



National Apostolate for  
Inclusion Ministry

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Chapter 1, **Sacramental  
Preparation Eucharist:  
Individualizing  
Lesson Plans**

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The Rev. Robert L Hagedorn  
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The Most Reverend  
Carl K. Moeddel  
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Bishop  
Archdiocese of Cincinnati  
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*Promoting the Full Inclusion of People with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities in the  
Life of the Catholic Church*

## What is Eucharist

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By Marilyn E. Bishop



### INTRODUCTION

The Eucharist is the heart and the source of all Catholic worship and life. It represents the people of God as they gather to receive spiritual nourishment. It also builds the unity of the body of Christ.

The Eucharist is also called the Mass. The Mass includes both the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. During the Liturgy of the Word, people gather in the Lord's name to hear the Word of God and to pray together. They come to give thanks and to be unified in their faith. The summit of the celebration is the Liturgy of the Eucharist which prepares people to receive Jesus who comes in a special way in Holy Communion. It is during the Liturgy of the Eucharist that people receive Holy Communion.

For people with intellectual/developmental disabilities, "The criterion for the reception of Holy Communion is the same for persons with developmental and mental disabilities as for all persons, namely that the person be able to distinguish the body of Christ from ordinary food, even if this recognition is evidenced through manner, gesture or reverential silence rather than verbally." (*Guidelines for Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities* published in 1995 by the U.S. Catholic Bishops)

It is important to recognize that reverence is the key to assessing a person's readiness. Reverence and sacredness of the ritual are two concepts that are common to people's understanding of sacraments throughout the world.

### WHAT IS THE SACRAMENT OF EUCHARIST

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (paragraph 1382), the sacrifice of the

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Mass is a celebration which is directed toward the intimate union of the faithful with Christ through Communion. During Mass Jesus urges the faithful to receive him as they did at the Last Supper when he gathered his friends for this special meal. The scriptures describe the institution of this holy sacrament thus:

“Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying: ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ And he did the same with the cup after supper saying, ‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.’” (Luke 22:19-22)

Through his actions Jesus transformed a Jewish ceremony into what we know today as the Eucharist. In the Mass, the priest repeats the words of Christ. The bread and wine are consecrated. They cease to be bread and wine and become the body and Blood of Christ himself, really present.

Through his words, Jesus tells that he gave up his life to save people. He gave his blood for the forgiveness of sins. Thus the Eucharist is a sacrifice because it memorialized the sacrifice of Jesus dying on the cross. The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are one single atonement for the sins of all. During the Mass this sacrificial offering is reenacted and becomes real.

### **IMPLICATION FOR TEACHING**

Students can understand that people need to eat to live. Since the sacrament was instituted at a meal and bread is eaten at the meal, they can be taught that Jesus is the bread of spiritual life. They must be helped to understand that people eat the Body and Blood of Jesus to strengthen them and to prepare them to live spiritually forever.

Students with intellectual/developmental disabilities may struggle to understand the relationship between ordinary bread and the small, thin wafer now used in most parishes. It will be left to the catechists to show that the wafer is real bread but different from the bread used at home.

Students can link the Mass to other events in their lives if they understand that this ceremony is very special but different from other ceremonies in their lives. For instance, Thanksgiving Dinner is a special family gathering but different from a family picnic on the Fourth of July. Yet, both ceremonies are special. Holy Communion is a great and unique ceremony during which Jesus comes into our lives.

In light of the above, the following ideas may be emphasized for the student with intellectual/developmental disabilities. Jesus is our friend. He gave his life to bring us to God. Jesus died for us but before he died he had supper with his friends. At the supper he created a special ceremony which we still use today. In this meal he gave us the unique gift of himself under the appearance of bread and wine.

All aspects of the Eucharist such as meal, community and celebration contribute to the human understanding of this sacrament. People know what it means to eat a meal, they know that family and friends (community) lend special emphasis to a meal, and they know that a very special meal is a celebration. All contribute “realness” to the sacrament. This will help the student to understand that this event is extraordinary.

### **SYMBOLS AND RITUALS OF THE SACRAMENT**

The symbols and rituals of the sacrament are many and rich. Symbols are visible signs of something invisible. The Eucharist has special symbols.



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NATIONAL APOSTOLATE  
FOR INCLUSION  
MINISTRY

P.O. Box 218  
Riverdale, MD 20738  
phone: 800.736.1280  
email: qnafim@aol.com

[www.nafim.org](http://www.nafim.org)

*Symbols*

|                         |  |
|-------------------------|--|
| <b>Altar</b>            | Table where Jesus gathered his disciples at the Last Supper                    |
| <b>Meal</b>             | Sign of brothers and sisters united in Christ                                  |
| <b>Loaf of Bread</b>    | Source of life as a basic food and symbol of unity as all eat of the one bread |
| <b>Wine</b>             | Festive sign of joy  |
| <b>Wine &amp; Water</b> | Wine = Christ;<br>Water = People;<br>Wine + Water = People united to Christ    |

Rituals are ceremonious ways used in worship. The rituals of the Eucharist remind people of the Last Supper.

*Rituals*

|                                    |  |
|------------------------------------|--|
| <b>Bringing gifts to the altar</b> | Builds a bridge to the Eucharistic prayer  |
| <b>Presenting the bread</b>        | Calls attention to an important moment about to happen                           |
| <b>Breaking the bread</b>          | Jesus' body was broken before he died  |
| <b>Participation</b>               | People share in the celebration with the priest to partake in the ancient ritual |

**WHAT DOES THE SACRAMENT DO?**

This sacrament enriches the recipient in many ways. Holy Communion increases our union with Jesus in an intimate manner. As material food gives life to the body, Holy Communion preserves, increases, and renews the life of grace received at Baptism.

Receiving the body of Christ strengthens friendship with Jesus and helps to avoid sin in the future. The more that one shares the life of Christ and his friendship, the more difficult it will be to break the relationship through sin.

Holy Communion united all to Christ and unites the faithful into one body – the Church. Communion fulfills the call of Baptism to be formed into one body. Holy communion is a prayer to achieve unity among all who believe in Jesus.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The Vatican II Council emphasizes the original ceremony instituted at the Last Supper. The leaders of the church now speak about the Eucharist as a meal and a community of participants who celebrate an important ritual with the priest as the presider of the assembly. The church understands the nature of community and its importance to the meaning of the Eucharist. As members of the community, people with intellectual/developmental disabilities are to be welcomed into total participation at the Mass. This means inclusion from the gathering at the beginning of Mass, to receiving Holy Communion and to the “sending forth” at the final blessing.