Instructed Eucharist: The Liturgy (Service) of Holy Communion/ Eucharist

The part of the service that follows the peace and announcements is called the service of holy communion, or the liturgy of holy communion. This is the part of the service where we remember Jesus’ last night with his disciples, and his sacrifice for us in his death. This is also the part of the service, where we are all invited to come and share a meal together (of bread and wine) at the Lord’s Table. This is a foretaste (or a sample pointing toward the future) of what it will be like in God’s Kingdom. Sometimes, this is also called the “Heavenly Banquet” or the “Lord’s Supper.” The formal word for communion is “Eucharist”, which we learned earlier means “thanksgiving”

There are 4 actions in the service/liturgy of the holy communion - Eucharist.

1. **Take:** The bread and wine are taken.
2. **Thank:** There is a prayer of thanksgiving.
3. **Break:** The consecrated bread is broken.
4. **Give:** The bread and the wine are given to the people.

Each of these actions recalls Jesus’ action at the Last Supper (the night before he died, when we celebrated the Passover with his friends and disciples). Jesus took bread and wine, thanked God for them, broke the bread, and gave it to his friends.

We will now go through the four actions of the Eucharist:

**TAKE:**

The Offertory

The first part of the taking action is The Offertory. In the church, the offertory is less about taking than it is about giving. Most people think of the word offertory to refer to the collection of money during the service. While we do pass the plate around during this time, the term “offertory” actually refers to much more than just money. During this time, we offer ourselves, our monetary gifts, and the bread and the wine, which will be consecrated. We stand and offer ourselves to God, in thanksgiving for what he has given us. We offer to him a portion of what we have in recognition that what he have is because of him. And we bring the bread and the wine from the congregation to the altar. In this congregation at the 10:15 service, we give out communion bread that has been made by one of our parishioners. We are hoping in the future to also make our own wine, so that everything we offer at the offertory is a representation of our gifts giving back to God.

While we are offering our gifts, in body, material, and spiritual representations, one of our choirs is offering their gift of music and beauty to us to enhance our time and focus us on God.

During the offertory, the table/altar is set. The deacon (at the 10:15 service, the priest, at the other services) prepares the altar (or holy table) setting the vessels and linens and filling them with the bread and the wine that are brought from the congregation. Enough bread for all is placed on the paten (the plate). Wine is placed in one or two chalices (cups) and a little water is added to the wine. While there is no rubric (or rule) regarding the addition of water to the wine, it is done in many churches. There are generally two symbolic reasons for adding the wine: 1) as a token of the union of human and divine natures in Christ (representing that Jesus is both human and God) and 2) as a representation of the blood and water that spilled from his side wound on the cross. One of the acolytes washes the hands of the celebrant (the one who is going to say the Eucharistic prayer). This comes from Psalm 26: “I will wash my hands in innocence, before I go unto the altar of the Lord.” It is also a practical way of rinsing off hands before serving communion to everyone.
THANK:

The next action of the service is thanking. We begin the service with a greeting again – “The Lord be with you” and continue through the story and miracle of the Last Supper. This part of the service is called – The Great Thanksgiving

The Great Thanksgiving

In the Great Thanksgiving we do what Jesus himself asked us to do: thank God and recall all that God has done for us in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Just like the flow of the service, the Great Thanksgiving, or Eucharistic Prayer, reflects the four actions of the Eucharist. Each of these four parts corresponds to a different action of Jesus at the Last Supper, where he took, blessed, broke, and gave bread and wine as sacraments of his body and blood.

The first part begins with a greeting – it is also called the Sursum Corda, which means simply “Lift up your hearts! (that’s one of the lines from the opening greeting).” The sursum corda has been the beginning of all of the Eucharistic prayers since the third century, and remind us that everything that follows is offered as a thanksgiving to God.

You may notice during this beginning that some priests or bishops hold their hands out and up. This is called the “orans” position (which means “praying”): This is probably how early Christians and Jews of Jesus’ time prayed. It shows an openness and acceptance toward God. It is also a welcoming symbol to the congregation, telling them to join in prayer and thanksgiving.

After the greeting there is a prayer that is specific to the season – it is called the Proper Preface. There are also prefaces specific to occasions, like baptism, weddings, funerals, etc. The Proper Preface is where we name the occasion and thank God for it. After the Preface, we join in with the heavenly host’s song, the Sanctus, which is Latin for “holy.”

