

# COLUMNISTS

## The Eucharist is both meal and sacrifice

Throughout the entire history of the church the Eucharist, or Mass, has been at the heart and center of its life. After the Resurrection and Pentecost the disciples gathered for "the breaking of the bread" (Acts of the Apostles 2:42), just as Jesus had urged them to do "in remembrance" of him (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24-25).

Given its origins in the Last Supper, the Eucharist is both a meal and a sacrifice.

It is a meal because it is patterned on the ritual Passover meal that Jesus ate with his disciples on the night before he died.

It is a sacrifice because of the close connection that Jesus himself made between this final meal and the sacrifice he would offer the next day on the cross.

He said that just as the unleavened bread is broken, so would his body be broken. The cup of wine becomes the cup of his blood, "which will be shed for you" (Luke 22:20).

All four eucharistic texts in the New Testament agree that Jesus' death is an atonement and establishes a new covenant. The Jews, in fact, regarded every death of an innocent person as an atoning death, and Jesus saw his own death in this light.

By distributing his body and blood in the form of bread and wine, Jesus indicated to his disciples that they were to share in his sacrifice and in the power of his atoning death.



By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

Although this sacrificial aspect is essential to the Eucharist, it is no more important or essential than the meal aspect. This is a point that is strongly resisted by some of the Catholics who have been exceedingly unhappy with the liturgical renewal promoted by the Second Vatican Council and by Pope Paul VI.

But the Eucharist is clearly and unmistakably patterned after a meal and was, from the beginning, celebrated as a meal. Following the death and resurrection of Jesus, the disciples continued to gather at meals, as he had urged them to do.

But why did he do so? We can't answer that question without appreciating the important place that meals occupied in Jesus' own relationships with his disciples and with others. And we can't understand that unless we recognize the larger function of a meal.

Meals do not have as their sole purpose the satisfying of the need for bodily nourishment. They are also a means of building community and of celebrating events, both happy and sad, that are important to the community.

Thus, a meal isn't arranged following a wedding or a funeral because the host family is concerned that the guests might faint from hunger on the way home from the service. Rather, it provides a way of expressing and strengthening the bonds of love and friendship that exist among the family, relatives, and friends.

The same is true of the Eucharist. Members of the church do not come to the Eucharist simply for the sake of their own spiritual nourishment. They gather as a family, as the people of God, bound together by the Holy Spirit as sisters and brothers in Christ.

By sharing in the one bread and the one cup, they become thereby one body in Christ. "Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Corinthians 10:17).

But there is even more to it than this. In Jesus' world a shared meal was always a sign of peace, trust, and communion. When Jesus shared meals with outcasts, tax-collectors, prostitutes, and others whom society frowned upon, he was do-

ing more than simply eating and drinking with them. He was proclaiming something about them and about God's attitude toward them.

Everyone, without regard for personal, social, economic, racial, political, or cultural "liabilities," is called to the heavenly banquet. The reign, or kingdom, of God is open to us all: women and men, poor and rich, slaves and free.

Unfortunately, this high ideal was not always maintained within the church. Even in New Testament times St. Paul had to chastise the Corinthians for eating and drinking without regard for the poor and for allowing factionalism to violate the whole point of the Eucharist (1 Corinthians 11:17-22).

If Paul could have seen how, in the centuries before Vatican II, the Eucharist had become for many a private spiritual affair, "said" by a priest to produce hosts for the tabernacle, with the congregation having no meaningful role other than reverent attention ("hearing Mass," we called it), with Masses recited quietly, and rapidly, at side altars, sometimes even without a server he would have been astonished, if not appalled.

But he would have been delighted with the council.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

## Trust God to do wonders for us

**Sunday's Readings:** (R3) Matthew 14:13-21. (R1) Isaiah 55:1-3. (R2) Romans 8:35, 37-39.

There are always people who focus on what can't be done or what can't happen. There are always people who are predicting disaster.

