

The Holy Eucharist

By

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Jesus instituted the Holy Eucharist the night he was handed over to suffering and death as a means of grace whereby we recall his sacrifice by bringing what happened in the past into the present. It is the central and most sacred act of communal Christian worship. The word Eucharist comes from the Greek “thanksgiving.” Christians celebrate this sacrament as a thanksgiving for God’s saving act in history through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Another article in *Sacred Music America* says, “The Anglican Communion is a part of the mainstream of Christian faith. Its understanding of the value and purpose of music is not uniquely its own. Anglicanism merely calls attention to the fact that the Christian doctrines of creation, incarnation, and sanctification constitute the essence of sacred music.” Something like this also characterizes the way we look at the Eucharist. The grace, ordered cadence and excellent language of the liturgy set it apart from ordinary experience. These resist overly subjective interpretation of God’s grace. The spiritual body and blood of the resurrected Christ will become objectively present during the prayer of consecration. Anglicans typically affirm the real presence while refusing to define how it happens.

The following explanation of the Holy Eucharist is based on Rite I of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer (BCP)* of the Episcopal Church in the United States. The liturgy is divided into two parts:

The Word of God: The first part of the liturgy originated in the ancient synagogue worship of the Jews. There are an opening anthem, a hymn of praise, and a reading of as many as three lessons from the Bible: the Old Testament, Epistle (or other non-gospel sections of the New Testament), and one of the four Gospels. Psalms and hymns may be said or sung between the lessons. At the conclusion of the reading or singing of the gospel, the priest (or other person) delivers a sermon appropriately based on one of the texts that have just been read. Hearing what God has done for us through the pages of Holy Scripture is motivating in and of itself. The Episcopal Church truly “soaks” its congregations with scripture, hopefully increasing their spiritual lives and a desire to bring the Bible into daily life.

After the sermon, the people stand and declare their faith in God’s mighty acts by reciting the ancient Nicene Creed. The ecumenical Council of Nicaea adopted the original version of it in 325 A.D., and the second Council of Constantinople completed it in 381 A.D. According to Anglican tradition, “The Nicene Creed ought to be thoroughly received and believed for they may be proved by most certain warrants of Holy Scripture” (*BCP*, 869). The Eucharist continues with the prayers of the people and the confession of sin. The congregation offers its prayers for the universal church, the civil

authorities, the welfare of the world, local community concerns, and those who are sick or in any kind of trouble, and the departed. This is a deeply spiritual and devotional act of submission to the will of God. In a final act of preparation, we offer a communal prayer of confession of our sins against God and our neighbor. We set our selfishness aside and admit to God that we have rebelled against him by not loving him, our neighbors, and ourselves. The bishop or priest then pronounces God's forgiveness in the name of the Church. The confession of sin holds us accountable before God, while at the same time receiving his forgiveness in love. The liturgy of the Word of God concludes with the ancient sharing of the peace, whereby we greet one another with love in the name of the Lord.

The Holy Communion: The second part of the liturgy is the celebration of the Eucharist itself. Members of the congregation bring forward bread, wine, money and other symbols of our offering to Jesus Christ. The deacon prepares the holy table. After this, the celebrant and the congregation begin the Great Thanksgiving, at which time we enter into the holy of holies where God turns our gifts of bread and wine into the spiritual body and blood of Jesus Christ our Lord. In this beautiful prayer we recall and bring into the present the sacrifice of Christ, his glorious resurrection and ascension, while anticipating his coming again at the end of time. We invoke the power of the Word and Holy Spirit to sanctify the bread and the wine that we may partake of him. At the conclusion of the Great Thanksgiving we recite the Lord's Prayer, reminding ourselves of the manner in which our Lord taught us to pray.

Then the celebrant breaks the consecrated bread to remember that Christ's body was broken for us and for our salvation. Afterwards an anthem may be said or sung. Normally this is the Agnus Dei, which reminds us of the paschal mystery that Christ died to take away the sins of the world. We then say the prayer of humble access. Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote this prayer for the first English prayer book, based on the Latin Sarum liturgy. It is a magnificent prayer that reminds us of our unworthiness as we humbly approach the holy table to receive his resurrected life.

Next we go to the communion table to receive the sacrament of Christ's real presence, a prelude of the messianic banquet at the end of time when we will feast with him in his eternal kingdom. This unity between Christ and his people is the closest we will ever come in this life to Heaven, because his grace breaks into our life on earth at that moment. It also attests to the abiding connection between Christ's reign and our life on earth. The Holy Eucharist concludes with a prayer that offers our gratitude for God's present gift of Christ in communion. Then we receive a blessing from the bishop or priest, and the deacon dismisses us. We leave this worship service and go into the world with renewed hope and commitment to serve our Lord Jesus Christ in our daily lives.