

Three Things Everyone Needs to Know About the Eucharist

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Hi, I am Dr. Edward Sri, and I'm a theologian author and the host of the All Things Catholic podcast. I lead pilgrimages to Rome, the Holy Land, to Poland, and I serve as the Senior Vice President of Apostolic Outreach for Focus. And I'm also a visiting professor for the Augustine Institute. But most of all, I'm married to an amazing woman, Beth. And we are blessed with eight children and we reside here in Colorado.

But I'm so excited to be with you for this Eucharistic retreat. You know, the Eucharist is at the very center of our Catholic faith. Jesus is so close to us at every mass, at every tabernacle, It's amazing, But sometimes the things that are close to us, we can begin to take for granted. We can start just going through the motions with that aspect of our faith. And that's why it's always important to go back and rekindle our devotion. And that's what I'm hoping to do in our retreat on the Eucharist together.

So what, what are we going to do? I'm going to give you a little outline and then we're going to pray and we'll jump in. But the outline is this, we're going to, in the first session, look at the three key aspects of the Eucharist. Do you know the three key aspects of Eucharistic theology that every Catholic should know? We're going to make sure we understand it, appreciate it, but most of all live it more deeply. And then in the second session, we're going to zoom in on one of those three aspects, and that's the Eucharist as the real presence. And we're going to talk about our prayer in front of the blessed sacrament in adoration, which is an incredible gift. But how do we do that?

Well, because many times we could show up for prayer. And does this ever happen to you? Does your mind ever wander? Do you ever get distracted or you feel like your heart isn't really in it? You know Jesus is really there, but maybe you don't feel His closeness? Why do we go through seasons of darkness and dryness and prayer? What's happening in those moments? How do we respond? We're going to see from the wisdom of scripture and the saints that these aren't just little problems in our prayer life. No, no. They're actually the places Jesus is inviting us to take the next step, a deeper step in our relationship with Him. That's what we'll look at more in the second session. But why don't we begin in a word of prayer.

Opening Prayer

In the name of the Father and of the Son of the Holy Spirit, Amen. Jesus, you who are the eternal son of God. And we thank you that you didn't stay in heaven. You came down and became one of us. You took on our humanity to die for our sins and the rise over sin, death, and the devil to free us and to fill us with your life. But Jesus, you didn't stop there. You went further and you chose to remain present to us. So close to us in the gift of your very self, in the Eucharist.

Jesus, you who are so present to us, we pray that we may be more present to you, not just physically present in the blessed sacrament and going to mass, but may we be more spiritually, emotionally, personally, present to you so we can receive all that you want to do in our souls, that you may transform us, that you may change us evermore into yourself, into your likeness as

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St. Paul says, from one degree of glory to another. We ask this in your holy name, Amen. In the name of the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit, Amen.

The Three Key Aspects of the Eucharist

I'm so excited to get into this, my friends. Do you know the three key aspects of the Eucharist? Three things every Catholic should know, and we want to make sure we live deeply and we pass on to others. What are those three things? It's the Eucharist as real presence, the Eucharist as sacrifice, and the Eucharist as Holy Communion. Now, maybe you've heard of these three things, I bet you have, but I want to make sure we understand them well. And what we're going to do is I'm going to just briefly mention the first one, because we're going to talk about that more in the second session.

The Eucharist As Real Presence

Let's talk about real presence here. Uh, what do we mean by this? Well, the church teaches that God is present to us in many ways. He's present in His creation, He's holding us in existence, He's present in the poor. He's present in the Word of God and sacred scripture. He's present to us in the sacraments, but He's uniquely present to us in the Eucharist. So what do we mean by this unique presence?

Well, the basic teaching is this, that at the words of consecration, in every mass when the priest says those words of consecration of the bread and wine, the bread and wine are actually changed. They're no longer bread and wine. They're changed into the very body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus Christ. Now, some of you may hear that and go, well, come on Dr. Sri, it still looks like bread, it tastes like bread, it smells like bread. You're telling me that's Jesus. It has all of the chemical appearances of bread. How could that possibly be Jesus?

