

Mount Angel Seminary

The Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist:
A Three-Part Lecture Series for High School Students

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Introduction

As we continue our study of the Eucharist, I am really excited about the next segment of the course. As you remember from our previous work, the Eucharist is considered the “the fount and apex of the whole Christian life.”¹ The Eucharist is so esteemed because the Church has believed from her founding, that during the Sacrifice of the Mass, the bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ. This is not just some nice liturgical gesture. On the contrary, we believe that in the Eucharist Christ is made truly present; “the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ and therefore, the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained.”² By receiving the Eucharist, we are able to participate in the life of Christ in a most intimate way, which in turn strengthens us spiritually to proclaim the gospel to the world.

Regrettably, recognition of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist by Catholics has declined dramatically. A recent Pew Survey found that 69% of faithful believed the Eucharist was only *symbolically* the body and blood of Christ.³ There is obviously a lot of work to do to educate people on what we believe is taking place at the Mass. To help you evangelize your generation properly about the central mystery of our faith, we will spend the next three days studying the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. We will do this by looking at the following areas: what is contained in sacred scripture, the teachings of the Early Church Fathers, and the development of the Church doctrine of transubstantiation (which is the process by which the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ). So, let's jump in and look at what scripture reveals about the Eucharist.

¹ Lumen Gentium 11

² CCC 1374 Council of Trent (1551): DS 1651

³ Gregory Smith Pew Research Center, Aug 5, 2019 “Just One-Third of U.S. Catholic Believe agree with their church that Eucharist is body, blood of Christ”
<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/05/transubstantiation-eucharist-u-s-catholics/>

Lesson I - The Real Presence in Sacred Scripture

Pope Benedict XVI wrote that the first question anyone must ask when questioning the real presence of the Lord in the Eucharist is “Does the Bible actually say anything like that?”⁴ The reason why the Bible must be our first source is because “[T]he whole of the Bible, the sum as well as all its parts, comes to us out of the liturgical and instructional life of early believing communities.”⁵ When we read the books of the New Testament we are in a way able to look back into time. This helps understand not only how they celebrated the a memorial meal of the Last Supper as Jesus had commanded them but also to appreciate what the early Christians believed happened to the bread and wine during this meal.

The earliest account we have of the celebration of the liturgy by the first Christian communities come from St. Paul.⁶ Writing to the Corinthians in the mid-50’s A.D. Paul is correcting them for their improper behavior in eating the Lord’s supper. As part of this he shares:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes. (1 Cor 12:23-26)

This passage from Saint Paul is eye opening. From it we can see that only 20 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the early Christian communities already have a well established liturgical celebration of the Lord’s Supper that includes a belief in the transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ.

The three synoptic gospels, which you will recall are Mathew, Mark, and Luke, all include nearly identical words of institution for the Eucharist. Let’s look briefly at each of these.

⁴ Ratzinger, 76.

⁵ Letter and Spirit 35

⁶ New American Bible, NT 251.

While they were eating, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, and said, "Take it; this is my body." Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, and they all drank from it. He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed for many." (Mk 14:22-24)

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and giving it to his disciples said, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins." (Mt 26:26-28)

Then he took the bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which will be given for you; do this in memory of me." And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you." (Lk 22:19-20)

In comparing these accounts of the Last Supper, the consistent wording from the evangelists, shows that each of the different faith communities they were writing for were all faithfully following the commands of Christ in their liturgical celebrations (It is interesting that Matthew includes the words about the forgiveness of sin that is not noted in the other institution narratives but that is subject of another discussion). While the early Christians obviously referred to the transformed wine and bread as the body and blood of Christ, from only reading the accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke it is not possible to determine what these first followers of Christ understood the bread and wine to be a symbolic representation or if they held a belief that is consistent with our contemporary understanding of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Fortunately, the Gospel of John, which is the last of the written gospels, provides some additional insight to the beliefs of the early Church.

