A 5-Part Catholic Study Guide

by Terry A. Modica

ECCLESIA DE EUCHARISTIA

The Church of the Eucharist
"On the Eucharist in its Relationship to the Church"
Enter more fully into the mystery of the Eucharist and deepen your intimacy with Christ! Enrich your celebration of the Mass!

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How to Use This Study Guide

In this five-week course, you will study:

- developing a closer personal relationship with Jesus in the Eucharist
- the Eucharist as the "source and summit of the Christian life"
- what Catholics believe and what we do not believe about the Eucharist
- why only Catholic priests can consecrate the elements of communion
- the role of the whole community in holy communion

You will be assigned a different portion of the Church document, Ecclesia de Eucharistia, to read each week. At the end of each lesson are theological reflection questions. Write your answers, then take them to your faith sharing community or bible study group for discussion.

You can find the document:
- at your local Catholic book store
- or order it online
- or read it online at the Vatican’s website or on EWTN.com

Use a highlighter or pen to mark the key phrases that seem most important to you. When scriptures are referenced, add to your understanding of the lesson by looking them up in your Bible.

About the Author/Instructor of this Study Guide:

Terry Modica converted to Catholicism in 1977, drawn by the Eucharist. At that time, she began to study official Church teachings in order to understand and dig deep into her new faith. Always involved in her parishes, she gained a reputation for inspirational teaching and spiritual leadership in Adult Religious Education, prayer groups, Parish Council, and as diocesan staff writer. She has a degree in Theology, and has been certified by the Diocese of Trenton, NJ, for Pastoral Administration, and is a certified graduate of the Lay Pastoral Ministry Institute of the Diocese of St. Petersburg, Florida.

She is Founder and Executive Director of Good New Ministries (www.gnm.org), the author of the daily Good News Reflections (www.gnm.org/good-news-reflections/) and has been teaching courses and seminars on the Catholic Catechism and Church documents since 1994.
Lesson 1
The Mystery of Faith

This Church document is an "encyclical" from the pope. The word "encyclical" means "letter", a personal, written message. Think of this document as a letter that Pope John Paul II has written personally to you. He really did! Focus in on the text of his message as something that the pope, who loves all the faithful like a papa loves his children, wrote because he wants you to benefit more fully and more deeply from the mysteries of the Eucharist.

Some terms to know:

1. *mysterium paschale*: the paschal mystery -- the sufferings of Christ to free us from our sins and gain us entrance into heaven

2. *mysterium eucharisticum*: the eucharistic mystery -- what happens on the altar during every Mass and what happens within us who participate

3. *mysterium fidei*: the mystery of faith -- Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again

4. *eschatological*: the future, final saving work of Christ through his second coming

While reading the text of this encyclical, keep in mind the questions that are provided by the instructor for each paragraph or group of paragraphs. After you finish each question's portion of the document, click through to the instructor's commentary on it. You will find the answers in the document itself, but the commentary will provide further understanding or reinforcement.

At the end of each lesson, you will be given theological discussion questions. These questions will be what we discuss in the e-Class through the group mailings.

Enter into this course with these questions in mind:

- What are some of the positive signs of Eucharistic faith and devotion that you have witnessed?

- Which has been most meaningful to you; why?

- What are some abuses you've witnessed? Describe your personal struggle in wanting these abuses to end. What gives you hope?

After giving yourself time to reflect on these questions, proceed by reading the pope's introduction of the document.
The Church of the Eucharist

INTRODUCTION

Read Paragraph 1 of *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* with the following questions in mind:

- What does the Church draw from the Eucharist?
- How can it give us confidence that we will receive eternal life in heaven?

*When you finish reading Paragraph 1, continue:*

"The Church draws her life from the Eucharist." This opening statement of the letter sums up the message of the entire document, which was written to help us understand more fully what it means to draw life from the Eucharist. It is you who receive life from the Eucharist, for "the Church" is not a title used here to refer to a building where we worship, nor does it mean the official, hierarchical authority of priests and bishops who lead everyone else. "The Church" in this encyclical is all of us -- the bishops, priests and deacons, men and women in the consecrated life, and all the lay faithful.

This powerful opening paragraph also makes clear that the Eucharist is the body and blood of Jesus Christ, because the pope knows that an amazing number of Catholics do not believe this. Christ's daily presence in the Eucharist, consecrated during Catholic Mass, is intensely and wonderfully "the heart of the mystery of the Church." We don't have to understand it to appreciate it. Indeed, if we wait to fully understand it before we believe, we will never appreciate it, for we will never believe. Faith is a gift that allows us to believe without understanding.

Lastly in the opening statement is a succinct reminder that we are on a journey to heaven during our earthly lives. The presence of Christ in the Eucharist (the Divine Sacrament) is available to us daily to help us stay on course. From this simple fact we can base our hope -- with confidence -- of reaching heaven. Jesus will not let us stray away, not too long, not if we're seeking him in the Eucharist.

*Paragraph 2*

Read the next paragraph with the following questions in mind:

- How does faith grow? More precisely, for the purpose of studying this document, how does faith in the true presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist grow?
- Did the first apostles have an immediate understanding of the Eucharist, or did it require a learning and maturing process?