After the Sanctus, some people stand and some people kneel (or sit if kneeling is too difficult). Either way is fine and appropriate for the occasion (standing = praise, kneeling = prayer). Those who stand often cite Eucharistic Prayer B, “you have made us worthy to stand before you.” Kneeling is actually the more recent tradition, and the posture many Episcopalians grew up doing. Standing is the more ancient posture for prayer.

The Eucharistic Prayer follows the Sanctus. In our Prayer Book there are six different Eucharistic prayers – two in the Rite I (or older – almost Elizabethan English – language), and four in the Rite II service.

The Eucharistic Prayers

In Rite I, the two prayers are called Prayer I and Prayer II. Prayer I is the classical Anglican Eucharistic prayer. It is closest to the rite that was used in the previous Book of Common Prayer (from 1928). There are some great old-fashioned words in this prayer, like “vouchsafe” “oblation”, and my personal favorite phrase “rendering unto thee most hearty thanks for the innumerable benefits procured unto us by the same”. John says if you want to do well on your verbal SAT’s just come to a Rite I, prayer I service! Prayer II is similar except that it, avoids some of the most technical theological assertions of Prayer I, and has a slightly more contemporary feel to it. Often people enjoy Rite I because it is so different from the way we speak every day.

In Rite II, there are four prayers, Prayer A, Prayer B, Prayer C, and Prayer D. Each one has a different emphasis, but all have the four fold action described above.

Prayer A focuses on the sacrifice made by Christ on the cross, and on the completeness of the redemption that sacrifice brought. It is a new prayer, which takes its form and its theology from classical
Anglicanism. It is the shortest of the Eucharistic prayers, and is the one most often used by churches in Rite II.

Prayer B is based on a very old prayer from the third-century. It is believed to be written by Hippolytus of Rome, a bishop from the 3rd Century. This prayer recognizes God’s redemption of his people in the Old Testament — the “Word spoken through the prophets” — is continued in the redemptive work of God in the New Testament — “the Word made flesh, Jesus, your Son.” Thus God is in the act of redeeming his people throughout history, not just with Jesus in the 1st Century. Then and now, God is continuously working to redeem us and bring us back to him.

Prayer C, is sometimes called the Star Wards prayer because it talks not just about God on earth and in heaven, but also in space (“At your command all things came to be: the vast expanse of interstellar space...”). It is a relatively a new prayer, written for the Book of Common prayer in the 1970’s. It narrates the Old Testament drama of God’s continuing efforts to call his people back to him, and the sending of Christ to complete that process. It is also the most interactive of all the prayers, and calls for frequent responses by the congregation, allowing this prayer to be participatory by all, and prayed collaboratively between priest and congregation.

Prayer D is considered one of the oldest Eucharistic prayers in the prayer book, and comes from the Eastern Orthodox tradition, where it is still used. It is also used among Coptic Christians and Roman Catholics, so that it is the closest thing in existence to an ecumenical (or representing many Christian denominations) Eucharistic prayer. This prayer recounts the history of creation and redemption, like the others but in its own way. It is unique, though, in providing for prayers of the people in the body of the prayer, rather than during the Liturgy of the Word. It is also considered the longest of all the prayers.

There are also supplemental Eucharistic Prayers, which can be found in a newer resource put out by the church, called, Enriching Our Worship. These prayers have been written to once again update the language into the way we speak. But it also tried to avoid gendered language when speaking about God (not making God male) and avoiding the word “Lord” which can assume an unequal power situation that some were uncomfortable with.

The Institution (or the Words of Institution)

What Jesus said and did during the Last Supper is central to all the Eucharistic prayers. We remember particularly what Jesus said about the bread and the wine, and we say them at each service of communion. The words we use are based mostly on what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians and in Luke’s story of the Last Supper.

About the bread, the priest says: “On the night before Jesus died for us, he took bread (the first action), and when he had given thanks, he give it to his friends, saying, ‘Take, eat. This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” As he/she says these words, the priest either touches or holds the bread.

Then the priest says the following about the wine: “Likewise, he took the cup of wine. And when he had given thanks he gave it to them saying, ‘Drink this all of you. This is my blood of the New Covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, do this in remembrance of me.” And he/she holds or touches the cup and any cruets (or bottle) that has wine in it.

