

Eucharistic liturgy expanded through years

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

A little less than 2,000 years ago, Jesus gathered with his followers in Jerusalem for a meal of fellowship. The occasion was the evening before Passover, a Jewish holiday celebrating God's deliverance of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt.

That night, Christ departed from the customary blessing of meals. As he passed the broken bread and the cup of wine to be shared by the group, he identified them as his own body and blood.

For centuries the church has kept alive the memory of that momentous night. No other sacrament holds as honored a place in the lives of Catholics as that occupied by the Eucharist. Indeed, the Second Vatican Council's document on "Bishops in the Church," decrees that:

"In carrying out their work of sanctification parish priests should ensure that the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice is the center and culmination of the entire life of the Christian community."

Within this statement flow more streams of Christian thought than might be apparent at first glance.

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Take, for example, the words: "center and culmination of the entire life of the Christian community." This one phrase is packed with meaning about the kind of "center" the Eucharist has occupied historically in the lives of Catholics.

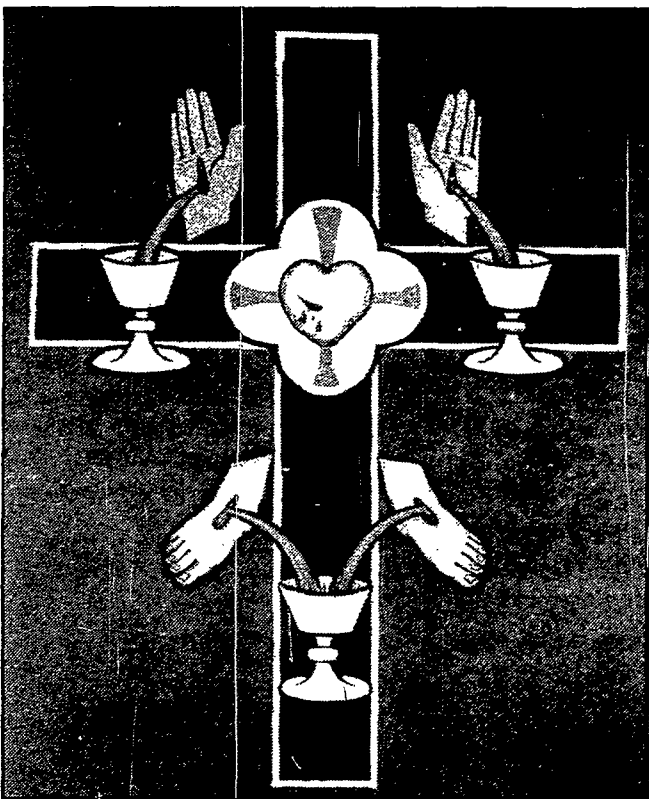
The letters of St. Paul contain the earliest mention of the Lord's Supper. In his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul chastises the believers at Corinth for getting drunk at the sacred meal and for failing to consume the food in a unified manner.

This passage points to the ideal at which the early Christians aimed when they gathered to commemorate the Lord's Supper — the ideal of a community bonded in love and aware that the risen Christ moved among them in spirit.

Through a workshop created a few years ago by the Finger Lakes Office of Religious Education, a number of Catholics in the Diocese of Rochester's Finger Lakes region have spent time considering this communal nature of the eucharistic meal.

Patricia Lawlor, consultant to the office, explained that the daylong workshop is part of second-graders' preparation for first Communion. Among other activities, children and their parents re-enact the Last Supper, tour their parish church, and make dough that they can take home and use in family meals. Such activities are meant to deepen participants' understanding of the Communion experience, she noted.

Like the early Christians, Lawlor noted that she and other workshop leaders emphasize not only the real presence of Christ in the consecrated bread and wine, but also the sharing nature of the eucharistic liturgy. "It's not only keeping Jesus in your heart," she said. "It's sharing



Another painting from the Chapel of All Souls depicts the Eucharistic Cross.



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

One of the ceiling paintings at Holy Sepulchre Cemetery's Chapel of All Souls depicts a pelican drawing blood from its own breast to feed its young. In the third century, this pelican became a symbol for Christ feeds the faithful on His Most Precious Blood.

Jesus with others."

Taking a sacred approach to communal meals has long been common practice in many religions. Joseph Martos, author of the 1981 book, *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church*, notes that "as a sacramental event the sacred meal was the most personally engaging (of all rituals)."

