

Instructed Eucharist

Introduction

For nearly 2,000 years, Christians have come together Sunday after Sunday, and often during the week. They have come to offer themselves to God and to communicate with God in a very special way. We call it “Eucharist,” which is an ancient Greek word meaning “thanksgiving,” but sometimes it is called Holy Communion, the Lord’s Supper, or Mass. By whatever name, our Sunday Eucharist is the centerpiece of the Church’s worship and life together.

Our worship goes beyond us as individual people or an individual church. In truth, worship is not really about or for us at all: worship is for and about God. Worship honors our deep, divinely implanted need to praise and give thanks to God. As *The Book of Common Prayer* says, “We praise God, not to obtain anything, but because God’s Being draws praise from us (BCP, 857).”

In Eucharist, we communicate with God not only with words but with our every sense: we listen with our ears, gaze upon holy things with our eyes, touch the water, taste the bread and wine, and on occasion, smell the rich fragrance of incense. Our worship is meant to be a full body experience.

We begin our worship as we focus our hearts. That can occur as we travel to church, or walk through the doors, or pass through the Narthex and touch the Holy Water Font, or listen to the musical prelude. The few minutes immediately before the service are an excellent time to quiet our minds and settle into the prayerful environment of worship.

Opening Procession

At the chime of the Sacring Bell, we stand for the procession of the Cross and the entrance of all the ministers, remembering that the people of God are moving toward God’s Kingdom, following the Cross of Christ. Many choose to bow as the Cross passes them, out of reverent respect for the meaning and significance of this sacred symbol. We typically sing a hymn to begin our service, which is typically chosen for its resonance with the readings or the nature of the day.

Liturgy of the Word

There are two halves to every Eucharist. The first is known as “the Liturgy of the Word,” and it includes several parts: opening prayers, readings from Scripture, a sermon, the Nicene Creed, the Intercessions or the prayers of the people, the Confession of Sin and Absolution, and the Peace.

Opening Acclamation

We begin with the opening acclamation. These words proclaim what we are here to do, and affirm our conviction that God is gathered with us, too. These opening sentences vary with the seasons of the Church, and we are currently using the most common: “Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” to which we respond, “And blessed be his kingdom, now and forever. Amen.” Many Episcopalians make the sign of the cross during the opening acclamation, and other times in the service when we invoke the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We make the sign to remember when we were signed with the cross in the name of the Trinity at our baptism. Manual actions such as making the sign of the cross or gently bowing at the name of Jesus Christ are ways we involve our whole bodies in the act of worship.

Collect for Purity

We continue our worship with the Collect for Purity, an ancient prayer that for much of history was said quietly by the priest before the service. In it we ask God to purify our thoughts and hearts, so that our lives may be filled with love and our and worship may offer true glory to God.

Song of Praise

Building on that prayer we next sing a Song of Praise. Often this is the “*Gloria*”, an ancient hymn drawn from the song of the angels to the shepherds on the night of Christ’s birth: “Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favors” (Lk 2:14). During Lent we typically sing the *Kyrie*, meaning “Lord, have mercy,” and during Advent we typically sing the *Trisagion*, an ancient Eastern Orthodox hymn translated “Holy God, holy and mighty, holy immortal one, have mercy on us.”

Collect of the Day

Then the Celebrant, or presiding priest, offers a final opening prayer, referred to as a collect. A collect is a prayer that brings together or *collects* our thoughts together in one focus. This opening collect can reference themes from the day’s scriptural readings, or focus upon a central theme or idea. Most of the collects used in our worship are many centuries old, and have been prayed by countless people in countless churches. Before the prayer, and quite often during the service, the celebrating priest greets the people by saying “The Lord be with you.” This really means, “God’s presence is here.” When the people say “And also with you,” we are saying that God’s presence is also found in the Celebrant.

Readings

Next we hear readings from the Bible. The word “Bible” comes from the middle-English word that means “book.” In essence, we’re taking down a few books from the shelves of a holy library and sharing sacred stories and teachings with one another. The readings are assigned for each Sunday in a three-year rotating cycle called the “Revised Common Lectionary,” which is also used by many other churches and denominations.