Well, I want to be clear what the church teaches. The bread and wine are really changed into the body and blood of Christ. But it's not a chemical change. It is not a chemical change. If you were to take the consecrated host and put it under a microscope in a laboratory, you're not going to see a chemical change. You're not going to see, oh, look, it, there's some Jesus cells floating around or there's some, some supernatural hemoglobin or a divine kidney. No, no, you're going to see all of the chemical properties of bread. But underneath those outward appearances of bread and wine, Jesus is really present. The same Jesus that walked the streets of Galilee, healing people, comforting them in their sorrows, encouraging them, strengthening them, calling them to repent, challenging them, inviting them to deeper friendship. That same Jesus's present in the Eucharist. He's really there and He wants us to draw near to Him. He loves us so much. He chose to come to us in the Eucharist. He longs for us to come and spend time with Him in His real presence. We'll talk more about that in the second session.

The Eucharistic As Sacrifice

But I want to spend some time looking at the second aspect of the Eucharist. And this is one I'm going to linger on more because I think there's more confusion here. While it's sad that studies show two thirds of Catholics think that the Eucharist is just a symbol, it's just a reminder, they

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don't believe in the real presence. And that's a crisis. I think 90% I would, my estimate would be at least 90% of Catholics don't really understand the Eucharistic sacrifice. If I asked the average Catholic in a parish, could you explain the Eucharistic sacrifice? I don't think 90% of them could pass that quiz. I want you to be a part of the fir the top 10%. Are you ready? Let's get into this.

So what I want to do is I want to take you in a time machine. I want to take you in a time machine. We're going to go back to the first century Jewish world. We're going to go to that upper room where Jesus instituted the Eucharist and He said those words for the first time, this is my body, this is my blood. We're so used to hearing those words at mass. I want you to hear them like a first century Jew would hear them. I want you to hear them like Peter and Andrew and John heard them, because what those words are going to be so powerful in shedding light on the Eucharist, especially the Eucharistic sacrifice.

The Passover Meal

Now, first thing I want to make sure you understand is that this, these words were spoken in the context of not any ordinary meal, but what is known as the Passover meal, the principle feast for the Jewish people you see at every Passover, what would the Jews do? They did three things. Three things that every year when they celebrate the Passover, first they retold the story of the first Passover. Every father in the home would retell the story of that fateful night. In Exodus chapter , when God told the Israelites to take a lamb, sacrifice the lamb in Egypt, and then take, put the blood on the doorpost and eat the lamb, and, and then eat in haste because they were going to flee that night and be free from slavery under Pharaoh. This was the night of their liberation from slavery in Egypt. This was the beginning of their nationhood. And so it's a powerful night in every year, they would retell the story of that first Passover, but they didn't stop there. They also reenacted it, it's like they did a skit on that first Passover. They would actually go and get a lamb, have it sacrificed, and they would eat the lamb.

A Memorial To Make Present

But they didn't just retell it, they didn't just reenact it. They did a third thing. And this is the one that's most important, want to make sure you get the third one? They celebrated it as a memorial, a biblical liturgical memorial. Now, what does that mean for the ancient Jews? Memorial means to make present. It's the biblical Greek word in the New Testament Mnemosyne or, or the, the Hebrew word “zikaron” It doesn't just mean to remember, it means to make present. And that's different from the way we use memorial. Like we may have a memorial service. We remember someone who died, you know, or we, have Memorial Day where we remember those who've gone before us.

So we just remember the past. That's not a biblical memorial, the biblical memorial is the past is made present. They really believed that that first Passover event was mystically made present to them every time they celebrated the Passover. In fact, there's a rabbi writing, about a generation after the time of Jesus. And he's explaining the Passover and he says, when we celebrate the Passover, it's as if we ourselves are walking out of Egypt. We're walking out with Moses and Aaron and Joshua and all of our founding fathers of our nation.

