

# **The Episcopal Eucharist Explained**

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Through this document we will give particular thought and expression to one special way our Lord makes himself known to us -- one way we celebrate his presence with us in the Holy Eucharist. Eucharist comes from a Greek word which means "thanksgiving." In the Eucharist we offer our thanks to God for his great gifts to us, remembering especially the life and death and resurrection of his Son our Lord Jesus Christ. The color for this day ... reminds us of the season of the Church Year [explain].

Eucharist is only one name for this service. In the Greek Church it is called the Divine Liturgy which refers to God's people worshipping him together. Sometimes it is called the Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper, and sometimes the Mass. But whatever name we call it, it is one of the most important ways for us to come to meet our Lord. We believe that he is really and truly present in the Bread and in the Wine.

This is why for almost 2000 years, Christians have come together Sunday after Sunday and often during the week. They have come to offer themselves to God and to receive Him into their lives in a very special way.

It is important for us to remember the Eucharist is not something that only a priest does; it is something we do together. A priest cannot celebrate the Eucharist alone; there must be at least one other person. What the priest does is represent us to God at the altar and to represent Christ who feeds us with the strength of his Body and Blood in the form of Bread and Wine.

There are two parts to the Eucharist which we should keep in mind as we experience the service. The first is "the Word of God," sometimes called the Ante-Communion ("ante" means "before"). This includes (1) the opening prayers, (2) lessons from the Old and New Testaments appointed for the day, (3) the Church's statement of faith, the Nicene Creed, and (4) the intercessions or the prayers of the people. The second part of the Eucharist is called the Holy Communion during which bread and wine are offered, consecrated or set apart, and then received by God's people with thanksgiving.

The service usually begins with a procession to the altar or the holy table which has been prepared in advance by the Altar Guild. Like our dining table at our own home when we are having a special dinner, there is a cloth spread over the table, and there are candles. Here the candles remind us that Christ is the Light of the World coming into our lives. If there are two candlesticks on the altar, we are also reminded that our Lord is both Human and Divine, both perfect Man and perfect God.

The procession also reminds us that the People of God, through time and history are moving toward God's Kingdom -- following the Cross of Christ, and bringing the Light of the Gospel into all the world. Lets try to think of these things during the procession, remembering that we are all part of God's family the Church.

The ministers -- that is the clergy, vergers, acolytes, and choir members, wear vestments. Vestments cover our ordinary clothing. This reminds us that the Church belongs to no particular time or place because it is both universal (in all places) and historic, (belonging to no specific time). It also keeps us from paying attention to what people are wearing, whether their clothing is new or old, the latest style or out of date. Other ministers may not wear vestments. At the Cathedral, Lay Eucharistic Ministers who bear the chalice or those who take Holy Communion to the sick and shut-in members of the parish, ... as well as the lectors and intercessors, those who read the lessons and prayers, ... all wear ordinary clothes. This is to remind us that we are all called to minister and all share in "the priesthood of all believers." Not all Episcopal Churches do things in exactly in the same way.

As the procession enters, the congregation stands. This helps all of us to remember that we are all participants in the Eucharist, offering God our prayers and praise together as one family.

**[All stand and sing the opening hymn]**

The first part of the Eucharist, the SERVICE of the WORD OF GOD is very ancient. It comes to us from a time before the birth of Jesus. The Jewish people came together to hear God's word, to sing songs, and to pray together. Remember, it was Jesus who gave us the Holy Eucharist at the Last Supper.

When all in the procession have taken their places, we begin our service by praising God, and by asking him to make our thoughts pure, and to fill us with his love.

This first part of our service is very ancient. It comes to us from the Jewish synagogue and consists of prayers and readings from the Bible. These describe our lives together with God, inspiring us in our Christian lives.

**[PRIEST: BLESSED BE GOD . . . COLLECT FOR PURITY]**

[7:30: This is followed by the reading of Christ's summary of the Law, stating simply our obligation of love for God and for each other.

**[7:30 - SUMMARY OF THE LAW]**

Next we ask God's mercy on us all by saying together the KYRIE, a very ancient prayer "Lord, have mercy", or else we say or sing together a song of praise such as the Gloria which is printed in our Prayer Book or other appropriate songs.

**[KYRIE OR GLORIA IN EXCELSIS]**

The celebrant now leads us in a special prayer. This short prayer is called a COLLECT because it collects our thoughts for a particular time or season of the Church's year.

**[THE COLLECT FOR THE DAY]**

Now we are seated to hear down to hear one or two readings from the Holy Bible. There may be a reading from the Old Testament. One of the readings may be part of an EPISTLE. An epistle is a letter. Saint Paul wrote many "epistles" or letters to his fellow Christians.