Since the Gospel of John was written later than the synoptic Gospels, as we discussed earlier, it would be even more steeped in and influenced by the liturgical practices of the early Christian communities to ensure that what was being practiced liturgically was also reflected in the passages.⁷ While John does not record the institution of the Eucharist by Jesus at the Last

⁷ Scott Hahn, ??

Supper, in John 6 he provides an extended exposition known as “the Bread of Life Discourse” that Catholics have traditionally used to inform their understanding of Christ truly being present in the Eucharist. It is important for us to read this in its entirety, so please open your Bibles to John 6:22-70. To set the stage for our reading, just prior to this passage Jesus had miraculously fed 5000 people by multiplying the five loaves of bread and two fish and the people wanted to make him a king. Can I have a couple of volunteers to read this pericope aloud for us.

As you can see, the Bread of Life discourse is extremely rich theologically. So we will need to break it down by looking at some distinct passages that will assist us in gaining a Biblical understanding of the Eucharist. As part of this passage, the crowd that has been following Jesus asks for a sign such as the mana that came to the Israelites in the desert during the Exodus so that they can believe in him. In response to their query Jesus states:

I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the dessert, but they died, this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die. I am the living bread that comes down from heaven, whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world. (Jn 6:48-51)

There are a number of words that should jump out to you from this brief passage. Jesus calling himself “I am” which makes you think of the name that God calls himself in the burning bush when talking to Moses. The idea that if you eat the bread you will “live forever.” Some of you may be thinking of the Lord’s Prayer where Jesus taught the disciples to ask the father to “give us our daily bread.” Finally, you have Jesus stating he himself is the “living bread” and that this bread must be eaten to “live forever.” Jesus even goes so far as to associate his “flesh” directly to this “living bread” so in effect telling the crowd they must consume him to have eternal life.

John records in the gospel that Jesus' words were not well received by the crowd. Yet, instead of softening his language and saying that he was was only speaking metaphorically,⁸

⁸ Ratzinger, *God is Near Us*, 77

Jesus doubles down and states emphatically: “Amen, Amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.”(Jn 6:53-56)

To get a proper appreciation of the challenging nature of Jesus' response, it is helpful to look at the original Greek that the Gospel of John was written. While our English translation of the Bible uses the generic word “eat” (phagein), John used the word “trogein”⁹ which would have been understood that Jesus was telling his followers they needed to eat his flesh like an “animal eating; ‘munch,’ ‘gnaw.’ This may be part of John’s emphasis on the reality of the flesh and blood of Jesus.”¹⁰ In addition to the animalistic food eating imagery that Christ uses, his teaching was also shocking to his followers because of the Jewish belief against eating flesh that contained blood. This was a prohibition that is explicitly cited in the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) yet now Jesus is telling them to drink his blood. Additionally, “a popular Aramaic saying of Jesus’ time identified the devil as ‘the eater of flesh’.”¹¹ In light of the shocking nature of this teaching from Jesus, we should not be surprised John records “many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him” (John 6:66).

Taken in the aggregate, the synoptic gospels description of Jesus words of institution of the Eucharist with the Last Supper account and his emphasis on consuming his flesh and blood in John 6 there is ample support in the New Testament for the Catholic understanding of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. At the conclusion of the Bread of Life discourse, Jesus asks the twelve apostles, “Do you also want to leave?” (Jn 6:67) Jesus is asking them, if they truly

⁹ Barron, 100.

¹⁰ NAB NT, 154

¹¹ Barron, Eucharist 109-110

believe he is “the bread of life” even if they don’t fully understand how Christ makes this happen? A central aspect of the Catholic faith is that it involves an intimate relationship with Christ. By instituting the Eucharist, the scriptures show Jesus provides us “a sacramental event in which the corporeal Lord seizes hold of our bodily existence.”¹² Just like the apostles we need to decide if we are willing to accept by faith what scripture has revealed about Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist. A great place to take your questions about this is to Christ directly, so we will conclude class today with a period of Eucharistic Adoration in the chapel. I invite you to bring your Bible along to help in further reflection of the Bread of Life discourse.