1. First we hear a lesson from Hebrew Scriptures, or “Old Testament.” This was the Bible of Jesus and the earliest church and it still communicates God’s truth to us today.
2. Next we sing or say a psalm. The Psalter was the songbook of ancient Israel and the early church, and psalms remain at the heart of all religious communities who pray multiple times a day.
3. Then we hear a passage from the New Testament, often a letter from Paul or some other leader of the early Church.
4. Finally, we stand to hear a passage from one of the four Gospels telling us a story about the life and ministry of Jesus.

At the end of the Old and New Testament readings, the lector says, “The Word of the Lord.” This is said after all readings, even the ones we don’t particularly understand or like very much. Not all of Scripture is comforting or assuring; some of what we encounter in Scripture makes us uncomfortable. But the same is true of God, who both comforts and challenges us, and so our reply is always “Thanks be to God.”

The word *gospel* literally means “good news,” and the reading of the gospel is a requirement of every Eucharistic service. At Transfiguration we have a Gospel Procession, when the Gospel Book is carried from the Altar and into the midst of the congregation. We stand out of reverence as we hear the Good News of Jesus Christ. It is traditional for a Deacon to read the gospel, but if a Deacon is not present, another clergy person may do so.

As the Deacon introduces the Gospel, many people make the sign of the cross with their thumb on their forehead, mouth, and chest. This physically signifies a prayer that the gospel would dwell “in my mind, on my lips, and in my heart.” This action is actually one of the earliest known symbols of the Church, dating from the 2nd century.

Sermon

After the readings, a preacher attempts to make connections between God’s Word and our everyday lives. Sermons are intended to help us live more faithfully as disciples of Jesus, and so they can variously seek to inspire, challenge, or offer comfort. Preachers often have special training, but in truth anyone with a heart for God and the confidence to share the Good News can preach!

The Nicene Creed

Following the sermon, the congregation stands to affirm the core, ancient beliefs of our faith in what is known as the Nicene Creed. There are two major Christian creeds, the Apostles’ and Nicene, and they are some of the Church’s earliest formal attempts to articulate God’s identity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Notice how we say, “We believe” throughout the Creed, because our Christian heritage is grander, richer, and more mysterious than any one of us understands, so we must share it with those around us, as well as all who have gone before and will come after.

Prayers of the People

After the Creed, we prayerfully intercede on behalf of Christ's Church and the world. Often spoken but occasionally sung, these prayers usually include special intention for

- the universal Church;
- the nation and all in authority;
- the welfare of the world;
- our local community;
- those who suffer and those in trouble;
- the departed
- and any other special concerns or needs present in the life of our community

These prayers are called "Prayers of the People" because they represent our deepest longings as God's people at prayer.

Confession of Sin

Following our prayers, we kneel to confess our sins and receive God's forgiveness. The Confession is only omitted during Eastertide, according to ancient tradition. Before speaking the words of the confession together, we experience a time of quiet to allow space for remembering those things from which we repent. True confession is not rote or thoughtless, but earnest and deeply felt. Then we recite together the words of confession. Notice that, as with the Nicene Creed, we use plural language: "We confess that we have sinned..." This is what is called a "general confession," because we are confessing generally our sins and our need for God's forgiveness. Sin does not happen alone or in a vacuum. Sin is like a web that connects us to one another, and so our confession is similarly communal. Individual confession is also encouraged, and our prayer book contains a separate rite for individual use with a priest.

The Absolution

After we have confessed our sins, a Priest stands and declares that all our sins have been put away by the mercy of Jesus Christ. God forgives without condition, but our repentance and commitment to righteous living closes the loop of reconciliation.

The Peace

The Liturgy of the Word and the first half of the service concludes with the passing of the Peace. The resurrected Jesus' first words to his friends were "Peace be with you," and here we speak that holy greeting to one another. But contrary to the way it might look, the Peace is not simply a time to greet our family and friends. It has its origins in a line from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: "When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift (5:23)." This is far more than a time of casual politeness. It is a sacred time immediately before communion for us to show our reconciliation with each other, and especially with those from whom we have been estranged.

