

Lesson Six: Memory and Presence: Communion as the Coming of Christ

I. At the Last Supper

A. Calling to Mind His Death

With our last lesson, we reached the climax of the Mass - the Eucharistic Prayer.

The Eucharistic Prayer is a prayer of remembrance. So is the Mass.

As we saw in the last lesson, the various prefaces to the Eucharistic prayers recall the great events in salvation history. These great events are presented as a prelude to the summit of salvation history - Christ's institution of the Eucharist at the last supper.

The Eucharistic prayers themselves are punctuated with expressions like "memento, Domine" ("Remember, Lord").

In Eucharistic Prayer I, the most ancient of the prayers, we ask God to remember the living and the dead, and we recall by name saints and martyrs, as well as the biblical sacrifices of Abel, Abraham, and Melchizedech. And, in the words of the prayer, we "celebrate the memory of Christ," especially His passion, resurrection, and ascension.

In the Eucharistic Prayers, the Mass is clearly seen as "the memorial of our redemption" (Eucharistic Prayer IV) in which, "calling to mind the death [He] endured for our salvation" (Eucharistic Prayer III), we relive the "memory of His death and resurrection" (Eucharistic Prayer II).

But words like "memorial" or "remembrance" - as they're commonly understood - don't do justice to what happens in the Eucharist. Nor do they adequately translate all that Jesus intended to convey when He commanded: "Do this in memory of me" (see [Luke 22:19](#); [1 Corinthians 11:24](#)).

B. Remembering His Covenant

This command, issued at the last supper, evokes an ancient strand of biblical tradition.

Remembrance is a key theme in the Old Testament. Sometimes when you read the word "remember" in Scripture, it simply means what it means to us today: "don't forget."

But when referring to God's "remembering," the word means much more.

For example, after the flood, God promises to "remember" His covenant and never again destroy the world by water (see [Genesis 9:15-16](#); note: the New American Bible translation has "recall," but this weakens the force of the Hebrew).

It's not as if God can ever forget His covenant. Here, and elsewhere in the Old Testament, when God "remembers," He is acting to accomplish His will - answering prayers, granting forgiveness, saving, and blessing His people (see [Genesis 30:22](#); [1 Samuel 1:19-20](#); [Psalm 98:3](#); [105:42](#)).

We retain this sense in the Mass with such prayers as: "Lord, remember your Church throughout the world" (Eucharistic Prayer II).

We're not for a moment presuming that God has somehow forgotten His Church. We're praying for His blessing, His continued saving activity in our lives.

In the Old Testament, the most dramatic example of this divine remembrance comes when God "remembers" His covenant with Abraham and raises up Moses to liberate His chosen people from their bondage in Egypt (see [Exodus 2:24](#); [6:5](#); [Leviticus 26:42,45](#)).

II. The Memorial Feast

A. The Passover Remembered

God commanded Israel to commemorate this national deliverance in a "memorial feast" that would be a "perpetual institution" (see [Exodus 12:14,17](#)).

This memorial, the Passover, was what Jesus was celebrating on the night of His last supper, when He instituted the Eucharist as the memorial of His suffering and death.

The Passover, as given to the Israelites by God through Moses, was to be an annual thanksgiving celebration that would call to mind God's saving actions and inspire the people to keep God's commandments (see [Exodus 13:3,8](#); [Deuteronomy 6:20-25](#); [16:3](#)).

Israel's worship, not only in the Passover, but in the other festivals and customs instituted by God through Moses, was a worship of ritual remembrance.

What was remembered? God's salvific intervention in Israel's history - especially in the exodus - and His covenant with Israel. The ritual remembrance included the reading or narration of His saving deeds, along with the offering of sacrifices.

And Israel was taught to believe that in these rites of remembrance they were brought into a mysterious sharing and participation in the covenant that God made with their ancestors centuries before.

We see this most clearly in the covenant renewal ceremony recorded in the Book of Deuteronomy. In this remembrance, Moses explains, the original covenant made at Mount Sinai is "actualized," or made present in their midst.

"Not with our fathers did He make this covenant, but all of us who are alive here this day. The Lord spoke with you face to face on the mountain from the midst of the fire. Since you were afraid of the fire and would not go up to the mountain, I stood between the Lord and you at that time, to announce to you these words of the Lord. . . ." [Deuteronomy 5:1-4, 15,23,25; 6:20-25](#))

Moses is remembering a series of events that took place on Mount Sinai during the first generation after the Exodus (see Exodus 19-20). Yet he is describing them as if the assembled Israelites are themselves there, as witnesses and participants in those events.

