

Both And

The Eucharist is the center of Catholic faith. I don't think too many Catholics would dispute this, though someone could say that Jesus, or Christ, is the center of Catholic faith. And that would be indisputable as well. The fact is that the Eucharist is how we experience Christ as we practice our faith. So both are true.

(One of the privileges of this writing assignment, and there are many, is the opportunity to create an argument that no one is having, and then settle it so peacefully...)

The Eucharist, according to *Lumen Gentium* (the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 1964), the Eucharistic sacrifice is the “font and summit of the whole Christian Life.” Some translate this phrase as “source and summit,” and I do like the sound of this version. Since it means the very same thing but sounds better, I'll use it here.

The Eucharist is the name we give to the celebration of the Liturgy. Though it's more commonly referred to as “the Mass,” it's the Eucharist that we celebrate. Eucharist is also the name of the sacrament that we receive in Holy Communion. A lot of people refer to “receiving Communion.” That's ok, but what we actually receive is the Eucharist, and by receiving it, we come *into communion* with Christ: we are united with Him; His body, blood, soul, and divinity, united with our body and soul. Communion is a state of being brought about by our participation in the Eucharist.

But the Eucharist, as is often said, is more than something we receive. It's also something we do. And that is where this idea of “source and summit” comes in. *Lumen Gentium* teaches us that the Eucharist is dynamic; it speaks of participation in the Eucharist, and not simply of “attending Mass” or “receiving Communion.” It's more than that: participating in the Eucharist — the whole celebration — calls us to “go and preach the Gospel by our life.” It also fortifies us in mind, body, and spirit, for this mission. The Word instructs and inspires us; the gathering supports our faith with a shared experience involving other believers who also need our support. And the sacrament literally feeds us, but with a food whose effects are vastly greater than the volume of what we consume.

And how is the Eucharist the “summit?” It's the summit because we are called to it. Evangelization (hearing the Gospel message, truly hearing it), Faith Formation, Baptism, and our general life of faith, all draw us to the Eucharist, which then sends us out once again.

We are meant to be changed by the Eucharist. Having both celebrated AND received the Body and Blood of Christ, we should scarcely be able to leave the same as we were when we arrived. Have you ever imagined meeting Jesus in person somewhere along the path of your life? Do you think you'd ever be the same after that? Well, that is exactly what happens in every celebration of the Eucharist.

So in the Eucharist — the action and the substance — Christ comes to us. This is a gift from the Father, who sent Christ into the world one time for all time, and sends His Body and Blood to us over and over again. God wants to be joined with us as food and drink join with the very substance of our physical being. When we return to our place, we are truly a walking Tabernacle.

How long, someone asked, is Christ actually present within us after we receive the Eucharist? I have two answers: one is “forever.” Christ never leaves us, even when we might turn away from Him. But if we're talking physical substance of bread & wine that have become His Body and Blood, then the answer would be until the digestive process breaks these into their various components and they would no longer be recognizable. But we are changed, nonetheless!

Eucharist: Source and summit, substance and event, received and lived. Both/and.