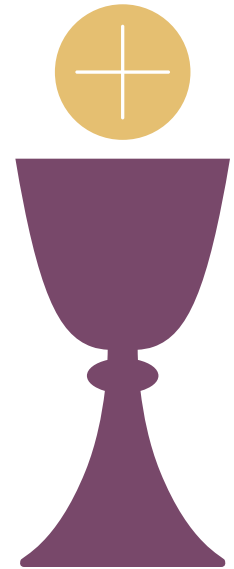


Eucharist, a Taste of Eternal Life

There is no subject so painful and difficult to comprehend as the subject of death. And there is no more honest and sensitive church statement about this subject than the one offered by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) in the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*:



“It is in regard to death that man’s condition is most shrouded in doubt. Man is tormented not only by pain and by the gradual breaking-up of his body but also, and even more, by the dread of forever ceasing to be. But a deep instinct leads him rightly to shrink from and to reject the utter ruin and total loss of his personality. Because he bears in himself the seed of eternity, which cannot be reduced to mere matter, he rebels against death. All the aids made available by technology, however useful they may be, cannot set his anguished mind at rest. They may prolong his life-span; but this does not satisfy his heartfelt longing, one that can never be stifled, for a life to come” (18).

The Council Fathers affirmed that the longing for eternal life is a deeply human longing, placed in our very nature by God, the Creator. Likewise, the dread of death and struggles surrounding death are something that believers share with all people.

So what can the Church bring to the world, beyond compassionate sharing of our universal human condition? The Council Fathers were likewise very clear: Christians are blessed with a sure and certain hope that death is not the end. Through Divine Revelation we know that God has prepared a glorious destiny for those who love him. We are not meant for death. We are meant for eternal life with God. This future is revealed and made possible through Jesus Christ, our Savior.

HIS PASSION AND DEATH LEAD TO LIFE

Paradoxically, Jesus showed us the way to eternal life by accepting a terrible and humiliating death. The cross was one of the most excruciating forms of public execution practiced in the ancient Roman Empire. Jesus did not stay far away from human pain, redeeming us at a safe distance. Rather, he passed directly through the worst possible physical suffering and spiritual abandonment, giving his life for the sake of us all. And God raised him up.

God’s action in raising Jesus from the dead has had a profound effect on us, even though we may realize it only dimly. Through the Resurrection God’s future has entered into time and history. We can truly touch the promised life and resurrection that waits for us all, by believing in the Risen Lord.

As Lent draws to a close and Holy Week begins, we know the joy of Easter is coming. But we must first walk with Jesus on the road to Calvary. The path to Easter passes through Good Friday. To believe in the truth of the Christian story means honestly facing the inevitability of death. Yet it also means holding fast to the promise of eternal life. Christians through the ages have believed that by dying and rising, Christ has triumphed over death itself. And he shares his victory with us—the gift of eternal life—in the Eucharist.

A LIFE-GIVING MEAL

“Jesus said to them, ‘Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him’” (John 6:53–56).

In this passage, St. John the Evangelist recounts an astonishing promise. Those who eat the flesh and drink the blood of Jesus will be so firmly united to him that they will share his own life forever. The passage points to Eucharist.

What an awesome gift! These words should cause us to marvel at what we receive through the Eucharist. It is truly the meal that brings us into union with our Savior and gives us his divine life, a life that will never pass away. Today, when we share in the Eucharist, eating the consecrated bread and drinking the consecrated wine, we receive the body and blood of the Risen Christ. We receive the life of Christ, so that we may remain with him always. Our communion with God, through Jesus Christ, is stronger than death.

The words of the Gospel according to John speak powerfully to the individual. Nevertheless, it is important to recall that the message of the Resurrection also has a social character. As theologian Thomas Rausch has observed, “We do not come to heaven alone, but accompanied by others, those we have helped or hindered on the journey to eternal life, whose lives are now intertwined inseparably with our own.” The eucharistic banquet, shared with those in heaven and on earth, is a perfect image of our hope for eternal life. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms, “By the Eucharistic celebration we already unite ourselves with the heavenly liturgy and anticipate eternal life, when God will be all in all” (1326).

REFLECT

How can simple gifts of bread and wine impart a life that never ends? Take time to reflect on the promises of Christ. How can Eucharist be a foretaste of the banquet of heaven? Take time to reflect on the “great reunion” we hope for in the life to come.

ACT

The liturgies of Holy Week can strengthen us in the hope of eternal life. Participate as fully as you can this year. When the Resurrection is announced in the Gospel of Easter, give thanks for the life this brings to *you*.

PRAY

God of hope and joy and resurrection, thank you for the Eucharist. We commit to you all the burdens we carry, all our fears of death and dying. Open your hand, O Lord of Life, and feed us once again.



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