

Resurrection Parish

CELEBRATE



Words, Words, Words: Eucharist, Mass, Liturgy and Ritual

What do we mean by “Eucharist”?

While the name “Eucharist” is not found in the New Testament, the verb “to give thanks” (*eucharistein*), which is its root, was part of the Eucharistic tradition almost from the beginning (see I Cor.11:23-25). The name “Eucharist” first appears in a collection of the early Christian writings known as “the Apostolic Fathers.” During the context of a Passover meal, Jesus said the prayer of “blessing” (*eulogia*) over the bread as narrated in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, or the prayer of “thanksgiving” *eucharistein* as narrated in the Gospel of Luke and the writings of St. Paul. This Jewish prayer of “thanksgiving or blessing” -- called a *Todah, Berakah, or Birkat ha-mazon* -- eventually developed into what we now call the Eucharistic Prayer. It is during the Eucharistic Prayer that the Church gives thanks and praise for all God’s gifts of creation and salvation. We especially remember the greatest gift of all - Jesus who gave us his own Body and Blood as real food and real drink. Beginning in the 2nd century the Church began to call the entire action surrounding this central prayer the “Eucharist.” Speaking of action . . . Eucharist is really more a verb than a noun. We do Eucharist and even more importantly, Eucharist does us. And we become Eucharist.

Where did the title “Mass” come from?

The Mass has been the most common title used when talking about the Eucharist from the 4th century to the present. The word Mass comes from the word *missio*, which means, “to send.” The last words of the Latin Mass were “*Ite, missa est*” which can be translated “Go, you are sent.” And we answered “*Deo Gratias*” or “*Thanks be to God.*” When the Church began to call the entire action surrounding the Eucharist the “Mass” or “You are sent,” it focused on the commitment and responsibility demanded of all who eat and drink at the Eucharistic Table. We are sent *from* the Eucharistic Table to *be* the Eucharist, bread broken and wine poured out for the life of the world.

Okay, I give up. So what does “liturgy” mean?

Liturgy comes from the Greek word “*leitourgia*” which literally means “work of the people.” For the ancient Greeks this meant the civic duty of all citizens to cooperate in making society work. Sounds like our responsibility as baptized Christians to fully, consciously and actively participate in Mass and all other rituals of the church. Liturgy and Mass do not mean the same thing. Mass is one kind of liturgy. For instance, the Sacraments of Reconciliation, Marriage and Baptism; the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours; and even the ecumenical Taizé Prayer are all liturgies – though Taizé Prayer is not a liturgy of the Church. Anytime an assembly gathers, and prays together according to a set pattern, they are doing liturgy. All liturgy requires a community, prayer and ritual. Non-liturgical prayers are sometimes called devotions and as an important part of our Christian identity come from and lead back to the communal, ritual prayer of the church . . . most importantly the Celebration of the Eucharist.

So what’s “ritual” all about?

Ritual is a basic human activity that uses symbols and actions to express our human experience. They are markers on the journey of life. When words fail, humans do ritual. When we fall in love we say, “I love you” but sooner or later the experience is so deep we need to express it with a symbol . . . a rose or a ring, and an action . . . a hug and kiss, a wedding. Ritual brings to expression what is already going on in the lives of those celebrating . . . birthdays (a party, cards, gifts and a cake that is set on fire) mark the journey of growing. The growing is already happening. The party celebrates that. Look for more next time on ritual, symbols and the basic structure of the Mass.

Welcome. Engage. Celebrate. Serve. Connect.