

EUCHARIST:

The Presence of Christ for the People of God

*You are there on the table; you are there in the chalice.
You are the body with us, for, collectively, we are this body.
We drink of the same chalice because we live the same life.*

-St. Augustine of Hippo-

INTRODUCTION

At the center of the Catholic faith is not a series of doctrines or a collection of theories, but an *action*, founded upon the ministry and command of Christ and in the unbroken tradition of the Church. *Eucharist*—also called *Holy Communion* or the *Lord's Supper*—is the foundational act of the Christian community; rooted in the celebration of the Jewish *Pascha* (Passover) on Holy Thursday by Christ and his disciples. It is the on-going manifestation of the Incarnation—the intrusion of God into the world in a complete and irreversible way—which is given to us to remember and to be *re-membered*, i.e., reunited, with God every day and at every level: physically as well as spiritually, personally as well as communally. The Eucharist, more than any doctrine or structure of authority, *is* the heart of the Church; its clearest and most profound sign of what we are and what we are to be—a People blessed by God and called to become the body of Christ for the life of the world.

Yet, even if all of that is true, what *is* the Eucharist and why does it have such importance? Is it bread and wine transformed by our prayer, or is it

something more? We speak of “*real presence*” but what does that mean? Is it magic? Is it metaphor or symbol? What are we doing at Mass when we pray the Eucharistic prayer and respond with the great “*Amen*”? These are the questions that those entering the Church or growing in their faith ask, but they should be the questions of all Catholics who seek to know their faith.

In the next few pages, I hope to explore some of the questions around the Eucharist, providing less a detailed theology of the sacrament, then a discussion of some key points and an invitation to your own prayer and reflection. For the truth is, like all the sacraments (indeed, perhaps more than any other), Eucharist means many things—i.e., it is *multi-valent*—and no explanation, no speculative theology will ever suffice or replace the experience one has of tasting the body of Christ or of receiving his blood in a

community of faith. Yet, theological reflection can help us better understand our experience of grace, and enter more deeply into the mystery of longing and love that the sacrament offers.



REAL PRESENCE: SYMBOL & REALITY

*The bread that I will give
is my flesh for the life of the world.*

-John 6:5-

*If it were only a symbol,
I'd say to hell with it.*

-Flannery O'Connor-

In the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks to thousands of his followers in language that horrifies them, and leads many to leave him. Telling them that they must “Eat my flesh” and “drink my blood,” he sets the stage for the accusations of cannibalism that will later be leveled at Christians from Rome to Jerusalem, and he drives away many—especially pious Jews who are directed by kosher laws to avoid even animal blood in their meals. For those raised in a post-Christian world, familiar with the Eucharistic language of *body* and *blood*, much of the horror of these passages is lost; we understand that Jesus was speaking *symbolically*, referring to the sacrament he would offer his disciples. Yet, even though Jesus does not seek cannibalistic followers, our sophistication can also blind us to the power of Jesus’ words, leading us to reduce the sacrament of Eucharist to a “mere” symbol. Avoiding these twin challenges of literalism and reductionism, the Church has long held for a principle of *sacramentality* and *real presence*—a principle that many today do not know and even more do not really understand.



To understand the notion of the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, we need first to understand the idea of **symbol** more richly than our culture often does. A true symbol is not just a conventional $a = b$ equation, where one thing *stands for* another; rather, when it is fully realized, **a symbol reveals a deeper, invisible reality that cannot be expressed directly**. For example, imagine you are sitting with your father, who is dying of cancer, and slowly feed him ice-chips to relieve his suffering. If you were an English major and read that in a novel, you might say that the action was *just a symbol* of your love for your father; but in reality, it was not *just a symbol* of your love, it **is** your love: **made visible**. That

is what a fully-realized symbol is: the visible manifestation of an invisible reality. Thus, we could say our choices and our actions are a *symbol of ourselves*, since they reveal the reality they

symbolize—i.e.

they show the inner self, however imperfectly. When a symbol reveals something of the reality of God, we call it a *sacrament*.

