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Historically, the Catholic Church, especially since the Reformation, has emphasized the Eucharist as a sacrifice instituted by Christ at the Last Supper to perpetuate his sacrifice on the Cross throughout the ages. Some Catholics are comfortable with this sacrificial language and get more out of the liturgy by joining their personal sacrifices with the sacrificial death of Christ. Others are troubled by the language of sacrifice because it reminds them of distasteful animal sacrifice and puts more emphasis on the horrible suffering of Jesus than on his fidelity to his mission which led to his execution.

As the Second Vatican Council teaches us, the inexhaustible mystery of the Eucharist can be described in many diverse ways, including “a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a paschal banquet and a memorial of his death and resurrection.” Thanks to contemporary scholarship, the notion of the Eucharist as memorial is a rich resource for deepening the liturgical spirituality of all Catholics and many other Christians as well.

The Christian notion of a memorial meal is rooted in the Jewish ritual of the Passover meal, which recalls the story of God liberating the Israelites from bondage in Egypt and in the process of this ritual reenactment makes present once again God’s saving action.

The earliest account of the institution of the Eucharist in the New Testament is in 1 Corinthians 11: 23-26, written in the middle 50s by the apostle Paul, who reports what he heard from others: “For the tradition I received from the Lord and also handed on to you is that on the night he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread, and after he had given thanks, he broke it, and he said, ‘This is my body which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.’ And in the same way, with the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this as a memorial of me.’ “We note the Lord’s double command over both the bread and the cup to repeat his ritual action in his memory. The original Greek word in both cases is *anamnesis*, which means memorial or remembrance.

The memorial command of Jesus also appears in Luke’s Gospel, written some thirty years after Paul, which recalls the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper during which Jesus “took bread, gave thanks and broke it and gave it to them, saying This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me” (22:14-20). Although Luke does not repeat the remembrance command over the cup, as does Paul, it is clear that the single command refers to the whole ritual action performed by Jesus in his farewell meal with his disciples.

The common Eucharistic Prayers include the memorial theme in the prayer immediately after the words of consecration called the *Anamnesis*. For example, Eucharistic Prayer IV has “Therefore, O Lord, as we now celebrate the memorial of our redemption, we remember Christ’s Death, and his descent to the realm of the dead, we proclaim his Resurrection and his Ascension to your right hand, and as we await his coming in glory, we offer you his Body and Blood, the sacrifice acceptable to you which brings salvation to the whole world.” There is a traditional Catholic teaching that the way we pray is a good guide to what we believe. In this regard, the A*namnesis* supports the conviction that the Eucharist is truly a memorial meal.

*The United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* affirms that the Eucharist is “the memorial of Christ’s redeeming death,” and goes on to explain: “the term memorial in this context is not simply a remembrance of past events; it is a making present in a sacramental manner the sacrifice of the Cross of Christ and his victory.”

This explanation raises the issue of how memory functions generally and specifically in the liturgy. In chapter 10 of his classic work, *Confessions*, Augustine found it difficult to understand the nature of memory, exclaiming: “Great is the power of memory, an awe-inspiring mystery, my God, a power of profound and infinite multiplicity.” He went on to describe memory as a vast storehouse of images, skills, ideas, impressions and emotions, which, in their endless variety, can be retrieved and re-stored. He was determined to use the great mystery of memory, which is at the very core of our mind and personhood, as a stepping- stone to move toward God, the “sweet light” and “gentle source of reassurance.”

Mindful of the importance of memory in the spiritual life, let us look more closely at the Eucharist as a memorial ritual. As the Catechism teaches, the Eucharistic memorial of Christ’s paschal mystery is not simply the recollection of a past event, but the making present of his death and resurrection for our salvation. The crucified Jesus was raised to life and continues to intercede on our behalf. As Vatican II teaches us, Christ is present at Mass in the assembly, the proclamation of the scriptural word, the presider and the consecrated bread and wine. The Eucharistic ritual makes visible and concrete the abiding presence of the risen Christ in our world. The liturgical memorial brings to mind the gift of self that Jesus offered on our behalf and in the process makes it available as food and nourishment for our journey.

Furthermore, the Eucharistic memorial, which is one unified ritual action combining the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, directs our attention not only to the death and resurrection of Christ, but also to various aspects of his life, teaching and impact, which can enrich our spiritual lives For example, the Gospel for the Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C, the famous Prodigal Son parable, reminds us that Jesus consistently proclaimed the remarkable mercy of a God who is more forgiving than even the most forgiving human father. We can imagine individuals who can benefit from remembering his teaching as well as the current availability of divine mercy; for example, a man who demanded his pregnant girlfriend get an abortion and periodically experiences serious guilt feelings; and a woman who needs to forgive her wayward husband for her own peace of mind. On any given Sunday, one or the other readings can jog our memories and move us to constructive action in ways that an exclusive concentration on the Mass as a sacrifice might miss.

In this regard, it is helpful to recall the work on memory by the recently deceased German theologian, Johann Baptist Metz (1928-2019), who emphasized the “dangerous memory of Jesus,” which challenges us to pay attention to the actual concrete suffering of oppressed people in the past and to do our part to empower those suffering injustice today. We remember Jesus came to liberate captives, that he reached out to the marginalized, that he remained faithful to the cause of God and humanity, which angered the powerful and cost him his life; and that he promised a final victory of good over evil. The memory of Jesus is dangerous because it calls us to share in his liberating mission which demands self-sacrifice, but, we might add, it is at the same time a hopeful message since the memory of Christ’s resurrection assures us of the ultimate triumph of justice and peace. Participating in Mass has the inherent power to both comfort us and challenge us.

While individual celebrations of the Eucharist can jog and direct our memory, regular participation in the liturgy over time helps form and shape our memory, producing what Augustine called “skill memories” and what some contemporary scholars call “habituated or embodied memories.” The form and dynamics of the way we regularly worship God influence our spiritual perceptions. For example, Catholics who regularly attend Mass, which centers on encountering Christ in the common human action of sharing a meal together, tend to be open to meeting the Lord in the ordinary experiences of life. Longtime participation in the Eucharistic liturgy has the power to program our memory to be automatically alert to the mystery dimension of everyday life. Habituated or embodied memory functions without conscious attention; for example, we remember how to drive a car without having to think each time about how to stop the car when necessary.

It is important to remember, however, that regular attendance at Mass may fail to develop an incarnational memory for any number of reasons: focusing so much on the sacrificial aspect of the Eucharist that it’s memorial character is totally missed; failing to recognize that the Eucharist is a ritual meal; missing the essential connection between liturgy and life; and limiting the potentially revelatory experiences of ordinary life to positive or uplifting events while dismissing those that are more challenging.

We all can grow spiritually by developing a more robust embodied memory that is habitually alert to the presence of Christ in the full range of human experience. We can enhance and sharpen that memory by regular spiritual practices such as daily meditation, examination of conscious and brief situational prayers. There is no doubt the Eucharistic memorial meal, celebrated at the command of Jesus, has an inherent power to program our memories to be alert to the depth dimension of ordinary experience. The challenge is to maximize this potential. Some things can help: better liturgies with more active, conscious participation; more emphasis on the Eucharist as a memorial meal; a better understanding of the essential connection between liturgy and life; a deeper appreciation of the revelatory power of daily crosses; and a better sense of how liturgical memory works. We all have to find our own way to develop an habitual memory more attuned to Christ’s presence in our daily lives.