Notice his intense stress on the present moment - us, you, alive, here, this day. Though the covenant was made long ago on Sinai, it is present in their midst.

In recalling the covenant, they aren't rehearsing the facts of a past event. In their remembrance, through the power of God, they are being made contemporaries of those events. Those events are being made present. In remembering the covenant, they are made heirs to that covenant, part of the family of God created by the covenant.

In every celebration of the Passover, men and women of every generation remember the day when they themselves came forth from the land of Egypt (see [Deuteronomy 16:3](#)). The exodus is something that they personally participate in. Every Israelite,

even today, speaks of the exodus in the first person. It is "what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt" (see [Exodus 13:8](#)).

B. The New Exodus

This is the rich Old Testament background to Jesus' command at the last supper.

He aimed to institute a new Passover memorial, one that would remember His "exodus" (see [Luke 9:31](#)), the mighty act of salvation accomplished by His life, death, and resurrection, by which all peoples and generations are freed from sin and death.

The new memorial instituted by Jesus wasn't to be a nostalgic reminiscence of Christ's last meal, or His days on earth. Like the Passover, it would be a liturgical memorial that would re-present, "actualize" - make actual - God's mighty work.

In the Eucharist, the once-and-for-all sacrifice of the cross becomes present, God remembers and renews the covenant made in Christ's blood (see [Luke 22:20](#)), and we who worship through this memorial are made sharers in the power and promises of that covenant.

What Moses told the Israelites about the covenant and Sinai could be said of us: Not with our fathers, the apostles in that upper room, did Jesus make this new covenant. He made it with all of us who are alive here this day. The Lord spoke with us face to face when He said, "Take . . . eat. . . This is my body . . . Take . . . drink . . . This is the cup of my blood . . . Do this in memory of me."

C. Christ, Our Paschal Lamb

Because the Eucharist is a memorial of the Lord's passover, we remember these words of its institution, just as Jesus spoke them at the last supper.

But what do those words mean, exactly?

Remember, Jesus spoke them in a Passover context. The Passover meal prescribed by Moses included eating an unblemished lamb with unleavened bread and bitter herbs and reciting an explanation of the feast's meaning (see [Exodus 12:8-11,24-27](#)). Later Jewish tradition added to the celebration the singing of psalms and the of drinking wine.

Notice that in the last supper accounts, unleavened bread and wine are mentioned (see Matthew 26:26-27; [Mark 14:22-23](#); [Luke 22:19-20](#)), and even the singing of psalms (see Matthew 26:30; [Mark 14:26](#)).

But no mention is made of the Passover lamb.

Jesus appears to be presenting himself as the Passover lamb, whose flesh and blood would be eaten in remembrance of the Lord's salvation. In fact, this is how Jesus is depicted in the Gospel of John.

John, incidentally, is the only one of the gospel writers who doesn't provide an account of Jesus instituting the Eucharist at the last supper.

But from his earliest verses John identifies Jesus as "the Lamb of God" (see [John 1:29](#)). At the gospel's end, John again subtly describes Jesus in terms of the paschal lamb.

When Christ is condemned by Pilate, John tells us, it was the "preparation day for Passover, and it was about noon." Why this detail? Because that was the time when Israel's priests slaughtered the lambs in preparation for the Passover meal (see [John 19:14](#)).

As He hangs on the cross, the soldiers give Jesus a sponge soaked in wine. They raise it to Him on a "hyssop branch." That's the same kind of branch the Israelites are instructed to use to daub their door posts with the blood of the Passover lamb (see [John 19:29](#); [Exodus 12:22](#)).

And why don't the soldiers break Jesus' legs on the cross (see [John 19:33,36](#))? John quotes Moses' original Passover instructions, explaining that it was because the legs of the Passover lambs weren't to be broken (see [Exodus 12:46](#); [Numbers 9:12](#); [Psalm 34:20](#)).

This point is further driven home in the long sermon that Jesus delivered in the synagoue at Capernaum near Passover (see [John 6:4,35-59](#)).

Jesus describes himself in terms of both the paschal lamb whose flesh must be eaten and the manna with which God fed the Israelites in the wilderness.

