If one thing distinguishes Catholics from other Christians, it is our devotion to the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Though all the Sacraments are important, the Eucharist is the spiritual center of Catholic life. Through the Eucharist we remember what God has done for us through Jesus Christ, when we gather every Sunday. We celebrate the Eucharist as part of other sacramental celebrations, such as Confirmation or marriage, making those Sacraments fuller and more complete expressions of the mystery of our faith. We celebrate the Eucharist at retreats, pilgrimages, and other spiritual events, giving those activities Catholic identity. And we celebrate the Eucharist when Catholics gather for important meetings, as a sign of our unity. The traditional language we use to express these varied celebrations of the same Sacrament is that the Eucharist is the “heart (or source) and the summit” (CCC, number 1407) of the life of the Church.

Words to Look For

- Paschal Lamb
- The Eucharist
- reparation
- assembly
- Consecration
- transubstantiation
- Liturgy of the Word
- Liturgy of the Eucharist
- Eucharistic prayer
- Holy Communion
- Acolyte
Why does the Eucharist hold such an esteemed place in Catholic life? It is because the Eucharist brings together in a single ritual all the important elements of the Catholic faith. In it we recall what God has revealed to us through history in the Liturgy of the Word. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we remember and make present the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. We actually receive Jesus Christ—physically and spiritually—when we receive the consecrated bread and wine, which become the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. In our celebration of the Eucharistic Liturgy, we are united across time and space with the Communion of Saints, who are praising God on earth and in heaven, all celebrating the same divine liturgy.

A common complaint of many teens—and a few adults—is that Mass is boring. There is no denying that many people experience this feeling as part of their spiritual journey. But if you understand what is happening during the Eucharist, you can never say that it is unimportant. Important things are not always exciting, especially if they become routine. But you may find that if you put your heart into it, the Mass will no longer seem as boring as you thought.

A Short History of the Eucharist

The roots of our celebration of the Eucharist are found in the Old Testament story of the Exodus. It is the story of how God freed the people of Israel from their captivity in Egypt. One particular event, the Passover, involved a sacrifice and a meal (see Exodus, chapters 11 and 12). The Passover is connected to the tenth and final plague that God sent to convince the Pharaoh to let the people go. In this plague God’s messenger killed the firstborn of every Egyptian family and the firstborn of all the livestock. To be
spared, every Israelite family had to kill a young lamb (called the Passover or Paschal Lamb) and spread its blood over their doorway. Then the angel of death would “pass over” their household, and their oldest son would live. They were to cook the lamb and serve it with unleavened bread, as their final meal in the land of Egypt. The Israelites were commanded by God to celebrate this Passover meal every year to remember their escape from slavery through God’s divine power.

Jump ahead now to Jesus’ earthly mission. Jesus was always eating and drinking. In fact, he and the disciples were accused of being gluttons and drunkards (see Luke 7:34). Jesus loved a good meal and conversation; mealtimes often became teaching moments (see Luke 11:37–52, 14:1–24, 19:1–10). Jesus also could not stand to see people go hungry. One of his greatest miracles is the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, a story found in all four Gospels (see Matthew 14:13–21, Mark 6:30–44, Luke 9:10–17, John 6:1–15).

The story of the loaves and fishes in chapter 6 of the Gospel of John is particularly important, because in it Jesus goes on to teach about the Eucharist. This chapter is a summary of what the early Christians came to understand about the Eucharist. Following are highlights of Jesus’ words in chapter 6:

- “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (verse 35).
- “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (verse 51).
- “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them” (verses 54–56).

All this emphasis on eating and drinking, on hunger and thirst, on flesh and blood reached its culmination in Jesus’ Last Supper with his Apostles. Again, this event is recorded in all four Gospels, although the Gospel of John has a different em-
phasis (see Matthew 26:17–30, Mark 14:12–25, Luke 22:7–23, John 13:1—17:26). The meal Jesus shared on this occasion with his closest followers was the Jewish Passover meal. Jesus knew that his death was at hand, and he wanted to leave his disciples a special memorial as a sign of his continued presence with them. So Jesus blessed bread, broke it, and passed it to them, saying, “Take, eat; this is my body.” Then he did the same with the cup of wine saying, “Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:26–28).

