

MEALS WITH JESUS ALONG THE WAY:
A THEOLOGICAL SPIRITUALITY FOR IECs

“Living the Gospel Collective Voices

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Introduction

We used to compare the Eucharist after Vatican II with the way it was before Vatican II:

- Silence in churches
- Fasting; the priest with his back to the people, saying prayers quietly
in Latin.
- Doing something else during the service: rosary
- 3 of 10 would go to communion
- An objective rite; outside the self in Latin, spectators, except sermon
and communion.

Today: as one theologian puts it: “As an act of ritual worship, the official meaning of the eucharistic liturgy has shifted from being a sacrifice offered by a priest on behalf of the people to being a communal meal shared by the people under the leadership of a priest” (JM2, 270).

As such, today the eucharist is more accessible; but its connection with actual life is not always clear, especially for younger generations. How do we make sense of the ritual; how do we address dwindling participation; will younger people come back after forming a family?

-Vatican II called for knowing and intentional participation in the Eucharist as shown by the use of vernacular and the altar turned toward the people. I think that Intentional Eucharistic Communities can show the wider church how to make sense of the ritual today.

-The question before us then is this: **how does the Eucharist fit into our everyday spirituality and life?** I will try to respond to this question. To do so I will implicitly be drawing from my experience with IECs. So it will be important to register whether I am describing your experience as well as the sources I’m drawing from.

-Five parts: I) the strategy of the presentation; II) the story of the first 130 years of the Eucharistic meal; III) what went on during the meal; IV) reconnecting with the Eucharist of the first disciples; V) what we do at Eucharist today. Followed by a brief conclusion.

I. A STRATEGY FOR UNDERSTANDING THE EUCHARIST

1. The analytical approach: as a sacrament; ritual; analysis of elements and structure
2. A way to reach a really basic understanding of the Eucharist is to return to its origins and examine its genesis: eg, AA, Catholic Worker. How did the Eucharist develop; Jesus did not set up the ritual we have today. This describes the framework of this presentation.
3. The title, “Meals with Jesus along the Way” signals a narrative approach: the origin of the Eucharist, the story of how it began, communicates well its role in spirituality. The title also shows our place in the story as companions of the first disciples. [BC]
4. The meaning of the term spirituality, and why everyone has a spirituality. [RH2, 4]
5. The story of origins sets up the possibility of an alignment of our personal stories with the story of Jesus and the story of the eucharist in his community of followers.

II. THE STORY OF THE EMERGENCE OF THE EUCHARIST AS A RITUAL MEAL

1. Before Jesus’ crucifixion; meals with disciples; inclusive, public sinners, everybody
2. Those gatherings and meals continued: hypothesis: we don’t have much data.
3. The meal as context of an Easter experience; the story of disciples going to Emmaus [Lk 24:13-35; RH1, 136-39.]
4. Continuation of the tradition of the meals with Jesus in the Jesus movement:
 - Paul: the meal at Corinth in the 50s; a meal in memory of Jesus; a real meal at which the poor were also fed.
5. The first 20 years: hypothesis, imaginative reconstruction
 - Study of meals in the Roman empire that shed light on what occurred at meals during this period of time.

-What these meals explain: i) the vehicle by which the Jesus Jews bonded together; early “social structure,” social support of common identity; ii) explains how early Christian literature got written.

III. WHAT WENT ON AT THE MEAL?

1. The conventions of a formal meal; patterns of less formal meals: The meal was a standard way of group gathering. The meal had a basic structure with several parts, but these two are important: An eating part and a more formal conversation and entertainment part, “in which different individuals bring a variety of stories, sayings, songs, and speeches during the *symposium*” [HT, 38].

a. The eating part: this is self-evident. It is not as if there was not conversation during the eating; but this part was focused on eating.

b. The social part of the meal is the most interesting. After the eating there was social time. Various forms of “entertainment” and interchange.

The meal then was “the place where teachings by the early Galilean Jesus movements, the pre-Pauline and Pauline communities, and the later gospel communities were elaborated” [HT, 40, citing Burton Mack]. Paul writes in 1Cor 14:26: When you come to the assembly or the meal, “each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation.” Each one contributes to the community meal. This is how the gospels and the hymns that appear in the NT were originally written.

2. Activities at a meal according to Acts: teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer (Acts 2:42). Is this early or late? But can be understood broadly.

3. The presence of Jesus: remembered; especially association with his death and resurrection; risen and really present spiritually.

4. The meal as unruly and as ordered: in the 50s Paul scolded the Corinthians for a lack of order in their Eucharistic meals; the poor were being ignored. He also demanded some basic rules for the conduct of the meal. “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord” (1Cor 11:27).

5. How the meal aspect changed: read the description of the Eucharist as it was celebrated once a week in Rome in the 150s. This is an account of the early Christian writer, Justin Martyr, because he was killed by the Romans 10 years later. He is addressing his description to Roman leaders as an explanation of Christian behavior against their defamation.

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the [apostles](#) or the writings of the [prophets](#) are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to

the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succors the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need. [JM1, 278.]

6. Note the changes and how similar in structure today.

-Not a meal any longer. The meal character has become a ritual gathering and a communion service.

-Official presider, president, the bishop

-The parts very similar to today's liturgy: i) Gather; ii) read the scriptural texts; iii) homily, exhortation, instruction; iv) rise together and offer prayers; v) the president says the Eucharistic prayer; vi) all respond AMEN; vii) a communion service; viii) communion sent to those absent; ix) a collection, for good works in the community.

IV. RECONNECTING WITH THE EUCHARIST OF THE FIRST DISCIPLES

1. The followers of Jesus did not completely disband. They held together. They are us; and we are them.
2. The beginnings of the Eucharist were experiential and vital; a life-giving and identifying practice; it was the disciples trying to stay together and support each other.
3. Allowing this inner impulse behind the Eucharist to have a resonance with our own experience today.

V. WHAT ARE WE DOING AT THE EUCHARIST TODAY?

1. Bringing our lives to community ritual; God not absent from everyday life (KR)
2. Remembering Jesus: reading the gospel stories and talking about them
3. Proclaiming Jesus: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup,

you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (Paul, 1Cor 11:26).

4. Expressing an experience of gratitude; eucharist means giving thanks; the
basic character of gratitude toward God v. entitlement. [SE, #s 230-
237.]
5. Petitioning God: prayers of the faithful; exercise of recognizing our
dependent position in reality before the creator
6. Being supported in faith by God and community: the whole event;
gathering; assembly
7. Aligning our lives with Jesus in the meal of disciples; the logic of
following Jesus by internalizing the values he represents in his teaching.
 - a) Following Jesus as a client. E.g., the gospel stories of healing.
 - b) Following Jesus as an apprentice: E.g., the gospel stories of sending
out disciples.
8. Helping the community; the basic intent of the collection as a sacred act
of responsibility toward the community

Conclusion

Let me summarize with two conclusions in response to the question: “how does the eucharist fit into our everyday spirituality and life?”

1. The key here is an experience of gratitude for life and for one’s existence. Meaningfully to participate in the eucharist requires a sense of standing before God in dependence and gratitude. One cannot authentically resonate with the eucharist without some sense of relating to God in gratitude.

2. The second point consists in a reflex desire to correlate or put in conjunction our lives with Jesus and the pattern of life that he taught and lived out in his ministry. I've tried to capture that action with the description of the eucharist as "meals with Jesus." We participate not just as clients but also as apprentices, to go out and do likewise.

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