The Eucharist in the New Testament

by Scott Hahn, PhD

Which comes first: life or breath? Which is primary? Which one is the condition for the other?

The subject matter of this essay presents us with a similar set of riddles. I've titled it "The Eucharist in the New Testament," but I could just as easily have used "The New Testament in the Eucharist." Since Jesus founded his Church, these two realities have been inseparable, complementary, and dependent on one another. It is almost impossible for a Catholic to imagine one without the other.

When we celebrate the Eucharist, we invariably read the "later books" of the Bible. The priest or deacon reads from the Gospel, and a lector may read from one of the letters of an apostle as well. The prayers of the Mass are saturated with quotations and allusions to New Testament passages.

"Behold, the Lamb of God." (Jn 1:29)

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." (Mt 23:39)

"Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof." (Lk 7:6)

"Holy, Holy, Holy Lord." (Rev 4:8)

"Our Father, who art in heaven." (Mt 6:9)

"Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth." (Lk 2:14)

Conversely, when we read the New Testament, perhaps our eyes are drawn to the beloved passages that deal most directly with that most beloved part of Catholic life: the Mass. We turn to the moment when Jesus instituted the Eucharist: when he took bread and pronounced it to be his body, then took a cup and pronounced it to be "the new covenant in his blood." We turn to the sixth chapter of John's Gospel, the famous Bread of Life Discourse: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world. . . . Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you" (Jn 6:51, 53).

As I said, it is almost impossible for a Catholic to imagine one without the other. Yet history asks us to do so, if only for a moment on the time line. Allow me to explain.

Let's focus for a moment on the phrase "New Testament." All Christians agree, of course, that it is a foundational term in our religion. We use it to describe the second and smaller part of the Bible. But to the first Christians—and to Jesus—the term had a different

and larger meaning, a meaning that is evident even in the book we call the New Testament.

To the first Christians, the word we translate as "testament" was supremely important. In Greek it is "*diatheke*." In Hebrew it is "*b'rith*." St. Jerome, in the fourth century,rendered it in Latin as "*testamentum*." In English, it has been translated inconsistently, sometimes as "testament" and sometimes as "covenant."

For the Jews of Jesus' time, the word described not a book, but a relationship—a family relationship, usually sealed (and renewed) by an oath, a sacrifice, and a meal. The ritual created a family bond where none had existed before—in marriage, for example, or adoption. God used the term to describe his special relationship with Israel.

We know of only one instance when Jesus used the phrase we translate as "New Testament," and he used it not to describe a book, but the Mass! St. Paul provides the earliest historical record of the event, perhaps twenty years after the Last Supper: "In the same way [Jesus] also [took] the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the *new covenant* in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me'" (1 Cor 11:25; emphasis added).

Read it closely. The New Testament should change the way we have perhaps been reading the term "New Testament."

According to the New Testament itself, *the Eucharist* is the New Testament. Long before anyone ever sat down to write a book called the New Testament, Jesus had given the chalice as the New Testament in his blood (see Lk 22:20). Years before the New Testament was a document, it was a sacrament, the most foundational Christian rite, instituted by Christ and given to the Church. The Mass is the meal and the sacrifice that renews *he kaine diatheke*—the New Testament—and that is our family bond with God. In Holy Communion with Jesus Christ, God's eternal Son, we are God's children now: "the children share in blood and flesh" (Heb 2:14).

Catholics have spoken of the Mass in these terms—covenantal terms—since the Church's earliest days, the generation that received the faith from the Apostles. St. Ignatius of Antioch, who died around AD 107, provides history's earliest instance of the phrase "the Catholic Church." In his letters, he habitually referred to the Mass as "the sacrifice." Even before St. Ignatius, however, a document called the *Didache*, attributed to the Apostles, speaks of the Eucharist as "the sacrifice." Recent scholars argue that the ritual sections of the *Didache* are older than the earliest books of the New Testament.