It is generally our custom to stand for praise, sit for instruction, and kneel for prayer. Not every church follows the exact same pattern of standing, sitting or kneeling, so if you are visiting another parish, try to do what the others are doing and you will feel more at home.

The Verger escorts the readers to the lectern. This emphasizes the importance of hearing God's Word.

A lay minister called a Lector usually reads the lesson or lessons from the Holy Bible. Lay ministers remind us that we all take part in the worship of the Church. At the end of each lesson the reader says "The Word of the Lord."

**[To which we reply: "Thanks be to God."]**

Remember that "liturgy" means worshipping together. It is important that we make our responses in a good, strong voice.

## **[The Old Testament and the Epistle]**

Between the lessons and the reading from the Holy Gospel there is usually a hymn or a psalm or a special setting for the choir. The Gospel is always read by a member of the clergy, and if possible, it is read by a Deacon. On special occasions, the Gospel may be sung or chanted.

On most occasions, there is a "Gospel Procession". The Gospel Book is carried into the nave or center part of the Church. The Gospel Procession may be led by a vergers and candles; in some parishes incense is used to symbolize the prayers of the people ascending to God. Wherever we are in the church, we turn to face the Gospel book and reader.

The Gospel Procession teaches us that it is our responsibility to carry the Good News of Jesus Christ into all the world.

Making the Sign of the Cross at this time asks God's blessing on our minds our words, and our hearts.

## **[THE GOSPEL]**

A sermon or a shorter teaching called a homily follows the Gospel. It usually explains some of the teachings in the Gospel and other lessons.

Today this instruction will take the place of the sermon, so let us now stand and say together the words of our faith as we affirm the power and love of God as he has been revealed to us in his mighty acts. The Nicene Creed most clearly states the Church's teaching of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Creed expresses the faith of the whole Church.

The word CREED means belief; the CREEDS of the Church teach us God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. They also remind us of how much God loves us as his children.

Many people bow their heads when the name JESUS is said in the creed. In this way they show their reverence for the Lord and for his holy Name. Bowing at the words which tell of Jesus birth (. . . came down from heaven . . . and was made man . . ." is another way we can show respect and honor to God. Making the sign of the cross at the end of the creed reminds us that at our baptism we were signed with the sign of the cross and made Christ's own forever. Such acts of reverence are ways in which we show outwardly what we believe inwardly.

## **[THE NICENE CREED]**

We now turn our attention to Christ's Church and the world. Together, we pray for the Church, for world leaders, for ourselves, and for the departed. The whole church, past and present, is united together in prayer. The names of persons who are in need of our prayers and often added at this point, and there is usually an opportunity for us to speak out loud the names of people we especially want to pray for.

## **[THE INTERCESSION]**

Now we ask God's forgiveness for those things we have done and left undone. Confession is a very important part of prayer whether we do it privately or in church with others. We all need God's forgiveness, and we know that he will forgive us when we come to him in faith and love and true repentance. After all have made their confession, the Priest says the words of ABSOLUTION, or forgiveness, assuring us that God has forgiven all those who have made a sincere confession of their sins.

## **[CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION]**

The first part of the service is now completed. We greet one another joyfully in the spirit of friendship and reconciliation and in the love of God, exchanging the PEACE with one another.

THE PASSING THE PEACE is a very ancient way for people to greet one another. Jesus taught us that we should love one another as sisters and brothers, and that we should forgive one another as God forgives us. When the celebrant says: "The Peace of the Lord be always with you," everyone responds: "And also with you." Then we share God's peace with one another.

## **[THE PEACE]**

# **II. THE HOLY COMMUNION**

## **[THE OFFERTORY SENTENCE]**

The Eucharist or the Great Thanksgiving begins with the offertory sentence which reminds us that all we have is God's gift and that we are offering his gifts back to him.

We now begin the second part of the Eucharist. There are four parts to this service. The First is our offering of bread and the wine. The second is the prayer of thanksgiving and the consecration of the bread and the wine. The third is the breaking of the bread. The fourth is the receiving of communion.

In the early days of the Church, worshippers brought their own bread and wine to the service. The deacons chose what was needed for the consecration, and the rest was set aside for the poor. Today we usually have lay persons who bring the bread and the wine to the altar. These may be either people from the congregation or acolytes in the sanctuary. The bread and the wine along with money collected at some services are the offerings that will be presented to God.

The bread and wine are called OBLATIONS. Bread, wine and money offered at the Altar represent our lives, our work, our recreation, our families and our community. In other words, we offer to God all that we have and all that we do. This is called STEWARDSHIP.

