

What is the Eucharist?

Roman Catholicism and Transubstantiation

The Eucharist (Greek: 'thanksgiving') is a Sacrament, and like all Sacraments, it conveys grace to all who receive it worthily. The Eucharist also makes present Christ's sacrifice on the Cross in an unbloody manner, for that reason it is sometimes known as the Holy sacrifice of the Mass. Through it, forgiveness of sin may be obtained.

At the words of consecration, the bread and the wine change completely into the actual body and blood of Christ. This change is known as Transubstantiation and Christ's presence in the elements is called the Real Presence.

From the Council of Trent (1545-1563): "...By the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. This change, the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called transubstantiation."

Lutheranism and Consubstantiation

In Lutheranism, there is a Sacramental Union of the bread and wine with the body and blood of Christ. In other words, Christ's body and blood are present "in, with and under" the forms of bread and wine. This is known as Consubstantiation.

Luther explained his view by using an analogy of an iron rod placed into a fire: both are united in the red-hot iron, yet both are also distinct. Lutheranism rejects the view of the Eucharist as "making present" Christ's sacrifice on the Cross.

Reformed, Presbyterian and Zwingliism

The Reformed and Presbyterian view derives from the teachings of John Calvin: Christ is not present literally in the elements, but he is spiritually present. Those who receive the elements with faith can receive the actual body and blood of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit which works through the sacrament, a view sometimes known as Receptionism.

Calvin explained his view of the Eucharist in his Institutes: "The rule which the pious ought always to observe is, whenever they see the symbols instituted by the Lord, to think and feel surely persuaded that the truth of the thing signified is also present. For why does the Lord put the symbol of his body into your hands, but just to assure you that you truly partake of him? If this is true let us feel as much assured that the visible sign is given us in seal of an invisible gift as that his body itself is given to us."

Many other groups (e.g. the Baptists) refer to the Eucharist as the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion and deny any form of physical or spiritual presence of Christ in the bread and wine. Rather, the Lord's supper is a remembrance of Christ's suffering and a reminder of his power to overcome sin and death. This view derives from the teachings of the Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli and is commonly known as Memorialism.