By saying these words and touching or holding the bread and wine, the priest calls God to be present with us in this blessing of the bread and wine. And even though the priest or bishop are the only people who can say the Eucharistic prayers and preside over the Eucharist, the prayers are offered on behalf of the entire congregation. The priest or bishop and the whole congregation are the celebrant together.
What is a Sacrament?

In the Episcopal Church, we have only 2 necessary sacraments – Baptism and Eucharist (through we recognize 7 total sacraments, like the Roman Catholic Church: baptism, Eucharist, marriage, confirmation, reconciliation, healing (or unction), and burial). A sacrament is a place where the Spirit of God touches us in our physical being – a manifestation of God in some thing. (The churchy definition is “an outward and visible sign or an inward and spiritual grace”) In the Eucharist, God is manifest in the bread and wine – in baptism, God is manifest in the water. The priest touches the bread and the wine as a sign that God’s spiritual presence is poured into these real, tangible objects; and the priest who does that action while recalling the words of Christ is part of a succession going all the way back to Christ. He/she was ordained and consecrated by a bishop who is in a line of bishops reaching back to the apostles who were with Christ in an upper room in Jerusalem, sharing that last supper. So, just in being there, the priest represents the whole hosts of saints that have gone before us and have continued to point us to God through this sacrament called Holy Eucharist.

The Oblation

After the words of Institution, we next offer our own prayers and thanksgiving to God. The churchy word for this is “oblation” or offering. In this portion of the prayer we offer to God the bread and wine, which are fruits of both God’s creation and human labor. After we offer them to God, God then offers them back to us as sacraments of God’s being in the body and blood of Christ.

The Invocation

The actual blessing of the bread and wine doesn’t happen until after the words of institution and the oblation. In this part of the prayer, we invoke (or call upon) the Holy Spirit to come and bless the bread and the wine. This particular prayer is called the Epiclesis (which is Greek for “the calling upon”), for it is through God’s own Spirit that the gifts we offer become for us Christ’s body and blood.

What happens to the bread:

John spent a lot of time in last weeks’ instruction (which is in video form on the website) talking about what happens when the bread and wine are blessed. Generally there are three schools of thought: 1) transubstantiation: the idea that the bread and the wine actually become Jesus’ body and blood. 2) memorialization: that the bread and wine are simply a prop for us to remember Jesus’ sacrifice for us, and 3) that whatever happens in the bread and the wine when the Spirit is invoked is a mystery, and we can’t exactly say what happens. We, as Episcopalians, follow the third school of thought – it’s a mystery what happens. But that we believe Jesus is present, we’re just not willing to say how exactly.

The conclusion of the Prayer:

The prayer concludes looking forward to the time when we will be caught up with Jesus at the end of time (whether ours or time in general). Then a doxology (or praise to God) follows that. Finally, the last word is said by all, AMEN. It is the only capital AMEN in the whole prayer book because it is a final AMEN to the greatest thing we can do, which is celebrate the Eucharist. It is capitalized because the congregation and priest are supposed to say it loudly and heartily.

BREAK:

The Breaking of the Bread or Fraction

After all the prayer and thanking and blessing, we have what is called the Fraction, or the breaking of the bread. Breaking the bread is functional: bread is broken so that it can be shared. The breaking of the bread also reminds us of the story in the Gospel of John where Jesus, having been resurrected runs into
some of his disciples on the road to Emmaus. The disciples do not recognize him when he first approaches. As he walks with them for a while he tells them everything they need to know about the scriptures and Jesus, but still, they don’t recognize him. Finally, they come to a place to eat, and when Jesus breaks the bread, their eyes are opened, and they see who he is. So, just before we come to the table, we break the bread, to open our eyes to who Jesus is.

The other reason we break the bread has to do with what we say sometimes when we break it. “Alleluia, Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us!” The people responding, “There for let us keep the feast, Alleluia!” This refers to the tradition in the Jewish faith of sacrificing a lamb for the Passover meal. The first Passover marked the Exodus of God’s people from slavery in Egypt. But here, in the Eucharist, we also remember that Jesus was also the sacrificial lamb for us, giving up his life for us on the cross – his body broken before his death.

