



Sacraments 14/36: Essentials of the Sacrament of the Eucharist

It is in the celebration of the Mass that we see the fullness of the Rite of the Eucharist. The meaning of the Greek word *Eucharist* as “thanksgiving” can be used to summarize everything we are doing at the Mass. We have gathered to thank God for what we have been given, what God has done, and what God will continue to do in our lives and in the world. At the very heart of the Mass, the absolute essentials of the Rite are the Matter of the Bread and Wine, and the Form is the ritual actions and the “Words of Institution.” In the Catholic Mass, we can only use unleavened bread made from just wheat and water. The wine can only be made from grapes and must have a minimum alcohol content. These rules are to keep the ritual as close as possible to the food and drink used at the Last Supper. No sweetener can be added to the bread. The hosts do not *have* to be the pressed wafers we are used to, but: substantial bread can be crumbly, and after the Consecration, even the crumbs have become Jesus. We use an alcoholic wine, not grape juice, again, because of the Last Supper. A non-alcoholic grape juice would have turned into vinegar very quickly in the desert areas of Israel. As alcohol is another earthly thing that can be abused, the evil is not within the drink itself, but within the addiction of the person suffering from alcoholism. In addition to alcoholism, the topic of those with a gluten allergy can also cause confusion in sacramental theology. As the elements are changed in the Eucharist, how could someone with Celiac disease or alcoholism suffer from receiving? Remember the theology of all of the Sacraments: grace builds on nature, but doesn’t replace it. In *transubstantiation*, bread and wine are turned into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. Yet God has allowed the “accidental” (external) qualities of the elements to remain. The Host can still cause problems for those with gluten allergies and the effects of alcohol can still be felt when consuming the Precious Blood. Remember, though, the host must still be made of wheat. There are *low*-gluten hosts available, but there is no such thing as a valid *no*-gluten host. Normally, parishioners with Celiac skip the Host and proceed to the Precious Blood, which still contains the completeness of the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Christ sacramentally, as does the Host by itself.

The Form is all of the words and actions contained in the Roman Missal: the large red book used at the altar. The whole Mass, with all of its actions, words, and songs, flesh out the entire meaning of the Eucharist for those celebrating. Yet the essential Form of the Eucharist is the “Words of Institution” used at the moment of consecration: “Take this all of you and eat/drink,” while the priest holds each element in his hands.

Who can perform the Sacrament of the Eucharist? Only a priest can preside at the Mass. The word “priest” here has a separate meaning from my “rank” as a priest as separate from a bishop. The word “priest” in English represents two different words in Latin. A *presbyter* (which we translate as “priest”) is an “elder” and an *episcopus* (which we translate as “bishop”) is an “overseer.” Yet both priests/*presbyters* and bishops are *sacerdotes*, “priests”. A priest/*sacerdotes* is one who offers a sacrifice. So in our specific sense, I as a *presbyter*, all *presbyters*, and all bishops are also *sacerdotes* who can preside at Mass. Vatican II reminded us of the “priesthood of all believers.” When we gather at Mass, everyone present is a *sacerdotes*, a “priest” in the specific sense that we all participate in the sacrifice on the altar. The difference is that the ordained priest stands at the head and presides over the sacrifice.

-Fr. Kopp

Next Week: Who can receive the Eucharist?