Lesson II - The Church Fathers on the Real Presence

Sacred scripture is not the only reference to help us understand what the early Church believed concerning the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. The group of writers now known as the “Church Fathers,” also wrote eloquently about the liturgy of the early Church that reflects what they believed happened when they gathered for the breaking of the bread. For those who wonder why we don’t have writings from the Church Mothers on this topic, we must remember that women in society at large, during the first 1000+ years of the Church’s existence, were not given the privilege or opportunity to write and teach. To gather a snapshot of the writings of this time period, I have split you into groups and assigned each group one of the Church Fathers to investigate his writings on the Eucharist. You will have one class period to study the writings of these men and tomorrow will present them to the entire class. The Church Fathers we will look at are St Ignatious, St. Justin Martyr, St. Cyril of Alexandria, St. Ambrose, and St. Augustine.

Thank you all for sharing your presentations. To reinforce what you found from your research, let’s look briefly at some excerpts from the writings of the Church Fathers on the

¹² Raztinger , 77.

Eucharist beginning with Ignatius. Saint Ignatius was the bishop of Antioch who was martyred in 110 AD. Ignatius provides some unique insight to the teaching of the Apostles concerning the Eucharist the beliefs because he was reported to have heard the Apostle John preach. Much of what we know about Ignatius we learn from letters he wrote to the local churches as he journeyed from Antioch towards his death in Rome. Within these letters, Ignatius makes reference to the Eucharist being the body and blood of Christ in his Letter to the Romans,¹³ the Letter to the Philadelphians,¹⁴ and the Letter to the Smyrnaeans.¹⁵ For example, when discussing his impending martyrdom he uses Eucharistic imagery; “Allow me to be eaten by the beasts, which are my way of reaching to God. I am God’s wheat, and I am to be ground by the teeth of wild beasts, so that I may become the pure bread of Christ.”¹⁶ He also reveals how the Eucharist will unite him with Christ in love stating, “I desire the Bread of God, which is the Flesh of Jesus Christ, who was of the seed of David, and for drink I desire His Blood, which is love incorruptible.”¹⁷ It seems clear from these examples and others that you have shared from your research that Ignatius believed that Christ is present. As Bishop Barron notes, “If Ignatius thought that the Eucharist were ordinary bread, caring only a symbolic valence, he would scarcely have imagined that it possessed such transformative power.”¹⁸

The next Church Father we will look at is Justin Martyr who died around 165 AD. He was a convert and “wrote some of the greatest apologetic works of the early Christian faith.”¹⁹ Justin Martyr was a philosopher by training so he lays out his defense of the faith in a very logical sequence. Within his First Apology that he wrote to the Emperor to defend Christianity,

¹³ Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, 54a, 22.

¹⁴ Jurgens, 56, 22

¹⁵ Jurgens, 64, 25

¹⁶ Jurgens, 53, 22

¹⁷ Jurgens, 54a, 22

¹⁸ Barron, *Eucharist* 104

¹⁹ Dennis Billy, *The Beauty of the Eucharist: Voices From the Church Fathers*, 58-59.

he includes a description of the liturgy that is being celebrated at that time. He describes the Eucharist as follows:

We call this food Eucharist; and no one else is permitted to partake of it, except one who believes our teaching to be true and who has been washed in the washing which is for the remission of sins and for regeneration, and is thereby living as Christ has enjoined. For not as common bread nor common drink do we receive these; but since Jesus Christ our Savior was made incarnate by the word of God and had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so too, as we have been taught, the food which has been made into the Eucharist by the Eucharistic prayer set down by Him, and by the change of which our blood and flesh is nourished, is but the flesh and blood of the incarnated Jesus.²⁰