The Great Thanksgiving

After the Peace, we move into the second half of the service, known as the Great Thanksgiving or Holy Communion, and it begins as we make an offering to show our thankfulness for all we have and all we are. Scripture directs that this offering should be a “sacrifice,” that is, a significant portion of our life and labor, and though today we commonly give money, in ancient times people gave produce from their fields, animals from their herds, or other objects of their livelihood. Here at Transfiguration, our presentation of offerings comes in two parts: first the bread and wine, and then later the collection in the plates. We stand in reverent quiet as both are carried and presented at the altar, because these offerings represent our entire lives, everything we are offering to be blessed, broken, and transformed by God.

The Offertory

During the Offertory, the Deacon “sets the table” with the help of an Acolyte, preparing the paten with the communion bread, and filling the chalice with wine and a little water. Adding a little water to the wine is an ancient Middle Eastern tradition, dating back before the time of Jesus, and also harkens to the moment in John’s gospel when the crucified Christ is pierced in the side, and out came blood mixed with water.

As the Deacon and Acolyte prepare the Altar with the offerings of bread and wine, and the Ushers collect the People’s money offerings, our Choir helps us present one more offering to God. The Anthem is more than cover music; it is an offering of beautiful sound that elevates our hearts and prepares us for the holy meal to come.

Sursum Corda

When the Altar has been prepared, the Great Thanksgiving begins with a piece of sacred dialogue between the Celebrant and People. It is called the “*Sursum Corda*,” a Latin phrase meaning “lift up your hearts.” In these few phrases we declare our shared desire to lift our hearts to God, remembering all of God’s works of love and redemption. Here at Transfiguration, we sing the *Sursum Corda* and much of the Eucharist to an ancient setting, because singing adds an additional dimension to our act of prayer. It heightens the emotion and devotion of our whole act.

For much of the Eucharistic Prayer, the Celebrants holds his or her hands out with palms up. This is called the *orans* position, and it traces back to ancient Judaism and the words of the Psalmist, who says, “I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name (63:4).”

In the early Church, everyone in the congregation stood for all prayers, and not only because there were no pews for sitting or kneeling. They stood to honor the way that in the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, we have been made “worthy to stand before God.” Some choose to kneel during the prayer, as a demonstration of humility and reverence. The prayer book is clear that you may choose either posture, though sitting is discouraged unless you are unable to stand or kneel.

Sanctus

After the Sursum Corda we sing the *Sanctus*:

*Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of power and mighty,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.*

In the Book of Isaiah, these are the words used by the seraphim to offer eternal praise to God (6:3). The *Sanctus* reminds us that our act of praise and thanksgiving occurs mystically together with all the faithful throughout time who eternally praise and worship God. Many choose to bow low while singing these words, to demonstrate awe and humility before the holiness of God.

Just before we sing the Sanctus, an acolyte strikes a bell three times. This bell is called the Sanctus Bell, because it is traditionally rung three times at the Sanctus, and to call attention to other important moments in the liturgy.

Institution

After the Sursum Corda, the prayer focuses on remembering:

- we remember how God has loved us since the beginning of creation;
- we remember how we have turned away from God;
- and we remember that God came to us as Jesus Christ to share our human nature so that we might be brought back to God.

The culmination of our remembrance is when we remember Jesus' last meal with his friends and the words he spoke over the bread and the wine. These words are called "the words of institution." At the time of the words of institution, the celebrating priest is required to touch the bread and the wine as an act of blessing.

Invocation

Twice during the Eucharistic Prayer, we ask for God to send the presence of the Holy Spirit, in what is formally titled the "invocation." First we ask the Holy Spirit to descend upon the gifts of bread and wine and transform them into the body and blood of Christ. Then, we ask the Holy Spirit to descend upon us also, and at this point, we make the sign of the cross on ourselves. In both places, we are asking God to sanctify, or make holy, the gifts that we have brought to this place: the gifts of bread and wine, and the gifts of our souls and bodies.

The Great Amen

As with most prayers, the Eucharistic Prayer concludes with a final Amen, but the importance of this Amen is so great that it is known as the "Great Amen"—something signified in the prayer book by the way it is printed in all-capital letters. The word "Amen" is simply an ancient statement of affirmation. It's sort of like saying, "Yes, I believe that. Those words are my words, too." The Great Amen is so important that the Eucharist cannot take place without it. Traditionally, there must be at least one person present at a Eucharist besides the Celebrant so that there is someone to say the Great Amen!

