

The Communion Rite: The Breaking of the Bread

Synecdoche. When was the last time – if ever – you heard, read, or said that word?! But it applies here as we come to the next part of the Communion Rite, the *Breaking of the Bread*. At one level the name of this part of the Mass simply refers to the action of the priest when breaking the big host into several smaller pieces for his own communion and that of several others. But the term is also an example of *synecdoche*, that is, a figure of speech in which a part of something is used to refer to the whole thing, like when you refer to someone’s new car as a “new set of wheels”. In the scriptures and early Church “the breaking of the bread” was a phrase used to describe the whole action of the Mass. The ritual gesture of breaking of bread done in the course of the Community’s Sunday gathering was seen as central to the very meaning of the gathering itself. In the earliest days of the celebration of the Eucharist there were not the kind of individual, pre-formed communion breads or hosts like we use today. Such small, individual hosts came into use only in the 12th Century. Previously there were only large loaves of bread that had to be broken into smaller pieces for distribution to the assembly. The symbolic significance of the originally practical necessity is that the one bread which is Christ is shared by the many so that we may become the one body of Christ. There is further significance as the breaking of the bread symbolizes the way in which Christ’s human body was first broken for us, and his blood poured out. The breaking of the bread thus reminds us of Christ’s sacrifice, and our commitment to share in his sacrifice by being willing to be broken ourselves in the service of others. This deeper meaning of the ritual action is also emphasized by the song that accompanies it, the “Lamb of God” which speaks of Jesus as the Lamb of Sacrifice.

Please let us know what else about our faith tradition you'd like to find out more about. Contact our Council for Catechesis at tkautza@saintmaryhc.org.