As can be seen, Justin states clearly that the Church at this time believed during the Mass that the bread and wine have been changed into the flesh and blood of Christ. One of the noteworthy aspects of Justin's apology is the emphasis he places on how Christians are being faithful to the Gospel commands of Christ to "do this in memory of me;" emphasizing that the liturgy has not been made up by men but comes from Christ himself.²¹

Cyril of Jerusalem also provides us with rich theological language concerning the Eucharist. He lived in the fourth century and was the Bishop of Jerusalem. He is most well known for a series of homilies he gave to the newly baptized as part of their post baptismal formation which include specific catechesis on the Eucharist during "the fourth and fifth Easter Week."²² During these lectures he stated the following about the Eucharist;

Let us, then, with full confidence, partake of the Body and Blood of Christ. For in the figure of bread His Body is given to you, and in the figure of wine His Blood is given to you, so that by partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, you might become united in body and blood with Him. For thus do we come Christ-bearers, his Body and Blood being distributed through our members. And thus it is that we become, according to the blessed Peter, sharers of the divine nature.²³

Do not, therefore, regard the Bread and the Wine as simply that; for they are according to the Master's declaration, the Body and Blood of Christ. Even though the senses suggest

²⁰ Jurgens, Justin Martyr First Apology, 128, 55.

²¹ Billy, Beauty of the Eucharist, 63.

²² Billy, Beauty of the Eucharist, 139.

²³ Jurgens, St. Cyril of Jerusalem Catechetical Lectures, 845, 360-361

to you the other, let faith make you firm. Do not judge in this matter taste, but - be fully assured by the faith, not doubting that you have been deemed worthy of the Body and Blood of Christ.²⁴

These instructions clearly show that Cyril believed in the real presence in the Eucharist. He amplifies these instructions in exhorting the faithful on how to receive the body and blood of Christ in a reverent manner; “if someone gave you some grains of gold, would you not hold them with all carefulness, lest you might lose something of them and thereby suffer a loss? Will you not, therefore, be much more careful in keeping watch over what is more precious than gold and gems, so that not a particle of it may escape you?”²⁵

St. Ambrose lived at the end of the fourth century in Milan, Italy. He was an exemplary bishop noted for helping bring about the conversion of St. Augustine with the use of his great oratory skills. Ambrose brought to this discussion an emphasis on the words spoken during the Eucharistic Prayers that transform the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ.

Perhaps you may be saying: I see something else; how can you assure me that I am receiving the Body of Christ? It but remains for us to prove it. And how many are the examples we might use! Let us prove that this is not what nature has shaped it to be, but what the blessing has consecrated; for the power of the blessing is greater than that of nature, because by the blessing even nature itself is changed.²⁶

Before it be consecrated it is bread; but where the words of Christ come in, it is the Body of Christ. Finally, hear Him saying: “All of you take and eat of this; for this is My Body.” And before the words of Christ the chalice is full of wine and water; but where the words of Christ have been operative it is made the Blood of Christ, which redeems the people.²⁷

You can see in Ambrose writings this belief that just as the power of Jesus’ words cause things to happen in the gospels to be effect miracles, Jesus words today spoken through the priest during Mass, bring about the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

²⁴ Jurgens, Cyril of Jerusalem, 846, 361

²⁵ Jurgens, Cyril, 853K, 366

²⁶ Jurgens, St. Ambrose 1333, vol II 174-75

²⁷ Jurgens Vol II, Ambrose 1340, pg 176-77

Finally let's take a look at the thoughts of St. Augustine of Hippo, one of the greatest thinkers in the history of the Catholic Church. As some of you have learned during the elective course you are taking on “Conversion and Iron Man,” Augustine underwent a major conversion to the Catholic faith as a young man and was baptized Ambrose in 387 AD. He also wrote about the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.²⁸

That Bread which you see on the altar, having been sanctified by the word of God, is the Body of Christ. That chalice, or rather, what is in that chalice, having been sanctified by the word of God, is the Blood of Christ. Through that bread and wine the Lord Christ willed to commend His Body and Blood, which He poured out for us unto the forgiveness of sins.²⁹

What you see is the bread and the chalice; that is what your own eyes report to you. But what your faith obliges you to accept is that the bread is the Body of Christ and the chalice the Blood of Christ.³⁰

What we see from Augustine is the emphasis on the fact that while the bread and wine have not changed in appearance, by our faith in Jesus as our Lord, we nonetheless believe that they have indeed become his body and blood.