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You know, if we Americans in the United States, we celebrated the 4th of July as a biblical memorial, we wouldn't just have a picnic, a parade, or a barbecue. You know what we would do? We would gather together and we would retell the story of the founding of our country. We would retell the story of the founding of, of the United States and the signing of the Declaration of Independence. But we wouldn't just retell the story, we would reenact it. We'd gather together and there would be a solemn proclamation of the original Declaration of Independence. And we would read it together, and then we'd all come up and sign our names on there as well.

And then thirdly, we wouldn't just retell it, we wouldn't just reenact it, we would celebrate it as a memorial. And what does memorial mean? To make present, to make the past event present. So as we went through this ritual, we would believe that our founding fathers like Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin and John Hancock were mystically made present to us so that we could enter into that founding event. You see, that's the understanding of Biblical Memorial to make the past event present so we can participate in it.

The Sacrificial Lamb

So with that background, my friends, are you ready to walk into that upper room? Now, let's go into that upper room. And the first thing we would notice, the first thing that would strike us if we were following the biblical accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke and St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, the four New Testament accounts that tell us about the institution of the Eucharist. The first thing that would strike us is that there is no mention of a lamb. There's no mention of a lamb there. The lamb is the main course, it's the main dish of the Passover meal that would, in a sense be shocking. There's no mention of a lamb, but what the New Testament accounts draw our attention to is a different kind of lamb that was there. You see, think about what Jesus says in the context of the Passover meal. He says, this is my body, which is offered up for you. That's technical language taken right out of the temple system.

Every first century Jew hears Jesus talking about a sacrifice. because that's what you would do. He'd take the animal and offer it up in sacrifice. The lamb would be offered up in sacrifice. Jesus takes that language and applies it to His body. Similarly, He says, this is my blood, which is poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Again, that's technical language from the temple system describing how the blood of the animal would be poured out over the altar for forgiveness of sins. So what Jesus is doing is entering into that sacrificial system and using all that language, but applying it to Himself. It's as if he's saying he's the Passover lamb. He's saying, it's my body being offered up. It's my blood being poured out for forgiveness of sins. I'm the new Passover Lamb being sacrificed to bring you freedom. Freedom from not just Pharaoh, but freedom from the slavery of sin and death and the devil.

So this is amazing when you understand the first century Jewish background to appreciate what Jesus is really saying and doing at the last Supper. But the most important point comes at the very end. Do you remember what He says at the end of this meal? He says, do this in remembrance of me, do this in memory of me, do this as a memorial of me. There's that biblical memorial again. And what does memorial mean to make? So what is Jesus saying? He's saying, make this present. Make this offering of my body, this pouring out of my blood present so that future generations can enter into it.

The Mass Is A Sacrifice

You see, this is why the mass is a sacrifice. Because every time we go to mass, the sacrifice, the offering of Jesus' body and the pouring out of His blood that took place on, Calvary, that sacrifice of His body and blood is made present to us as a biblical memorial. I like to say it this way, that every time we go to mass, it's as if we go to Calvary or maybe Calvary comes to us. We become like St. John the Beloved Disciple, and Mary and Mary Magdalene who are there at the cross. Why are we there? Why is it present to us so we can enter into it and we can allow it to change us. Catechism tells us that in the sacrifice of the mass, every Catholic should offer up all of our works, all of our joys, all of our sufferings. We united all with Jesus who's offering His life totally as a gift of Himself to the Father. That's what Jesus is doing on Calvary. And that gift of Himself is made present to us at the mass so that we can join our lives with Jesus and unite all of our lives as a gift in Him being offered to the Father.

Now, why is this so important, my friends? This is, this is so crucial. I just want to say, if you want to be a better husband to your wife, a better wife to your husband, if you want to be a better mom to your children, a better dad to your children, you want to be a better friend, you want to be a better coworker, a better parishioner, most of all, if you want to give your life more to Jesus and to the Father in His spirit, you need the sacrifice of the mass and to be present to it, to understand it, to live it better.

