

Jesus Christ: Truly, Really, Substantially Present

The Church speaks not only of the Sacrifice of the Eucharist but also of the Eucharistic Presence. After the celebration of the Eucharist, the Church affirms, “*the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained*” in each of the elements, the bread and the wine. The Church further affirms that this presence of Christ continues to exist as long as the appearances of bread and wine remain (cf. CCC 1374, 1377). The word that the Church has developed to refer to this reality is “transubstantiation,” a rather complicated word to refer to a simple yet profound reality — that while the appearances of bread and wine remain, it is the reality or substance of Jesus that is before us. While the word may be new (it was coined near the beginning of the twelfth century), the doctrine to which it refers can be traced back into the earliest centuries of the Christian Faith.

Initially, portions of the Eucharistic bread were kept in order to be available to take to those who were sick or might be in danger of death. As time passed and the Church continued to pray about and reflect upon Christ’s Eucharistic Presence, it was seen to be appropriate and beneficial for the faithful to spend time in prayer and adoration before Christ, present in what came to be called “the Blessed Sacrament.” The power and gift of this Presence cannot be overstated. To be in a chapel or church where the Blessed Sacrament is kept is to be in the presence of Jesus Christ. While appearances may differ, we are at no disadvantage to the first century residents of Palestine. We, too, can be in the same room with the power and reality of Jesus.

Food, Indeed

It is for this and for many other reasons that I am puzzled when I meet inactive Catholics who say they have left the Church because “they weren’t being fed” or who claim that now that they have left the Church they have a “personal relationship with Jesus.” While I can be sympathetic to the assertion that some priests are not great preachers or that a particular congregation can seem lifeless at the celebration of the Eucharist, it seems that those who leave are throwing the proverbial baby out with the bath water. For instance, many, including non-Catholics, have observed that the average Catholic, who attends Mass every Sunday, over the course of two or three years will hear more Scripture read than the average non-Catholic Christian. The formal structure of the Church’s lectionary, the book containing the Scriptures to be read at Mass, assures that the selection of readings is not left to the personal taste of the priest or of the congregation. Many non-Catholic congregations may never hear certain Gospel passages read in their churches because those passages are not of inter-

est to their pastor or are perhaps difficult to explain. So, objectively, Catholics are fed more Scripture.

Speaking of being “fed,” where else can I really be fed on the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus Christ, but in the Eucharist? It seems a very poor trade-off to go in pursuit of a better preacher or friendlier community and, in the process, lose access to direct communion with Jesus Christ. Is it possible to have a more personal relationship with Jesus than to be united to Him in Holy Communion? Perhaps St. Augustine captures it best when he said that normally when we eat food, the food becomes us, but when we consume the Eucharist, we become Him.

Conclusion

Invite all who are reading this, non-believer, fellow Christian, inactive Catholic, and practicing Catholic, to re-examine the Catholic Church’s teaching on the Eucharist and to join us, in profound union with Jesus, in worshipping the Father in Spirit and in Truth.

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Prayer of consecration to Jesus:

God our Father, I believe that out of Your infinite love You have created me. In a thousand ways I have shunned Your love. I repent of each and every one of my sins. Please forgive me.

Thank you for sending your Son to die for me, to save me from eternal death. I choose this day to renew my covenant with you and to place Jesus at the center of my heart. I surrender to him as Lord over my whole life and over all things.

I ask you now to flood my heart and soul with the Gift of Your Holy Spirit and to grant me the gift of new life. Give me the grace and courage to live as a missionary disciple for the rest of my days. Amen.

Eucharist

True Worship



Introduction

The Eucharist, the Mass, the Lord's Supper, the Breaking of the Bread, the Divine Liturgy. Whatever it has been called throughout history, the sharing of bread and wine has been seen by nearly all Christians to be an important celebration of the Christian Faith. For most of those outside of the Catholic fold, this sharing has been understood as only symbolic of some indefinable sharing in the life and work of Jesus; some have gone so far as to abandon wine in favor of grape juice. But to quote one English anti-Catholic revolutionary of the sixteenth century, for Catholics, "it is the Mass that matters." The Second Vatican Council, which met in the early 1960s, called the Eucharist "the source and summit" of the Christian Faith. What is the Eucharist and why does it matter?

True Worship

The prophet Malachi once prophesied, "From the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering" (Mal 1:11). Jesus will later add that the hour is coming when true believers will worship the Father "in spirit and truth" (Jn 4:23). All Christians, especially Catholics, acknowledge that the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross was the perfect final sacrifice of atonement, that no other sacrifice is or will be necessary. This was final, once and for all. And yet Malachi speaks of a future time when sacrifice will be offered not only in Jerusalem but "in every place," and that this sacrifice will not be tainted by sin, as have been all sacrifices offered by men, but rather it will be spotless, a "pure offering." Jesus promises that believers will worship the Father "in spirit and truth," that the sacrifices of the Temple will be replaced by True Worship.

