

THE GIFT OF THE EUCHARIST

One of the gifts of that first Easter is the Eucharist. Before being handed over to be crucified, Jesus instituted the Eucharist, which we celebrate at every Mass. He left it to his Church, the Assembly of Believers, in memory of what He was about to undergo.

All Christians accept the fact that Jesus did this at the Last Supper. However, we disagree on what it actually means. The early Christians understood it to be an act of Thanksgiving; therefore, the name “Eucharist.” They also understood it to be the Body and Blood of the Lord.

Referring to the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, Saint Cyril of Jerusalem had this to say in one of his catecheses, “Since Christ himself has declared the bread to be his body, who can have any further doubt? Since he himself has said quite categorically, *This is my blood*, who would dare to question it and say that it is not his blood?”

Around the year 350, Saint Cyril instructed those receiving the Eucharist for the first time in this way, “Having his body and blood in our members, we become bearers of Christ and sharers, as Saint Peter says, in the divine nature.” And, then, he admonished, “Do not, then, regard the eucharistic elements as ordinary bread and wine: they are in fact the body and blood of the Lord, as he himself has declared. Whatever your senses may tell you, be strong in faith.”

The Didache (an ancient document that records some of the teachings of the Twelve Apostles) speaks about the Eucharist and the prayers of thanks to be used. A meal was eaten prior to the celebration of the Eucharist. When the meal was over, the uninitiated and faithful were separated.

The instruction given is this, “Let no one eat and drink of your Eucharist but those baptized in the name of the Lord; to this, too, the saying of the Lord is applicable: *Do not give to dogs what is sacred.*” While that may sound harsh to us today, it expresses very clearly the understanding that the Eucharist is the very Body and Blood of Christ.

We, along with several other Christian Churches, have preserved that understanding. It is an important part of Roman Catholic teaching and is contained in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Actually, in our tradition, a person may not receive the Eucharist in Holy Communion until they are able to understand what it is.

I am inspired, strengthened, and encouraged when I take time to become more aware of our connection with the past. It should prompt us to receive Holy Communion reverently and to receive under both forms, as the Lord instructed and the Church has allowed once again. But, that can be the subject for another time.

For the time being, let us return to the teaching of the Twelve Apostles and their instruction for the Lord’s Day: “On the Lord’s own day, assemble in common to break bread and offer thanks; but first confess your sins, so that your sacrifice may be pure. However, no one quarreling with his brother may join your meeting until they are reconciled; your sacrifice must not be defiled.”

Perhaps, that is why some absent themselves.