He insists on describing the eating and drinking of His flesh and blood in starkly literal terms. Four times, He uses a Greek word - trogein - that refers to a crude kind of eating, almost a gnawing or chewing (see [John 6:54,56,57,58](#)).

His original audience, including many of His followers, were shocked and appalled at His insistence that they must eat His flesh and drink His blood (see 6:52,61,66).

III. At the Lamb's Supper

A. Giving Us Our Daily Bread

From these texts we can understand the tradition handed on to us by the apostles - that Christ is "our paschal lamb" (see 1 Corinthians 5:7) whose blood was shed for our salvation and whose flesh and blood we eat and drink in remembrance of that salvific act.

We profess this faith in every Mass, making the words of Scripture our own.

The priest presents the consecrated bread to us with John's words: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (see [John 1:29](#)).

He follows these words with words drawn from John's Revelation, which allude to the wedding supper of the Lamb ("Happy are those . . ." see [Revelation 19:9](#)).

As we explored in Lesson 5, in the Eucharist we join ourselves to a cosmic liturgy, described in Revelation as a heavenly wedding feast.

As is appropriate for a wedding feast, we introduce the Communion Rite of the Mass by praying the family prayer that Jesus taught us (see [Matthew 6:9-13](#); [Luke 11:2-4](#)).

In the context of the Mass, the petitions of the Our Father take on new meaning. We might even say that the Mass fulfills the Lord's Prayer word for word.

In the Mass, we hallow or glorify His name and ask Him to forgive our trespasses. The Sign of Peace symbolizes our forgiveness of those who've trespassed against us - as we offer a gesture of reconciliation before approaching the altar (see [Matthew 5:23-24](#); [John 14:27](#)).

In the Mass, the Father gives us our "daily bread." In fact, epiousios, the word translated "daily," is a Greek word found only in the Lord's Prayer. Its exact meaning has puzzled translators and scholars for more than 20 centuries now.

It's interesting to note, however, that the idea and expression "to give bread" seems to trace back to the primordial experience of God giving the Israelites a daily portion of bread from heaven as they sojourned in the wilderness (see [Exodus 16:4](#); [Psalm 78:24](#)).

The giving of bread becomes an image of God's care and salvation elsewhere in the Old Testament (see [Psalm 107:9](#); [146:7](#); [Proverbs 30:8-9](#)).

Jesus refers to the original wilderness experience in His Passover sermon at Capernaum - saying that our "Father gives you the true bread from heaven" (see [John 6:32](#)).

The idea of giving bread occurs only in a few other places in the Gospels. But those places are all highly suggestive. In fact, each time it appears, it is in a scene heavy with Eucharistic overtones.

Jesus takes, blesses, breaks, and gives bread in His miraculous multiplication of the loaves (see [Mark 6:41](#); [8:6](#); [Matthew 15:36](#); [John 6:11](#)); at the last supper (see [Mark 14:22](#); [Matthew 26:26](#)); and at Emmaus after His resurrection (see [Luke 24:30](#)).

So, too, in the Mass, he comes to give us our daily bread. By this bread we are strengthened against temptation, and promised deliverance from evil.

In the Mass, we're blessed to be able to eat bread in the kingdom of God, as Jesus promised (see [Luke 14:15](#)). Indeed, in the cosmic liturgy of the Eucharist, the kingdom has come on earth as it is in heaven.

That's why the early Christians recited a short "doxology" after saying the Lord's Prayer during the Mass. We still pray their doxology ("For the kingdom, the power, and the glory . . .") in our Mass.

B. Until He Comes Again

In the earliest Eucharistic celebrations, the first believers also prayed a short prayer for the coming of the Lord in glory: "Come, Lord Jesus!"

The prayer - an Aramaic expression, Marana tha - is also found in the New Testament where it also evokes the Eucharistic setting (see [1 Corinthians 16:22](#); [Revelation 22:17, 20](#)).

The early Christians looked forward to the second "coming" of the Lord. The Lord's coming in glory was anticipated as a time when He would finally reveal himself and call all peoples into His presence for judgment (see [Matthew 24:27](#); [1 Thessalonians 2:19](#); [3:13](#); [2 Thessalonians 2:1,8](#); [1 John 2:28](#)).