It is against the backdrop of these two Scriptures that the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist, the Mass, must be understood. Non-Catholic Christians tend to understand the once-and-for-all Sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross to mean that we no longer offer sacrifice. Catholics understand this same once-and-for-all Sacrifice to mean that we have been given a new Sacrifice in which to participate. At the Last Supper, Jesus took bread and identified it with His Body. He took wine and identified it with His Blood. He concludes by instructing the Twelve Apostles, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Lk 22:19). Catholics have taken this instruction very seriously and, from the time of the Apostles, have offered the Eucharist at least every Sunday and, often, more frequently than that. In the West, this is characteristic of Catholicism. While it is still possible to find a weekly Sunday Eucharist among the old mainline non-Catholic Christian groups (e.g., Episcopalian, Lutheran), it is far more common to see celebrations of a "Lord's Supper"

as a monthly or even a quarterly event among more evangelical-style communities.

More Than a Mere Symbol

At the Last Supper, Jesus offers His Body and Blood for our salvation. He does this in the context of the ritual Passover Meal of the Jewish people. Of course, less than twenty-four hours later, He will very literally be pouring out His Blood and offering His Body for our salvation. He tells the Twelve to continue to offer His Body and Blood in remembrance of Him. St. Paul takes this command so seriously that he tells the Church at Corinth that if they eat and drink at the Eucharist unworthily they will become guilty of the death of the Lord (cf. 1 Cor 11:27). This is very strange. For if we, say, burn a man in effigy we are not in fact guilty of his death. But St. Paul says we would be guilty of Jesus' death. There must be something more than merely symbol or metaphor here.

The Catholic Church has always taken Jesus seriously, even literally, when He called the bread His Body, and the wine His Blood. In John 6, Our Lord tells His followers quite bluntly, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (v. 53). And, even further, "My flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed" (v. 55). We notice that when many of His followers begin to abandon Him because this is a "hard saying" (v. 60), Jesus does not soften His teaching and does not say He only meant this symbolically or metaphorically. Rather, He turns to the Twelve Apostles and asks if they, too, will abandon Him. He appears to double down and express a willingness to start again from scratch, if necessary, rather than alter this teaching (cf. vv. 66-67).

Some non-Catholic commentators have attempted to show that John 6 is to be understood symbolically by appealing to verse 63, which says, "It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail." If this means that Jesus' previous talk about eating His Body was to be understood symbolically then what sense is to be made of the fact that many of his disciples abandon Him at this point? It seems more in keeping with the entire tenor of John 6 to understand verse 63 as an instruction to apply the understanding of faith and not some sort of literalistic understanding, as if we were to engage in some sort of cannibalism. Of course, the irony here is that in the first centuries of the Christian Church, so certain and adamant were the early Christians about the fact that they were really eating and drinking the Body and Blood of the Lord, that they often were thought to be cannibals by their pagan Roman neighbors.

Christ's One Sacrifice Re-Presented

What does the Catholic Church teach about the Eucharist? In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* ("CCC"), it states, "The Eucharist is thus a sacrifice because it *re-presents* (makes present) the sacrifice of the cross. ... The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are *one single sacrifice*. ... 'In this divine sacrifice which is celebrated in the Mass, the same Christ who offered himself once in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross is contained and is offered in an unbloody manner'" (CCC 1366-1367, italics and parentheses in original text). That hyphenated word "re-presents" is important because it needs to be understood in its original sense, meaning "makes present again." Thus, in the Mass, Jesus is not re-crucified nor do Catholics believe that He is sacrificed again but, rather, they believe that in the Mass the once-for-all sacrifice of the Cross is made present to the modern believer.

Two points must be made here. First, consider God's Eternal Nature, not in the sense of His having existed for billions of years, but rather in the sense that Time does not exist for Him. He exists in a perpetual Now. Thus, any point in human history, including the Crucifixion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus, is Now for God. Thus, the Eucharist places us into immediate connection with the Sacrifice of the Cross by connecting us to the Eternal Now of God.

Second, the regular celebration of the Eucharist, and the other Sacraments, answers a rather important question about our salvation. Yes, Jesus died and rose, and thus obtained for us the grace of salvation and sanctification, but the question remains: how is that grace applied to me, a believer living nearly two thousand years after the historical facts? If someone were to discover a cure for cancer halfway around the world, it is not enough to say that cancer has been cured. An individual sick with cancer must personally take the cure him- or herself. Jesus has won our redemption but we each must take the cure. How do we do that? We do this in a way that is in keeping with our human nature. As human beings, we are both body and soul; we have both a material and a spiritual component to our being. God, in His wisdom, provides a medicine that addresses both the material and the spiritual aspects of our nature. In the Eucharist, we have the material aspects of the actual celebration of the rites as well as the particular material of bread and wine. God uses these material elements as the means by which He gives to us Himself, Who is the source and cause of our redemption. Under the appearance of feeding our body, our soul is also fed. So we worship Him in Spirit and in Truth.

