

*This Document explains the theology of the
Eucharist for the purpose of training
Eucharistic Ministers, Acolytes, Greeters
and Ushers*

Understanding The Eucharist

For Worship Ministries

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Historical and Theological Background

Over the past two or three decades, a major shift has taken place in what is considered the normative Sunday morning experience for Episcopalians. Before that time, and extending back into the Colonial era; the service of Morning Prayer—with sermon and hymns—constituted the core of Sunday worship.

Since the Catholic Revival of Anglicanism beginning in the mid-1800s, most American congregations had begun to offer an early celebration of the Holy Communion, without music and often without a sermon, but at the main service, the sacrament was only offered once or twice a month, or even once a quarter. This is personally how I grew up.

With the adoption of the *1979 Book of Common Prayer*, there could no longer be any doubt as to the official teaching of the Episcopal Church: “The Holy Eucharist, the principal act of Christian worship on the Lord’s Day and other major Feasts...” —so begins the preface to that revision (p.13).

With more frequent celebrations, as a purely practical matter, the Celebrant needed help in the distribution of the sacrament. In most congregations, there is only one priest, and no deacons. Hence, the use of licensed lay persons for administering the Communion spread very rapidly, and is now nearly universal.

At first, assisting the Celebrant by administering the chalice at the Eucharist was just added to the range of duties performed by those licensed as Lay Readers. (A Lay Reader was originally simply someone licensed to officiate at public worship—i.e. Morning or Evening Prayer—in the absence of a priest or deacon.

Being a Eucharistic Minister is the highest level of licensed lay ministry. In time, however, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church created the category of Licensed Chalice Bearer, later renamed Lay Eucharistic Minister. More recently still, those who are so licensed have been permitted in certain circumstances, to administer both species of the sacrament—the consecrated bread as well as the chalice.

This was originally conceived as purely liturgical ministry, but as the church matured in its understanding of some of the theological implications of the Eucharist—namely, that it is a sacrament not only of “vertical” communion with God, but also “horizontal” communion between the members of the Body of Christ—the desirability of including those who, for reasons of health, are chronically unable to attend the liturgy became evident. Hence, the designation Pastoral Lay Eucharistic Minister was created to designate persons who are specially trained and licensed to deliver the sacrament to the chronically homebound directly following the celebration of the liturgy. Then, at the 2003 General Convention of The Episcopal Church; the Canons were revised to change the name of those offering Communion. In the revised process, those formerly known as Lay Eucharistic Ministers (LEM) were named simply

Eucharistic Ministers. Pastoral Lay Eucharistic Ministers (PLEM) were named Eucharistic Visitors. Lay Readers were included with the office of Worship Leaders and/or Pastoral Leaders.

The Canons of the Diocese of San Diego employ the title Lay Eucharistic Minister (LEM) to describe the ministries of Eucharistic Ministers who serve only at the Altar, and which is equivalent to the older title, Licensed Chalice Bearer, as well as Pastoral Lay Eucharistic Ministers (PLEMS) who visit shut-ins and the sick.

It is critically important to understand that all three levels of license are extraordinary:

- Lay Eucharistic Minister,
- Pastoral Lay Eucharistic Minister
- Lay Reader

The administration of Holy Communion is inherently clerical in nature; it is properly the province of the ordained—Bishops, priests, and deacons. Sacramental ministry is one of the key distinguishing marks of the exercise of Holy Orders. Hence, licensed Lay Ministers are, paradoxically, not really performing lay ministry at all! They are, in fact, deputized, in a restricted sense, to share in the functions of the clergy.

Those who serve routinely in these categories need to bear in mind the spiritual nature of their work, and be ready to cheerfully step aside on those special occasions (e.g. the Bishop's visit, ordinations, institutions, etc.) when there is an ample number of clergy.

The Nature of the Liturgy

Eucharistic ministry is, to state the obvious, inherently liturgical in character. The word "liturgy" comes from the Greek "leitourgia", which is a compound of the word for "people" (laos—from which we get "laity") and the word for "work" (ergos, from which we get words like "ergonomic"). Hence, liturgy is "*the work of the people.*" "People" is a singular noun. The liturgical assembly is not a mere aggregation of individuals who come together to do the same thing at the same time. It is one united chorus of praise and thanksgiving. It is not a spectator event, but calls for the "full, active, and conscious" participation of all the baptized. The liturgy may be compared to a dramatic production, but everyone has a role to play; the only one in the audience is God!