When Lou Holtz, now the football coach at Notre Dame, led the University of Arkansas into the 1978 Orange Bowl, he was warned that fans might throw oranges at his team.

"Could be worse," said Holtz. "We could be going to the Gator Bowl."

That's why Holtz is a great coach: He has a positive attitude.

I am sure the disciples of Jesus thought he was in over his head when he set out to feed a multitude of 5,000 men and perhaps a greater number of women and children with only five loaves of bread and two fish. The disciples surely said to themselves, "It can't be done! Impossible!"

Charles F. Kettering once said when he was research head of General Motors, that when he wanted a problem solved, he would call his staff, but he would first have them place their slide rules on a table outside the room where they would be meeting. If he didn't do that, he said, he'd find someone reaching for his slide rule in the middle of the meeting. In a few minutes, this person would be on his feet saying, "Boss, you can't do it."

No matter what you try to accomplish



By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

a word for sunday

in life, isn't there always someone saying, "You can't do it. You cannot lose that weight. You can't get that job. You can't make that marriage work. You can't really change."

And because we listen to people who say it can't be done, we give up before victory is ours.

In the Gospel the disciples of Jesus were focusing on their problems, not their possibilities. Jesus told them to give the crowd something to eat and they said, "We have here only five loaves and two fish."

Did Jesus ask them what they had to work with? No! Did he ask them if any of them had any experience in the catering business? No!

Jesus knew that no task undertaken at God's command is impossible. If God tells us to go out and feed a hungry world — not only with physical bread but also with the bread of life — is that impossi-

ble? No! No task undertaken at God's command is impossible. Our God is a God of miracles. Our God can take a lump of clay and fashion it into a living human being. Nothing is impossible to God. Didn't the angel Gabriel tell that to a virgin at Nazareth?

Jesus took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up toward heaven, he blessed them, and breaking the loaves, he gave them to the disciples. The disciples gave them to the multitudes and after all ate, they had 12 baskets left over.

In other words: Learn to trust God. Trust God. He can do a lot with a little. The mistake the disciples made was that they were trying to solve the problem of feeding 5,000 people without taking Jesus into account. That too is often our trouble. We try to tackle life's problems alone, banking on our own resources.

At the terrible Andersonville, Ga., prisoner-of-war camp, where men died by the hundreds, Colonel Trumble recalled that even worse than the shortage of food was the scarcity of water. One day, he and several other prisoners went to the western edge of the encampment and knelt in prayer. They asked God to give them water.

"Suddenly," the colonel said, "a brilliant flash of lightning burst out from a cloud, striking a huge rock and splitting it apart. A stream began to gush out and continued to flow."

Today, in the center of the former

camp is the spring with a stone house covering the rock. And above the door is a sign that reads "Providence Spring," commemorating the miracle that had produced it.

You see, our God is a God of miracles. He can provide for our needs. He can help us accomplish our dreams. He can take our little and turn it into much. One thing the disciples did right: They went to Jesus.

That is all we must do: Go to Jesus, trust him, and he will do wonders for us.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming, N.Y.

### Daily Readings

**Monday, August 5**

Jeremiah 28:1-17; Matthew 14:22-36

**Tuesday, August 6**

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14 or 2  
Peter 1:16-19; Matthew 17:1-9

**Wednesday, August 7**

Jeremiah 31:1-7; Matthew 15:21-28

**Thursday, August 8**

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Matthew 16:13-23

**Friday, August 9**

Nahum 2:1, 3; 3:1-3, 6-7;  
Matthew 16:24-28

**Saturday, August 10**

2 Corinthians 9:6-10; John 12:24-26

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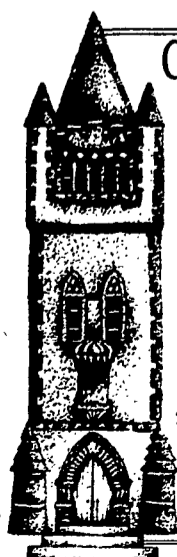
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