

Three Minute Liturgical Catechesis

Article 22: They Recognized Him In the Breaking of the Bread

When the disciples who met Jesus on the road to Emmaus invited him to join them for dinner, Luke's gospel tells us, they “recognized him in the breaking of the bread” (Luke 24:35). A bit later the book of Acts describes the life of the early Church this way: “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).

So “the breaking of the bread” was a phrase that early Christians used to describe the Mass. This ritual gesture was seen as central to the meaning of what they did when they gathered on Sunday.

The term can remind us of two significant points. We use the term “breaking bread” with friends or family as a way of speaking about sharing a meal together. Using this phrase to describe the Eucharist reminds us that the central ritual of our faith is a meal that we share with Christ. We spoke several weeks ago of the Mass as a sacrifice. It is also a meal. We might call it a sacrificial meal or a sacrifice in the form of a meal. Jesus chose a meal as the fundamental symbol of the Eucharist, and he reveals his presence in the breaking of the bread.

The breaking of the bread is a practical prerequisite for sharing a meal. In an age of pre-sliced loaves, we may need to remember that, in ancient times, bread was not sliced but commonly broken and shared. So the breaking of the bread speaks first of sharing, and thus it speaks of the union that we call Communion. Our liturgical prayers often speak of our sharing one bread and one cup as a symbol of our unity in the one Christ. We break the bread in order to share the one loaf.

This practical action, however, has also taken on a symbolic meaning. Christ's body was broken for us and his blood was poured out for us. So breaking the bread also reminds us of Christ's sacrifice. In the process, it reminds us of our commitment to share in his sacrifice. If we love as he did, we have to be willing to allow ourselves to be broken and our energy poured out. We have to be willing to allow ourselves to be consumed by others. We have to be willing to be the body of Christ, and that means we have to be willing to nourish those around us.

We do not do this exactly as Christ does, of course. We are broken and poured out and consumed figuratively, but the commitment is the same as that of Jesus. It is our willingness to love as deeply and as widely as he does that is crucial.

This deeper meaning of the ritual action is emphasized by the song that accompanies it. The “Lamb of God” speaks of Jesus as the lamb of sacrifice, who takes away the sins of the world and grants us peace.

The breaking of the bread is another element of the Communion Rite that helps us prepare ourselves to enter into intimate union with Christ and with all our brothers and sisters.