

Fostering Faith Catechist Formation Insert

Scripture: New Testament

Theme

The Kingdom of God as signified and actualized through the development of the Eucharistic meal

Catechist Competencies

1. Trace the development of the Kingdom of God and its foundation in the Sacrament of Eucharist.
2. Draw a connection between the Kingdom of God, the Church, and their personal faith lives.
3. Use scripture to cultivate a maturing friendship with Christ.

Catechism References —

#101-119, 126, 131-133, 541-554, 763, 2816.

Introduction

In the Gospel of St. Luke there are nine stories of meals being served when Jesus is present. Luke records the most number of meals; and so, this study centers on Luke's recollection with references given to the other evangelists where these stories of meals are found in their gospel.

These meals taken together give a fuller aspect of the Christian Passover or Eucharistic meal. Each of these meals is formed by the participants' or Luke's perspective on the role of Jesus at the meals. Was it Jesus the prophet? Jesus the Christ? Or Jesus who came to be known as Lord? For many of these insights I owe a great deal of gratitude to my professor of Eucharist at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, Eugene LaVerdiere, SSS; and, more recently to his wonderfully inspiring book, *Dining in the Kingdom of God*; The Origins of the Eucharist in the Gos-

pel of Luke ©1994, Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, Chicago, IL.

We will look at the nine meals according to Jesus' presence as (1) Prophet; (2) Christ, and (3) Lord. We will highlight in each meal setting the Kingdom characteristic distinguished through Jesus' presence.

Jesus as Prophet

The first seven meals involve Jesus as Prophet. It is as prophet, like John the Baptizer before him, that Jesus is calling people to remembrance of the Covenant and God's saving act. Read Luke 4:18-19.

Jesus had unrolled and read this prophecy of Isaiah before those gathered in the synagogue of his hometown of Nazareth. Those who heard him either knew him or his family and were not immediately impressed by his conclusion: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (vs. 21) One could hear others exclaim, "Is not this Joseph's son?" (vs. 22) Or maybe, "Isn't that the carpenter's son? Thirty years old, not married, and living at home last I knew. Now he's God's prophet?" Jesus replies, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" (Vs 24). And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown."

Jesus goes on to compare himself to two beloved prophets of old, Elijah and Elisha. For this he is nearly killed. He leaves town quickly. Though Luke does not tell us the name of the

Scripture: 1 hour



Completion of this study entitles the catechist to one hour of credit toward certification.



Focusing the Study

What is the Kingdom of God? St. Paul briefly states, "For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." (Romans 14:17, all scripture quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version [NRSV]). As Jesus the Christ is truly present in the Mass, so is the Kingdom of God. Jesus taught us through many signs and wonders. The focus of this study is the signs and wonders recorded regarding the many meals at which Jesus sat as guest or as host and the many diverse peoples he called to himself through the meals.

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town where he meets Levi, we know that he is still traveling among the villages of Galilee, not far from his hometown. His first dinner occasion is at the house of Levi, the tax collector, the one who would come to be known as Matthew, one of the Twelve. Read Luke 5: 27-31.

In this passage, the Pharisees complain that the table is not filled with the righteous but with tax collectors and sinners! Who does Jesus call to the table? - Those in need of conversion. A healthy person doesn't need a physician. The table Jesus sits at is a table of redemption. Its meal has the power to heal and to change forevermore the lives of those who eat it. Conversion is the first characteristic of the Eucharistic meal. The ones who come to the table desire to change their lives and believe that the one who can do this is at the table. Like the younger son in the parable of "The Prodigal Son," they need not have already reformed their lives; rather, like the younger son, they have turned their back on their old ways and moved in the direction of the Father. Because of this they are welcomed home. The older son in the parable may represent the Pharisees at this meal because they question the presence of the tax collectors and the sinners. They



themselves do not sit down at the banquet Levi has prepared.

The second meal is at the house of Simon the Pharisee. Jesus had been preaching in Capernaum where he cured the centurion's servant and then moved into the village of Naim where he raised the widow's son. His fame was spreading rapidly: "A

great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!" This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country. (Luke 7:16b-17 and 36 - 50). It was here at Naim, in Galilee, near Nazareth, that Simon lived.

The second characteristic of the Eucharistic meal is forgiveness and reconciliation. How lovingly it is portrayed by this penitent woman who places herself at Jesus' feet on which she pours out expensive perfume. It is an act of worship that rises out of love.