Yet non-Catholics sometimes ask how the Eucharist can be a sacrifice if Jesus' Death was the once-for-all sacrifice. If the sacrifice was his Death, and his Death was "once for all," as we read in St. Paul (Rom 6:10) and St. Peter (1 Pt 3:18), then why does the Church celebrate Mass every day, many times a day? It's a fair question, and it should lead us to ask another question: What is it that made Jesus' crucifixion a sacrifice?

To us, after two thousand years of Christian formation, the idea seems self-evident. But to a first-century Jew, it would probably have seemed absurd. Sacrifice was permitted in only one city, the holy city, Jerusalem. Jesus was crucified outside the city walls. Sacrifice

could be offered in only one place in the holy city, in the Temple, on the altar, by an ordained priest from the tribe of Levi. Calvary was far from the Temple, and it had no altar, no offering priest. To even the most careful observer, it would have appeared to be a profane event, a fairly unremarkable Roman execution. A sympathetic soul might have judged Jesus' Death to be martyrdom, like the deaths recounted in the histories of Maccabees, but not a sacrifice.

What made it a sacrifice? It was the eucharistic offering at the Last Supper. Jesus presented the bread and called it his Body. He presented the chalice and deemed it the "blood of the covenant." This is sacrificial language. This is a sacrificial offering. Jesus is echoing the declaration of Moses as he sprinkled sacrificial blood over the Israelites, thus ratifying God's covenant with them (Ex 24:8).

It is St. Paul who connects all the dots for us. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, after introducing the "message of the cross" (1:18), he calls Christ "our paschal lamb" who "has been sacrificed" (5:7). Thus, he makes the connection between the Passover celebrated as the Last Supper and the crucifixion on Calvary.

Indeed, it was that first Eucharist that transformed Jesus' Death from an execution to an offering. At the Last Supper, he gave his Body to be broken, his Blood to be poured out, as if on an altar. The Last Supper was the necessary first act of the drama of the Passion. It was like an opera's overture that establishes all the important themes.

As Paul retold the story of the Last Supper (1 Cor 11:23-25), he spoke of the event in sacrificial terms. He quoted Jesus' echo of the words and action of Moses. He recounted that Jesus had called the Supper a "remembrance," which was a technical term for a specific type of Temple sacrifice (the memorial offering). And just in case we missed any of those connections, Paul compared the Christian Supper (the Mass) with the sacrifices of the Temple (1 Cor 10:18) and even with pagan sacrifices (1 Cor 10:20). All sacrifices, he said, bring about a communion, a fellowship. The offerings of idolatry bring about a communion with demons, but the Christian sacrifice brings about a communion with the Body and Blood of Jesus (1 Cor 10:19-21).

Thus, Jesus' Death on Calvary was not simply a brutal and bloody execution. Jesus' Death had been transformed by his self-offering in the upper room. It had become the offering of an unblemished Paschal victim, the self-offering of a high priest who gave himself as a victim for the redemption of others. "Christ loved us and handed himself over for us as a sacrificial offering to God for a fragrant aroma" (Eph 5:2).

The Eucharist infuses that love into us, uniting our love with Christ's, our sacrifice with his. St. Paul preached, "I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship" (Rom 12:1). Note that he speaks of "bodies" in the plural, but "sacrifice" in the singular. For we are many, but our sacrifice is one with Jesus', which is once for all. This is what Jesus willed when he made his offering and then commanded his apostles to repeat the action as his memorial sacrifice: "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:24-25).

The document we call the New Testament presents the rite we call the New Testament as something central to Christian belief and life. Redemption, as Christ accomplished it, makes little sense apart from his eucharistic offering.