From looking at just this representative small sample of the writings of the Church Fathers, you can discern a generally accepted belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. This belief is so entrenched in the Church that there is also no significant discussion of how this change takes place, “beyond their insistence that the word of Christ was its necessary condition.”³¹ In fact, it is not until the 11th century that people begin to seek answers on what the Church means when it states that Christ is fully present in the blood and wine of the Eucharist and how this change takes place. This is the next topic we will now begin to study.

Lesson III - How Does the Bread and Wine Become the Body and Blood Christ?

²⁸ Billy, *Beauty of Eucharist*, 220

²⁹ Jurgens Vol III, Augustine, 1519, 30

³⁰ Jurgens Vol III, Augustine 1524, 32

³¹ Barron, 108

Interestingly during the Patristic Period (1st - 8th century) when there was all manner of discussion about the person of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Trinity, there was no formal debate at all concerning the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.³² In fact it was not until the 9th century that we have the first full treatise of the Eucharist written by St. Paschasius Radbertus. Paschasius' writings affirmed the idea of the real presence of Christ but placed excessive emphasis on the corporeal aspects of the Eucharist that he believed it shared with the actual physical body of Jesus. "He did not sufficiently explain the unique and special mode of Christ's existence in the sacrament."³³

Interestingly, Ratramnus, a monk from the same monastery as Paschasius, at the request of King Charles the Bald wrote a counterargument to what was presented by Paschasius. Ratramnus claimed it was impossible for the Eucharist to be the actual body of Christ because no substantial change has taken place to the bread and wine. "Thus Christ's presence is purely spiritual and is capable of spiritually nourishing us in the way that the other sacraments ... but that is all."³⁴ Ratramnus' arguments against the real presence were ignored by the Church for the next several hundred years and belief in the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist continued without controversy until Ratramnus' conclusions were revived by Berengarius of Tours.³⁵

The 11th century saw a rise and acceptance of rationalism. This view still holds sway to our modern day with a belief that knowledge comes only from using scientific principles to verify what is the truth. As the Eucharist is a mystery and relies on faith, it is easy to see that the belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist was going to be questioned. The first big challenge came from Berengarius of Tours who "firmly denied the conversion of the substance

³² Feingold, *The Eucharist: Mystery of Presence, Sacrifice, and Communion*, 223

³³ Feingold, 236

³⁴ Feingold, 237

³⁵ Feingold, 238

of bread and wine into the substance of Christ because he thought such a conversion was impossible.”³⁶ Berengarius had two major objections that many still hold to this day. First, it was impossible for Christ to be bodily in heaven and also present on the many altars around the world. Second, the body and blood of Christ of the Eucharist still resembled bread and wine which seemed to indicate no change had taken place. Despite his objections, Berengarius insisted he still believed in Church teaching about the real presence. Exactly how Berengarius believed Christ was present in the Eucharist is difficult to understand but one of his opponents described it by stating that “the Lord's Body and Blood are contained there, but in a hidden way, and they are impanated - if I may it in that way - so that they may be consumed.”³⁷

While the writing of Berengarius initially caused some confusion in the Church, ultimately his objections were beneficial because they forced theologians to clarify what it meant in claiming the Eucharist to be the body and blood of Christ. At the Synod of Rome in 1079 AD Berengarius was forced to recant his position. A particularly noteworthy outcome of the synod was for the first time in a magisterial document we read that “the bread and wine that are placed on the altar are substantially changed [substantialiterconverti] into the true and proper and living flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, our Lord.”³⁸ To justify the Church’s belief in the substantial change, she appeals to what was found in sacred scripture and sacred tradition.³⁹ These would include some of the items we looked at in the first two lessons in this study block.

