

## THE MASS THROUGH THE AGES

### Comments by Pope Benedict XVI

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) was interviewed by Peter Seewald over the course of 3 days. Excerpts from his responses to a number of questions on the Mass (Eucharist) follow. (Taken from: Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. *God and the World*. Ignatius Press, 2002.)

#### **An early description of the celebration of the Mass from a man by the name of Justin Martyr approximately 150 years after the birth of Christ.**

“On what is called the day of the sun, all those who live in the city and in the country gather together. Then the memorials of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read out to everyone, as much as there is time for. When the reader has finished, then the person presiding urges people to imitate all the good things they have heard. After that, we all stand up and pray. After the prayer, bread, wine, and water are brought up; the presider offers up prayers and thanksgivings with all his might, and the people utter their assent by saying Amen. Then there is the distribution. Each person receives his share of what has been consecrated; but the deacons take it to those who are absent. Now, this feeding is called the Eucharist. Only those people who accept our teaching as true, who have been purified by the bathing for the remission of sins, and who live in the way that Christ demands are allowed to take part.”

Ratzinger: The basic structure of the Eucharist (Mass) as outlined here has remained essentially the same, even though particular parts of it have of course developed since the second century.

#### **Can you, please, explain a little the structure of a Holy Mass?**

Ratzinger: “The first part is the Liturgy of the Word. We gather together under the Word of God, just as the original community did at Sinai, to hear and to receive. [In the description of the early Mass above] there is talk about readings, about prophets and evangelists. This has taken on a particular structure within the service, so that we hear prophet, apostle, and Christ... Under the heading of *prophet*, we understand the whole of the Old Testament; under that of *apostle*, the apostolic letters; and under that of *Christ*, the Gospel.

...The Word [then] needs to be expounded [homily], because it comes to us, in a sense, from afar off and needs to be brought nearer to us so that we can understand it. The Word... is followed by the actual service of the Eucharist itself. This is made up of three parts.

First the **gifts** are provided, bread and wine. This is an image of our bringing to the Lord the whole of creation. Then follows the **prayer of thanksgiving**. That is, the bishop or the priest joins in the prayer of thanksgiving offered by Jesus on the evening before he died. This is the great act of praise of God. It includes

both our thanksgiving for Christ and our remembrance of his words and actions in the last hours of his life—and also the **transubstantiation of the bread and wine**, which are now no longer our gifts but the gifts of Jesus Christ, in which he gives himself, according to his words at the Last Supper...

In other words: bread is no longer bread, but is the body of Christ. And wine is no longer wine, but the blood of Christ. The gifts, therefore, are changed into a living Word....

Justin also mentions certain conditions for the sharing of Holy Communion that follows. This is the worship of those who are believers, he says. Just as the Lord gathers together the Twelve at the Last Supper, so likewise the Eucharist is the gathering together of those who have become believers in Christ, who by baptism have become the Church, the Body of Christ. To that extent, both the structure of the celebration and the conditions for admission to it have, in fact, become quite clearly developed, already in this early stage, and have remained... to this day.”

**The Eucharist is seen as the most sacred action in the world, carried out in the most sacred place in the world. The Body, the Blood, the Soul and even the Godhead of Jesus, it is said, are present in this sacrament. Is it true that a new miracle happens each day in this action? The transformation of bread and wine into flesh and blood—surely that can only be meant as a symbol.**

Ratzinger: “No. The Church believes firmly that the Risen One truly gives himself here, wholly and entirely. To be sure, at various periods in the Church’s history there have, again and again, been disputes about this. The first great dispute cropped up in the early Middle Ages, the second in the sixteenth century. Luther held out in favor of transubstantiation here, with great emphasis, while Calvin and Zwingli, in their different ways, were in favor of a symbolic understanding, so that from this developed the great division within the Reformation movement.

