

# **EUCHARIST**

**A Guide for the Perplexed**

**Ralph McMichael**

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**Published by T&T Clark International**

*A Continuum Imprint*

The Tower Building	80 Maiden Lane
11 York Road	Suite 704
London SE1 7NX	New York NY 10038

[www.continuumbooks.com](http://www.continuumbooks.com)

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**British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-13: 978-0-567-03228-7 (Hardback)  
978-0-567-03229-4 (Paperback)

Typeset by Newgen Imaging Systems Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by the MPG Books Group

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A book is the product of many influences, both explicit and implicit ones. Certainly, an author takes up the task of writing having been shaped by many people and an array of ideas. Appropriately, this is the case for me and for a book on the Eucharist, the sacrament of communion. My sharing in the Eucharistic life began with my parents: Ralph and Marinell. My study of this life was initiated and inspired by Louis Weil. Any growth and maturity in the life of the Eucharist was fostered by the numerous students and parishioners where I have taught and prayed, serving as theologian and as priest. Special thanks are due to Pamela Dolan and Marshall Crossnoe, who read the manuscript and offered their editing skills, support, and friendship. Most of all, I am grateful to those persons with whom I share a loving and faithful communion of life: Nelson, Anne Marie, Breck, and wonderfully with Jan.



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# INTRODUCTION

What is the Eucharist? At first, this might seem a straightforward question. However, any canvassing of a group of Christians, especially if they are members of different denominations, would reveal an array of answers that might not be recognized as answers to the same question. In fact, the question itself implies one such direction for its answer by the presence of the term Eucharist. For the subject of this study has, and does go by, many names, the Eucharist being one of them. Other names or terms for this subject include Lord's Supper, the Mass, Holy Communion, and the Divine Liturgy. Eucharist itself has referred to a complete rite or ritual event as well as to a specific part or object within this event. Each of these names has a history of theological exposition, controversy, and ecclesial identity. Furthermore, this history of multiple ecclesial and theological developments is viewed today from a plurality of liturgical rites existing not only within an array of churches but within an array of cultures and of languages. Eucharistic celebration and understanding can also be shaped by our heightened postmodern awareness of difference and otherness. Any attempt to resolve this plurality by the identification and enforcement of a singular and universal Eucharistic celebration and theology would prove futile. Despite various ecumenical efforts and achievements, we still view a Eucharistic landscape that is diverse, and in some ways fragmented.

The reader might ask at this point, so what? Is a uniform and universal Eucharistic rite and understanding desirable? Would the task of identifying a normative Eucharist, with an accompanying theology, be appropriate in light of our acknowledgement that we live in a multichurch, multicultural, multilingual, and even multireligious world? This depends on our reference(s) for appropriateness. What constitutes an appropriate Eucharistic celebration and understanding? Are these appropriate questions for a reflection on the Eucharist? And, what is the purpose and goal of our questioning? What is the

question that lies behind all of our questioning, the question, whether we realize it or not, that generates the questions we ask and maintains the silence of the questions we do not ask?

Let us return to our starting question—What is the Eucharist? This is a question of identity, a quest for recognition that would be guided by the perception of a normative structure and enactment. Presumably, one could reach a point in this quest where a structure of enactment, or ritual, could be identified as a Eucharist or not. We could have a basis for declaring what is, and what is not, a Eucharist. Our criteria for assessment would emphasize what constitutes the Eucharist and what abides as its normative enactment. (“Celebration” of the Eucharist is a term that bears an attributive meaning; it is not neutral, but it will serve as our regular reference to the act of Eucharist.) The what-question leads to the particulars of what makes a Eucharist *qua* Eucharist and to its recognizable performance. That is, the what-question addressed to the Eucharist implies the how-question. How is the Eucharist done? The Eucharist is an event, a corporate action, and as such, it allows for evaluation of its performance.

The primary generative question is not what or how, as critical as these questions are, but why. Why the Eucharist? This question lies behind all of our questioning regarding the Eucharist. It is a question that must be remembered as we explore all other questions so that we do not forget what kinds of understandings, performances, or life the Eucharist allows and makes possible. Fidelity to the why-question exists as the Eucharistic gaze. This gaze has two visional directions: The presence of the Triune God offering us the sacrificial invitation to share in the Son’s life of communion; and, the way this transformative gift of communion exists for the life of the world. These two directions or horizons of the Eucharistic gaze provide the appropriate guide for all the myriad of questions, controversies, performances, and understandings that have arisen about the Eucharist. The twofold horizon of the Eucharistic gaze—God’s invitation to communion and for the life of the world—is our guide for all types of Eucharistic perplexity.