As the Church continued to work through the theology of the change of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, it realized that this change is not like the transformational change that takes place in nature.⁴⁰ The Eucharist involved a complete and total change of

³⁶ Feingold 239

³⁷ Feinbold 241

³⁸ Feingold, 242-43

³⁹ Feingold, 246

⁴⁰ McDermott, ST 75-8, 575

substance into another through the power of God. Eventually the Church settled on the word transubstantiation to describe the change into the body and blood of Christ that takes place during Mass. This term was first used in the mid-11th century and found its way into official Church documents in 1202 and again in 1215 when it was included by the Fourth Lateran Council to explain the mystery of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

There is indeed one universal Church ... in which the priest himself, Jesus Christ, is also the sacrifice. His Body and Blood are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the appearance of bread and wine, the bread being transubstantiated into the body by the divine power and the wine into the blood, to the effect that we received from what is his what he has received from what is ours in order that the mystery of unity may be accomplished.⁴¹

The casualness of the use of the word transubstantiation at the council, without any additional explanation, demonstrates that “the term is obviously, by this time, generally accepted as an ordinary way of speaking about the eucharistic change.”⁴²

To assist us in understanding the term transubstantiation and what the Church believes about the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, we will turn to the writing of Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas is perhaps the most well noted and respected Doctor of the Church and lived during the 13th century. One of his most well known works is the *Summa Theologiae*. While Aquinas wrote on many theological topics, he is especially known for his love of the Eucharist which was “much more than merely a topic of academic interest; it was the center of his spiritual life.”⁴³ Thomas Aquinas’ love of the Eucharist also compelled him to write various hymns and poems that the Church still uses today; including during our times of adoration here at Regis.

The first question that Aquinas can help us answer is if the Eucharist is only a sign or if it is actually Christ? Aquinas wrote that the Eucharist is composed of the body and blood of Christ

⁴¹ Feingold 250

⁴² Barron, 113

⁴³ Barron, 114

but it “cannot be perceived by our senses but only by faith in God’s authority: This is my body which is to be given up for you.”⁴⁴ Jesus says these words at the Last Supper and as we discussed earlier this authority is extended to the priest during the Mass. Aquinas gives several reasons why it is necessary for Christ to be actually present in the Eucharist. The one that is most appealing to me is that Jesus loves us more intentionally than anyone else. We read in scripture that Jesus calls us his friends (Jn 15:14-15). This is why Jesus does not want “to deprive us his bodily companionship” while we are living on earth and through the Eucharist we are able to be sacramentally joined to the body and blood of Christ.⁴⁵ It is the ongoing celebration of the Eucharist that serves as the “seal and guarantee of the friendship with all the Lord’s disciples across the ages.”⁴⁶

It would be natural for people to wonder how it is possible for Christ to be physically present when the Eucharist does not in any way appear to be Jesus. Thomas writes “the body of Christ is present in this sacrament not in the way a body is present in a place with its dimensions matching those of the place, but in a way altogether special to this sacrament.”⁴⁷ When we are talking about Christ being present in the Eucharist, we must be clear that this sacramental presence is not the incarnated body that Jesus assumed on earth and is now in heaven.⁴⁸ So when the Eucharist is locked in the tabernacle or exposed in the monstrance it is not like we have hidden the Jesus of the incarnation away or are parading him through the streets.⁴⁹ We accept by faith that the words of Christ used at the Last Supper make the bread and wine his body.⁵⁰ Jesus though is able to make his body present in a sacramental mode in the Eucharist; “the body of

⁴⁴ McDermott, 571 III, 75,1

⁴⁵ McDermott, 571, III, 75, 1

⁴⁶ Barron, 118

⁴⁷ McDermott, 571, III 75 1

⁴⁸ Barron, 118

⁴⁹ Barron, 119

⁵⁰ Barron, 130

Christ is not in the sacrament of the Eucharist the way a body is ordinary in a place” which allows Him to be completely present sacramentally on many altars throughout the world.⁵¹

Having established that Christ is present in the Eucharist sacramentally, it is important to understand the way the Church explains this changing of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ actually takes place because it still tastes like bread and wine. Thomas Aquinas makes use of the ideas of substance and accident to explain how this change takes place.

