

has become absorbed into Christ's very essence. That supreme fact is almost too great to be grasped and believed. Certainly we probably do not, as creatures who are moved by our emotions, actually 'feel' that truth or become excited by it like we might, for example, over a concert, or family wedding, football match or similar event. But there are many fantastic truths we accept without becoming excited over, like the fact our sun is just one star in **billions** of stars in one galaxy that, in turn, is just one of **billions** of galaxies. Our mind, though, accepts things in faith, including the immense truth of the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, so it is important for our salvation that our actions must reflect that belief. **It is this central truth that elevates the Catholic Faith above other Christian faiths.**



5. The very presence of Jesus himself ensures us of an **ongoing source of sanctifying grace** to renew us constantly. Moreover, this grace destroys the effects of any venial sins, helps protect us against the temptations of more serious sins, and helps transform us into even more charitable Christians.
6. **The occurrence of sanctifying grace is unique** - it is present **before** it is used because it is Jesus himself, whereas the other sacraments have the power of sanctifying only when someone actually **makes use** of them.
7. Because the Eucharist is the sharing in Christ's very being, then everyone who receives the Eucharist is simultaneously united with each other in his **Mystical Body**. This sacrament is not just of individual importance, therefore; it is the sacrament, par excellence, **of unity for all Christians** throughout the world. In the same way, each Mass itself is not just an event for the particular worshipping community, it is an event **for the whole Church** as part of the offering and sacrifice to the Father made by Jesus as Head of the Church. And this whole Church is not only the worldwide Church today, it also includes those who have died and have not yet been united with the Father. The Mass is as much for them as for us. That is the power of Christ's Mystical Body
8. The Eucharist is a **truly Trinitarian event**, realised every time a Mass is said. The transformation of the bread and wine at the consecration is achieved **through the power of the Holy Spirit**, at the moment of the Epiclesis when the priest places his hands over the bread and wine, in association with the words of consecration. Jesus' offering of himself to the Father is specifically undertaken, therefore, with the actions and participation of the Holy Spirit.
9. **The Eucharist is the source of the whole spiritual life of the Church for the very reason that it is Jesus Christ himself** - it is not only the supreme sacrament, therefore, but the pathway along which all graces ultimately flow into the other sacraments. It is the ultimate **sacrament of unity** - the unity of all Christians with each other, the unity of all the faithful living and dead, and the unity of all worshippers with the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

## Our Catholic Faith

### 20. The Eucharist

– *Supreme Sacrament, Source of the Sacramental Life, and Cornerstone of Initiation*



#### Questions tion

for Reflec-

1. Explain how the Eucharist is a sacrament of initiation?
2. Why is the Eucharist intrinsically linked to Jesus' Passion?
3. What are the principal benefits of receiving the Eucharist?

## The Eucharist as a Sacrament of Initiation

The Eucharist is the sacrament that **completes initiation** into the Church of Christ, and in the early Church it always immediately followed Baptism and Confirmation. This is still the practice in the case of the initiation of adults, and for babies in the Eastern Orthodox Church, when all three sacraments of initiation are given at the same time. In our Roman Catholic Church, however, although the Eucharist is recognised as the sacrament that completes full initiation, the process that is followed for children changed over the centuries so that it is now given when the child reaches the age of reason and before the sacrament of Confirmation, although it is itself preceded now by the sacrament of Penance.



Although it is the sacrament that completes initiation, the Eucharist is obviously also an **ongoing sacrament**. Indeed, it may also be appropriately called either the **Sacrament of Constancy** (alongside that of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation), or the **Sacrament of Renewal** of our spiritual life, because it is one that we may constantly utilise to help us on our spiritual journey.

## What is Meant by the Eucharist?

The word 'Eucharist' translates a Greek word that means thanksgiving, and our sacrament of the Eucharist is the supreme act of thanksgiving to God. This is so because it relives Jesus' own act of communion with his Father that took place at the Last Supper, when Jesus celebrated (or anticipated the celebration of) the Jewish thanksgiving feast of Passover, while at the same time anticipating his own sacrifice on the cross so that all humankind might be saved.

At this supper with his disciples Jesus instituted our own special sacrament with his words over the bread and wine "**Take and eat, this my Body**" and "**Drink from this all of you. This is my blood, the blood of the covenant that is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins**" (Mtt.26 and parallels in Mk.14 // Lk.22 // 1 Cor.11). This action also explains why the sacrament is sometimes called the **Breaking of Bread**, while its setting and function inspired the terms **Holy Communion** and **Last Supper**, and its intimate link to Jesus' death which the Eucharist makes present led to the description **Holy Sacrifice**. The Catholic Church calls its principal liturgical event, that simultaneously re-presents Jesus' sacrificial death and brings about the sacrament of the Eucharist, **the Mass**. This name is thought to be derived from a monastic custom of signalling the end of the service with the words 'Go (Ita), it is sent forth! (Missa est)'. This, in turn, led to the combined expression **Holy Sacrifice of the Mass** to refer to the Eucharist.

**The Liturgy of the Eucharist, or the Mass** as it is generally known, reflects the way the Church has always celebrated the Eucharistic meal from the time it was a community meal in the context of a house gathering of believers. There are readings from scripture, although now taken from both Old and New Testaments, there is teaching about those readings, there are general prayers to God, and there is the blessing, eating and drinking of the bread and wine in memory of what Christ did and asked his followers to continue- in other words, there is the Liturgy of the Word, Homily, Prayers of Intercession and Praise, the Consecration of the Eucharistic offerings to God, which serves both as a communion meal with the Father and a memorial of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, and the receiving of 'Holy Communion' - this is **our Mass**, unique in its **fivefold nature** of being:



***Thanksgiving, Sacrifice, Real Presence, Community, Sustenance.***

## The Special Nature of the Eucharist as a Sacrament

The Eucharist is the **supreme** sacrament for several reasons:

1. It **makes present** - really, truly and substantially - Our Lord Jesus. This is one of the great mysteries of Faith. The Church calls the process whereby the substance of the bread and wine are changed (whilst yet retaining the qualities associated with those items) 'transubstantiation'. That Jesus meant his words at the Last Supper to be taken seriously can be seen in his Eucharistic address in John's Gospel (ch.6). In that text, it is clear that many of those who followed him found it so repugnant to accept his statement about eating his flesh and drinking his blood that they left him. But, while being serious, Jesus was at one and the same time using metaphor and testing their faith. He was referring not to the flesh and blood of his purely human body, but to the flesh and blood of his resurrected and divinised body, the new type of body we shall all be transformed into, as St. Paul describes (1 Cor.15)
2. As such, the Eucharist is the defining sign of **Christ's enduring and continuing presence** in our lives.
3. It re-presents not only Jesus' **communion** meal with his followers, that unites them and us through him with the Father, but also Jesus' **sacrifice** on the cross that guarantees our salvation. **Every Mass relives in a mystical way the moment Jesus died once and for all for the whole of humankind**. This sacrificial remembrance is undertaken through the sacerdotal office of the priest, but the congregation too is also involved as partners in this relived sacrifice because we are united with Christ as his followers.
4. When a person receives Holy Communion, it is an almost unbelievable truth that **Jesus has entered into their very being and in so doing that person**