"In Africa, for example ceremonial meals strengthened the blood kinship among the members of the clan," Martos wrote. "Each year the Aztecs in Mexico mixed dough with blood and shaped it into the image of one of their gods before sharing it in ritual communion."

Christians first commemorated the Last Supper through simple sacred meals of fellowship in each other's homes. The word *Eucharist* itself derives from a Greek word signifying "thanks" or "gratitude." Thus, when the early Christians gathered for their sacred meal, they sang songs of thanksgiving to God for the redemption wrought by Christ.

The Christians also listened to readings from Scripture and explanations of their meaning, a practice which formed the basis for the modern-day homily. A leader of the community prayed over the gifts of bread and wine, which were then shared by those assembled.

As the church grew in the Roman Empire, the idea of the Eucharist as a *sacrificial* meal became more prevalent. Martos also pointed out that many persecuted Christians sacrificed their lives for the faith, just as Jesus had sacrificed his life on the cross. Christ's own sacrifice coincided with the sacrifice of the Paschal Lamb, the lamb slain and eaten at Passover.

Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century. By that time, the eucharistic meal was undergoing elaborate changes that transformed it into a liturgical celebration.

The term "liturgy" comes from a Greek word originally referring to a work done for the common welfare. Liturgy increasingly became a work done by the local bishop and his assistants on behalf of the people, Martos and other scholars have noted.

Father Joseph M. Champlin of Syracuse explained in his 1986 book, *Special Signs of Grace — The Sacraments and Sacramentals*, that the earliest Christians kept their secret eucharistic meals short for fear of being caught by persecutors. "That opposition, among other factors, kept the Eucharistic celebrations relatively simple, comparatively brief, ... often at homes, sometimes secret," he wrote.

Historians have pointed out that once Christians had the freedom to worship openly in the empire, however, they began to develop elaborate services that were held in basilicas or public meeting places.

Services in the Roman rite — which held sway throughout much of Western Europe — were conducted in Latin. "Mass" itself derives from a Latin word meaning "dismissal," and referred, in part, to the dismissal of the congregation after communion, according to *The Changing Sacraments*, a videotape series produced by Franciscan Communications.

Interestingly, the videotape series also indicates that the church replaced Greek with Latin as the language of the Mass because Latin was better known among believers. That rationale was restored at Vatican II, when the church fathers decreed that the Mass should be celebrated not in Latin but in whatever language is native to a given region.

In Medieval times, many church leaders became temporal leaders as well. This development — among others — helped create a gulf between the clergy and the laity. That gulf was reflected in the liturgical celebrations that were dominated by clergy as lay members of the church became spectators rather than participants at Mass.

The liturgy itself evolved into an elaborate ceremony performed in large churches and calling for little participation by the people. Attention in the pews turned from the communal notion of the eucharistic meal to a more personal focus on the presence of the divine Christ in the eucharistic bread and wine, Father Champlin's book explains.

Church leaders continued to debate weighty theological questions that placed greater emphasis on Christ's presence in the bread and wine. Lay Christians, meanwhile, began drawing back from frequent Communion, partly out of a sense that they were unworthy to receive Christ. Participation by the laity was further discouraged by the gradual decline of Latin as a common language, Father Champlin added.

These and other developments encouraged devotion to the consecrated host or "Blessed Sacrament," and to the saints. The common people also began to express their faith through processions in which the exposed host was carried around churches or villages. By the 16th century, so few lay Catholics were receiving Communion regularly that the church found it necessary to order Catholics to receive the Eucharist at least once a year.

The 19th century saw church scholars exploring the origins of the Mass in Scripture and church tradition. Movements to make the liturgy more accessible to lay Catholics began to stir in Europe and elsewhere. By the time of the Second Vatican Council, the church hierarchy was ready to call for the sweeping reform that has marked eucharistic celebrations in the last 30 years.

Calling for increased lay participation, a renewed emphasis on Scripture and the celebration of Mass in the vernacular, the council's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* also urged a return to distributing the Eucharist in both forms — both bread and wine.

Further developments included the institution of communion by hand, a practice implemented in this diocese by Bishop Joseph L. Hogan in 1977. At that time, Bishop Hogan announced his hope that the practice would create "deepening (of) our understanding of the Eucharist and the liturgy as a whole, and of enhancing our Eucharistic devotion."

In spite of the many changes that have occurred in eucharistic practice throughout the centuries, Lawlor noted that the sacrament's essence is unchanging.

"The Eucharist is the continual renewal of who we are as Catholic Christians," she observed.