It is true—not every role is the same. Some parts are highly visible, and seem quite prestigious, while others are inconspicuous. This is consistent with the "body theology" enunciated by St Paul (Romans 12, I Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4).

The priest (or Bishop) who officiates is referred to in the *Prayer Book* rubrics as the "Celebrant," and represents Christ himself as the host of the banquet, the one who gathers the family and presides at the meal. Assisting priests signify the "college of presbyters" of the diocese, all in union with the Bishop, who is the chief priest and pastor.

("Presbyter" comes from the Greek word for "elder" and is the root of the English word "priest.")

When one or more deacons are present, they signify, in a focused way, the vocation of all Christians to servant ministry—serving the Lord and one another in the community of the Church, and serving the cause of the gospel of Christ in the world.

For this reason; it is the deacon who “sets the table” and “does the dishes.” Similarly, it is the deacon who reads the Gospel (often in the midst of the congregation, signifying the taking of the Gospel into the world) and leads the Prayers of the People, the Confession, and bids the dismissal. In the absence of a deacon, a priest reads the Gospel and a lay person leads the prayers. But, it is always the deacon’s prerogative to fulfill these functions.

The deacon may also be the Celebrant for those parts of the Eucharist that are considered to be the liturgy of the Word, and will, on occasion, offer the sacrament from previously consecrated bread and wine. This is called *Communion Under Special Circumstances* (BCP 396).

It is the distinct role of the laity to represent the Laos—the holy people of God, assembled to offer its holy sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, in union with the sacrifice of Christ, “once offered” for the sins of the world, and to be nourished by the sacred Body and Blood. The members of the congregation are actors, not spectators.

According to Prayer Book rubrics, it is normative for laypersons to read the lessons prior to the Gospel and, in the absence of a deacon, to lead the Prayers of the People. On such special occasions as baptisms, ordinations, and institutions; lay people play a central and essential role in presenting the candidate(s) to the Bishop or Celebrant.

Sacramental Theology, “Real Presence” and Its Implications

The Eucharist is a sacrament. The classic catechism definition of a sacrament is that it is an “outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.” The outward sign in the Eucharist is bread and wine; the inward grace is *koinonia*—a New Testament word denoting a particularly intimate bond of fellowship and communion—“vertically” with the Lord, and “horizontally” among the gathered communicants. It is our means of participating in the very life of the Trinity, through the self-offering of Christ in his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and continued advocacy on our behalf at the right hand of the Father.

Historic Christian teaching holds that the Eucharist is the principal means by which the Church knows the risen Christ to be present in her midst. Broadly speaking, of course; Jesus is spiritually present in the midst of any “two or three” who are gathered to worship.

Prayer Book Rubrics

The rubrics are essentially the “fine print” of the Prayer Book. They give “stage directions” for the performance of the Eucharistic drama. Unless the word “may” is used; their observance is mandatory, not optional. They have the force of Canon Law. The word comes from the Latin for RED as the rubrics used to be in red.

There are many different ways of defining and explaining the nature of this Eucharistic “presence,” and this has been a source of division among Christian bodies over the last several

centuries. In classic Anglican terminology we use the expression “real presence.” We do not specify how Christ is present in the sacrament, but we affirm that he is. This is very different from the Roman Church who considers the consecrated bread and wine the actual body and blood of Christ. This is called *Transubstantiation* in the Roman Church.

Moreover, this “real presence” is objective, which is to say that its reality is independent of anyone’s ability to comprehend it, or the state of anyone’s faith. A communicant’s level of faith may be relevant to the spiritual effect that the sacrament has on him or her, but it has no impact on the presence itself. Once they are consecrated, the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine are permanently changed. They are no longer signs merely of the ordinary stuff of human experience—food and drink—but they mediate the presence of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, and the power of his risen life.

This presence does not evaporate at the conclusion of the liturgical act. If there are “leftovers,” we do not simply return them to their original containers for use at the next celebration. Rather, according to Prayer Book rubrics, they are either “reverently consumed,” or reserved in a place of honor—a stylized “cupboard” known either as a tabernacle (if it is free standing) or an aumbry (if it is mounted in a wall as it is in St Bart's) or—in rare cases—a pyx (if it is suspended from a beam or the ceiling). This place of reservation is usually near the main altar, but may be in a side chapel or a special place designated for devotion to our Lord as he is present in the Blessed Sacrament reserved. The primary use of the Reserved Sacrament is for the communion of the sick—when a priest or deacon brings Holy Communion to the hospitalized or homebound in the course of ordinary weekday ministry. A derivative—but, nonetheless, wholesome—use for the Reserved

Sacrament is as a focus for prayer and devotion, either individual or corporate, at times other than the celebration of the liturgy.