After Jesus’ death, Resurrection, and Ascension into heaven, the early Church put together the Old Testament understanding of the Paschal Lamb and sacrifice with the words and actions of Jesus. They understood that although the sacrifice of the original Passover lamb saved the firstborn from physical death, Jesus’ sacrifice saves us all from the eternal death that is separation from God. Jesus is the new Paschal Lamb (see John 1:29, 1 Corinthians 5:7). The old sacrifices by the Israelite priests were not enough to overcome the damage caused by Original Sin, but Jesus’ sacrifice completely restored our relationship with God once and for all (see Hebrews 10:1–10). The Church understood that Jesus wants us to repeat the ritual of the Last Supper, and that when we do so, he will be physically and spiritually present (see 1 Corinthians 11:23–26). These are the core understandings of the Eucharist that we still celebrate today.

The Church Building
A church building isn’t just a convenience. A church should convey a sense of God’s presence and lead us to prayer. The U.S. Catholic bishops make this clear in their document Built of Living Stones:

Just as the term Church refers to the living temple, God’s People, the term church also has been used to describe “the building in which the Christian community gathers to hear the word of God, to pray together, to receive the sacraments, and celebrate the eucharist.” That building is both the house of God on earth (domus Dei) and a house fit for the prayers of the saints (domus ecclesiae). Such a house of prayer must be expressive of the presence of God and suited for the celebration of the sacrifice of Christ, as well as reflective of the community that celebrates there.

The church is the proper place for the liturgical prayer of the parish community, especially the celebration of the Eucharist on Sunday. It is also the privileged place for adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and reservation of the Eucharist for Communion for the sick. Whenever communities have built houses for worship, the design of the building has been of critical importance. Every church building is a gathering place for the assembly, a resting place, a place of encounter with God, as well as a point of departure on the Church’s unfinished journey toward the reign of God. (Numbers 16–17)
The Meaning of the Eucharist

Our look into the historical beginnings of the Eucharist has already begun to point out the meaning of this great Sacrament. Like all Sacraments, the words and actions are a symbol of what is happening in the spiritual reality. The Church has developed some clear descriptions of the spiritual reality of the Eucharist that you should be aware of.

Thanksgiving and Praise

The word Eucharist comes from a Greek word meaning “thanksgiving.” In the Sacrament we give God thanks and praise for all that God has given us: life, love, family, friends, creation, and most important, Jesus’ sacrifice of love on the cross and the promise of the resurrection. Think for a moment about some of the prayers we say: “Glory to God in the highest,” “Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation,” and “Holy, holy, holy Lord.” They are all about praising and thanking God.

But in the spiritual realm, it isn’t just we who are praising and thanking God, it is Christ himself, with us and through the Holy Spirit. Remember that one of the names for the Church gathered is the Body of Christ. It is Christ himself, our high priest (see Hebrews 8:3), who leads our praise and thanksgiving to the Father. Through the Holy Spirit, our earthly praise and thanksgiving is joined to the perfect worship of God by the saints and angels in heaven (see Revelation 19:1–5).

Memorial of Christ’s Passover Sacrifice

The Eucharist is also a memorial of the life, death, and Resurrection of Christ. This happens in a number of ways. In the Gospel reading and the homily, we hear and reflect on the meaning of a particular teaching or event from the life of Jesus. In the creed we profess our belief in the mysteries of our faith, including the saving events of Jesus’ life. And in the Eucharistic prayer, we specifically recall the events surrounding his death and Resurrection.
But the spiritual reality is something much more than just remembering these events. In the Eucharist these saving actions are made present, and we are actually participating in these events! Through the words and actions of the priest, Jesus himself is blessing the bread and wine. Jesus is making his Body and Blood present in the form of bread and wine. The saving power of Jesus’ Passover, that is, his sacrifice on the cross, strengthens us and renews us. It isn’t that we are resacrificing Jesus but are making his original sacrifice real and present during the sacramental ritual.

