

THE THEOLOGY OF THE EUCHARIST: WORSHIP THAT MAKES US WHOLE

1. Eucharist, Agape, Holy Sacrifice, Mass, Divine Liturgy: What's in a Name? (October 26)

Names we give to the Eucharist shape the way we welcome God's healing, presence, and fellowship.

2. The Words of Institution (Consecration): Are They Magical? (November 2)

Jesus' words "This is my body" make sense if we become aware of the many ways Jesus is present in our celebrations.

3. The Invocation of the Holy Spirit (Epiclesis): The Eucharist's Forgotten Act? (November 9)

The Holy Spirit is called to sanctify bread, wine, and the community.

4. The Great Thanksgiving (Doxology): What Does the Eucharist Have to Do with Praise? (November 16)

The Eucharistic turns everything into praise and thanksgiving to the Father.

5. "Do This in Memory of Me" (Memorial): Are We Remembering or Re-Living? (November 30)

The Eucharist is more than remembrance - it unites us to Jesus' death and resurrection, until he comes again.

6. The Eucharist as Meal and Sacrifice: How Do These Fit Together? (December 7)

We become a sacrifice to God by being united in one body through the sharing of one bread.

7. One Bread, One Body (Communion): How United Do We Really Become? (December 14)

The Eucharist heals us from division and isolation by calling us into fellowship with each other and with God.

8. "Go in Peace to Love and Serve the Lord" (Mission): How Does the Eucharist Shape Our Lives? (December 21)

The Eucharist blends into everyday life as God sends us out to love, serve, and be his witnesses to the world.

**1. EUCHARIST, AGAPE, HOLY COMMUNION,
MASS, DIVINE LITURGY. LORD'S SUPPER:
WHAT'S IN A NAME?**

1. The many names given to the Eucharist express various (and often opposite) understandings of this celebration (see charts 1 and 2).
2. The main areas of contention are
 - 2.1. How to understand Jesus' sentence: "Do this in memory of me"? Issue of the **memorial**.
 - i. Are we simply *remembering* Jesus and his sacrifice.
 - ii. Or are Jesus and his sacrifice somehow brought to us now?
 - 2.2. Is Jesus really present in the bread and the blood? Issue of **presence**.
 - 2.3. Can the celebration of the Eucharist be understood as a **sacrifice**. And what is its relation to the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus on the cross?

Trends

3. Few areas have been a focus of controversy in the history of Christianity more than the Eucharist.
4. Most of the history of the evolution in the understanding of the Eucharist has been driven by *reaction* to what was perceived as abuses or theological errors.
5. This evolution can be outlined as follows:
 - 5.1. 1st to 3rd centuries: Eucharist part of the *meal* of the community, mostly in private homes.
 - 5.2. 4th to 9th centuries
 - i. Eucharist separated from the meal.
 - ii. It takes place not in homes but in churches, more and more modeled after temples.
 - iii. The table becomes an altar.
 - iv. Emphasis on the role of the celebrant – priesthood.
 - v. More and more elaborate liturgies.
 - 5.3. 9th to 16th centuries
 - i. Emphasis on the presence of Jesus in the bread and the wine.
 - ii. The consecration becomes the most important moment of the celebration.
Hence introduction of communion on the tongue (9th century), bells at the consecration (12th century), kneeling during the Eucharistic prayer (13th century).
 - iii. The consecrated host becomes so sacred that communion becomes more and more rare – what matters is *seeing* the host, hence the importance of the elevation of the host by the priest after the consecration (13th century).
 - iv. Development of a cult of the host outside the celebration of the Eucharist.
 - v. Development of a transactional understanding of the 'benefits' of the mass (especially for the dead): the more masses, the more benefits.
 - 5.4. 16th to 20th centuries

- i. The Protestant reformation reacts to Medieval excesses by questioning the understanding of the *presence* of Christ at mass and its *sacrificial* character.
 - ii. The Catholics react by even greater emphasis on *presence* and *sacrifice*.
- 5.5. The 20th century
- i. Progression in the study of liturgy leads to a better understanding of the Eucharist.
 - ii. Liturgical reformation in many churches and effort of Christian denominations to understand each other.