One of the implications of the real presence of our Lord in the sacrament is the appropriateness of honoring him with posture and bodily gesture. In the Anglican

Church, customs vary widely between congregations, and those who serve at the altar should conform to the example and direction of the rector, vicar, or other ordained leader.

In general, the classic gesture of reverence for Christ as he is present in the Blessed Sacrament is the genuflection (from the Latin for “bend the knee”). A profound bow— that is, from the waist, not merely from the shoulders—is also appropriate. Those serving at the altar should consult their supervising priest for instructions on exactly when to make what sort of reverence.

The Spirituality of Ministry at the Altar

“...that I may go to the altar of God, to the God of my joy and gladness.”

—from Psalm 43

Serving at the Altar of God—whether as Celebrant, deacon, acolyte, or LEM—is an act of what the New Testament calls *doulia*. (*Diakonia* is also a scriptural word for servanthood, but *doulia* is the stronger of the two—implying something on the order of “slavery,” actually—and is therefore appropriate for us who are “not [our] own, but have been bought with a price.”—I Cor. 7:23) It is an immense privilege, and can be a great joy, but it is an act of sacrifice, and there are certain attendant spiritual hazards.

Eucharistic Minister Behavior

A Eucharistic Minister is “up front” and on display. He or she is vested, sits up with the clergy, and is probably listed by name in the bulletin or other publication of the church. Most people are aware that it is a ministry requiring a special license from the Bishop. Such a person obviously has “status,” at least within the congregation, and, by implication, within the diocese as well. It is a significant responsibility.

There is ample territory here for the (deadly!) sin of Pride to take root and grow if one is not vigilant. It is vital to remember—and this may serve as a first line of defense against the potential incitement to Pride—that Eucharistic Ministers and acolytes are “stage hands” in the drama.

The better they do their job, the less attention they will call to themselves. The mentality of everyone at the altar must be to point away from themselves and toward Christ. The biblical model for this attitude is that of St John the Baptist, who said of Jesus, “He must increase, and I must decrease.” The theological model is none other than the Holy Spirit, whose eternal role in the life of the Blessed Trinity is to direct attention toward the Father and the Son.

It is a challenge either to work while praying or to pray while working. Clergy discover this fact very quickly after they are ordained, and Eucharistic Ministers inevitably encounter it as well. As a Eucharistic Minister, you make a gift of yourself to the Lord on behalf of His people. This will, to a certain extent, require you to sacrifice your own “experience” of worship in order to get your job done. For one thing, your priest may ask you to serve at a time when you would not otherwise have chosen to attend worship (a different hour on Sunday, a weekday or special service). Inasmuch as you are able to do so without breaking other commitments, honor these requests.

At a more profound level, though, Eucharistic Ministers participate in a shared stewardship of the liturgy for the sake of the laos gathered for worship. You are not your own; you are not “number one” when you are scheduled to serve.

It is your job to be attentive to several mechanical details; there is less freedom to simply lose yourself in “wonder, love, and praise.” Rather, *your role is to help make sure that the people in the congregation have that freedom, even while you do not.*

So there is the possibility that you will emerge from the celebration not feeling as “fed” as you have been accustomed to feeling, and this may become a source of spiritual irritation to you. Even so, such irritation can also be a tool in the perfection of your own holiness if you will offer

that tool and make it available to the Holy Spirit. If you will embrace the spiritual hunger and irritation that result from service at the altar, and foster the attitude of *doulia*, you will, in time, be refreshed and rewarded. It comes to different people in different ways, but it comes.

The Shape of the Liturgy

If you have worshipped in different congregations—just within our own diocese, let alone the Anglican Church nationally or the Anglican Communion worldwide—you have noticed that there is a tremendous amount of variety in the way the liturgy is “performed.” While being faithful to the text and rubrics of the same Prayer Book, it is possible to construct two services which bear more resemblance to the worship of other church bodies—from Roman Catholic to Eastern Orthodox to non-denominational charismatic—than they do to one another!