The Lord's Prayer

Following the Eucharistic Prayer, we recite together the Lord's Prayer. This is the only prayer that we say in every public act of worship in the Episcopal Church.

The Fraction

Then the Celebrant breaks the bread, in what is known as the “Fraction.” It calls to mind not only Christ being broken on the cross for us, but also the story from Luke’s Gospel of the disciples recognizing the risen Jesus at supper in Emmaus only when they broke the bread.

Following the Fraction, there is a significant period of silence, one that may at times feel uncomfortably long. It echoes the great silence that the gospels say came over the whole earth in the moments after Christ’s death. It is a moment of deep holiness, reverence, and awe. Sometimes silence communicates more truthfully than even our best words.

Finally, we sing a fraction anthem, which is our way of summing up what happens in the breaking of the bread. Often this is the phrase, “Alleluia, Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us / Therefore let us keep the feast.” Passover was the night of Israel’s deliverance from slavery in Egypt, and the Passover meal was the meal Jesus shared with his friends in the Last Supper. But since the early days of the church, Christians have understood the crucifixion of Christ to be the *final* Passover, and have compared Jesus to the Passover lamb. We occasionally sing other Fraction Anthems, depending on the season or theme of the day, but they all draw our minds to the mystery of Christ’s presence and sacrifice.

Communion of the People

All baptized Christians are invited to receive communion, regardless of age or church membership. Those who have not been baptized are welcome at the Altar rail in order to receive a blessing, a desire signified by crossing your arms over your chest. You may stand or kneel at the altar rail, for the same reasons you may stand or kneel during the Eucharistic Prayer.

In the Episcopal Church we administer both bread and wine to everyone, as Jesus did with his disciples, and you are encouraged to receive both kinds. And the key word is *receive*. We do not “take” communion or “make our” communion. We receive it. This is an act of grace, of Jesus Christ making himself known and available to us, and so we *receive* it as a gift.

This explains the traditional manner of receiving the bread, that is, by holding out our hands in hopeful expectation. We don’t take the host from the priest’s hands, but rather receive it in humility and gratitude. Gluten-free host are available, and you may indicate your desire for this by holding your hands out palms-down. The traditional manner of receiving the wine is to guide the cup to your lips and take a small drink, though if you leave the host in your hands the Eucharistic Minister will dip it in the wine and place it in your mouth.

The shared cup is one of the most powerful symbols of communion. It is a sign of unity, thanksgiving, and our common life together. Rich and poor, old and young, black or white... we all drink from the common cup. When we let our discomfort at sharing the cup with total strangers, or our fear of disease or sickness prevent us from sharing this holy moment, we lose something of its transforming power on our lives. We put up boundaries between one another that Christ died to tear down. Sharing communion so intimately demonstrates our desire to be part of God’s one, common family.

When Communion is finished, the remaining bread and wine are reverently consumed or returned to the elements, or else they are reserved in the Tabernacle behind the Altar. This Reserved Sacrament is used for pastoral visits to the sick or shut-in. The candle in the Lamp above the Altar burns constantly as a sign of Christ’s presence in this special way. The candle is extinguished on Good Friday after we consume all the elements reserved overnight, and lit anew from the flame of the Paschal Candle after the Eucharist of the Great Vigil of Easter.

Post Communion Prayer

After everyone has communed and the table is cleared, we say together the post communion prayer, in which we give thanks for what we have just received, and we ask Christ's presence to strengthen us for service in the world.

The Blessing

After this, the Celebrant pronounces God's blessing and we are sent out. This reminds us that the Eucharist is the work of the people of God together. It is not a service confined to Sunday morning; rather, it is a way of life. It is the essence of life itself.

The Dismissal

In fact, the word "Mass" comes from the Latin word for dismissal. We are not allowed to linger; we are called to go back out into the world and do the work we have been given by God to do. He has fed us with spiritual food and strengthened us to follow Christ wherever we may go.

Worship is over. Our service begins.