## **[THE OFFERTORY]**

The minister of the altar, a priest or a deacon, "sets the table" by laying first a corporal, a white linen cloth, on which are placed a chalice (a cup for the wine) and a paten (a plate for the bread). The purpose of the corporal is to hold any crumbs which may come from the bread. Next, wine is poured into the chalice and a little water is added. This reminds us of the blood and the water that appeared when Jesus' side was pierced by a spear at the crucifixion. Tradition says that the wine and water together represent both the humanity and the divinity of Jesus, that he is both Man and God, and that we are called to share with him in his risen life.

Before the Eucharist begins, an acolyte pours a little water over the priest's fingers. This reminds us that we should all come to God's altar with clean hands and pure hearts. It has long been the custom for the head of the Jewish household to wash his hands in a similar way before the prayers at the Passover meal. Jesus probably did this at the Last Supper.

The Holy Table or Altar having been prepared, the Eucharist continues with "Lift up your heart" - - the "Sursum Corda". This is followed by the "Sanctus", the ancient hymn: "Holy, Holy, Holy," followed by the "Benedictus": "Blessed is he who comes in the Name of the Lord..." reminding us that our Lord does come to us in the Holy Communion, and that he is made known to us in "the breaking of the bread."

## **[SURSUM CORDA, SANCTUS AND BENEDICTUS]**

The Priest now says the GREAT THANKSGIVING or the PRAYER OF CONSECRATION.

This prayer reminds us of God's love for us, that we turned away from him, and that he sent his Son Jesus Christ to share our human nature and to live and die as one of us, so that we might be brought back to God. We are also told of Christ's death on the cross, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world, and we are reminded of the Last Supper and the words Jesus spoke over the bread and the wine. Finally, we ask for the gift of God's holy Spirit and that we might faithfully receive the precious gift of Christ's Body and Blood in the form of Bread and Wine.

In a very real way, the Holy Eucharist is a drama. It reenacts the offering of Christ and makes it real in our lives. Whether we "feel" Christ's presence or not. He is with us, according to his promise.

**[THE PRAYER OF CONSECRATION]  
[THE LORD'S PRAYER]**

At the first Eucharist and in those of the early Church, it was necessary to break the loaves or cakes of bread so that they could be distributed for Communion. For many this breaking of bread has a special meaning: it has become a reminder of the breaking of our Lord's Body on the Cross. To symbolize this the celebrants breaks the bread saying "Allelulia, Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us." ... to which the people respond: "Therefore, let us keep the feast, Allelulia."

**[THE FRACTION]**

**[THE INVITATION]**

The gifts we presented to God in the offertory are now returned to us. Because God has accepted them, they are changed. They have become the spiritual Body and Blood of Christ. Through them we receive God's Power, Love, and Strength . . . his very life.

**[THE COMMUNION OF THE PEOPLE]**

The gifts we gave at the offertory, the bread and the wine, are now returned to us. But because God has accepted them and used them for his purpose, they are changed. They are not for us the Body and Blood of Christ ... his Power, Love and his strength.

Instructions for receiving communion are printed in the program, but let me remind you again how to receive the Bread and the Wine. For the bread, place your right hand over your left and hold them up chest high so that the priest can easily place the bread on the palm of your hand. You may then consume it or leave it for the minister to dip or intinct it in the wine and then place it in your mouth. If you wish to receive the chalice, please guide it to your lips. If you do not wish to receive the wine, cross your arms over your chest and the chalice bearer will pass by. After you have received the Bread and the Wine, it is appropriate to say "AMEN."

As soon as everyone has received Communion, the Bread and Wine are reverently removed to the sacristy where the chalice and paten cleaned and put away according to the custom of the parish. Some of the consecrated Bread and Wine may be reserved for the sick and those who are unable to come to church. It is kept in the Aumbry - - the beautifully adorned cabinet over which the sanctuary light burns - - symbolic of the Presence of the Risen Lord.

At the principal services on Sunday morning, Lay Eucharistic Visitors come forward to take the Consecrated Bread to the sick and shut-in members of our Cathedral congregation so that they might share with us in Holy Communion. In other words, since they cannot come to Church, we take Church to them.

It is almost time for us to go, but we should not leave before we say together the prayer of thanksgiving. After this, the priest will give us God's blessing.

**[THE PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING]**

We now prepare leave the Cathedral. The procession leads us out into the world around us so that we may do the work that God has called us to do . . . wherever we may be: in our homes, in our schools, in our work and in our play. We have been fed with spiritual Food. God has given us the strength to live our lives as faithful followers of Christ our Lord.

Finally, the Deacon will send us forth to do the work that God has called us to do, and we all respond by saying: "Thanks be to God."

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We have concluded the Eucharist where we began, in the midst of life, in a world where there is suffering and need. But we are centered, as Christ was, in a life to be lived and shared. The Eucharist is the work of the people of God together. It is not a service confined to Sunday morning. Rather, it is a way of life. It is the essence of life itself.

**[THE RECESSIONAL]**

**[THE DISMISSAL]**