Think of the liturgy as a human body—with a skeletal frame, covered by muscle tissues and skin. While human skeletons vary in size, the essential form and the basic scale are constant. There is relatively little variety between them. The features which actually make one person visibly distinguishable from another are found in the form and distribution of muscle tissue (and fat!), as well as in the color and texture of the skin. The same applies to the liturgy of the Eucharist. Outwardly, there is tremendous variation, so much so that it is difficult to identify contrasting styles as even members of the same “species.” Inwardly however, at the level of the skeleton, there is an essential uniformity.

To extend the metaphor, there are two major “bones” in the “skeleton” of the Eucharistic liturgy. These are the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Altar. In the latter case, the words “Table” or “Sacrifice” are sometimes substituted for “Altar.” Alternatively, the Liturgy of the Word may be referred to as the “Mass of the Catechumens” and the Liturgy of the Altar styled the “Mass of the Faithful.” (This harkens to the ancient era in which the unbaptized were dismissed after the sermon, and allowed to witness the entire liturgy only after they had received the sacraments of Christian initiation.) In the Prayer Book, these sections are entitled “The Word of God” (p.323, p.355) and “The Holy Communion” (p.333, p.361).

To switch metaphors now, another way of understanding the structure of the liturgy is to think of it as a two act drama, with a brief prologue before Act One, an interlude between the acts, and a short epilogue following Act Two.

Act One is the Liturgy of the Word. At its heart, of course, is the reading of Holy Scripture. On Sundays and Principal Feasts 2, the norm is to read three lessons plus a section of the Psalms. The first reading is usually from the Old Testament, though during the season of Easter it is taken from the Acts of the Apostles. The second reading is usually from one of the epistles, though it may also be from Acts or Revelation. The final reading is always from the gospels.

After the Word is read, it is then proclaimed—this is the function of the sermon. The preacher’s task is to shine a light on some significant aspect of the appointed scriptural texts in such a way as reveals its relevance and application to the lives of those in the congregation. We then respond to the Word that has just been read and proclaimed—this is the function of the

Creed. The Creed means more than it says; it serves as a symbol of the entire mystery of Christian faith and practice.

Principle Feasts

There are seven Principal Feasts in our calendar. They take precedence over all other days, including Sundays. You should know what they are and when they fall. See p.15 of the Prayer Book.

The sermon is sometimes called a homily—there is no substantive difference, though sometimes there is an implication that a “homily” is shorter and/or less formally delivered than a “sermon.”

Act Two then, is the Liturgy of the Altar. The focus of attention shifts from the lectern and/or pulpit to the Holy Table on which the sacrifice is offered. The heart of this section of the rite is the consecration of the bread and wine to be the sacramental Body and Blood of Christ. There is a simple sequence of action here, which is summarized by four one-syllable verbs: take, bless, break, and give. This sequence is plainly visible in two New Testament passages which have obvious Eucharistic overtones: the feeding miracles (see Luke 9:16) and the post-Resurrection appearance on the road to Emmaus (see Luke 24:30).

First, we take the elements of bread and wine and place them on the altar. It is significant that we are commanded to use bread and wine, not mere wheat and grapes. Wheat and grapes occur in nature, and are pure gifts from God. But to make bread from wheat and wine from grapes requires human skill and labor. As we say in one of the offertory sentences, “Let us with gladness present the offering of our life and labor unto the Lord.”

The elements which we “take” represent us; we are, in effect, offering ourselves on the altar. Next, the Celebrant, on behalf of the gathered community, blesses the elements. This is accomplished by means of the Eucharistic Prayer (sometimes referred to as the “Canon”). In the Eucharistic Prayer we remember the saving acts of God in history, we invoke the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, and we offer ourselves in union with the sacrifice of Christ.

Then, the Celebrant breaks the bread. The vocation of bread is to be broken. If bread is not broken, it cannot be eaten, and cannot give life. The breaking of the Eucharistic bread symbolizes the fact that the body of our Lord Jesus had to be “broken” in death before it could become the means of eternal life for those who are united with him.

Finally, the Celebrant (assisted, usually, by Eucharistic Ministers!) gives the sacred Body and Blood to the people. In this act—indeed, in the very act of presiding at the liturgy— the Celebrant acts as alter Christus—“another Christ”—standing in as the gatherer and host of the banquet, who feeds his guests with the bread of eternal life.

The Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Altar are the essential elements in the Eucharistic drama. The initial liturgical action—that which gathers the people and forms them into a Eucharistic community—is commonly referred to as the Entrance Rite. This can be very simple and brief, or it can be fairly elaborate.