We see this in the frequency of the New Testament's explicit discussions of the Eucharist. The institution of the sacrament is recounted four times: three times in the so-called synoptic Gospels (Mt 26, Mk 14, and Lk 22) and once in St. Paul's letters (1 Cor 11:25). We should note that this is the *only* real narrative overlap between the evangelists and St. Paul. Though St. Paul was Jesus' most prolific interpreter, he rarely quoted his Master. Yet here he carefully narrates a scene and reports Jesus' words at some length. Moreover, the apostle takes pains to emphasize that he is not the origin of the Tradition. He is simply passing on what has already been well established in the Church. "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread" (1 Cor 11:23).

How well established was this? Well, the Acts of the Apostles conveys the worship of the earliest Christians in a compact statement: "They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers" (Acts 2:42). The Church in every succeeding age observed those four elements in one action: the holy sacrifice of the Mass.

There are many other eucharistic scenes in the New Testament, less explicit, perhaps, but no less vivid. St. John's Gospel treats the subject theologically in the Bread of Life Discourse (chapter 6), but also dramatically, in the same chapter, as it tells the story of Jesus' multiplication of the loaves. The early Church Fathers believed that Jesus' act of transubstantiation at Cana—changing water to wine—was a symbolic foreshadowing of the Mass.

Consider St. Luke's account of Jesus' Resurrection appearance to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Jesus walked with them, but they did not recognize him. Then, "at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight . . . he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread" (Lk 24:30-35). St. Luke could hardly be clearer in connecting this event with the supper recounted two chapters earlier. Jesus' actions are almost identical. They reprise the theme introduced in the overture and bring his Passion to a fitting resolution. The Eucharist, instituted on the night he was betrayed, was the Savior's first order of business when he rose from the dead. It was the Church's constant concern as it went out from Jerusalem to the whole world.

Once we see how central the Eucharist was to the life of the early Church, we begin to see the New Testament with new eyes. What else could the Epistle to the Hebrews mean when it describes the Church's heavenly-earthly worship? "No, you have approached Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and countless angels in festal gathering, and the assembly of the firstborn enrolled in heaven, and God the judge of all, and the spirits of the just made perfect, and Jesus, the

mediator of a new covenant, and the sprinkled blood that speaks more eloquently than that of Abel" (Heb 12:22-24). What else could the Book of Revelation mean by the "wedding feast of the Lamb" (Rev 19:9)?

You don't have to be Catholic to see how the New Testament documents presume and depend on the New Testament sacrifice and the New Testament meal. Over the last fifty years and more, many Protestant biblical scholars have noted what Abbot Denis Farkasfalvy has called "the Eucharistic provenance of the New Testament." The movement that began with scholars such as Oscar Cullmann, F. J. Leenhardt, and Ernst Kasemann continues today in the work of John Koenig, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Arthur Just.

What these scholars recognize is that the *documents* we call the New Testament were written to be proclaimed in the context of the *meal* we call the New Testament. They are to be read aloud in the assembly (Rev 1:3). Thus, they use terms that were ordinarily, in the ancient world, associated with priesthood, sacrifice, and liturgy. They contain hymns and doxologies and sudden insertions of ritual formulas. They are sometimes lost on us, like the original meaning of the phrase "New Testament" itself, because we have covered them over with centuries of interpretation and homiletic use. But a good study Bible can sensitize us to the meanings that have been hidden by subsequent history.

St. Paul opens his First Letter to the Thessalonians by assuring them, "We give thanks to God always for all of you, remembering you in our prayers, unceasingly" (1 Thes 1:2). The verb he uses for "give thanks" is "*eucharistoumen*." Similarly, the First Letter to Timothy prescribes the offering of *eucharistias*, which is often translated as "thanksgiving." In first-century Judaism and Christianity, these terms referred not just to generic categories of prayer, but to specific types of sacrifice. Did St. Paul intend the terms to be read that way? We cannot know for sure, but we should be open to the possibility.

The rest of the New Testament documents might incline us to see still more of the New Testament sacrament or, better, to hear more of it, when the Scriptures are proclaimed, as ever, in the course of the Holy Mass.