

I've never seen it as a question on Family Feud, but if there were a Catholic version, and a survey of 100 random Catholics were taken, I'd be curious how they would answer the question "what is the Eucharist to you?" The reality is people's understanding of it is all over the map. To some it is a representation or commemoration. Others might say it's symbolic of what occurred years ago at the Last Supper. And, truth be told, there are many different adjectives one can use, and talking about the theology of the Eucharist took up many classes at seminary. But like last week on Trinity Sunday, when I mentioned that "love" was the best word to describe what the Trinity was, to that I'd just add one word to talk about the Eucharist, namely "sacrifice." For as the Trinity is the outpouring of God's love to us that we are called to emulate, the Eucharist is a re-presentation of the Last Supper where we are reminded of just how much God loves us, but also are reminded of how we are called to bring this food to a hungry world. It's the Eucharist that can transform a person, and bring out the best in them as they grow closer to God, and then have an impact on others.

Years ago, a woman who would become a saint had a great love for the Eucharist that would lead her to lay down her life. Margaret Middleton (or Clitherow her married name) was born in York, England, around 1556, the daughter of a candlemaker. Queen Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1558. The vast majority of English people were Catholic and wished to remain Catholic. When the new queen threatened to destroy the Catholic Church, they shrugged their shoulders and waited for it to all blow over. It took several years for them to realize, when it was too late, that if they wanted to retain their faith, they must be ready to suffer for it. The law clearly stated that the Mass was outlawed and the whole population was ordered to attend the new Protestant services. The Middleton family accepted the new religion and the Queen as the head of the church.

Margaret married a Protestant, John Clitherow, at the age of 18, and at the age of 21 Margaret once again became Catholic and professed her faith and allegiance to the Pope. (Her father had left the faith with the new queen, and been rewarded by becoming Sheriff of York.) Throughout their marriage John paid her fines for not attending Protestant church services and he allowed Margaret to bring up their children as Catholics and was very careful not to know if the forbidden Catholic Mass was being celebrated in his house. John made things as easy as he could for his wife. He was a good man; in fact his brother William was actually ordained a Catholic priest. He was careful to ignore that Father Mush was a frequent visitor and obviously celebrating Mass for Margaret and her friends. Margaret was a loving wife and mother. She was disturbed by John's protestations of faith in the Queen's religion but she still loved him dearly. John said that he could wish for no better wife and she had only two faults, "she fasted too much and would not go with him to church."

Her home became one of the most important hiding places for Catholic priests in all of England. The house had a secret cupboard where the vestments, wine and the altar breads were kept. It also had a "priest's hole" where priests could be hidden. On March 10, 1586 the Clitherow's home was raided. The searchers found everything, where the Mass was celebrated, the vestments, and the altar breads. They carried off the

incriminating evidence. By now the Clitherows had three children, the oldest was studying in France to be a priest, and when Margaret was taken away from her home that day and thrown into prison her two younger children never saw her again.

Subsequently the young boy went on to become a priest and the young girl a Sister. On her third day in prison her husband was allowed to visit her, their last meeting. On March 14 Margaret was brought before the judges in Common Hall in York. Her indictment was read and she was asked how she pleaded. In answer she said, "I know of no offence whereof I should confess myself guilty. Having made no offence, I need no trial." On the next morning she was taken back to the Common Hall. The judge reminded her that under the law of Queen Elizabeth, when an accused person refused to make a plea and stand trial before a jury, the accused would be sentenced to what was called "peine forte et dure." This involved the accused lying naked on the stone floor of an underground cell with a door laid over them and heavy stones piled on the door. Further weights were piled on the door until the accused was crushed to death. Margaret refused to make a plea or to stand trial and the judge sentenced that she should be crushed to death for having "harbored and maintained Jesuits and seminary priests, traitors to the Queen's majesty and her laws." Ten days later on March 25th 1586 (Good Friday that year) she was executed by crushing.

Before her execution she was asked to pray for the Queen, and she did pray for the Queen, she prayed that the Queen would become a Catholic! The executioners (hired beggars as the two executioners who were supposed to do it were too cowardly to carry it out) placed the board upon her and the huge stones on top. Within a quarter of an hour she was dead. They left the body under the door from nine in the morning until three in the afternoon. It was Good Friday. She was left beneath the board from nine in the morning until three in the afternoon and they buried her body in waste ground hoping it would never be found again. Pope Paul VI canonized her in 1970 and gave her the title "Pearl of York." Her home, 26 The Shambles, York, has become a place of pilgrimage visited by thousands each year. She is called a martyr of the Eucharist because she was executed for protecting priests and making it possible for them to celebrate Mass. It is through the faith and courage of people like Margaret in this country also that we are able to celebrate the Eucharist here today.