A Collect is a particular form of prayer. In its original manifestation it occurred at the end of a long litany, and served as a summation of the people's offering of petition and intercession. It now usually stands on its own. In the Eucharist it serves as a sort of hinge between the Entrance Rite and the Liturgy of the Word. The classic form of the Collect consists of an Address ("Blessed Lord..."), an Ascription ("who caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning..."), a Petition ("Grant us so to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them..."), a Result ("that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ..."), and, when it occurs in this position in the Eucharist, a Doxology ("who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen"). Other forms of the Collect include the Opening Acclamation, the Collect for Purity, and the Hymn of Praise (Kyrie and/or Gloria, or something else).

The material between the Creed (which concludes the Liturgy of the Word) and the Offertory (which begins the Liturgy of the Altar) is a sort of interlude. It consists of the Prayers of the People, the Confession of Sin, and the Peace. Then, after the Communion, there is what might be called an Epilogue: the Prayer of Thanksgiving, the Blessing, and the Dismissal.

For an excellent summary of this essential liturgical action—the skeleton of the Eucharist—see *An Order for Celebrating the Holy Eucharist* in the *Prayer Book*, pp.400-401.

Broad Practical Issues

The practical side of your preparation for Eucharistic Minister licensing is being handled by your supervising priest. However, a few brief comments may be in order here.

On Liturgical Decorum

Those who serve at the altar perform an invaluable service, but insofar as they call attention to themselves, by their appearance or behavior, that value is compromised. Certain conventions have evolved which may at first seem forced or affected to those who are not used to them, but which have the effect of moderating the distinctive impact of those who have a visible role in the liturgy. The cardinal rule here is that one's hands should never dangle. Whether you are sitting or standing or walking, but especially if you are walking, fold your hands in front of you. (Your priest may have a more specific preference as to how you do so.) If you are holding an object—a chalice, a hymnal, the Bishop's crozier, whatever—with one hand, place your other hand on your chest. When you are seated (which usually means someone else is reading or preaching), be reticent about too much looking around the church or other gratuitous bodily shuffling; this can be very distracting to others.

On Reverence Toward the Blessed Sacrament

The objective real presence of our Lord's Body and Blood in the consecrated bread and wine demands some form of bodily reverence. As mentioned previously, this is either a genuflection or a profound bow (consult your priest). It can become awkward, however, for those who work habitually around a place when the sacrament is reserved. A good working analogy is that of military personnel saluting superior officers. If a sailor reports for duty to the bridge of a ship,

he snaps to attention and salutes the skipper. Then he goes about his work. He does not stop to salute every single time his path and the captain's happen to cross. Then, when it is time to leave the bridge, he salutes once again before he departs. In most cases, the same pattern can be appropriately applied to reverencing the Blessed Sacrament.

On Cross-Training

In an ideal world, a Eucharistic Minister could focus on his or her specific duties, and not worry about anyone else's. If you have not noticed, however, this is not an ideal world! Consequently, it would behoove you to be able to step in to the role of acolyte, particularly those whose job it is to serve the priest or deacon in setting up the altar during the Offertory, and cleaning up after Communion. The same applies to the Altar Guild: sometimes they may overlook a setup detail, and if the Celebrant suddenly needs a corporal or purificator or extra bread or wine, you should know how to find them quickly.

On Vocabulary

The special items used in the celebration of the Eucharist in most churches invariably have a "common" counterpart (for example, a corporal is essentially a sanctified place mat!) Nonetheless, it is a good idea to call things by their proper names. These include: paten, chalice, purificator, corporal, host, cruet, flagon, tabernacle, aumbry, ciborium, alb, cassock, cotta, surplice, etc. Ask your priest which of these terms apply in your particular situation.

On Intinction

Many communicants prefer not to drink directly from the chalice, but to consume a communion wafer which has been dipped in the consecrated wine. This practice is called intinction. There are variations in how this is done. The most appropriate practice is for the communicant who wishes to intinct to simply leave the host flat in the hand. Then the minister bearing the chalice takes it and dips it and places it on the communicant's extended tongue. Some communicants have been trained to indicate their desire to intinct by holding the host up between thumb and forefinger. Still others will want to perform the act of intinction themselves. Your priest is the final authority on what method of intinction is allowable.

On Technique

Bill Zettinger will train you in the fine points of handling the chalice. Remember however, that, while it is your job to maintain the security of the chalice, and never let go of it completely, a good deal of leeway should be given to the Communicant. A well-instructed Communicant will grasp the base of the chalice and guide the rim to his or her lips, and control the angle at which it is held and the duration of the act of consuming.