand years ago in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. It is the primary source of the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is what has been celebrated by Christians since the very beginning of the Church and is still celebrated every Sunday throughout the world today.

The Last Supper, the event with which we Catholics are so familiar, took place on the night before Jesus died when he gave bread and wine to his disciples at a Passover (or a Passover influenced) meal. Instead of connecting the meal with the Passover lamb of the Old Testament, he connected the meal with his own pending sacrifice, the sacrifice of the Lamb of God, who came to take away the sins of the world. He did this most specifically when distributing the bread before the meal ("this is my body") and when passing the final cup after the meal ("this is my blood"). Jesus' command to "do this in memory of me" gave birth to the practice of the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper is the ritual meal celebrated to commemorate the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ in which the Lord is uniquely present. The first people who celebrated this ritual meal wanted to be clear that the Lord's Supper was not just a reenactment of what Jesus had done the night before he died but was meant to commemorate the entire life of Christ. This is a positive insight because it helps to expand and deepen the meaning of the Eucharist right
There are many Eucharistic references in the gospels beyond the Last Supper which give deeper meaning to the Lord's Supper. Scripture scholars have pointed out that one way we can be sure that the evangelists are referencing the Eucharist is not by a repetition of Jesus' words, but of his actions. It is true, for example, that when Jesus performs the miracle of the loaves and fishes, he does not say, "take this all of you and eat it; this is my body." However, all versions of the miracle of the loaves (and fishes) in the gospels do contain the same actions of Jesus as found at the Last Supper: "taking," "blessing/thanking," "breaking" and "giving." It is more than a coincidence that the gospel writers used these same verbs to describe both the miracle and the Last Supper. So powerful are these actions of Jesus that they have given shape to the liturgy of the Eucharist from scriptural times to the present day. With a variety of Eucharist themed meals in the gospels, we realize that this special sacrament commemorates more than just one meal in the life of Jesus Christ. In fact, not only does it commemorate the occasions on which Jesus broke bread with his disciples, but the Eucharist recalls the entire life of Jesus. As the Holy Father notes, "The Eucharist is indelibly marked by the event of the Lord's passion and death, of which it is not only a reminder but the sacramental re-presentation." What is commemorated at the Lord's Supper is not just the Last Supper, but rather the entire saving action of Jesus Christ which "includes not only his passion and death but also his resurrection." The Last Supper is permanently enshrined in the memory of the Church as the night in history that Jesus of Nazareth gave us the Eucharist. The Lord's Supper which we celebrate today not only makes us present to that meal of long ago, but to the entire Paschal Mystery of Christ alive in our midst, at our table, in the breaking of our bread.

**Action or Object?**

Action or object – which best describes the Eucharist? As Catholics we believe that Christ is most truly present to us in our world through the Eucharist, but we are also very aware that Christ did not reveal who God is to us by merely being present to us. We know from the gospels that Jesus made God known in many ways: parables, miracles, teachings, and most importantly through his death and resurrection. It was by both being and doing that Jesus Christ fulfilled his mission in the world.

Much ink has been spilt especially since Vatican II on the concept of the Eucharist as an action versus the concept of the Eucharist as an object. Unfortunately, one is sometimes left with the feeling that one must be right and the other must be wrong. In some cases, this manifests itself in overly pious actions by individuals during Mass or a refusal on the part of the "local authorities" to admit Eucharistic devotions into the life of the parish. Consequently, the liturgy becomes a sign of division with different camps praying in different ways to make "theo-political" statements. Nothing could be more antithetical to the very essence of the Eucharist in which we pray, "Grant that we, who are nourished by his body and blood, may be filled with his Holy Spirit, and become one body, one spirit in Christ."
Deeper reflection reveals that the relationship between the action and the object of Eucharist is complimentary. One cannot exist without the other. The object of the Eucharist, that is the transformed elements of bread and wine, exists to bring about an action: the transformation of God’s people into the body of Christ. Nathan Mitchell summarizes: “Action (liturgy) produces object (the sacramental species); but the object is destined for one more action (eating and drinking by God’s people). The Eucharist is never destined to remain an object...it is always returned to the people in the form of spiritual food and drink.”16

We who receive the object of holy communion are meant not only to reverence this great presence but to do something with what we have received. Having encountered Christ in a deeply personal way at the table of the Lord, we are compelled to carry out God’s will, build up the Kingdom of God on earth and, like Mary, cooperate in God’s great plan of salvation for the world.

So, is the Eucharist an action or an object? Kevin Irwin, in his article “Models of the Eucharist,” comments on the benefits of a plurality of Eucharistic understandings when he writes:

A far better Catholic rhetoric is both-and. When traditional “Catholic” concepts about the Eucharist are juxtaposed with equally traditional concepts about the Eucharist such as sacrificial meal and foretaste of the totally “real” presence of Christ in the Kingdom of heaven... then a clarity of vision and an integral understanding of what the Eucharist is and means can result.”17

In other words, we are stronger in our belief in the Eucharist when a greater amount of valid ideas and practices are permitted to flourish in the life of the Church, but we are weakened in our faith in the Eucharist when we are overcompelled to carry out God’s own mission. The Eucharist is not only to reverence this great presence but to use it in our liturgy (the sacramental species) to unite the faithful with Christ himself as the head. “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.” (1 Corinthians 12:12). Which way is the Eucharist best described? As Irwin implies, the answer is not a choice of either action or object, but an incorporation of both action and object.