Parousia (pronounced: PAHR-oo-SEE-uh), the Greek word used by the New Testament writers for this "coming," means both "advent" or "arrival" and "bodily presence." For instance, Paul uses parousia to describe his own immediate bodily presence, which he admits is, while real, not striking or imposing (see [2 Corinthians 10:10](#); [Philippians 2:12](#)).

Outside the Bible, parousia came to be an official term for the visit of a king or emperor.

And the first Christians saw the Eucharist as a parousia.

"For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until He comes," Paul wrote (see [1 Corinthians 11:26](#)).

Paul's words are still heard in our Eucharist celebrations today - one of three options for proclaiming the Mystery of the Faith following the consecration of the bread and wine.

Very early, Christians began praying, as we still do, "Hosanna . . . blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" in their celebrations of the Eucharist (see [Matthew 21:9](#)).

Jesus himself had said, on the threshold of His passion: "I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'" (see [Matthew 23:39](#)).

And we see Him when we say this prayer in the Mass. In every Eucharist, He fulfills His promise to be with us until the end of the age (see [Matthew 28:20](#)).

The Eucharist is His coming, the parousia, the Real Presence of Christ. In the Eucharist we have the bodily presence of Christ, the coming of the king who stands at the right hand of God (see [Acts 7:56](#)).

In describing His "coming," Jesus said that "this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place" (see [Matthew 24:34](#)).

And at the last supper, He said He would not drink wine "until the kingdom of God comes" (see [Luke 22:18](#)).

A moment later, He told the apostles: "I confer a kingdom on you . . . that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (see [Luke 22:29-30](#)).

These same images are found in John's vision of the cosmic liturgy - the wedding feast of the Lamb (see [Revelation 19:9](#)); Jesus as the Word of God and the King of Kings (see Revelation 19:13,16); the kingdom of priests who reign with him (see

[Revelation 5:10;20:6](#)); the thrones of judgment (see [Revelation 20:12](#)); the "apostles of the Lamb" and the "twelve tribes of the Israelites" (see [Revelation 21:10-14](#)).

C. A Share in His Body and Blood

Whenever the New Testament speaks of Christ's coming, it speaks also of His judgment. The Eucharistic parousia is a real presence - Christ coming in power to judge.

This is why we must come worthily to the celebration. As Paul warned, if we do not come worthily, we eat and drink judgment upon ourselves (see [1 Corinthians 11:27-32](#)).

This is why before we pray the words of the centurion while on our knees before receiving communion, "Lord, I am not worthy . . ." (see [Matthew 8:8](#)).

We are not worthy to be visited by our Lord. And yet He makes us worthy. He grants us "participation" (koinonia, "communion" or "sharing") in His body and blood (see [1 Corinthians 10:16](#)). Through this Eucharist we "come to share (koinonia) in the divine nature" (see [2 Peter 1:4](#)).

This participation, this sharing, is the goal of all of salvation history, the blessing that God desired to bestow on all peoples. It is a history that begins "in the beginning," as we read on the Bible's first page, and continues in every Mass, in which we echo the prayer found on the Bible's last page - "Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!" (see [Revelation 22:20](#)).

And with every coming of the Lord in the Eucharist we anticipate that final coming, when death will be defeated, and He will hand over the kingdom to His Father, and God will be all in all (see [1 Corinthians 15:23-28](#)).

In the Eucharist we receive what we will be for all eternity, when we are finally taken up to heaven to join with the heavenly throng in the marriage supper of the Lamb. At Holy Communion we are already there.

"The Lord is with us," as the priest says after communion. And we are sent away from every Mass in peace - both dismissed and commissioned - to live the mystery, the sacrifice we have just celebrated, through the splendor of our ordinary life in the home and in the world.

IV. Study Questions

1. What does it mean in the Old Testament when God is said to "remember"?
2. What did Israel remember in its ritual worship?
3. Explain how Israel's remembrance of its covenant brought the people into a mysterious sharing of the covenant made with their ancestors.
4. How and why does the New Testament describe Christ as a new "paschal lamb"?
5. What does parousia mean? Why do we say that the Eucharist is parousia?

For prayer and reflection:

Read Paul's warnings about the worthy reception of the Eucharist (see [1 Corinthians 11:27-32](#)). Do you truly "discern" the body? Based on what you have learned in this course? What resolutions can you make to better "discern" the body and blood of Christ when you come to Mass?