

REFLECTIONS ON

'THE BREAKING OF THE BREAD'

Recollection for Seminarians, Holy Spirit Seminary, Bomana, 8-10-2016

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Dear Seminarians,

When I studied theology I always wanted to know a little more about this phrase: 'Breaking of Bread'. I do not think that I have a full understanding yet. I like to share with you my some of my reflections on the 'Breaking of the Bread in the New Testament and its significance to us .

2. Breaking of the bread in the N.T:

Breaking of bread = Fractio Panis (Latin)
= klasei tou artou (Greek)

The phrase breaking of the bread appears in three places in the N.T.:

(The Biblical references here are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), the Catholic Version, 1989 unless otherwise mentioned)

2.1 (Luke 24:35) 'Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the **breaking of the bread**'.

2.2 (Acts 2:42) 'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the **breaking of bread** and the prayers'.

2.3 (Acts 2:46) ' Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they **broke bread** at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts'.

2.4 There are two other texts with similar meanings:

(Acts 20:7) ' On the first day of the week, when we met to **break bread**, Paul was holding a discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking until midnight'.

(Acts 20:11) 'Paul went upstairs, and after he had **broken bread** and eaten, he continued to converse with them until dawn; then he left'.

In Judaism the breaking of the bread was a ritual in the beginning of a meal. The father of the family would say the prayer, break the bread and pass it around to others. A good example is the 'cutting of the cake' during a birthday or wedding party. Before the guests eat the cake the birthday boy/girl cuts the cake with a knife. We do

not sing and clap hands when a person cuts a pizza or a whole fried chicken. In the early Christian community the 'Breaking of the bread' becomes the technical name for the Eucharist.

3. Jesus **breaks** the bread:

The word 'broke' appears 20 times in the N.T.:

Mat 14:19	Luke 9:16
Mat 15:36	Luke 22:19
Mat 26:26	Luke 24:30
Mark 5:4	John 19:32
Mark 6:41	Acts 2:46
Mark 8:6	Acts 13:43
Mark 8:19	Acts 19:23
Mark 14:3	Acts 27:35
Mark 14:22	1Cor 11:24
Mark 14:72	Rev 12:7

3.1 Jesus broke the bread in the feeding of the 5000: (Mt 14:19) Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and **broke** the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.

3.2 Jesus broke the bread in the Last Supper: (Mt 26:26) While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he **broke** it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body."

In the miracle narratives Jesus *takes* the bread, *blesses* it, **breaks** it and *gives* it. Many writers are of the opinion that this does *not* refer to the Eucharistic formula. But this same formula is followed in the Last Supper narratives. The bread (artos) was and is the main item of the meal of a Jew. Jesus breaks the bread as in a Jewish meal but this **breaking** takes on a special significance in the writings of the Evangelists and in the early Christian community.

3.3 Breaking of the bread with the two disciples at Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35):

The two frightened disciples were astonished that this 'stranger' who was walking with them did not know the events that rocked the whole town. Eventually, they come to realize that this stranger is Jesus, their Master.

This realization takes place after Jesus **breaks** the bread with them. Then they were able to say, 'Were

not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us' (Lk 24:32).

5. Breaking of the bread in the early Christian community:

The early Christian community faithfully came together for the 'Breaking of the bread' (Acts 2:42, 46) to commemorate the Last Supper, the Death and the resurrection of Christ.

The action of breaking the bread received a symbolic interpretation: those who shared the broken bread became one body in Christ (1 Cor 10:16). It was also a sign of being one children of God (Didache 9:4).

6. Breaking of the bread down the centuries:

Breaking of the bread took an allegorical meaning in the middle ages. It signified the death of Jesus Christ and so the pieces of bread were sometimes arranged in the form of a cross. The Eastern liturgies had many prayers and songs accompanying this 'fraction' (the breaking) symbolizing the passion and death of Christ.

Martin Luther was against this allegorical meaning of the Eucharist to the 'breaking of bread' and so there was no 'fraction' in the Lutheran liturgies. But later on some reformed Lutheran liturgies included it.

Some of the Protestant Bibles still reflect this thinking. For example the Acts 2:42 would have the '**fellowship meals**' instead of 'breaking of the bread' :

"They spent their time in learning from the apostles, taking part in the fellowship, and sharing in the **fellowship meals**, and the prayers" (Good News Bible).

" They joined with the other believers in regular attendance at the apostles' teaching sessions and at the **communion services** and prayer meetings" (Living New Testament).

The Catholic bibles have them as : "They devoted themselves to the teaching of the Apostles, and to the communal life, to the **breaking of the bread** and to the prayers" (New American Bible, Jerusalem Bible, The Community bible, Revised Standard Version etc.)

7. Today: The Catholic liturgy does have the action of breaking (fractio) in the Mass to mean the passion and death of Christ. But the terms such as 'Eucharist', 'The Lord's Supper', 'Mass', 'Communion' etc. are used more than the phrase 'Breaking of the bread'.

My reflections:

8.1 The primary ministry of the priest is the 'breaking of the bread':

The priests share Christ's priesthood: His breaking of the bread in the Last Supper and His sacrifice on the cross. Therefore the offering of the sacrificial meal (Mass) is the priest's primary ministry. In the breaking of the bread he helps people to **recognize Jesus** as did the two disciples at Emmaus (Luke 24:35).

8.2. Duty of all Christians:

"The Gospel must be heard in Oceania by all people, believers and non-believers, natives and immigrants, rich and poor, young and old. Indeed all these people have a right to hear the Gospel, which means that Christians have a solemn duty to share it with them". (Ecclesia in Oceania).

8.3. We are 'broken' people at times:

We feel broken at times. The same Greek word 'klasis' (break) is used to describe the situation Peter is in after disowning Jesus three times: "Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, 'Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.' And he **broke** down and wept" (Mk 14:72).

Sometimes we are let down by others and sometimes we let others down like our Bishop, Superiors, friends, relatives, parish leaders or the people with whom we live and work. We need the support of one another. As Professor Scott Hahn says, ' The Lay People like to see the Missionaries witness through their unity and support'.

When the Priest lifts up the 'broken bread' during the Mass, we can pray for our own individual brokenness. He continues to make us **whole** through the '**Breaking of the Bread and the Word**'. ***

Bible Sharing (Lk 24: 28-35)

“They recognized him at the breaking of the bread” (v35)

Questions for reflection

- ◆ *How do I recognize Jesus in the Eucharist ?*

 - ◆ *What role does Eucharist play in my life as a seminarian?*

 - ◆ *What importance do I give to Mass, Benediction or Eucharistic Adoration?*

 - ◆ *What are the distractions I encounter during Mass and how can I contemplate on the Mass?*
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