**SACRIFICE OR SUPPER?**

With a return of the meal concept of the Eucharist, concern is sometimes expressed that the sacrificial nature of this sacrament may be obscured. At the Last Supper, “Jesus did not simply state that what he was giving them to eat and drink was his body and blood; he also expressed its sacrificial meaning and made sacramentally present his sacrifice which would soon be offered on the cross for the salvation of all.”18 Once again, however, we see an intense complimentary relationship between these two concepts of sacrifice and supper.

The Eucharistic prayers of the Church are themselves central to uniting the sacrifice of Christ with the Lord’s Supper. All contain sacrificial language such as: “We offer you in thanksgiving this holy and living sacrifice,” (Eucharistic Prayer III)19 and “We offer you his body and blood, the acceptable sacrifice which brings salvation to the whole world” (Eucharistic Prayer IV).20 Other prayers in the Roman Missal emphasize the sacrificial aspects of the Eucharist such as Easter preface #5 which states, (Jesus) “...showed himself to be the priest, the altar and the lamb of sacrifice.”21 The church does not want us to forget that this is not only a joyful celebration of the life of Christ, but it is also a recollection that the mission of the Son of God could not be completed without his supreme self-sacrifice.

At one time it was commonly held that every time a Mass was celebrated, Jesus was “sacrificed” on the altar to God. This implied that Jesus needed to continually be sacrificed in order to redeem the world, but nothing could be further from the truth. “The Mass makes present the sacrifice of the cross; it does not add to that sacrifice nor does it multiply it.”22 The celebration of the Mass does, however, make “Christ’s one, definitive redemptive sacrifice always present in time.”23 At Mass, the salvific acts of Jesus are not repeated, but we do experience the one-time sacrifice of Christ each time we celebrate the Eucharist.

Jesus always made use of things and ideas that were second nature to humanity which were then transformed with divine meaning. Jesus’ gift of the Eucharist taps into a primordial truth of all living things: no meal comes without a sacrifice. In order for any living thing to exist, another living thing must die. Christ knew that he had to sacrifice himself in order that we might live.
Aidan Kavanagh, a liturgical theologian, expresses concern that modern humanity is too out of touch with the regular sacrifices which sustain our lives: “Suburbia prefers its meat wrapped in plastic, all signs of violence removed so as to reduce the necessity of entering into the dark and murderous transaction with reality which one creature’s giving up its life for another entails.” If we do not retain a sense of gratitude for the sacrifices of creation so that we may live from day to day, how can we possibly offer true thanks – Eucharist – for the greatest sacrifice of all?

Using the image of the lamb in reference to Christ, Kavanagh presses the importance of remembering the sacrifice of Jesus with the meal of the Lord’s Supper:

We had to learn how to... commerce in vital deaths so that the communion of all in all might be restored. There could be no shortcuts. We had to look the lamb lovingly in the eye as we cut its lovely throat, and we had to keep that awful memory as we dined thankfully upon its flesh to live. Without this unspeakable memory, we found that we grew quickly cold once again – calculating, unworldly about World, forgetful that the carrots we pulled in our gardens and the wheat we cut in our fields died no less really than the lamb of liquid eye so that we might live. And we entertained the distant possibility that our own lives might have to be yielded up in the same spirit for the life of all; that, as someone finally once said, we could discover life only in throwing it away.

Indeed, Christ teaches us how to receive the gift of life thankfully while being supremely aware of the sacrifice made so that we might live. We are to remember not only the carrots and the cattle which give their lives for our mortal existence, but the sacrifice of Christ who gave his own flesh and blood that we might live forever.

CONCLUSION

Object and action; noun and verb; food and meal; all are different ways of defining the Eucharist as something that “is” and as something that is “done.” The being of the Eucharist is the real presence of Christ found in the appearance of bread and wine. The doing of the Eucharist is the building up of God’s kingdom. Not only do each of these ways of thinking define what Eucharist is, but each is absolutely dependent on the other for meaning.

Defining Eucharist does not end with being and doing – the New Testament is clear that the Eucharist only finds its full meaning when its ultimate purpose is fulfilled. The gospel of John distinctly records that on the same night Jesus broke bread and shared a cup of wine saying, “Do this in memory of me,” he also washed the feet of his disciples saying, “As I have done, so you must do.” The message is clear: when the church celebrates the Eucharist, Christ is really and truly present in the elements of bread and wine, and when the Church washes feet through service, Christ is really and truly present in those whom we serve. We cannot dine on the body and blood of Christ if there are people in our midst who are hungry.

...John relates, as a way of bringing out its profound meaning, the account of the washing of the feet, in which Jesus appears as teacher of communion and of service (cf. Jn 13:1-20). The Apostle Paul, for his part, says that it is “unworthy” of a Christian community to partake of the Lord’s Supper amid division and indifference towards the poor (cf. 1 Cor 11:17-22, 27-34).