What she did in her life was exactly what the Eucharist is all about: a sacrifice. God loving us so much that He laid down his life; and through that process, letting hope and love have the last word over sin and death.

What links our readings together is this notion of sacrifice, specifically blood sacrifice which was a part of ancient Israelite culture. God did not need anything for his benefit, but rather a person making a sacrifice would offer something to God, such as a part of his creation (e.g., the doves sold in the Temple) to express sorrow. Moses makes a covenant with God on Mount Sinai and seals it in the first reading, we hear in Exodus that the blood from the sacrifice is splashed on the altar and sprinkled on the people. This is the chance for the people to display their commitment to God; they say they will do everything God asks. The blood sprinkled is done as blood is the source of life, and it

is a symbolic way of people saying we receive our lives from God, and turn our lives to him.

We know though as Christians there is something far superior to the sacrifice of an animal, and that is the blood of the Lamb. Hebrews speaks of Jesus as the high priest who goes into the sanctuary not with the blood of goats or calves but with His own blood. In the Temple, the high priest would go into the Holy of Holies with a lamb and a goat. The lamb was sacrificed and the blood was sprinkled. The goat was the scapegoat; the goat was sent away into the wilderness symbolizing the sins of the people being taken away. There was a veil separating the holy of holies from the rest of the Temple. The priest acted in the person of Yahweh, with the people again doing what happened on the first reading - pledging their life to God. Jesus though is both that goat and the lamb. The one perfect sacrifice. He the innocent victim, takes our sins. He is the perfect sacrifice offered. He destroys the veil forever so that we are no longer separated from God. We hear it most clearly in our Gospel: This is my body...this is my blood which will be shed for many." This is the ultimate sacrifice. And what is anticipated sacramentally is lived out on the first Good Friday, when the lamb and the scapegoat, Jesus, takes away the sins and takes upon himself the sins of the world.

So what happens at Mass, specifically with the Eucharist? The priest stands in the presence of Christ, and re-presents the first Mass, where Jesus is again made sacramentally present. Why do we need to do this again and again? Because we need a reminder of how much we are loved, and a reminder too that we cannot do it on our own. We need food for the journey. Just as you need to eat multiple times a day for strength physically, we need spiritual food as well. Through the Eucharist, God dwells in us and we receive grace. The covenant is strengthened; it's our bridge to heaven. And when you think about the Eucharist, think of two things.

The first is think about what it does to you personally. Jesus knocks at the door, but it's up to us to let Him in. That is why we need to not just have Communion be something mechanical, but think about what is happening. It's why we receive it after we've reflected on the Word, called to mind our sins, said the Eucharistic Prayer, and prayed that we would be worthy to have Jesus enter into us. When we come forth and receive Jesus into our souls, we are meant to be drawn closer to Him. Through the Eucharist, sins are forgiven. Grace is received. Strength is given to avoid sin. And our eyes are opened to act to bring the love of God into the world. Ideally what happens is a transformation where we grow closer and closer to God. To be sure, we will sin again. We don't just go to confession once, receive Communion once, or have Lent once in a lifetime. We are all works in progress. But by being mindful of our shortcomings, by thinking about how we can grow in grace, and by thinking how we can become a better disciple, the Eucharist will transform us.

The second part is the fruit of that transformation. That's what we see in the lives of people like Saint Margaret Middleton. She had Mass in secret, but she lived out the effects of the Eucharist. She became a friend of persecuted Catholics in the north of England. Her home was an important hiding place for fugitive priests so others could

receive the Eucharist. She refused to plead guilty because if she did plea, her children would be brought as witnesses and possibly tortured. She sacrificed for her children so they could enter religious life. And she was loved by the citizens of York. Finally at her trial, she refused to be shaken, sacrificing her own body linking that to the blood of the Lamb of God killed on the first Good Friday. The effects of the Eucharist for us are how we live out the faith. It happens in so many ways. There is social justice where we provide for those in need and the poor; there is stewardship in the parish where we volunteer and catechize our young; and there are the everyday acts of love that happen in families when people care for one another. If we were on trial for being a disciple like Margaret, would there be enough evidence to convict us?

When we celebrate the Eucharist, we enter into that same covenant that the apostles did at the Last Supper. Divine Life is given to us. For Saint Margaret, that love transformed her throughout her life into a woman who loved God completely and had a singular focus on God's Kingdom and bringing it into this world. Let's make sure on our part, we never take for granted the gift we are given in the Eucharist, and as we prepare to receive our Lord on this altar, let Jesus take away your sins. Let His love into your heart. And let that love transform you like Saint Margaret into a person who brings the divine love of God into the world.