

Free essay on eucharist

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The Eucharist had been surrounded by controversies and unresolved disputes between the representatives of different churches for over a thousand years. The priests, schoolmen and bishops disagreed on the connection between the bread and wine and the flesh and blood of the Christ; their disputes revolved around the procedural issues, and the impossibility of finding the common ground eventually led to the formation of different approaches toward the Eucharist and its elements. During the history of the Eucharistic liturgy, the number of people participating in it was gradually rising, while the level of the participation was falling down. Finally, the priests have taken authority over the process, thus, making people not only become the passive viewers, but also later forget about the origins of the liturgy and its meaning. However, as the Middle Ages passed, the overall progress of human thought influenced the understanding of Eucharist, as schoolmen, bishops and laymen became more interested in the origins of the tradition and less obedient to the Church and its dogmas. Nowadays, as many sources about the Eucharist have become more available, people can learn more about the tradition, and the increased understanding of its roots has led to the desire of more people to actively participate in the liturgy forcing the Church to change some of its rules and become more democratic. The interest toward the Eucharist throughout the history signifies its high value for the Christians, as it implies the Christ's sacrifice of his life for the salvation of humanity. As Smith put it, " the Eucharist conveys God's grace as a boat conveys its passengers, whereas the other sacraments convey grace as a letter conveys meaning in the Mass spiritual nourishment is literally to be had from the elements themselves. It is exactly as important

for the Christians' spiritual life to feast upon them as it is for their bodily lives to partake of food" (Smith).

Having developed from the traditions of sacrifices, primarily, the Jewish ones used and altered by the Christ during the Last Supper, the procedure of thanksgiving has been changing during almost two thousand years along with the society and the influence the religion and church had on it. The roots of the tradition can be found in the sacrificial rituals that existed in the tribal times. People were making sacrifices to please the gods, thank them or ask for forgiveness of sins. Later on, the tradition has consolidated in the Jewish traditions, where people offered sacrificial gifts in form of vital body organs of specific animals. The offering was usually followed by the shared meal, when people united in their praying to God and thanking him (Martos 212). One of the most important holidays in Judaism is Passover, or the "passing over of Yahweh" to help the Jewish people in their sufferings (Martos 213). Having the Passover meal has been a long established tradition, and the Last Supper is deemed to have taken place the day before the holiday. Jesus, however, has made changes in the tradition that evening, the changes that have become the beginning of the Eucharist liturgy. First of all, he has washed the feet of his disciples to show them they should help each other; when breaking the bread, he said it was his body they were sharing, and after pronouncing the blessing over the wine and passing it to the disciples, he said it was his blood and it constituted a new covenant between them (Martos 214). After the Christ's death, his followers continued the tradition; however, their thanksgiving was dedicated to Jesus, rather than God. People started abusing it by getting drunk and overeating without sharing. The

apostle Paul condemned such behavior, reminding that it was not only the resurrection, but also the death of Jesus as a sacrifice that was remembered during the meal, and reminded about the significance of food and sharing it with others.

The expansion of Christianity has enlarged the groups of people participating in the communal worship. For this reason, people could no longer bring enough food to support the thanksgiving evening. Holding such feasts was no longer possible, as they have been substituted by sharing only the bread and the wine, and they were also becoming less and less frequent.

Gradually, the worship day shifted from Saturday to Sunday, the day of resurrection. The process became longer, as the meal was preceded by sermons, readings and singing. Some people started gathering daily before the evening meal for the Eucharist (Martos 219). The increase in the number of people participating in the commemoration of Jesus grew, and the communal meal became the ritual meal, as it was now shared as a part of the sophisticated ritual, rather as an event held in a private group of Christians sharing their food. At first there were no set words for the prayers and sermons, except for the words of institution, i. e., the words of Jesus, “ This is my body This is my blood Do this in memory of me” (Martos 218). The lift of ban on Christianity led to the quick popularization of the religion across Europe, where the Christians were inventing various styles of liturgy depending on the peculiarities of their beliefs; however, the basic elements of liturgy - bread, wine and thanksgiving - always remained. As the emperor vested judicial rights in the bishops, and the Church gained a solid ground in the region, it could now dictate the rules of the liturgy and control their

execution.

The Middle Ages were met with people forgetting the origins of the Eucharistic liturgy. They were no more active participants of the mass, and the priests became the main actors. At the same, Christianity was spreading to the Eastern Europe, which caused the necessity to translate the texts used during the liturgy into the local languages, while the Western countries were still using Latin that was already not a common language. This created even a bigger distance between God and lay people, who not only did not know the origins and meaning of the tradition, but could not understand the language used during the sacred moment. The gap created between God, church and people was increasing, and more people started believing in the special powers of the Eucharist. These were the times of superstitions and blind faith. During these centuries, bishops and schoolmen were torn apart by the discussions of the consecration of the Eucharist. Some believed that it was inherently sacred, taking Jesus' words literally, while the others believed in the spiritual presence of God in the bread and wine. The first thought was prevailing for a long time, before the creation of the Protestant church. Luter, Calvin and Zwingly expressed views opposite to the ones of the Catholic Church. These people spoke from their own spiritual experience during the liturgies, and found that they did not believe that the bread and wine were the physical representation of Jesus (Martos 249). They rather believed in figurative or symbolic meaning behind the tradition. The Church answered to them with solidification, as it confirmed its scholastic views in what became known as the Tridentine dogmas that were formulated by the Council of Trent that repeated the thoughts prevailing during the Middle Ages.

The twentieth century has seen major changes in the attitude toward the Eucharist. As the modern society became increasingly interested in the history of the Middle Ages, and the Roman church attempted a restoration of its traditions, the world started to learn more about the traditional Eucharist. The old books revealed that the laity has actually been an active participant of the liturgy in the past. In order to renew the traditions and engage more people in the celebration of the mass and singing its parts, the monks not only had to print the missals for people, but also make them understandable. In order to make sure the laity comprehended the words of the mass, the church lifted the ban on translation of the Roman missal in 1897. The Pope Pius X allowed more people to take part in mass by participating in receiving the communion. Moreover, he allowed for children as young as 7 years old to participate in the communion, the unprecedented action, as children were considered not only unable to understand the sacred nature of the process, but have not yet been able to sin deliberately in order to seek God's forgiveness and salvation (Martos 259). This first communion at a young age became a tradition and a highly celebrated event in the human's life. Nonetheless, the newly allowed practice of increased participation of people in the liturgy met resistance by those, who condemned the breach of the established rules, and in order to maintain peace and find common ground between the two sides of the conflict, the aforesaid Pope ordered that the priests were to follow the official rules of the liturgy, while making it more comprehensive to the lay people. The further progress of the theological thought brought to life a new theory about the consecration developed by Leenhardt in 1955. According to the theory of "transfinalization" the creator

of any object determines the final product. Likewise, the Christ intended that the bread and wine would become his flesh and blood, and although the first elements were human-made, and the latter was divine, it was God's power as a creator to produce such change (Martos 263).

The Eucharist still remains a very important Christian tradition, whose original details are gradually being reintroduced in the ceremony. While there are still many debates around the Eucharist and its meaning, these theological questions are a matter of different views created by different traditions and cultures. The existence of the Anglican, Protestant and Catholic churches as separate entities is evidence that the agreements in understanding the meaning of such important topics as the Eucharist will not be reached in the near future. Nonetheless, as one of the pillars of the Christian tradition, the Eucharist will remain one of the most important events of the religion's followers, regardless of the many disputes that surround it on a theoretical level.

Works Cited

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Conclusions