**GIVE:**

**Distribution of Communion**

John talked about this in his last instruction, so this will be brief. Anyone who has been baptized (in any faith denomination) is invited to come to the table and receive communion. For a long time in the Episcopal church, no one could receive communion until they were confirmed by the Bishop. So, many people were baptized as infants and then had to wait until they were teenagers to take communion. The idea being that people needed to understand what they were doing before they could have the bread and the wine. About 40 years ago, the theology of the church changed. The emphasis was not on understanding exactly what one was doing, but being part of community and joining in the rituals of that community. Rather than being a full member of the church at confirmation, the church then stated that baptism was when someone was fully part of the church. And once fully part of the church, the baptized member could then not be kept from all the sacraments – including communion. Babies might not know what they were doing when they were taking communion, but rather than prove understanding before taking communion, they would be learning as they go and receiving the gift of communion as their understanding increased. When taking communion, one can eat only the bread, only drink the wine, or have both the bread and the wine. We say someone receive all of the spiritual benefits of communion, even if he/she only consume bread or wine. Those who are not baptized can come and join the community at the table and be blessed by the priest, thus being part of the community and not being excluded. There has been talk about opening up communion to those who are not baptized, and some conversation about conversion through communion, but nothing official has happened on that aspect. Communion is also taken out into the congregation to those who cannot climb the stairs or make the trip to the altar.

Practically, communion is given out by clergy and lay people at the altar rail. Generally, clergy give out the bread and the lay people (chalice bearers or Eucharistic ministers) give out the wine. But, anyone who has been licensed by the Bishop can give out bread or wine. The bread is placed in the hands of each person who comes forward. He/she can either eat it or hold it to dip into the wine (this is also called “intinction”). The wine is passed in a common cup. One can dip the bread into the wine and eat the bread, or take a sip from the cup. It is also okay to not drink the wine. People either will leave before the wine gets to them, or they remain and place their hands crossed across their chest to let the chalice bearers know they don’t want any wine. Many people are concerned about drinking from a common cup that germs will be spread. However, studies have shown that wiping the lip of the chalice with the purificator (cloth napkin) between communicants is actually a fairly effective hygienic measure.
Any bread or wine that remains at the end of communion needs to be dealt with, as it is a sacrament. Sometimes the bread and wine are kept aside and used to take communion to those who cannot come to church (this is called “reserved sacrament”). This is placed in the ambry, which is a small concealed box behind the altar. If the bread and wine are not going to be saved or reserved, then it must be dealt with as a sacrament. Sacraments can be disposed of in three ways: 1) burned, 2) buried, or 3) consumed. Since burning bread and wine is not safe or effective, that is generally never done. Blessed bread and wine can easily be consumed by any one or more of the people serving at the altar. However, sometimes there is a lot of wine left over and those present do not wish to drink that much alcohol at one time. When that is the case, the wine can be buried. There is a special sink in many churches called a piscina, which has a drain pipe that leads directly to dirt (and not to the sewer). This is the only sink that blessed wine can be poured down. Other times, wine (and/or bread) can be poured in a potted plant, or outside in the dirt.

**Post Communion Prayer**

After communion is distributed and the table is cleaned up by the deacon, the final prayer is said by the congregation and the priest. This prayer sums up what God has done with us in the liturgy and reminds us that what we have done in worship today prepares us for what we are called to do in the world. We are not to leave church and go one with life as if we have never come, but rather use this service and what we’ve done here, to infuse our week with our faith and God’s gift to us in the Eucharist. This is the final moment of the drama of the Eucharist: equipped with the Word, nourished with the Sacrament, we go out into the world in the name of Christ. And that, or some variation of that, is exactly how the service ends: with the dismissal, bidding us all now to go, out to the world, where there is holy work to be done, and our hands to do it.

**Blessing and Dismissal**

Historically, various prayers, hymns, readings and blessings have been added on to the end of the liturgy until periodically they need to be removed. Today, very little obscures the ending of the liturgy. The priest blesses the people, using a form that can change to reflect the season, or can be the same each week. This is the final sacramental piece of the communion piece, giving us a final infusion of God’s grace before we leave.

Then we sing a final hymn, during which the clergy, lay participants, acolytes and choir exit the church (following the cross). This is usually a rousing hymn getting us ready to enter the world with excitement and mission!

After an exit hymn, the deacon dismisses us, and we respond with “Thanks be to God!” At that moment, it is appropriate to leave the church. Some people were taught they should not leave until the candles are extinguished. Either way, the service is ended and we are sent forth in to the world. We go forth new people: in the name of Christ; to love and serve the Lord; rejoicing in the power of the Spirit; and blessing the Lord! An appropriate sign at the front door as you leave this morning would be: “You are now entering your mission field!”