

2. Some Highlights in the Historical Development of the Celebration of the Eucharist

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It is a good thing for us to consider the history of the celebration of the Eucharist. It is a rich and sometimes complex development that is difficult to limit to these few paragraphs. Yet, there are some aspects that we might call to mind, especially in thinking of the preparation of Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion and their continued training and formation.

The foundation upon which the Eucharistic liturgy developed is rooted in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. There are the meals he ate with his disciples, and the meals he shared at the table of a variety of persons as he traveled and preached the gospel in those few short years of his ministry. And there are those miracles of the multiplication of the loaves and fish that we read about in the gospels. All of these meals culminated on that evening before he died on the cross, when he sat at table in the upper room and shared his last supper with his disciples.

It is in the context of that paschal meal that he commanded them – and all who would follow after them – to “Do this in memory of me.” Ever since, throughout the ages, faithful Christians have sought to obey this command. We find this description in the synoptic Gospels and in Saint Paul. (e.g. Luke 22:19 and I Corinthians 11:24)

As we consider the various historical developments and decisions made by the Church, we can be confident that they were made with a desire to be faithful to this command of Jesus in mind. To do so in his memory means more than to mimic his gestures or to recreate an historical tableau of that meal. To remember in this way means to actually be present to and participate in those very events of his passion, death, and resurrection in such a way that they become present to us, part of the fabric of our own life here and now. The technical, theological term for this kind of memory is anamnesis.

But before we go further, one more scriptural meal encounter should be considered: the encounter of the Risen Lord with the disciples on the Road to Emmaus. As the travelers along the road encounter the Risen Lord, he reveals to them the meaning of the Scriptures, and later as he sits at table with them, he pronounces the blessing and breaks the bread. Here we have a picture of the most important elements of the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist in its earliest form. This same basic form will be recounted in the First Apology of Justin, Martyr dating about the year 150 AD. We still follow this basic form of the Eucharistic Liturgy today.

In its earliest form it seems clear that the elements that constitute the celebration of the Eucharist, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, are clearly established. The setting for this weekly Sunday Eucharist in the early centuries was different from our own in that it was usually within a domestic setting, that is, the home of a member of the community that was large enough to accommodate the gathering. The language of the liturgy would have been the common language of the people at that time, Aramaic or Greek. They would have readily taken part in hymns and chants, dialog and responses to prayers much as we do today, and as a culmination of their participation at Sunday Eucharist they would have received holy Communion under the forms of both bread and wine.

In 313 AD, another important event in the history of the Church occurred: *The Edict of Toleration of the Emperor Constantine*. With this edict it was no longer against the law of the Empire to be Christian. And the Church, firmly rooted and solidly established during those early years of persecution, now found it possible to freely and openly proclaim and live the gospel. Now, with the influx of new members, a number of things happened that affected the celebration of the Eucharist. Larger places were needed for the Sunday assembly and the simple setting and domestic rites began to become more elaborate to accommodate the size of the assembly and the larger buildings used for the gathering.

Elements such as a more elaborate procession to begin the celebration, a procession with the gifts and a more elaborate communion procession developed at this time. There were also various chants and acclamations

that developed to accommodate the size of the assembly and the place it gathered. Still, the basic structure of the Eucharist remained the same. And the basic elements of participation in sung and spoken prayer and reception of Holy Communion would be considered the norm.

The various prayers and hymns and acclamations in these earliest days were learned by rote and handed on primarily by memorization. Although we have examples of a few very early texts and orders of service they tend to be minimal in detail. These texts and prayers tended to develop within various geographical regions. Often collections were gathered in books for the bishop and his clergy. These early collections were called *libelli* and *Sacramentaries* and their purpose was to aid the memory and facilitate the rites which were becoming more and more complex. There was no thought given to publishing a liturgical book intended for the Church universal at this time.

Another historical event that had an influence on the celebration of the Mass was the coming to power of the Emperor Charlemagne (743-814). In establishing an empire Charlemagne saw the Church and its public worship as a means to create unity within his empire. As people were conquered in the various geographical regions it was expected that they would be baptized and become members of the Church. Catechesis was uneven at best, and often the ordinary folks had minimal or no understanding of the liturgy and the life of faith. It would take several generations for the faith to take firm root and begin to have a positive influence on these new members.

Meanwhile, Charlemagne sought to facilitate this expansion by sending copies of the *Sacramentary* from Pope Hadrian out into the empire. It seems that the pope was not clear about what Charlemagne intended to do, because the *Gregorian Sacramentary* that he sent the emperor was prepared strictly for papal liturgies and was not the most helpful in accomplishing what the Emperor had hoped. Nevertheless, copies were prepared and the celebration of the Liturgy continued to develop throughout the Holy Roman Empire.

Because of the expansion of the Church to other geographical regions and to a variety of different peoples, the language used by the western Church at this time, Latin, was not so familiar to the common folks. As mentioned above, the catechesis and formation of the quickly expanding Church membership was often lacking, so the language and rites that people experienced were quite different and unfamiliar to them. This often limited participation and a true appreciation of the various rites and prayers that make up the Liturgy. Another complication that occurred at this time was that there was often a delay in celebrating the other sacraments of initiation beyond baptism. Because people were not always prepared to receive Holy Communion in a timely way, the practice of fully participating in the Eucharist by reception of the Body and Blood of Christ became more the exception rather than the norm. The clergy responsible for education and formation did the best they could, but it would take generations before the faith would be firmly established among these people and in these new places. And the reception of Holy Communion tended to become more and more limited to the reception under the form of bread alone at this time.

As the Church continued to grow and become established in the West (Europe) a variety of social, political and ecclesial factors contributed to what we call the (Protestant) Reformation. Actually, reformation was a recognized need among the various groups both within and outside the Church. This was certainly not limited to the area of liturgy. However, the liturgy was one of the most common areas affected. Issues such as the frequent reception of Holy Communion, reception under both species, participation in the liturgy by the gathered faithful, and the use of the vernacular were all given serious consideration and often recognized as a great value by some of the Council Fathers at Trent. But because the Church did not want to appear to give in to the requests by certain of the Protestant reformers, these issues were not addressed at this time, and the status quo was maintained.

Following the Council of Trent, *The Roman Missal* was published and all in the Latin Rite were expected to follow the Order of Mass contained therein. Still, some of the issues listed above were not forgotten, and renewed efforts in formation and catechesis of the faithful in both liturgical participation and the reception of Holy Communion continued to develop in positive ways that influenced the practice and

participation of all who gathered to celebrate the Mass. Among these developments, we would have to include the leaders of the Liturgical Movement of the late 1800s as well as Pope St. Pius X, whose leadership in the early 1900s gave direction to Liturgical Music as well as the more frequent reception of Holy Communion at Mass and the lowering of the age for the reception of First Communion.

These experiences of the Church had a positive influence which led to the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* of the Second Vatican Council, promulgated on December 4, 1963. Among the highlights of the liturgical renewal begun at the direction of the Council, the call for the full, conscious and active participation of the assembly of believers in the celebration of the Mass gave foundation to the overall experience of the Liturgy as we experience it today. Along with the use of the vernacular language, the encouragement that the faithful now be offered the possibility to receive Holy Communion under the forms of both bread and wine has been a great gift to the Church in our own day and time.

