

## Eucharist and the Last Supper

In an article titled ‘Coronavirus and the Eucharist’ that was published in *La Croix* in 2020, Fr Thomas O’Loughlin offered some sound observations on the nature of church and the purpose of gatherings for the celebration of the Eucharist. One key issue was the language we use about the Mass and the way it shapes our thinking and point of view. For example, O’Loughlin quoted common expressions like ‘getting Mass’ or ‘missing Mass’, ‘getting/taking communion’ as if the Eucharist is ‘out there’ and we approach and take it to ourselves.

In Australia we are used to hearing clergy speak of ‘saying Mass’ – a hollow expression if ever there was one, that basically implies an ordained man reciting the words of the liturgy and reading from a book. This conjures up an image of disconnection. We never seem to hear priests describe their liturgical function as celebrating the Lord’s Supper, which is the language of the first generations of Christians. The pity is that ‘saying Mass’ is not even shorthand for taking part in a community gathering to remember the Lord Jesus with thanks, which is the language Jesus himself used at the Last Supper. Language does indeed both shape and betray our attitude.

A brief consideration of the gospel accounts of Jesus’ last meal with his friends could possibly help us get back to basics – basics that are uncluttered with the ceremonial accretions that have been piled up over centuries.

The Fourth Gospel with its treasury of symbolism and mystical connotations begins the Last Supper episode with a startling gesture of relationship, so surprising that it wrongfoots Simon Peter. The writer tells us that Jesus got up from his reclining position at supper (nothing like the Da Vinci style of seating at a table), took off his outer garment, wrapped a towel around himself then poured water into a basin (no doubt water for Jewish ceremonial pre-prandial washing) and began washing the feet of his friends and wiping them with the towel.

We need to stop and reflect that Jesus throws off his outer clothing and stands only in an undershirt and loincloth. In the culture of the day, he is practically naked. What a gesture of service this was! This is the full hospitality ritual usually performed for the guests by servants, but here it is a deliberate and totally focused gesture of service by Jesus.

### Eucharist and Connection

We might reflect on this each year at the Maundy Thursday liturgy, but how many of us think about Jesus’ intimate connection with his closest friends as we file up to ‘receive communion’ at a Mass? The Johannine writer drives the whole scene home when Jesus replies to Peter’s objection that what he doesn’t understand right now will become clear later on. In other words, Peter will come to a full understanding of what Jesus stood for regarding the reversal of accepted roles and the whole notion of serving leadership. The message of Jesus from the foot-washing is that true community means we all have to be towel and basin people to each other.

Luke portrays some of this intense friendship when he has Jesus declare how eagerly he looked forward to sharing this meal with his disciples (Luke 22:15). A high point of the meal comes when Jesus takes bread and blesses it in typical Jewish fashion before sharing it with his friends. This customary blessing always occurs in the context of a family meal and the disciples around Jesus at this supper are family.

When Jesus declares, ‘This is my body’ he is not redefining the nature of the bread. He is not saying this is no longer bread, but it is now my body. Rather, as French Jesuit biblical scholar Xavier Léon-Dufour put it, he is inviting his friends ‘to recognize in the bread shared, his own body and to constitute in this way a community...’ In effect, this means he will be present among them as the risen Christ who will be with them always, but most particularly when they are gathered as a community in his name to remember him.

This emphasises the community dimension of Jesus’ blessing of the bread and sharing it. To put it crudely, those gathered at the last supper did not think they were consuming the physical body of Jesus. For these Jewish men and women this would be unthinkable, forbidden, and culturally abhorrent. Human beings are not listed in the Bible as permitted creatures, and human flesh is therefore categorically forbidden as food (Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14). Those present at the Last Supper understood that the bread broken and shared was a poignant symbol of Jesus’ body that was about to be broken as gift.

Jesus then took the cup, and it is worth noting that *potērion* is the Greek word used in all three Synoptic gospels for ‘cup’. It refers to a drinking vessel, which for most people in Jesus’ day was an earthenware cup.