Love Is On The Cross

Because here's the thing, that sacrifice of Christ that's made present to us at every mass, that's the fullest revelation of love. Remember, what does the Bible say? What is love? God is love. First John, chapter four, verse eight, God is love and love became man. He took on our humanity. And we look at the whole of Jesus' life you're seeing a revelation of love. But St. John Paul the second explains that the fullest revelation of love is seen on the cross. And that cross is made present to us at every mass because Jesus wants to change us. And do you have areas where you know you can grow in total perfect sacrificial love? I know I've got many. We all do. And when I look at the cross, I see such beautiful love, but I'm also challenged because I see that I fall short of that love. And I know that Jesus is calling me to love like He loves.

When I, when I look at the cross, for example, I see such courage. He endures so much suffering. And I know I can complain when I'm just a little cold or it, it's in the summer and my air conditioning isn't working. I'm a little hot and I can whine and complain about Jesus. I know He is inviting me to sacrifice more, to be willing to be more courageous and endure suffering better. I look at Jesus, I see such patience. The people He came to save don't appreciate Him, they don't understand Him, they're mocking Him, they're rejecting Him. And I see Him just being so patient and He forgives them. He says, father, forgive them. They know not what they do.

And I know in my life I have times when I, when I don't feel appreciated or I don't feel understood or somebody hurts me and I can get frustrated and, and I, and I want to hold a grudge. I don't forgive as quickly and as easily and as deeply as I should. Jesus on the cross is doing something amazing for me. But He is also challenging me to love and be more patient and forgiving like He is. When I look at the cross, I see such perfect trust. He says, father, into your

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hands, I commit my spirit. I want to trust my life and put my life in the father's hands. I know the father's hands are trustworthy, but I know in my own life, sometimes I just clinging on and want to control and manage certain areas of my life. And I'm afraid to put them in the father's hands. I want to control it, but when I do that, I just end up worried and anxious about many things like Martha and I can struggle with that. because I know I need to trust more. Jesus on the cross is inviting me to love and to trust and to forgive and to be courageous and to sacrifice like He did that day.

Do you have areas where you can grow in this total sacrificial love in your marriage with your children, with your friendships, in your parish, and most of all with God Himself, again, we all do. If you want to grow in trust and not be a slave to anxiety, because you're just controlling, want to control everything. If you want to grow in sacrifice and not fall into the habit of selfishness and comfort for yourself. If you want to grow in patience instead of losing your temper when the kids are having a meltdown, if you want to grow in forgiveness and not be weighed down by holding grudges against others. If you want the areas we want to grow in Christ like love, we all do. How do you grow in sacrificial love the most? It's through encountering sacrificial love Himself at every mass, the sacrifice, the mass Christ sacrifices made present to us because He wants to relive. Jesus wants to relive His perfect love on the cross in us.

This my friends, this is at the heart of Catholic, a Catholic understanding the cross. Jesus didn't die. So we don't have to, He didn't die in in instead of us. No, no. He died offered His life as a perfect gift to the Father, to reconcile us to the Father, but also to show us the way of love. Because He wants to reproduce that perfect act of love on the cross in our hearts. That's why it says, if you want to be my disciple, pick up your cross and follow me. He's inviting us to live the cross in our daily lives more. And He wants to reproduce it. And we all have areas where we know we need to grow in these areas, but we fall short. We need a strength outside of ourselves to help us to love beyond what we could do on our own. And that happens in the sacrifice of the mass.

And I want to highlight this because in 2020 when I heard so many people sadly missing communion and longing to receive communion when all our churches closed down because of Covid and so many people couldn't receive communion, it was a beautiful thing to hear so many people missing communion, they long and yearned to receive communion again, it was sad that it was happening, but good to hear how much they wanted communion. And that was great. But you know what, I never heard a single Catholic in those months, never heard a single Catholic say, I miss the sacrifice of the mass. I think that's telling you see, our faith isn't about just what I receive, it's also about what I give. And I want to give more. I want to give more of my heart. And that's why we want to participate in the sacrifice of the mass.