With this understanding, we can see what is meant when theologians speak of Jesus as the *sacrament of God*, i.e., the visible image of the invisible God (to paraphrase St. Paul); or when the Vatican II speaks of the Church as “in the nature of a sacrament” (VCII, **Lumen Gentium**, 1), since it is a visible manifestation of the Incarnate God, Jesus. In both of these cases, the term **sacrament** means **symbol** in its full, not in its weak, sense. Jesus does not just

“stand for” God, but **is** God, made visible; and likewise, the Church, in its fullness, **is** Christ, alive in the world today. Such a strong sense of symbol breaks down the false dichotomy of *symbol v. reality*, because the truest symbols are precisely those which are united to the reality—which reveal the reality in a profound and mysterious way.

So it is that the Eucharist *is* the body and blood of Christ, sacramentally present, through the action of the Mass. Indeed, the action of the Mass is the sacramental re-enactment of the Incarnation. As the Word of God became flesh, and then, throughout his human life, offered himself back to the Father, receiving in return the fullness of life in resurrection; so, we join with Jesus in a *sacramental* repetition of this action. The Word is received into the community; the bread and wine (symbols Jesus himself chooses to represent himself when he gives



his body and blood away before they can be taken by others), are offered to the Father in the power of the Spirit; the Father, through the same Spirit, consecrates these gifts with the Spirit of the resurrection, thus making the bread and wine the sacramental body and blood of the resurrected one. ***It is not the flesh and blood of Jesus, but the body and***

blood of the resurrected one, which thus becomes our food and drink—the living symbol of God who continues to be present at each Mass and in each moment.

MEMORIAL OF OUR REDEMPTION

“Do this in memory of me.”

-Eucharistic Prayer-

In the oddly-titled but wonderful book, ***The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat***, neurologist Oliver Sacks tells of a number of people who have had strokes or seizures that affected unusual centers in the brain. In one such case, a man is left without any short term memory—and by this, I do not mean the type of dementia one finds in Alzheimer's patients; rather, this man is totally lucid but completely trapped on a day in 1944 when he had his stroke. Minute to minute, things appear and then disappear. Aggravations, joys, people, places: all are there but none are held in memory and so disappear immediately. At one point in his conversation with this man, Sacks asks, “*Are you happy?*” and the man responds with a poignant honesty that reveals the tragedy of his condition: “*I don't know.*”

Without memory, how could he know if he were happy—how could any of us know—since joy and sorrow both exist in the flow of memory, as responses and recollections to events and people who enter our lives? Far from a thing of the past, memory is a present phenomenon, by which we hold and redeem all the moments of our life into a present self, who is unfolding into an unmade and as yet uncreated future. As the philosopher and theologian, Søren Kierkegaard says, we are “*everything we have ever done, plus freedom.*” So it is, that memory is not mere recollection of past events, but the heart of our reality, by which moments transcend their

own occurrence and continue to exist and shape the depths of our being. We are, largely, the memories which live through us.

Such a sense of living memory—which, in the Greek of the New Testament, is called **anamnesis**—is at the heart of our experience as Christians, and especially our life as sharers of the Eucharist. When Jesus says to his disciples, on the eve of his passion and death, “**Do this in memory of me,**” he is not simply asking them to wax nostalgic about the good old days; rather, he is commanding them (commanding us) to make present again, to **re-member**, his life and his death and his resurrection through our living relationship with those events in the sacrifice of the Mass and the life of the Church. The real presence of Christ in the Eucharist and in the Church emerges through the acts of remembrance by which what happens in Jesus’ life happens in every community that bears his name and in every person who recalls—by word and action—his sacrifice of love. Just as we are, in a real sense, the memories we hold of our own lives, so too, as Christians, we become Christ by making the memory of him a part of ourselves. We re-member Christ in our own lives and in our community, and so become the sacrament of Christ for the world.

This act of remembering lies at the root of the structure of the Mass itself. We begin with gathering, with the acknowledgement that we are both individuals and community. In this moment, we take time to acknowledge our faults and open ourselves to God’s mercy. The **Penitential Rite** that begins Mass recalls our baptismal call to unity and forgiveness; it unites us to Jesus, who began his public ministry in the baptism of repentance preached by John the Baptist. Similarly, the **Liturgy of the Word** unites us to the teaching

life of Jesus, recalling how—in word and deed—he incarnated the promises of the Old Testament and became enfleshed in the life of the early Church. However, the teaching of Jesus finds its ultimate expression not in words but on the cross, where he offers up his life rather than renounce the loving compassion that he has shown throughout his ministry. The cross, then, is an *altar of sacrifice*, by which Jesus gives his love to the Father, even at the cost of his physical life. And at our altar, we remember this sacrifice, by offering the bread and the wine, as Jesus did just before his death. Though we do not die in the same



way as Jesus, **we enter his death by entering the memory**, and by allowing the memory to enter us: body and blood given to God and to us before they can be taken and spilled by the violent of the world. In consuming his body and blood, we *re-member* Jesus; we make him part of our bodies and our community by this sacrament, and then by going forth (as the Mass ends) to become that memory alive in the world. In other words, *we become the incarnated memory, the real presence of Christ, which is the purpose of the sacrament and, indeed, the promise of our salvation.*

COMMUNION: THE CHURCH AS EUCHARIST

The first, the most basic definition of a human being is that of priest.

