

THE GIFT OF HOLY COMMUNION

For Parents of Children
Celebrating First Eucharist

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PUBLICATIONS

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Let us set things right, says the LORD:
Though your sins be like scarlet,
they may become white as snow;
Though they be red like crimson,
they may become white as wool.

Isaiah 1:18



INVITATION TO A FAMILY FEAST

DEAR PARENTS,

You have overseen your child's first word, first step, first taste of solid food. You have shared your child's first day of school and the loss of the first tooth. Now you are on the brink of another first, a beautiful moment in your child's growth: First Holy Communion.

Not so long ago you saw to it that your child was initiated into the Catholic Church through baptism. You and other Christians celebrated the life of God in your child. But this was only the beginning of the church's formal initiation process. Receiving the Eucharist for the first time is the next step.

Each week the followers of Jesus gather as a family to celebrate the Eucharist (or the Mass), a sacrifice and a sacred meal in memory of him. There the saving acts of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection are made present again so that we can participate in them. There Jesus himself is really present and feeds us with his body and blood, nourishing the divine life in us. There we are united with him and with one another in his body, the church. There we develop the courage and determination to live like him in our corner of the world.

As a member of God's family, your child is invited to join us around the table of the Lord and to partake of this banquet by receiving Jesus in holy communion. You have the right and the responsibility to prepare your child for this sacrament. Your parish priests, teachers and other personnel will assist you and your child, but you are the major player in this sacred undertaking. Your words, attitudes and actions regarding the Eucharist influence your child in a powerful, irreplaceable way.

This book will help you carry out your momentous role. By reading it reflectively, you will deepen your understanding of Eucharist. You will update or refresh your knowledge of the guidelines and rituals for the communion. In addition, you will discover ways to make your child's First Holy Communion a treasured, memorable event.

Under your guidance, may your child know what a great and wondrous gift the Eucharist is and come to desire it with all his or her heart. May the faith you have passed on to your child grow and become strong. May your child's First Communion be the first of many communions until that day when we all feast at the heavenly banquet that has no end.

SPECIAL MEALS IN HISTORY

Think of a special meal you have recently enjoyed. Perhaps it was a quiet dinner for two, lunch with an old friend, a lively supper with the give-and-take of all family members. Maybe the occasion was a wedding, an anniversary, a funeral or Thanksgiving Day. Meals have meaning far beyond their biological function of nourishing our bodies!

Not only do we humans eat daily, but we eat with others to signify our togetherness, and we do it as a ritual to celebrate special events. Jesus knew what it means to be human. It is no wonder, then, that he chose a meal as the context for our worship. It is a wonder beyond words and a sublime mystery that at the Eucharist Jesus actually *becomes* our food and drink. He instituted this sacrament at the meal we call the Last Supper.

THE LAST SUPPER

The night before he died, Jesus gathered close friends for a farewell dinner. He gave them—and us—a distinctive way he would be with his followers always: the Eucharist. This was a precious gift, the gift of himself. During the meal Jesus took bread, said the traditional Jewish blessing over it, broke it and gave it to the disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body which will be given for you. Do this in memory of me.” Then he took a cup, gave thanks and gave it to them. He said, “This is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

With this ritual, the apostles became the first priests, and from the hands of Jesus himself they received the *first* First Communion. What great love Jesus showed for them and for us! At Mass, as the priest repeats Jesus’ words and actions, bread and wine become the body and blood of

Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Through the Eucharist, Jesus unites, nourishes, strengthens and guides his followers through the centuries. Moreover, just as Jesus sacrificed himself to the Father at the Last Supper and again the next day on the cross, so too at every Eucharist he again offers himself to his Father. This time we too are able to offer Jesus—and ourselves with him.

In the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, it was the Passover meal that Jesus and his Jewish friends celebrated at the Last Supper.

THE PASSOVER MEAL

For Jewish people, the Exodus event—their deliverance from slavery in Egypt—is God’s supreme act of love for them. As slaves, the Israelites were forced to do hard labor and endure beatings and random killings. God freed them from this wretched life, made them a chosen people and gave them their own land.

The night Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt they ate a meal that God had prescribed. Each family slaughtered a lamb and marked their doorway with its blood. This blood was a sign that the tenth plague, death, should pass over their houses and not strike them. The Israelites ate the lamb with bitter herbs to commemorate the trials of their captivity and with bread that was unleavened because there was no time to wait for yeast to do its work. God commanded the Hebrews to observe forever a memorial feast of the liberating events. This feast is known as Passover and the meal as the Seder.

How appropriate that Jesus’ sacred meal is associated with Passover. He is the Lamb of God whose blood has rescued us from the slavery of sin and death. Because he died and rose for us, we are able to “pass over” to the Father with him, to move from death to life in our promised land, heaven. The unleavened bread at our Eucharist is our bread of life.

The wine is the blood that saves us. Jesus gave the Passover new, deeper meaning.

MANNA

During the Israelites' forty-year journey to the promised land through the Sinai desert, God fed them with a special breadlike food called manna. It was a gift "rained down from heaven" that the hungry people found on the ground each morning, except for the Sabbath. Manna, a sign of God's presence, helped to keep the Israelites alive and gave them hope.

In our life's journey to our heavenly homeland, God sustains us in a similar way with the Eucharist, our bread from heaven. The manna was a foreshadowing, a hint, of the gift of the Eucharist.

THE MULTIPLICATION OF LOAVES

Jesus further prepared his followers for the Eucharist by a miracle. All four gospels give an account of Jesus feeding thousands of people with only a few loaves of bread and some fish. As the meager food supply was distributed to the crowd, it multiplied miraculously. So abundant was the meal Jesus provided that not only was everyone filled but there were leftovers!

In John's gospel, after this amazing meal people followed Jesus, looking for more food. Jesus used the occasion to tell us the most intimate things about his gift of the Eucharist: He claimed to be the living bread from heaven and that whoever ate this bread would live forever. He said that the bread he would give was his flesh for the life of the world. He promised that whoever would eat his flesh or drink his blood would remain in him and he in them.

After this stunning revelation, many disciples left Jesus. They couldn't accept what he promised about feeding us with his own body

and blood. But Jesus didn't take back his words or soften them. He didn't say, "Oh, come back. I was speaking only symbolically." We can assume that Jesus meant it when he said, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day" (John 6:54).

EMMAUS

Another gospel story calls attention to the importance of the Eucharist. Three days after Jesus was crucified, two dejected disciples left Jerusalem for Emmaus. As they walked along, they tried to make sense out of the execution of the prophet Jesus. A stranger (the risen Jesus) joined them and explained what the scriptures said about the Messiah. When the three travelers reached Emmaus near evening, the disciples urged the stranger to stay with them. He accepted. At table he took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them. In the breaking of the bread, they instantly recognized Jesus.

A TIMELESS MEAL

Clearly, the memorial meal we celebrate claims a rich history and layers of meaning. In the Eucharist, past, present and future converge. Every time we celebrate the Eucharist, Jesus' past saving acts are made present and our future glory is promised. We have a foretaste of the eternal banquet when we will participate in the liturgy of heaven with the angels and saints. Our Eucharist is a sign of the "communion of saints" that we profess when we pray the Apostles' Creed. We are even now united with those who have gone before us, one in faith.