*When you finish reading Paragraph 2, continue:*

We cannot judge others for their lack of faith in the true presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, nor for seemingly being disinterested if they say they believe yet do not attend Mass or, when in Mass, fail to show the awe and respect that we ourselves have for the Eucharist. Can you recall a time in your life when you did not feel as strongly as you do now about the Eucharist? What changed your mind? Was it a process or an overnight enlightenment?

For most people, it's a process. Sometimes, it takes years.
If you are currently one of those who’s struggling to understand how Jesus can be fully present in the consecrated bread and wine, be assured that in this course, you will not be criticized nor be made to feel guilty or outcast.

The chosen Twelve followed Jesus closely during his earthly ministry, yet even they did not grasp the full meaning of the Eucharist while Jesus instituted it during his Last Supper. He had already told them that "unless you eat of my body and blood, you won't have eternal life", but there was too little information within their grasp at that time. They could not understand. What Jesus said sounded freaky.

How freaky is the idea of Christ's full presence in Mass today? Do you know that he is not only in the Eucharist but he is equally fully present in the Word that is read and in the gathering of the community? Isn't it freaky to look at the guy in the pew behind you, the one who's always chewing gum, never sings, and often chatters to his kids, and realize that Jesus is in him looking back at you?

By the way, to say that Jesus is equally fully present in the Word and in the assembly does not deny his superior presence in the Eucharist. Only in the Eucharist does he come to us in the flesh and in his real blood -- the fullness of his Sonship, one with humankind as our brother and savior, and one with the Divine Father. The printed text in the Bible is not Jesus, although he does come to us in the Word, and the person sitting next to you is not Jesus, although whatever we do to that person we are doing to Jesus. But the bread IS Jesus and no longer bread.

Faith grows. It takes a lot of spiritual work to be able to recognize Jesus where he is not so plainly obvious. And so it is with people who are not fully awed and excited about the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.

Paragraph 3:

Read the next paragraph with the following questions in mind:

- For what reason is the Eucharist called "the center of the Church's life"?
- How does the paschal mystery influence the Church's life through the Eucharist?
- How does it atone for our sins?

When you finish reading Paragraph 3, continue:

The institution of the Eucharist during Christ's Last Supper sacramentally represented the sufferings Jesus was about to endure, not as a symbol of his pain and sacrifice, but as a gift that would forever keep us connected to that sacrifice. Every Mass unites us spiritually to the Last Supper, and not only that, but also equally to the sweating of his blood as he agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane, his arrest and imprisonment, the rejection, the mockery, the scourging, the brutal walk to Calvary, and his sufferings on the cross, all of which led to Easter and the Resurrection of new life.

We are an Easter people! The Eucharist brings us to freedom from sin and its deadly grip. And it brings us to eternal life in God's kingdom, which began with our baptism and is renewed at every Mass.
Prior to the death of the Messiah, sins were washed away for the Jewish community annually on the Day of Atonement. The people would make pilgrimages to the Temple of Jerusalem and provide animals for sacrifices, preferably a calf, a ram, and seven lambs. Through the high priest, the children of Israel would ask God's forgiveness for their transgressions of the Law.

It was a solemn fast day -- no food and no work -- held on 19th day of Tishri, which falls in September/October. The most important ceremony for atonement was the offering of two goats: one that "carried" the sins of the people and was sacrificed to the Lord, and one that "carried" the prayers of the people and was set free into the wilderness. (See Leviticus 16:7-10, 20-23.)

Jesus became the sacrifice that carried the sins of all people. Our sins killed him, and to conquer them he conquered death through the Resurrection. With this, he freely gave us the gift of life. Without this, we would have no life. His sacrifice, therefore, is the source of our life. This is what we celebrate in the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Christ's gift of dying and rising on our behalf is the center of the Church's life, and we remember this by participating in the Eucharist, thus fulfilling his command to "Do this in memory of me."

Paragraph 4:

When we spend "a holy hour" in adoration before the consecrated Body of Christ while it's in the monstrance or in the tabernacle, what are we really doing? And what makes the time from the start of Mass to its end "a holy hour"?

It's a time of spiritually joining Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, saying yes to the question he asked in the midst of his agony: "Won't you stay with me for an hour?" In a very real way, your presence before Christ in the Eucharist gives him comfort and companionship as he suffers abandonment by those in this world who are rejecting him today.

Read Paragraphs 5-8, and for 8, consider this question:

What is the cosmic nature of the Eucharist?

Partaking of the holy Sacrament of Communion is not a private encounter with Christ. Individually, we do experience him, but much more is happening than that, much more. By uniting ourselves to Jesus as we hear him in the Word and then receive him in the Eucharist, we're uniting ourselves to the whole parish community, even to the strangers among us, including the ones who drive us nuts and make us cranky.

And we are also uniting ourselves to the pope and to the whole Church, every parish around the world and every parishioner. And we are uniting ourselves to all of creation, everything that God has made, which should remind us to be good stewards of our natural resources and defenders of this truth.

At the time of Original Sin, our world lost Paradise. Destruction entered into creation, and all creation "groans" as it awaits the glory of God (see Romans 8:19-22). Paradise on earth won't return until the Second Coming of Christ, at which time the full glory of the Lord will restore everything to its sinless state, but when Jesus redeemed the world by offering his body and blood