We're going to talk about communion. That's a great gift we're going to get there next. Don't get me wrong, it's really important. But our faith isn't just about what do I get out of it? Is it interesting for me? What did I learn? How does it help me? It's also about taking what Jesus to offer and then giving ourselves more, giving ourselves more to Him. And that's what the sacrifice of mass is about and what it enables us to do. He perfect love, present at every mass, He wants to reproduce that perfect love in us so that we can love, like He loves to trust, like He

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trusts to forgive, like He forgives to be patient like He's patient, to be courageous, like He's courageous.

Let's live the sacrifice of the mass. So at those words of consecration, at those moments, don't look around and see who's there and what they're wearing. That's not, that's not the time to do that. Don't be thinking about your todo list or the football game or the donuts after mass. No, no. This is the time to give Jesus everything. Catechism, unite all of our works, all of our joys, all of our sufferings with Jesus. And then beg Jesus to change our hearts, to transform our hearts so that we could love like he loves.

Jesus The Bridegroom

Now in closing, I want to look at that last aspect briefly here. I want to talk about the Eucharist as Holy communion. And I love this line right before we receive Holy Communion, the priest holds up the sacred host and he says, blessed are those who are called to the supper of the lamb. Do you know where those words come from? They come from the Bible, they come from Revelation Chapter Nineteen verse nine, which is this, the culmination of all of salvation history. It's an incredible moment and we hear an echo of it at every mass, but we often don't realize the connection, everything from the masses is, is ultimately rooted back in scripture. And the more we understand that biblical background, the more we'll be able to enter into all that Jesus is offering us.

So let's understand that background. You know, there's many images used to describe our relationship with God. God is father, God is our, Jesus is our brother. He's the creator, He is the law giver. But the image that describes the closeness God wants with us, that image, the most powerful one in the Bible is that of marriage. That, that Israel's described as the bride. And God is described as the bridegroom and like, it's like they were married in Mount Sinai, but when, when Israel's not faithful, she's described as like an adulterous, you know, worshiping other idols and not being faithful to, to Yahweh. Well the prophets were told that one day God would come again as bridegroom. And even though Israel's been an unfaithful bride, worshiping other gods, God would come and woo her heart back and win her back and be they be betrothed again and renewed forever.

That's why Jesus comes and He's called the bridegroom by St. John the Baptist and He performs His first miracle in the context of a wedding at Cana. That's, that's not coincidental. It's all about the imagery of Jesus, the bride room coming to unite Himself to us. And this theme reaches its climax in Revelation chapter nineteen, verse nine, where St. John has this image of the heavenly liturgy in the apocalypse. And he hears the angels say, blessed are those who are called to the wedding supper of the lamb. That's what the priest is echoing from Revelation nineteen, nine, the wedding supper of the lamb.

So did you know what that's telling us? It's telling us and reminding us that when we receive holy communion, this is the culmination of the mystical wedding feast in heaven. because in Revelation chapter nineteen, when the angel announces the wedding supper, the lamb, it's announcing the mystical wedding feast between Christ and his church, between the bride and the

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bridegroom, between God and his people. And, and that wedding feast, we participated here on earth in Holy Communion.

In fact, you ever get a wedding invitation in the mail? You know, every time you go to mass, you get a wedding invitation. When you come down the aisle, you're no ordinary guest at this wedding feast. You're the bride, you're a part of the bride, the church. It's like, here comes the bride. And you have those intimate moments in communion with Jesus. At the end of, when you come back to your pew, your bridegroom, your beloved is dwelling within you.

This is not the time to, you know, be looking around. This is not the time to be developing your parking lot exit strategy. No, no. This is the time to rest with your beloved, to rest with your bridegroom. Think of Holy Communion as that mystical wedding feast. The union of the bride and the bridegroom, the very body, blood, soul of any of Jesus is dwelling within you. Be present to Jesus. Spend time with Him, Tell Him you love Him. Take time to give thanks. Don't rush out. You know, the donuts will still be there and even they run out of donuts. You can pick some up on the way home. Spend a few minutes in Thanksgiving with Jesus at the end of every communion. It's an incredible gift.

We're going to talk more in the next session, about the real presence of Jesus and our time with him in prayer and some of the struggles that we may have in dryness in prayer. That's what we'll look at in our next session.