The third meal is the well-known story of the multiplication of the loaves of bread. Read Luke 9:10-17.

The disciples had tried to convince Jesus to send the crowds away as it would be a seemingly impossible task to feed them all. Jesus, on the other hand, is ready to play host with his disciples' help. The third characteristic is hospitality. Jesus is not going to send the people away. This is a deserted place. They are like pilgrims on a journey. Hospitality is the only option.

We Christians are a pilgrim people on a journey toward divine union with our Maker. We come to the Eucharist often on a stomach made empty by the cares of the day. We live in a materialistic society of slick messages that has alienated itself from God's Word. This can be our desert and we the still, small voice of hope, faith and love that sprinkles the dry desert air. It is good to know that Jesus is here ready to nourish us on the way.

Something more is found here as well. The beginning of a Eucharistic formula is taking place. Notice that Jesus gives his disciples instructions that are to be carried out before the meal begins. They are to sit the people down in groups of fifty. The grouping into fifties gives a formal atmosphere to the meal. Obviously this is an extremely large formal gathering. Luke, being a Gentile, puts a Hellenistic touch of arranging this meal like a huge Greek symposium, where a meal is followed by discussion. It may be interpreted as a gathering of the churches. One hundred churches of about fifty members each. This would approximate the size of the early Christian communities which met in homes.

The formula is as follows: (1) taking the five loaves and two fish; (2) he looked up to heaven; (3) blessed and; (4) broke them; (5) gave them to the disciples; (6) who gave them to the people gathered before them.

The fourth meal takes place in 'a certain village' according to Luke where Martha and Mary live. In the Gospel of John, Martha and Mary who live with their brother Lazarus dwell in the village of Bethany, a town very close to Jerusalem. In Luke, Jesus' journey has not brought him so close to Jerusalem as of yet. It is still distant; and so, Bethany may not be the village Luke understands the sisters to be living in. See Luke 10:38-42.

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According to Jesus, Mary has chosen the better part. She is at the feet of the Lord, which is the place for the disciple, and listening to the Word. The fourth characteristic is the importance of the Word (the Divine presence) in preparing for the Eucharist. This in no way diminishes Martha's role as she prepares the Eucharistic Meal which will take place in her home. In the early Church the home was the center for the Christian meal. Martha has opened her home for the gathering of the local Church. She is working according to the rubrics of her day; but, maybe she is overly concerned with the ritual. Isn't the ritual, as important as it is, what people do? Isn't the heart and spirit of the meal what only God can do? Jesus reminds Martha that she has lost her focus. "Not by bread alone does one live, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of the Lord." (Deut. 8:3; NAB) Jesus emphasizes his point as he calls her name twice, as God often does when attempting to get our full attention, e.g. Story of Samuel. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing." The one thing is to be aware of the Lord's presence and to be attentive to it. How can one minister outside of the Lord's presence? One cannot. In Luke, this meal is followed by the teaching of the "Lord's Prayer" to his disciples.

Shortly after Jesus' teaching on prayer, he is invited to the house of a Pharisee. Please read the passage in Luke 11:37-41.

The fifth characteristic is that interior purity supercedes ritual purity. The Pharisees here are far more observant of the Law than of the Spirit behind the Law. Jesus' remedy: "So give for alms those things that are within;" in other words, be generous to those in need and you will be made right, forgiven.

Our next meal is a Sabbath meal. Jesus is approaching Jerusalem. His teaching on the Christian meal is becoming more focused on interior preparation of both the gatherer and those called to the table. This began at the last meal when Jesus challenged the Pharisees over the issue of ritual purity. Here the audience is still the Pharisees. Read Luke 14:1-14.

Jesus acts without their consent. He understands their dilemma. They have conformed to a principle without understanding it. The Sabbath is a day of worship; but, the One being worshiped is the God of the Living. Would such a God require worship at the expense of another's suffering? The Pharisees are afraid to examine a question that might lead them to a action different than the one they have already chosen. Jesus then looks about the room and examines the guests. When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them the parable of the wedding banquet.

This is a lesson in humility.

Jesus then addresses the host. This is an important lesson on intention. Do we choose the people who sit at our table based on how they might benefit us? Or do we call to the table those in need of a meal and company?

And lastly, Jesus teaches at this meal by way of a parable on another great meal. Please continue reading Luke 13:15-23.