As a sacrifice, the Eucharist is also reparation (making amends) for the sins of the living and the dead. Part of the prayer tradition of Catholics is consciously to remember someone during the Eucharist who has died, and to pray that his or her journey to heaven will be swift. You may have noticed that often a particular person is prayed for during the prayers at Mass. People arrange for this by contacting their parish office to ask that a Mass be designated as a memorial for someone they know who has died. And many people remember a special person or need in their personal prayers before or after Holy Communion. This is something you can do at any Mass.

**Presence of Christ**

In the Eucharist Jesus is present in the fullest possible way. He is present in the assembly, the people gathered as the Body of Christ. He is present in the Word, the Scripture readings that are proclaimed at every Mass. Christ is also present in the priest or bishop who presides over the Eucharist. But he is particularly present in the bread and wine, which, after the Consecration (the part of the Mass in which the priest prays over the bread and wine, repeating Jesus’ prayers from the Last Supper), become the Body and Blood of Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

**Saintly Profiles**

**Saint Katharine Drexel (1858–1955)**

Katharine Drexel, also known as Mother Drexel, was the daughter of a wealthy Philadelphia banker. She devoted her life and her considerable inherited wealth to serving the poor. She felt a special call to serve the African American and native American communities in the United States. At the age of thirty, she began preparations for religious life with the Sisters of Mercy. In 1891, when she pronounced her first vows, it was as the first member of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, which she founded.

Katharine established more than a hundred missions and schools on Indian reservations, in rural areas, and in inner cities. In 1915 she started a teachers’ college that eventually became Xavier University of Louisiana, the first and only predominantly African American Catholic university. Throughout her life she fought for and funded civil rights causes.

Today the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament continue Katharine’s Gospel-inspired mission of witnessing to the power of the Eucharist, by dedicating their whole life to practicing justice and fostering unity among all peoples. Katharine was the second American-born saint and was canonized in October 2000. Her feast day is March 3.
The technical word for the transformation of the bread and wine into Jesus’ Body and Blood is **transubstantiation**. This is perhaps one of the hardest things for us to understand. It is a belief that separates Catholics from many other Christians. But we have Jesus’ own words to testify to this reality (see Matthew 26:26–29). To help you understand this mystery better (we will never completely understand it!), you may wish to review the section “Symbols and Rituals,” on pages 146–148, in chapter 15, “Introduction to the Sacraments.” The bread and wine become a sacramental symbol that points to and makes real the spiritual reality: that we are receiving Jesus in a real and physical way. Although the bread and wine retain their physical forms, they have truly become Jesus’ Body and Blood, nourishing us to live as his disciples.

**The Eucharistic Rite**

The Eucharistic Rite, or ritual, is the most complex of the sacramental rites. The Lord’s Supper, the Holy Sacrifice, the Holy and Divine Liturgy, Holy Communion, and the Mass (from the Latin word *missa*, meaning “sending forth”) are all names for the Eucharistic Liturgy. The entire rite consists of four parts: (1) the gathering rite, (2) the Liturgy of the Word, (3) the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and (4) the dismissal rite. The **Liturgy of the Word** and the **Liturgy of the Eucharist** are the two main parts; together they create one single act of worship. The following outline shows the words and actions that typically occur in each part.

**An Outline for the Eucharist**

The movement of the Sunday Mass usually follows this outline:

1. Introductory Rites
   - Entrance (usually with gathering song)
   - Act of Penitence
   - *Kyrie* (“Lord, have mercy . . .”)
Did You Know?

Liturgy of the Word

- Gloria ("Glory to God . . .")
- Collect ("Let us pray . . .")