Humans stand in the center of the world and unify it in their act of blessing God, of both receiving the world from God and offering it to God—and by filling the world with this eucharist, humans transform their life (the one that they receive from the world) into life in God, into communion with Him.

The world was created as the “matter,” the material of one all-embracing eucharist, and human beings were created as the priest of this cosmic sacrament.

-Alexander Schmemmann-

About 30 years ago, two Jesuits were driving through the Alaskan bush, arguing about theology. The older Jesuit complained that the younger men were not teaching the Eskimos

view of the world.” At this the older Jesuit started to splutter and yelled, “Then what do you tell people about the Eucharist? What do you believe?” The younger Jesuit looked thoughtful and said, “I believe that whatever it was that happened between Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper, happens every time we gather around the altar and break the bread and share the cup. I am not sure exactly of how it works, or what it all means. . .but I know it’s something real and powerful that changes everything.”

*“Something real and powerful that changes everything.” In the end, for all the theologies of the Eucharist, this is perhaps the most important thing we should keep in mind: **that God’s love and embrace of the world was not a one-time event, but happens every day and is changing the world is a constant and quite irrevocable way.** Indeed, the world itself is becoming Eucharist—an offering of praise and thanksgiving, a blessing given to humanity and returned to God—through each moment of sacrifice and celebration.*



about *transubstantiation* (i.e., St. Thomas Aquinas’ explanation of how the bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus). “Well,” said the younger Jesuit, “*the truth is that I am not sure I understand that whole*

At the heart of our faith, we are called to believe that the Eucharist of the Mass is not a complete and isolated incident, but is the visible outcropping of the Eucharist that is unfolding in the whole of the Church, where the dichotomies and divisions we cling to are being overcome by a love that takes flesh and by a God who will not be reduced to our simple, one-dimensional intellectual boxes. Eucharist—which is also *communion* with God and with each other, with the

products of the earth and of powers of heaven—proclaims that **God cannot be categorized by a simple “either/or” but insists on being “both/and”**: both divine and human; both

Creator and creature; both ascended into heaven and present in the food we eat and the wine we drink. We gather at an altar of sacrifice that is also—simultaneously—a table of celebration, and we consume the living God who consumes us in the process: *who becomes our flesh and bone, our spirit and our substance, while never taking away our own unique identity.*

If this all sounds terribly confusing, that is because it is. It is as confusing as love. As confusing as any of the great truths which call us to think with our hearts and our bodies, as well as with our heads. Such truths are always ***multivalent***—existing at multiple levels at the same time—and so demand a symbolic and not a merely literal expression. Yet, we must sustain this “*confusion*,” this multivalence, or risk reducing the Eucharist to an element or a moment, and so lose the real presence of Christ at every level of reality. (This is the essence of the ***Mystery of the Eucharist***: not simply something we don’t yet have enough information to understand, but something that, by its nature, transcends understanding.)

This need for multivalence is why, when I train Eucharistic ministers, I encourage them to say, simply “*Body of Christ*” when they distribute communion, and to avoid the more emphatic, “***This is the Body of Christ.***” This latter formulation, often used to stress the real presence of Christ in the consecrated host, is not *wrong*, but is too literal and too limited. It misses the beautiful richness of meaning present in the moment of communion—a richness that transcends one single definition of the Body of Christ and includes many. For while it is true that the consecrated host is the Body of Christ, so too is the person who comes to receive it. And, to go further, the community of giver and receiver, in the action of sharing (as Christ did at the Last Supper) is, likewise, the Body of Christ.