When I read of the many excuses sent by those chosen for the banquet, I recall the beginning of John's gospel as he reflects on the Incarnation: "He (Jesus) came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him." (John 1:11; NAB) The lesson here is that those who reject the Christian meal are free to do so. They are rejected because they have chosen rejection. They have excluded themselves. Those who were normally excluded are now invited to the banquet hall of unlimited seating. The outcasts are now in! The sixth characteristic of the Christian meal is that it is all inclusive. No one is rejected because they are sick, a social outcast, poor or hungry; only those who reject the banquet stand outside. For "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!"

Our seventh meal and last of Jesus as prophet is the meal at the home of Zacchaeus the tax collector. It takes place in the town of Jericho. Jesus is close to Jerusalem now. Please read the account of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-9.

Zacchaeus recognizes from a distance who Jesus is: the one who can bring satisfaction to his life. In his heart he has already decided to change and is willing to make amends and more. Jesus readily accepts the invitation to his heart and invites himself into his home. It is this open heart of Zacchaeus that offers true hospitality to the One on the journey, to the pilgrim on the road to Jerusalem. Hospitality to those on a journey is an ancient custom, e.g. Abraham and the three angels of the Lord. The seventh characteristic of the Christian meal is readiness of the heart to receive the Lord.

Jesus the Christ

We have just looked at the meals wherein Jesus is prophet. We now look at Jesus who has entered the city of Jerusalem to share in a Passover meal as Christ (Messiah). As messiah, (1) everything is foretold; and (2) this Passover meal is shared with disciples rather than the normal family gathering. Please read Luke 22:7-37.

At one point, Jesus introduces into the meal the servant image of the Kingdom of God. We have already seen that the places of honor are for all because the Kingdom is all-inclusive, all are equals in the eyes of God. The apostles, on the other hand, are

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ministers. In the Kingdom their role as leaders is reversed from that of the secular world. Here the minister is the servant, the waiter at the table. Jesus, as host at this Passover, this Last Supper, is servant to all. Note particularly vs. 24-27. Jesus then foretells Peter's denial as he calls him by his former name; but, quickly he adds Peter's return and the imperative to strengthen his brother disciples for the crisis that is coming.

Jesus concludes with a messianic scripture before walking out into the Garden of Olives.

The eighth characteristic is the presence of Christ the Servant. As the Body of Christ, we are all servants.

Jesus the Lord

Our last meal is the meal of Christ the Lord. It begins with a journey to Emmaus. Two disciples are on a journey. This is a typical representation of the pilgrim people. This world is not our home. This is the first day of the week. It is the day of the resurrection; but, it is unknown to them at this point. Yet, see how this story unfolds. It is a story of Word and Eucharist.

There are two disciples because "Where two or more are gathered in My name...." They are walking away from the Holy City because the events of the past few days have shaken them and spun them around; but still, they enter into the Word. It is the Lord who inspires them to do so. It is like a liturgy of Word that is preparing their hearts for the liturgy of the Eucharist which will follow.

Distress and dismay fall sway to the inspiration of the Spirit of Jesus that opens the scripture for them. "Were not our hearts burning within us!" Jesus is more than a prophet, more than a messiah.

With the inspiration of the Spirit the Word of God enlightens the two disciples. Do they want more than enlightenment? It is up to them. Jesus appears to be ready to move on; but, ready to stay if invited. Our disciples take the next step. They invite Jesus to stay over and be their companion at the table. He breaks bread with them as a friend would, as a family member would, as a companion would. Now they see him as he truly is: the one who is on the journey with them always. He is Lord! Please read Luke 24:13-35.

This last characteristic is the presence of the Spirit of Jesus. This is the presence that breaks open the Word for us and sets our hearts on fire. This is the presence that is recognized when we break bread together.

Review Questions

1. List the nine characteristics of the Kingdom of God as found in the Eucharistic meal accounts of St. Luke.
2. St. Paul was able to briefly define the Kingdom of God.

Briefly define in your own words the Kingdom of God.

3. By what three titles is Jesus known in the Gospels?

Practical Applications/Critical Thinking

1. Choose one of these characteristics of the Kingdom of God and discuss how you have experienced it at Mass or as a sign and presence of the Body of Christ.
2. As you reflect on yourself and your local church, how many of the nine characteristics are noticeable, vibrant realities?
3. How does our Catholic celebration of Mass help the Church to recognize characteristics of the Kingdom of God in the local community?
4. What can catechists do to help their students to make this understanding of the sacrament of Eucharist a reality in their lives?

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