2. Liturgy of the Word

- First Reading (usually from the Old Testament)
- Responsorial Psalm (usually sung)
- Second Reading (usually from the New Testament letters)
- Gospel Acclamation
- Gospel Reading
- Homily
- the Profession of Faith (the Nicene Creed)
- Prayers of the Faithful (prayers for the needs of the Church and the world)

3. Liturgy of the Eucharist

- Preparation of the Altar and the Gifts
- Eucharistic Prayer (The central prayer in which the priest thanks God for all his gifts, calls down the Holy Spirit, and consecrates the bread and wine, making it the Body and Blood of Jesus. Includes the preface and the "Holy, Holy, Holy.")
- Communion Rite (This includes the Lord’s Prayer, the Rite of Peace, the Breaking of the Bread, the reception of Holy Communion, and a song of praise or silence.)

4. Concluding Rites

- Greeting and Blessing
- Dismissal (usually with a closing song)

The gathering rite prepares us for the celebration of the Eucharist. It comprises a song played when the priest or bishop processes in with the other liturgical ministers, a penitential rite for the forgiveness of minor sins, the Gloria to God, and an opening prayer by the priest. We then move to the Liturgy of the Word, the time in which we receive Christ through the words of

Liturical Clothing and Colors

The celebrant’s vestments (special religious clothing) reflect the ordinary clothing worn by men in the Roman Empire during the fourth century. Here is a brief description of some of the liturgical vestments worn today:

- **Alb.** This is the long, white robe that the celebrant wears over his regular clothes. The alb signifies Baptism and may be worn by any baptized person.
- **Stole.** Priests and deacons wear this long scarflike vestment around their necks to signify their ordained ministry. In ancient times, people wore scarves to designate their official status.
- **Chasuble.** This is a colorful outer garment worn over the alb. The colors are carefully chosen in light of the liturgical season or feast.

The color of the vestments sets a tone and indicates the nature of the liturgical feast or season.

- **White** symbolizes purity and hope and is worn during the seasons of Christmas and Easter and also at funeral Masses.
- **Red** signifies the outpouring of blood and is worn on Palm Sunday and Good Friday. It is also worn on the feast days of the Apostles and martyrs. Red also symbolizes the fire of the Holy Spirit and so is worn on Pentecost and for the Sacrament of Confirmation.
- **Green** symbolizes hope and is worn during Ordinary Time.
- **Violet** or **blue** is worn during Advent to signify preparation and during Lent to signify penance.
the Scriptures. On Sundays the Liturgy of the Word comprises a Scripture reading from the Old Testament, a psalm that is sung or recited, a reading from the letters of the New Testament, and a reading from one of the Gospels. This is followed by a homily in which the readings are explained and applied to our lives today. The Liturgy of the Word finishes with the recitation of the Nicene Creed and the general intercessions, in which we pray for the needs of the Church and the world.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist begins when the gifts of bread and wine are brought to the altar. Only simple, unleavened wheat bread and grape wine may be used. A prayer is said over these gifts (“Lord, accept these gifts of bread and wine”), and then the priest prays the preface to the Eucharistic prayer, to which the assembly responds with “Holy, Holy, Holy.” The priest then prays the Eucharistic prayer on behalf of the gathered community. You will recognize this prayer, because it begins with the priest’s saying, “Lift up your hearts,” and we respond, “We lift them up to the Lord.”

The Eucharistic prayer is the longest prayer of the Mass and has a number of different parts. The priest can choose from several forms of the prayer. No matter which form is used, though, the core of the prayer is always the same. The priest extends his hands over the bread and wine and says the words of Consecration used by Jesus at the Last Supper: “This is my body, which is given for you. . . . This cup that is poured out for you is . . . my blood” (Luke 22:19–20). The bread and wine and these words are the essential signs of the Sacrament.

After the Eucharistic prayer, the assembly recites the Lord’s Prayer, exchanges a sign of peace, and processes up to receive the Eucharist. The dismissal rite includes a final blessing, the sending forth, and usually a closing song as the priest and servers recess out.