The Eucharistic gaze allows for the recognition of the unexpected, the familiar receptivity of the strange gift, and for the life that beckons beyond the horizon of our own portraiture. To gaze at something or someone involves a level of fascination beyond the usual noticing or practiced awareness. A gaze is a fixed attention that may not be conscious or premeditated. We gaze because we are drawn toward an

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object or toward a subject that somehow requires a space and a time from us so that an unmediated presence is possible. When we are gazing at something, we are not doing other things; the gaze is at the forefront of the haze of all possible thoughts, feelings, or actions that we may have, or do, at any given moment. When one gazes that is what is happening with the gazer, at the sacrifice of all else. Now we can and do gaze at many things over the course of a day, a month, or a lifetime. We might consider doing an inventory of our gazes. What would this inventory tell us about ourselves, our desires, our imaginations, and our worlds? Perhaps, some of us do not gaze at anything. That is, an invested attention to anything or anyone is not there. Instead, we may bounce around, noticing more and more things, so that nothing or no one ever is allowed the space and time to dwell with us, truly to have our attention. Maybe, the more there is to gaze upon less gazing will occur.

Gazing as an enduring attentiveness requires discipline and an openness to discovery. After the initial gaze, which is more reflexive and less self-conscious, we might turn our attention away when we get tired, or bored, when we surmise that we have seen and felt all there is to see and to feel. Something else may distract us, enticing us to gaze upon it. If our gaze is always and only the reflex to an object, or to a person, at that initial level of presence, then our gaze will quickly fade or go elsewhere.

Gazing beyond the initial fascination requires commitment; we enter into the realm of the will to see what reality will reveal. We commit to the discovery of the mystery that is the gazer and the gazed upon. The mystery of the Eucharist is approached appropriately with such a gaze, the Eucharistic gaze. The Eucharistic gaze has two modes: gazing on and within the Eucharist, and Eucharistically gazing on everything else. There is an *intra* and *extra* Eucharistic gaze.

The *intra* Eucharistic gaze is not an objective observation but a faithful participation. It is not a study of the Eucharist whereby someone remains detached in order to describe what is happening. The Eucharist is an event of purposeful participation. It is what it is as a gathering of people who recognize that this is where and how they belong, and they are willing to sacrifice for this belonging. The gaze of a faithful participant is an abiding return to what will happen, and who will be present at this Eucharist. The participant returns to what is the same and to what is possible. The abiding structure and economy of the Eucharist

provides the recognition, the remembering, that places the participants within the dynamics of revelation. The gaze is an attentive expectation to what and where new life is given. The Eucharistic gaze is an enduring reception of renewal. We do not exhaust the meaning of the Eucharist, because our existence is not in the mode of progressive knowledge exercised by the current codes of human rationality. We must learn the Eucharist from the Eucharist. This learning does not begin without regard for what we have learned already or for our prior habits of learning. However, we enter into a transformation of learning within the Eucharistic way of knowing and of the known. We are not to bring our complete schemes of knowing and meaning to the Eucharist and to its customary questions. The effort of knowing is not to fit the Eucharist into a pre-constructed view of what is real, true, or meaningful. The questions and answers of human discourse and thought cannot be adopted, or even adapted, by Eucharistic thought and discourse without the transformation that occurs within the Eucharist itself. Eucharistic theology has a philosophical dimension and scope without becoming a product of any philosophy.

Likewise, the *intra* Eucharistic gaze does not allow for just the repetition of the questions and of the answers from the tradition(s) of Eucharistic theology. The disposition of reception to renewal is the proper mode of encountering the tradition of the Eucharist and its customary concerns. The Eucharist is an abiding reality within the tradition or past, in the present and in the future. Basically and ultimately, there is no fourth-century, sixteenth-century or twenty-first century Eucharist. There are practices and understandings that characterize these periods, but they do not define or confine the Eucharist. They illuminate the Eucharist. Ideally, they are vestiges of our attempts to speak what we have heard, to depict what we have seen. We gaze at the whole of the tradition as an array of reflections of human fidelity, understanding and imagination of what the Eucharist is and of what happens during its enactment. This does not mean there has never been disagreement and conflict over the Eucharist. I do not propose that we force every view and practice into a predetermined grand narrative. Instead, we need to bring the various theologies, traditions and practices regarding the Eucharist into a framework that is accountable to the wholeness, the catholicity, which the Eucharist grants and implies.