While Luther held the view that this presence of Christ was necessarily associated with the moment of the celebration, the Catholic Church believes that the presence of Christ within these gifts continues [beyond the Mass]. For if the bread and wine have been truly “transubstantiated”, i.e., if the gifts of the earth have really become the gifts of the Lord, then the Lord has thereby irrevocably taken possession of them. And of course in our own century there has been renewed debate about this. ...[But] Scripture and likewise the whole of the primitive tradition of the Church is unequivocal: Christ does not just give us symbols; he truly gives himself.

That means that Communion is an encounter between one person and another. That Christ enters into me, and I may enter into him.”

### **If then someone has received Christ in this way—how will this most holy sacrament then take effect upon a person?**

Ratzinger: “There too we must leave aside all thought of what is miraculous and magical. This is a personal process.

The Risen One who is now present...is not a thing. I don't receive a piece of Christ. That would indeed be an absurdity, but this is a personal process. He himself is giving himself to me and wants to assimilate me into himself... Man, if he abandons himself in receiving this...is made like Christ, made to resemble Christ. And that is what is happening in Communion, that we allow ourselves to be drawn into him...”

### **How should we prepare ourselves to receive Holy Communion?**

Ratzinger: “...When I allow myself to be touched, to be spoken to, by the Word of God. When I direct myself toward Christ in the prayers shaped in the primitive tradition of the Church. True sharing in the prayer and the celebration of the Eucharist means that I listen, receive, and that the door opens up within me, so to speak, through which Christ may enter into me. And, on the other hand, that my own self becomes so free and open that I can begin to enter into HIM.”

### **How should we actually receive Holy Communion?**

Ratzinger: “In a way that is appropriate for the presence of the Lord. The signs of reverence we use have changed in the course of time. But the essential point is that our behavior should give to inner recollection and reverence an outward bodily expression. Earlier, Communion used to be received kneeling... Nowadays it is done standing, but this standing should be done in reverence before the Lord.”

### **[Should we receive] communion in the hand, or directly in the mouth?**

Ratzinger: “I wouldn't want to be fussy about that... A reverent manner of receiving Communion in the hand is in itself a perfectly reasonable way to receive Communion.”

### **After receiving the sacrament, what can we meditate upon?**

Ratzinger: “...I should place my day in his hands and ask him to let his presence take effect in me. It is important to entrust oneself to him, which may be expressed in quite particular kinds of prayer, according to one's situation.”

**Are those who have to right to receive Communion as clearly defined as it was before?**

Ratzinger: “Yes. From the earliest records on—we can see it in the First Letter to the Corinthians—that is quite clear. It is a problem of our own day that we take part in Communion rather as a kind of rite of socialization, by which we ensure, so to speak, our mutual solidarity. There is a danger then that it might become simply a sign of friendship and belonging. And that is much too little. In this way, not only do we lose sight of the holy and essential thing that is offered us here, but the necessary inner cleansing never takes place within man.

St. Paul warns of the dangers of no longer distinguishing this transubstantiated bread from any other. Today we have somehow lost our grasp of the distinction—and that makes for a multiplicity of problems. Then divorced people who have remarried, for example, feel they are the only ones excluded, and that rightly looks like an unfair discrimination. I think we all ought to look at ourselves more critically; we ought to distinguish the Body of the Lord and to know that we are all, again and again, in need of penance before we receive Holy Communion. There are conditions for being admitted to this. We have no right to the Lord on our own account, but through the rules of the Church he shows us when we may receive him.”

**And is that the difference between a Catholic Eucharist and an ecumenical Lord’s Supper fellowship?**

Ratzinger: “Yes. The Catholic Eucharist is always associated with membership in the community of faith of the Catholic Church. And the Eucharist itself, we are convinced, should only ever be celebrated by an ordained priest. The Protestant celebration of the Lord’s Supper, on the other hand, is subject to different rules. We know that people can also meet the Lord here, but we cannot allow the fact to be obscured that the question of apostolic succession and of priesthood—as of the Catholic faith and teaching in its entirety—marks a boundary here. “