Curious anecdotes about the Eucharist

- 6. The physical understanding of the presence of Jesus in the host became so literal that all sort of odd concerns and practices started to appear.
- 7. Saint Thomas Aquinas takes very seriously the question of what happens if a mouse eats the consecrated bread.
- 8. Concern for even the smallest fragments of the consecrated host was so strong that once a priest touched the host, he kept his thumb and index finger joined for the remainder of the liturgy, until he washed his hands afterward and consumed the water used for that washing. (Image 2)
- 9. Only half-jokingly, someone I knew who had been an Anglican and had become a RC, told me that only RCs have “God in the box”, referring to the consecrated bread in the tabernacle.
 - 9.1. The origin of the practice of keeping some consecrated bread after the end of the Eucharist was the need to bring communion to the sick.
 - 9.2. With time a devotion to Jesus present in the tabernacle started to develop, which reached a paroxysm in the creation of orders of contemplative nuns “of the Holy Sacrament” devoted to perpetual Eucharistic Adoration.
 - 9.3. See the image of the child Jesus coming out of the tabernacle (Image 1)s
- 10. Many theologians came to view the Mass as a re-presentation of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross and began to identify a specific moment when his immolation is “re-presented”:
 - 10.1. Some pointed to the breaking of the host, seeing the fraction as the sign of Christ’s body being immolated.
 - 10.2. Others located it in the act of consuming the consecrated host, since its destruction in eating it expresses the completion of the sacrifice and the communicant’s participation in it.
- 11. The Eucharist became a means of affirming clerical power. Once I entered a church in London in the middle of a sermon and I heard the priest say: “The sacrifice of Christ would be locked up in the past without the power of the priest to make it present now through the celebration of mass.”
- 12. The fixation on the Eucharist as presence of Jesus became such that authors started to wonder at what precise moment this happened during the celebration. The obvious choice was for the words of consecration – at the precise instant the priest says “This is my body”, Jesus is on the altar (hence bells, genuflection, and elevation of the host).

Image 1



Image 2



1 - ORIGINS AND MEANINGS OF THE MAIN NAMES OF THE EUCHARIST

Term	Meaning	Date / Usage	Implicit Theology
Eucharist	From Greek <i>eucharistia</i> “ thanksgiving, gratitude ”.	New Testament and early Church documents.	Emphasis on the Hebrew understanding of <i>sacrifice</i> as <i>thanksgiving</i>.
Agape	From Greek <i>agapē</i> meaning “ divine love, self-giving love ”.	New Testament and early Church documents.	- Emphasises community, fellowship, and sharing in love. - In early Christianity the agape meal was often associated with the a meal. - It disappeared when the celebration was separated from the meal.
Divine Liturgy	From Greek <i>litourgia</i> : “ divine service ”.	Used in Byzantine-rite (Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholic) churches from the 4 th or 5 th century onward.	Emphasises the cosmic dimension: the heavenly liturgy made present on earth.
Mass	From Latin <i>missa</i> (as in the dismissal formula <i>Ite, missa est</i> , “Go, the dismissal is made”) meaning “ dismissal ” or “ mission ”.	Used in the Western (Latin/Roman) tradition and many Protestant communities from the medieval period onward.	- Emphasises the offering of Christ’s body and blood. - The sacrifice of Christ made present.
Holy Communion	From Latin <i>communio</i> meaning “ sharing in common, participation ” (from Greek <i>koinōnia</i>).	Used in the Western (Latin/Roman) tradition and many Protestant communities from the medieval period onward.	- Emphasises the union of the believer with Jesus - And (not always) the union of believers with each other because of their “comm(on)-union” with Christ.
Lord’s Supper		The term appears in the New Testament and early Church documents but was not used as a name for the Eucharist until the Reformation (16 th century).	- Emphasises the memorial dimension. - It downplays (or eliminates) the sacrifice.

2 - EUCHARISTIC DOCTRINES

<i>Denomination</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Understanding of Christ's Presence</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
Eastern Orthodox Churches	Eucharist Divine Liturgy	Mystical Real Presence The bread and wine truly become Christ's Body and Blood through the Holy Spirit (epiclesis), <u>without defining how</u> .	The Eucharist is both thanksgiving and participation in Christ's eternal self-offering; heaven and earth unite in one worship.
Roman Catholics	Eucharist Mass	Transubstantiation The whole substance of bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ, while the appearances (accidents) remain.	The Eucharist is the re-presentation (not repetition) of Christ's one sacrifice on the cross, made present sacramentally.
Anglicans (High Church and Anglo-Catholics)	Eucharist Mass Holy Communion	Real Presence in bread and wine Christ is truly present, spiritually and sacramentally, though <u>without defining how</u> .	The Eucharist is a memorial in which the Church offers praise and joins in Christ's once-for-all sacrifice.
Lutherans	Eucharist Holy Communion	Real Presence in bread and wine Christ's Body and Blood are <u>in, with, and under</u> the bread and wine.	The Eucharist conveys grace and forgiveness; it is not a re-sacrifice, but participation in the once-for-all sacrifice.
Reformed Evangelicals (Calvinist)	Lord's Supper	Real presence only in the act of communion Christ becomes present to believers when they receive the bread and wine.	A covenant meal; the believer is nourished by Christ's Body and Blood when he eats the bread and drinks the wine.
Low Church Anglicans Evangelicals Baptists Free Churches	Lord's Supper	Presence in the faith of the communicant Christ is present to the faith of the communicant by the Holy Spirit, not physically in the elements.	The Eucharist is a commemorative meal and fellowship with Christ only happens through faith.