Nowhere in any of the standard English versions of the Bible is the word ‘chalice’ used to translate *potērion*, unlike the mistranslation found in the current Eucharistic prayers of the Mass. Moreover, to think that Jesus would have used an expensive chalice at the Last Supper is laughable. He never had anything that was of greater value than what an average person could afford.

Jesus then took the cup, gave thanks (*eucharistēsas*), passed it around and said, ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many’ (Mark 14:24; Matthew 26:28). In the context of the Passover meal, which was a remembrance of the Exodus event, the disciples would have certainly made the connection with Moses sprinkling the sacrificial blood of the covenant over the people as a symbolic seal of their contract with God and their pledge to be a people of God (Exodus 24:8). Luke notes that Jesus is referring to a new covenant, an obvious allusion to the ‘new covenant’, which the prophet Jeremiah (31:31) described as a return to God with a renewed authentic relationship of the heart.

So, Jesus is saying that the new covenant will not be sealed with the blood of sacrificed bulls but with *his* blood which will be poured out as self-sacrificing gift. It is worth bearing in mind that those gathered with Jesus understood these traditional biblical allusions and the intention of Jesus. Again, to put it crudely, did they think they were drinking his blood? Emphatically, No, because, as well as being culturally repulsive, the consumption of blood is absolutely forbidden in the Bible (Leviticus 17:10-14). They grasped the symbolism of Jesus’ words and actions and drank the wine as an act of unity and sharing in Jesus’ gift of himself.

We are, then, a community in this new covenant, this new relationship, and the Eucharist is the ultimate sign of our commitment as a community. And an essential aspect of this new status is our coming together, as Jesus put it, ‘in remembrance of me’ (Luke 22:19). For centuries, and still in modern times, the Jewish Passover meal with the lamb and symbolic herbs was a recalling of the Exodus event, the prime freedom event of the Jewish people. It was also a re-enactment of the covenant pledge of allegiance to God. Now in this final supper Jesus is asking his disciples to gather for a meal to remember him with bread and wine, which are the signs of his body broken and his blood poured out.

One important aspect of Jewish culture is the inheritance and legacy a father leaves his family. Here we see Jesus presenting his last will and testament. He has no offspring and no property, but he has himself and his teachings, these are his legacy. These are what he leaves to the small community gathered around him in the intimacy of a meal. We are part of that community and share in that intimacy when we gather to remember him. Remembering him, his wisdom and his supreme gift of himself is vital to his presence in our communal gatherings and our collective consciousness.

The Vatican II document *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (7 & 8, 1962) explains ways in which Christ is present to us when we gather to give thanks. He is present in the word, the Scripture that is read in the liturgy, he is present in the person of the minister representing the person of Christ, he is present in the community as he promised: *Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in their midst.* He is present ‘under the Eucharistic species’ which are signs of his gift of himself – his body broken and his blood poured out. He is present, not physically but sacramentally.

The sad fact is the Eucharistic liturgy has been so formalised and stereotyped that we have lost the sense of the Last Supper with its hospitality, the intimacy of a meal and all that often goes with an uplifting community gathering – seeing the faces of others, sharing the joy and pain of those around us, encouraging the downtrodden, expressing ourselves in the warmth of smiles and visible connection.

This is not the same as ‘getting Mass’ or ‘receiving communion’. Rather, it is closer to the Christ who earnestly desired to share a meal with his friends, who longed to ‘be with.’ Strangely enough, we often achieve this quite well outside the church, when we gather afterwards for a morning tea in the open air or in the parish hall. We could stop and think, Christ is truly present at our morning tea, because this is as natural as Jesus having a meal and chatting with those close to him.

We can still experience the presence of the risen Lord within our family or even with a single ‘other’. Recall the two disciples on the way to Emmaus who extended hospitality to Jesus, inviting him to eat with them. It wasn’t a Mass in a church, but when they gave thanks (*eucharistía*) and broke bread in remembrance of Jesus they recognised his genuine presence. He was truly there with them.