Likewise, I propose that we attend to the whole Eucharist. When pursuing certain theological and liturgical questions customarily

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posed to the Eucharist, we need to avoid a tightly drawn circle of discourse around one part of this theology or of the liturgy. For example, when pursuing the question of Christ's presence in relation to the bread and wine, we will work within an array of affirmations and understandings of Christ's presence in the world, in the church, and in the celebration of the Eucharist as a whole. While giving due attention to sections and phrases of the Eucharistic prayer, we cannot forget the various claims of Christ's presence in terms of its nature, place, and economy. Where is Christ present? When is Christ present? How is Christ present? And especially, why is Christ present? We will attend to different modes of the encounter between Christ and the baptized within the Eucharist, and how this encounter is mediated by language, action, disposition and materiality. Our understanding of the Eucharist is perceived within a multidimensional totality of texts, actions, materials and intentions. This understanding will not be manufactured within a framework outside of the liturgy itself. Eucharistic questions should not become primarily philosophical, linguistic, sociological, or anthropological ones.

The *extra* Eucharistic gaze is the movement from the Eucharist toward the world. The Eucharist is an event that takes place within the church but the whole world is its horizon. What happens in the Eucharist is for the life of the world. The celebrants, all the baptized, leave the celebration with a Eucharistic mission. This mission has various dimensions. The celebrants are to live Eucharistic lives. They are to invite others into the Eucharistic celebration and life. They are to work towards the realization of a Eucharistic world in the most comprehensive and fullest sense. How we approach the world, how we live in the world and how we define world are to be shaped by the reality we have come to know and share in the Eucharist. We go into the world on a mission derived from our formation as Eucharistic people. It is imperative to acknowledge that we have a mission to the world, to that which is not church. The Eucharist is not only an intra-ecclesial project of whatever sort. There is a tendency to view and to practice the Eucharist for reasons constituted outside of the Eucharist, to gaze on the Eucharist from other places of perception, reality and concerns. These places might be ecclesiastical authority, doctrinal allegiance, community building, cultural awareness, justice seeking, experiential expression, consciousness raising, sensitivity training, and so forth. We can view the Eucharist as a means to another end, however appropriate that end may be or however that

end may find a place in the Eucharistic economy. The Eucharistic gaze looks out to the world as a formed view, perception, awareness, and direction. This does not mean that we are not to see how the world actually is, but we are to envision what the world could become as a Eucharistic reality. Presence, peace, offering, giving, sacrifice, forgiveness, reconciliation, remembrance, and narrative are all grand themes of the Eucharist comprising the mission to the world. Again, these themes must be identified from within the Eucharist rather than being adopted from elsewhere. This does not mean that non-Eucharistic discourses cannot assist the articulation and development of these themes, while remaining faithful to the Eucharistic identification and direction inherent within them. Likewise, a proper Eucharistic discourse will address other discourses, the Eucharistic scope of concern and understanding will have cultural, linguistic, philosophical, economic, and political dimensions.

In what follows, I will strive to address Eucharistic questions in Eucharistic ways. This is not a compendium of different views. I have not sought to rehearse the standard arguments and personages of the long history of debate. This work can be viewed as a companion to several other studies on every facet of the history, liturgy, practice, and theology of the Eucharist. The reader can turn to many books worthy of our attention for detailed examinations and representative bibliography. Instead, I will seek to cultivate the Eucharistic gaze both as a movement within, and as a movement without, the event of the Eucharist. This will be done by abiding within the tradition of Eucharistic enactment and understanding, while recognizing the variations and complexities/perplexities presented by it. Along the way, dealing with Eucharistic questions will involve, explicitly and implicitly, the comprehensive scope of other basic theological concepts. Reflection on the Eucharist will take Christological, soteriological, and ecclesiological directions. This is an effort to abide within the Eucharist in the course of reflecting on the customary areas of its exposition, i.e. tradition, presence and sacrifice. However, as has been indicated thus far, the Eucharist is a theologically comprehensive reality and perspective. Thus, we will consider the nature and purpose of the church and of the Christian life from within the Eucharist. Finally, we will take up the question of theology as a proper Eucharistic one.

