

## The Eucharist and the Church

The Eucharist has been at the center of the life of the Church since apostolic times. We know from reading the Acts of the Apostles that Christians met in one another's homes for "the breaking of the bread." (Acts 2:42, 46) Although today's Mass is quite different from those first early gatherings of Christians, there has always been a certain constancy in the celebration: the community comes together with a bishop or priest to hear the Word of God, to give thanks and remember the death and resurrection of Jesus, and to partake of the sanctified bread and wine that in faith have become the Body and Blood of Christ. In one sense, we could say that to be Church is to celebrate the Eucharist.

Just as our families gather to share stories around the supper table, the Eucharist is the meal at which the Christian family gathers to hear the stories of our salvation in Christ and to share a meal. No one is a stranger at the Eucharist — rich and poor, powerful and powerless, young and old — all who constitute Church are united around the altar of the Lord, who feeds us again and again with His Body and Blood.

The relationship between the Eucharist and the Church is intimate and dynamic. The Eucharist is an **active** celebration when we eat and drink the Body and Blood of the Lord. This we see in the oldest text we have on the Eucharist, which is from St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 11:23-26):

*"For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in memory of me.' In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' **For as often as you eat of this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.**"*

This passage also shows us that the Eucharist is first an action of Jesus himself in the shedding of his blood to redeem us from our sins. It is the sacrifice of Christ that restored our relationship with God the Father. Furthermore, by the command of Christ at the Last Supper, the Eucharist is also the action of the Church. At Mass, the priest stands in the person of Christ, head of the Church, and he offers the sacrifice on the altar. In turn, we, the Church, join ourselves to that sacrifice, and in accepting of Jesus' invitation to take and eat and take and drink, we enter into sacramental communion with the Son of God and form one body in Christ. It is in gathering for the Eucharist that individual Christians become the Church, and therefore, we can say that the Eucharist makes the Church.