Lord’s Supper and Last Supper; action and object; sacrifice and supper: these are just some of the complimentary ways we understand the Eucharist. They temper each other in order that we may gain a healthy understanding of this divine mystery among us. Perhaps the greatest test of a Eucharistic understanding is where it leaves us. The Eucharist needs to move us from the altars of our churches to the altar of the world, making great sacrifices of ourselves in imitation of Christ. The Eucharist nourishes us to give witness to God’s real presence in the world by serving others and building up the Kingdom of God on earth.

Rev. Thomas A. Dente
Director
Office of Divine Worship


See Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 75.

For a detailed history of Eucharistic thought and practice, see Nathan Mitchell, Cult and Controversy: the
Worship of the Eucharist
Outside Mass (The Liturgical
Press, Collegeville, MN, 1982).

* Sacrosanctum Concilium, 7.

* Pope John Paul II, Ecclesia de
Eucharistia (Rome, April 17,
2003), 25.

* Ibid, 60.

* Note that "The faithful should be
made conscious of the
preeminence of the Liturgy over
any other possible form of
legitimate Christian prayer.
While sacramental actions are
necessary to life in Christ, the
various forms of popular piety
are properly optional. "
(Directory on Popular Piety and
the Liturgy, 11).

* Recall that all the gospels were
written after the Last Supper
took place by people who were
regularly celebrating the Lord's
Supper, so the recording of any
meal in the New Testament
could be interpreted
Eucharistically.

* For a more detailed but readable
treatment of the differing
Eucharistic theologies found in
the New Testament, see Jerome
Kodell, The Eucharist in the
New Testament (The Liturgical

* "Taking" = Preparation of the
Gifts, "Blessing/thanking" =
Eucharistic Prayer, "Breaking"
= Fraction Rite and "Giving" =
Distribution of Communion.

* See Lk 24:28-31, Jn 21:9-14

* Pope John Paul II, Ecclesia de
Eucharistia (Rome, April 17,
2003), 11.


* Eucharistic Prayer III, The
Roman Missal (Catholic Book
Publishing Co., NY, 1985) p
554.

* Nathan Mitchell, Cult and
Controversy: The Worship of the
Eucharist Outside Mass (The
Liturgical Press, Collegeville,
MN, 1982) p 347.

* Kevin Irwin, "Models of the
Eucharist" (Origins Vol 31:No

* Pope John Paul II, Ecclesia de
Eucharistia (Rome, April 17,
2003), 12.

* The Roman Missal (Catholic
Book Publishing Co., NY, 1985)
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Worship of the Eucharist
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Word on Worship bids farewell to the Director of the Worship Office, Sr. Sandra DeMasi, S.S.J., who has served 13 years in the office, 9 of them as Director. She is moving on to be assistant administrator of Maris Stella Retreat and Conference Center in Harvey Cedars, Long Beach Island, NJ. Sr. Sandy’s liturgical talents will be greatly missed along with her excitement and enthusiasm for teaching others about the worship of the Church.

During her time with the Office, Sr. Sandy promoted the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (for adults and children). She also took on a leadership role in moving the archdiocese to separate catechumens and candidates as they prepared for the rites of initiation. Sr. Sandy has helped many parishes establish the liturgy of the word with children ensuring that they followed the guidelines of the Church to prepare the children for full participation in the Sunday assembly. Being computer savvy, Sr. Sandy built up the web site and kept up with electronic mailings to parishes with liturgical information.

Sr. Sandy was herself a board member and a contributing member to Word on Worship, served on the Liturgical Commission of the Archdiocese of Newark, was a presenter for NCEA and took responsibility for the liturgical formation of parochial school teachers. She was elected as one of two representatives from Region 3 (NJ & PA) to the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions and served as a consultant for ICEL on the Christian initiation of catechetical age children.

During her tenure, Sr. Sandy helped prepare and execute numerous liturgies including the Papal Visit of 1995, Catechetical Congresses, New Jersey Principal Conferences, not to mention a myriad of liturgical celebrations in the Cathedral Basilica of the Sacred Heart. We will continue to count on Sr. Sandy for contributions to Word on Worship and we look forward to seeing her first book on adapting the RCIA for catechetical age children published by RCL Publishing.

Of her time in the office, Sr. Sandy remembers working in the parishes of the archdiocese as her most favorable experience. Of the liturgy, she is most fond of quoting the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: The Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life. “It’s all in all” she says, quoting the founder of her order, the Sisters of St. Joseph, indicating the pervasive importance of liturgy and the Eucharist in the life of the Church. Word on Worship sadly bids Sr. Sandy farewell, but joyfully wishes her all the best in her new ministry.

Director of Worship Office Resigns

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POPE JOHN PAUL II MEMORIAL CARDS
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The Worship Office has available In Remembrance Prayer Cards for Pope John Paul II for parishes, schools, catechetical programs, Religious houses, etc. The color card is 2 3/4" x 4 7/8" and has a picture of the Holy Father taken at Giants Stadium. They are sold in packs of 100. The cards can be picked up at any time or can be shipped.

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