

## The Early Church

Eucharist celebrated in houses, in homes and in secret



### TARGET AUDIENCE

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#### Overview

This Object is the second in a chronologically ordered set of six covering the evolution of the Eucharist from its origins through to the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

The multimedia element is comprised of seven images with key texts selected from the Supporting Content.

#### Teacher Background

Teachers are encouraged to review the 'Exploring the Mass' section of the DVD Rom *Become One Body One Spirit in Christ* to deepen their understanding of the scriptural, historical and theological foundations of the Eucharist.

In particular, the following aspects of *Become One Body One Spirit in Christ* provide entry points and context for this Learning Object:

- Within the pathway 'Evolution of the Mass' watch the video 'Christian Ministry of the Early Church'.
- Also within this pathway is the timeline 'Mass Through the Ages'. Click on the button to view the timeline. Scroll along it using the arrows.

*Where appropriate, use this material with the students.*

#### Supporting Content

*This text supports the focus of the multimedia element.*

For the first three centuries the Eucharist was celebrated in the houses and homes of Christians. In times of persecution these celebrations would have been in secret, in catacombs and other hidden spots. At other times Christians gathered together openly in each others' homes or in 'house churches' for the Eucharist though Mass was not celebrated publicly as it is in our own time.

The liturgy around the core of the Eucharist, the re-enactment of Jesus' words and actions at the Last Supper, developed gradually. Christians borrowed from the Jewish synagogue ritual a service of readings and prayers which preceded the taking, blessing and breaking of the bread.

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### Supporting Content

Readings were taken from the Old Testament scriptures and from what would become the New Testament scriptures; and the letters and testimonies of the apostles and disciples. Psalms would be sung.

After these the leader of the community would pray spontaneous prayers of thanks and praise over the bread and wine, recalling especially the acts of God in Jesus Christ before breaking the bread and sharing the cup. Thus from early times the structure of the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist was established.

This is how St Justin described the Eucharist around the year 150:

*On Sunday we have a common assembly of all our members, whether they live in the city or the outlying districts. The recollections of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as there is time. When the reader has finished, the president of the assembly speaks to us; he urges everyone to imitate the examples of virtue we have heard in the readings. Then we all stand up together and pray. On the conclusion of our prayer, bread and wine and water are brought forward. The president offers prayers and gives thanks to the best of his ability, and the people give assent by saying, "Amen". The Eucharist is distributed, everyone present communicates, and the deacons take it to those who are absent.*

The earliest language of the Mass was generally Koine Greek, the common tongue of the Greco Roman Empire, though other vernacular languages such as Aramaic/Syriac languages were also used. Latin, the language of Western Europe and North Africa began to be used there, and by 380 was used in Rome. Latin eventually became the liturgical language of the Mass throughout the West while Greek remained the chief, but not the only, liturgical language of the East.

### For Reflection and Discussion: Ideas for Use

Select one or more of the following activities for students to complete.

- 1 **Use the timeline in the DVD Rom *Become One Body One Spirit in Christ* to familiarise students with an overview of the thirty five key events from the Last Supper (CE 34) to the Mass Today (CE 2010). With that as context, students can find out what other important events happened during a chosen period they are researching: Origins of Eucharist, The Early Church, Religion of the Empire, The Middle Ages, Council of Trent, and the Second Vatican Council.**

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### For Reflection and Discussion: Ideas for Use

- 2 **Students could be formed into six small groups to each prepare a presentation to the class on one of the six Objects in the Timeline of the Eucharist series. Using the Supporting Content and utilising the multimedia element as the focus of their presentation they should draw on the named further resources, to aid them in preparing their presentation.**
- 3 **Individually or in pairs/threes, students choose one of the slides in the multimedia element and accompanying Supporting Content and use this as the basis for further research on this aspect of the Object.**
- 4 **Direct students to use the website, [The Christian Catacombs of Rome](#), to assist them with this task.**  
Look carefully at the images of the Eucharist depicted in the catacombs and notice who the participants are and what they are doing. What would they think of the way Eucharist is celebrated today? What can we learn from them? Do you think most Catholics today would risk their lives to celebrate the Eucharist? Give reasons for your answers.
- 5 **Screen the video clip 'Christian Ministry in the Early Church' in the 'Theological Reflections' section of the 'Exploring the Mass' pathway of *Become One Body One Spirit in Christ* to assist students to reflect on this question.**  
How is the ministry of Bishops and Priests now similar to their role in the Early Church? How do they differ?
- 6 **Direct students to the video clips and accompanying Mass text in the 'Receive' section of *Together At One Altar* to assist them with this question.**  
Rule a page into two columns. Break down Justin's account of the Eucharist into its component parts and match them to the parts of the Eucharist as we celebrate it in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- 7 **Direct students to the glossary from *Together At One Altar* as a starting point to complete this task. Additional information can be found in the [Glossary: Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) and the [Glossary of Theological Terms](#) (click on individual letters).**  
What is the linguistic origin of these liturgical words and what do they mean – Eucharist, *Alleluia*, *Kyrie Eleison*, *Maranatha*, Mass, *Agnus Dei*, Deacon? What do they tell us about the origins of the Eucharist?

### Teacher Professional

Archbishop Levada, William J., ['Glossary: Catechism of the Catholic Church'](#),

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**Development Resources**

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