Only priests and bishops can preside at the Eucharist. It is Christ himself, the high priest of the New Covenant, who offers the Eucharistic sacrifice through the ministry of the
ordained priest. Ordination gives them the special character needed to represent Christ, allowing them to consecrate the bread and wine so that they become the Body and Blood of the Lord.

Receiving the Eucharist
All Catholics have an obligation to "keep holy the Lord's Day" (the Third Commandment), that is, they must attend Sunday Mass. All Catholics are encouraged to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord whenever they attend Eucharist and are obligated by the precepts of the Church to receive Holy Communion (another name for the consecrated bread and wine) at least once a year.

Although everyone is welcome to attend the Mass, under some circumstances people cannot receive Holy Communion in the Catholic Church. One situation is if a person is not Catholic. Because the Eucharist is a sign of our unity, it would be a false symbol for someone to receive it who is not in union with the beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church.

Another situation in which a person should not receive the Eucharist is if a person is guilty of a serious (mortal) sin and has not yet confessed it. Committing a mortal sin results in a serious break in our relationship with God, and only receiving absolution (forgiveness) in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation can restore the baptismal grace necessary to receive Christ properly. A person who seeks forgiveness for a mortal sin is encouraged to be part of the Eucharistic assembly and to receive Penance and Reconciliation as soon as possible so she or he can again receive the Body and Blood of the Lord.

Six Ways to Serve at the Liturgy
Your parish's liturgy depends on people using their gifts to fulfill special roles during the Sunday Eucharist. Read the descriptions of the following roles, and consider your own gifts and talents. Young people all over the country are serving in these ministries; might you be called to serve in one of them?

- **Greeters** (or ministers of hospitality) make sure that as people gather for Mass, they are met with a warm, genuine welcome.
- **Lectors** proclaim the first and second readings. They immerse themselves in the Scripture passages by reading them and praying with them before the liturgy.
- **Musicians** add joy, spirit, and reflection to the celebration, and foster a sense of unity among the people by leading the singing of hymns and prayers.
- **Gift bearers** bring forward the gifts of bread and wine—symbols of God's gift of creation and human work.
- **Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion** express their faith by assisting with the distribution of Communion.
- **Servers**, sometimes called acolytes, assist the priest by taking care of the books and objects used in the liturgy, so the celebrant can focus on the prayers and ritual actions.
Receiving Christ in the Eucharist has a number of beneficial effects in our lives. It builds up our relationship with Jesus, and it strengthens our relationship with his Body, the Church. It unites all the members of the Church together, making the entire Church stronger and more vital. Participating in the Eucharist brings forgiveness for our venial sins and strengthens us to resist serious sin. The Holy Spirit sends us forth from the Eucharist, strengthened to be Christ’s presence in the world. With all these benefits, why would anyone not wish to regularly attend Mass and receive the Body and Blood of Christ?

For Further Reflection

- People often find that taking a few minutes to prepare for the Eucharist helps them receive more from the Sacrament. Some ways of preparing include looking over the Scripture readings before Mass, remembering people you want to pray for during the liturgy, and getting to the church a few minutes early to silently pray and meditate before the liturgy begins. What could you do to better prepare yourself for the Eucharist?

- The Sunday Eucharist is a time for the people of your parish to connect and grow together in Christ. Many new churches and remodeled churches include larger gathering areas so people can visit before and after Mass. How well does your parish encourage people to grow together as a community?

- Read the section “Presence of Christ,” on page 177, and think about how you experience Jesus Christ’s presence in the Eucharist. Ask a friend or family member about how he or she experiences Christ in the Eucharist.

- Look over the sidebar “Six Ways to Serve at the Liturgy,” on page 181. Do you already serve in one of these ways? If not, which way of serving would most fit your gifts (charisms)? To whom would you need to talk in order to serve at your parish liturgy?