“Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29) This ancient phrase in John’s Gospel, read at the beginning of Ordinary Time, contains the same words we hear during the Communion rite at Mass each Sunday. I had always assumed that these beautiful words were original to the Gospel of John. The evangelist actually borrowed these words from the meals shared in the early house-churches following the passion of their beloved Jesus. This table fellowship of Messianic Jews, who had followed Jesus, was a time to share their stories of his life and the hope of a new future. He had died, but they believed his Spirit was alive in them. They were not yet called Christians; this was to come later. They were Jews who still went to their local Synagogues and to the Jerusalem Temple. The Temple was not yet destroyed and the Gospels were not yet written.

With the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, the center of the Jewish faith moved to the synagogues under the direction of the Pharisees. The Pharisees, who had rejected Jesus, rejected his followers from the synagogues that they controlled. These followers, though tolerated by the Romans up to this point, became suspect and were forced underground to operate out of house-churches.

The meals they shared (along with all they owned), were shared in common in the memory of the Master who had shared Himself completely, even His very life. By mid first century, these
meals became more structured and by all accounts could be called Eucharistic in the same sense we have today. Many elements of this early Eucharist, documented in the Didache (circa late first-century), are recognizable in today’s more formal Mass.

You might ask, "Why all this discussion about the early Church?" Let me explain. In today’s church we have a highly developed theology from alms giving to worship, we have the Nicene Creed, the Sacred Scriptures, the Code of Canon Law, and the Catechism. From this perspective, we might assume that all these things are what make us church; and in one sense, this assumption might be correct. But there is a different view that I have come to appreciate.

After Christ died and was resurrected, the early Church had none of this formal structure. What they did have was first-hand experience of Jesus, his teachings, and his ministry. Some actually had the memory of a meal shared with their Beloved. As Rich Mullins song, Creed, says “I did not make it, no, it is making me.” I believe this is true not only about our Creed, but it is also true about our rituals. This is especially true of the most central ritual of our Faith, the Eucharist: the source and summit of our Faith. The Eucharist came first and everything else flows from it. In this ritual meal, shared in community, we are transformed – by the real presence of Jesus – into the real presence of Jesus. You may ask, “How can this be?”

In John’s Gospel (17:21) Jesus speaks of this divine communion, “…so that we may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us.” This unitive nesting of God and us, divine and human, also speaks of the “supernatural existential,” or the innate capacity of the human person to receive the self-communication of God.

While we find it difficult to comprehend this real presence of God in us, I believe that Jesus’ disciples also struggled with this mystical truth of grace that is God’s gift of God’s self. I believe (and this is speculation, not doctrine) that He decided to make His presence real and actual in another and physical way in the hope that they/we would understand. He hopes that we also understand and believe this great truth. And so each week we hear the words “Take this all of you, and eat it: this is my body which has been given up for you.” The next time you hear these words, know that this act is the central communal action of the people of God gathered as the living Body of Christ, the confluence of the infinite Creator with the finite person in a most intimate and perfect way.