The real presence of Christ in the consecrated bread and wine of the Eucharist is inseparable from the real presence of Christ in the Church

—indeed, the Eucharist, given and received, is the Church (i.e., the Body of Christ), encapsulated in a single moment. For this reason, we venerate the consecrated bread and wine through genuflections and bows, but we also consume it as a gift given to us to share, given for our refreshment and our celebration, our strengthening and our union. We honor Christ in the tabernacle, but honor him fully only when we also *become* the living body of Christ—i.e., the communion of the Church—for the consecration of the world.

Jesus Christ—who became the body and blood of Mary without ever ceasing to be the Son of God—becomes our body and blood, as well; communes with us in our very flesh, as well as in our minds and hearts. How can that not “*change everything*”? How can that not make our lives different, and move us to make the world different? In this Communion of God and each of us (and all of us), we are not *withdrawn* from the world, but *enter it fully*, to sanctify it and to offer it back to God in a never ending circle of love and gift, sacrifice and celebration. ***We—the body and blood of Christ—become the sacrament of redemption we receive, for the life of the whole world.***



EPILOGUE: SUNDAY OBLIGATIONS

*An awe so quiet
I don't know when it began.
A gratitude
has begun
to sing in me.*

-Denise Levertov-

Recently, while at a dinner in Portland, a group of friends began to ask me about the Sunday obligation to go to mass. One of my friends—a lawyer, whose brother was from a very traditional parish in Wisconsin—was concerned because the pastor of his brother's church had told him he could never miss mass without it being a grave sin. My friend and the others at the table (too long among the Jesuits, I fear) thought the absoluteness of this demand excessive, and questioned me about my views.

"The Eucharist is a gift, and the Church calls us to weekly attendance to encourage us—to prod us—to receive the gift that will bless us, if we do it. It is like an obligation that gets your child to go to school or that gets you to the gym: in the long-run you know it serves you, and makes you better. At the same time, it isn't absolute—there are exceptions: travel or illness or a good reason. But in deciding a good reason, we have to be honest with ourselves, which is not always easy to do."

Like any good Jesuit, I encouraged them to discernment: to not let their decision be based upon urges or rules, but grounded in their deeper desires. I encouraged them to reflect on how rich the experience of Eucharist was—even when the priest wasn't perfect or the music wasn't

all they wanted or it seemed too long. And they admitted there was something about receiving the body and blood of the Lord that had them leaving mass almost always feeling better than when they came in.

Then one of the people asked, "Can't we just substitute going on a weekday or doing some good work?" To which I replied that, while daily mass and good works were also spiritually valuable—and perhaps, when prevented from Sunday, going on a weekday might strengthen one's spirit—still, one should not think of "substituting," since the obligation of Sunday mass was to gather in the community, and that was not something you could make up in any other way; anymore than one could make up for missing Christmas by bringing a gift home at another time. The obligation—though not blindly absolute—mattered, because God wants each of us to find happiness, and calls us to Jesus to strengthen us for the road.

I suppose all of these arguments were good and reasonable and, I think, made an impression; but as I thought of them myself, I realized that even *I* wasn't really convinced. Sometimes, I thought, *my own spiritual life is probably better met by staying at home and*



reading, or sleeping in, or spending some time with a friend. After all, God isn't taking attendance, and is just as present in nature as in Church (haven't we all heard that before). So, from what does the Sunday obligation emerge?

And then, sitting at the dinner table with all these friends, it struck me in a way it had never struck me before: going to Sunday mass is not just about **me**, but about **us**. I go not only for what I *"get out of it"* but because it matters for others that we are there together. Even when we don't yet know each other's name, when we stay in the same spot or just barely acknowledge each other: it matters.

Our gratitude, our understanding of God, our active living of our sometimes-too-secret identity as the Body of Christ raises not just me, but those who may be sitting around me—sitting alone, even when others around them, sitting with wounds they don't completely acknowledge, with needs they only barely comprehend. I am obliged not

because God will be *disappointed* or *angry* or *less divine* by my absence—nor because I always get *something* from Church—but because *I am on mission to the Church as a member and companion of every other person in those pews* (or who might be there if we drew them in). **We are Eucharist for each other, even when we may not know it.**

I come to Mass because I am grateful (eucharistic)—and indebted—to *us*; and even if God may not *need* me there, the body of Christ does. The obligation is not, I guess, really to God *"up there"* but to living God who has handed me his body and blood to distribute to the world. My obligation is to the Church: the whining children and the bent seniors, the harried moms and the ironic teens, the successful and the struggling, the lost and the dazed and the cocky and the scared—i.e., my people, God's People, our People.