## CHAPTER 1

### TRADITION

*For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.<sup>1</sup>*

*1 Corinthians 11:23–26*

The first account we have of the institution of the Eucharist, and its celebration, is introduced by a reference to tradition. Paul speaks of "receiving from the Lord" and "handing on" what he recounts to the Eucharistic community in Corinth. Reflection on the tradition of the celebration and meaning of the Eucharist begins within that tradition. We do not have sources for the study of the Eucharist that are not mediated by tradition and that are not handed on to us through and as tradition. What is available to us for the study of the origins and development of the Eucharist, its history and theology, are texts that issue from a prior Eucharistic life. While these texts are sources for our study, they are also witnesses of the tradition. They were generated for the sake of continuing and/or explaining what the church was already doing. The sources for study of the Eucharist, and this is particularly the case prior to the Reformation, are ways of "handing on" what is being done. The sources are not attempts to create a Eucharist where one does not exist. These are witnesses to various faithful attempts to "hand-on" what has been "received from the



Lord.” Our approach to these texts should remain mindful of how we abide faithfully within the continuum of receiving and handing-on. We engage the tradition within its characteristic dynamic of receiving from others what we will hand-on to others. We have to learn what we will teach, and this learning and teaching occurs within a shared life shaped by the enactment of our subject.

Because the textual witness to the tradition issues from a Eucharistic life, it does not tell us everything about this life. Our sources come from a variety of contexts and circumstances, each bearing a theological rationale that is not completely or definitively articulated. This means that we should exercise some modesty in our claims and conclusions we draw from the study of the Eucharistic tradition. As witnesses to the tradition, the texts serve as sources both of what is being handed on and of what is received. This exchange of giving and receiving is an enduring dynamic that requires that we do not attempt to construct a linear story of the development of the Eucharist. There will be gaps in our understanding, and we should not yield to the temptation to cover them over with heavily footnoted speculation. Perhaps, the recognition of the incompleteness of the Eucharistic tradition will guide us into a deeper sense of the nature of the Eucharist itself.

In this chapter, I will not present a survey of the history of the celebration and theology of the Eucharist. Rather, I will attend to what the historical sources tell us about the nature and development of the tradition of the Eucharist. I will approach these documents as witnesses to the Eucharistic tradition, and not as sources for historical reconstruction of the celebration and meaning of the Eucharist. My main concern is how the documents reflect an understanding and practice of the Eucharist that we receive. Put another way, the emphasis here is not on what generated the texts, but on what the texts can generate. We want to keep alive the question of tradition and not bury it under mounds of definitive or contested readings. The questions of what happened, and what did it mean, are asked for the sake of what can happen, and what it can mean? We should ask what is being handed on to us, and what can it mean?

## **FIRST WITNESSES**

We began with a quotation from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians because it gives us our first written account of what

is customarily referred to as the “institution narrative.” There are four of these narratives of Jesus’ words at the Last Supper. In addition to the Corinthians account, there is one in each of the synoptic Gospels: Matthew (26: 26–28), Mark (14:22–24), and Luke (22:17–20). All these are called “institution narratives” because with words and actions they describe how Jesus is said to have instituted the Eucharist. As I have noted, the institution narrative in First Corinthians is conveyed through appeal to tradition, to a prior teaching and life. Also, Paul wrote to a community already engaged in the regular celebration of the Eucharist. The recounting of this narrative serves to reenforce Paul’s admonition toward appropriate Eucharistic practice. He appeals to tradition in order to address a contemporary situation. What about the renditions found in the synoptic Gospels? Are they too witnesses to tradition, rather than originators of that tradition? The answer to this question is complicated and can vary. Suffice it to say at this point that the Gospels were written by persons and within communities already involved in the regular celebration of the Eucharist. The Eucharist preceded the Gospels. We do not have the institution of the Eucharist without the emerging tradition of the Eucharist. Therefore, we will consider these institution narratives as first witnesses to the Eucharistic tradition. Each of the four narratives will be examined individually and then will be compared with each other. After this examination and comparison, the question of tradition will be posed directly.

Prior to considering the narratives in turn, we would do well to bracket for now our experiences of those narratives as found within Eucharistic prayers. We can be so accustomed to hearing and seeing them as focal points of our Eucharistic prayers we might not pay close attention to their distinctiveness. The place, wording, and use of the institution narratives in the New Testament are not the same as found in most Eucharistic prayers. This caveat of distinction between the first witnesses and later Eucharistic prayers holds not only for textual analysis, but also for theological attribution. Witnesses to the tradition are not the same as proof-texts for well-established theological viewpoints.

Paul’s version of the institution narrative, which he “hands on” to the Corinthians, locates the Supper “on the night” Jesus was betrayed. Jesus takes a loaf of bread and gives thanks before breaking it, and he states that the bread “is my body that is for you.” The