Accidents are perceptual by our senses and are characteristics or conditions “which do not directly belong to the essence of the thing, but rather answer the question of how a thing is.”⁵²

Examples of accidents would be size, shape, color, smell, etc. In talking about a substance, Thomas is referring to the “reality that underlies all the outward appearances or changeable accidents of a thing and gives it its identity.”⁵³ We should not associate substance as being something we can grasp with our senses for it is more properly understood as “that underlying and essential invisible substrate that constitutes the deepest identity of a given thing.”⁵⁴

With this basic understanding of substance and accident, we can now discuss what happens when the priest uses the words of consecration at the Mass. As we all know from our own experience at Mass, the accidents of the bread and wine do not change as the Eucharist continues to taste and look the same as bread and wine (side note, this is why we should look with some skepticism at reports of blood and heart tissues being found in reported Eucharistic miracles). The change that takes place occurs with the substance of the bread and wine, through the power of God the substance is completely changed into the body and blood of Christ.

Thomas notes that “this conversion is not like any natural change, and only God has the power to

⁵¹ Barron, 119

⁵² Feingold, 260

⁵³ Feingold, 260

⁵⁴ Barron, 120

bring it about.”⁵⁵ While our senses are unable to comprehend any change, our faith allows us to “penetrate further than they do” to recognize Christ is truly present body and blood, soul and divinity in the Eucharist.⁵⁶

Conclusion

As we complete these three part lectures, I think it is important that we not get so caught up in the theology of the real presence of Christ, that we forget why Christ left us the Eucharist in the first place.

“The Catholic doctrine of the real presence is not contradictory; it simply rests on the omnipotence of God and the divinity of Jesus Christ. Just as God can create the world out of nothing, so He can change one thing into another by His word. He who said at the beginning, “Let there be light,” now says, “This is my body.” And just as out of nothingness light was made, so now Jesus Christ is made present on the altar under the appearances of bread and wine.”⁵⁷

“Sight, touch, and taste in Thee are each deceived;
The ear alone most safely is believed;
I believe all the Son of God has spoken
Then Truth’s own word there is no truer token.” TA Adoro te devote⁵⁸

“To symbolize real presence, that is, to proclaim, make explicit and celebrate it, more is required than just the words of Jesus identifying himself with the sacred meal, powerful action though that be. There is required also the action of believers who accept and cooperate with this action of Jesus ... in their commemorative meal they proclaim his presence, and actualize it and celebrate it and unite themselves to him as already present.”⁵⁹

⁵⁵ McDermott, 572, III 75 4

⁵⁶ McDermott, 573, III 75 6

⁵⁷ Feingold, 274

⁵⁸ Feingold, 277 (TA Adore Te Devote, in Cantalamess, This is My Body, 13.)

⁵⁹ Lawler, 131

“The real presence is not an end in itself, but the salutary means by which Christ lives more intimately within our hearts ... Christ comes in order that by means of this eucharistic presence he might live in our hearts, in our spirits, in our senses, and in our sanctified bodies.”⁶⁰

There is an eschatological significance of the Eucharist as well of transubstantiation. Just as God is able to take the “fruit of the earth and work of human hands” to create the Eucharist “are not destroyed or annihilated through the power of Christ; rather, they are transfigured, elevated into vehicles for Christ’s self-communication.”⁶¹

⁶⁰ Schillebeeckx, 180

⁶¹ Barron, 122

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