

REAL PRESENCE IN THE EUCHARIST

In the Gospels, Jesus says, “This is my body” and “This is my blood.”
What does that mean to each of us? *by Jeffrey D. VonLehmen*



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How is Jesus present in the Eucharist? Most of us, at one time or another, find ourselves either asking that question or trying to explain the mystery for someone else. Catholics believe that the body and blood of Jesus are present in consecrated bread and wine. We do not say the Eucharist is *like* the body and blood of Jesus, but that it *is* the body and blood of Jesus. In the Gospels Jesus says, “This is my body,” and “This is my blood.” That is strong language. It is language Christians have sought to understand for many centuries.

In the Eucharist we proclaim the Mystery of our Faith. And it is a mystery! But the mystery of the kingdom of God and the Eucharist is meant to be obvious, although it cannot be reduced to human logic. Sometimes, what is most obvious is most overlooked.

I invite you to look at the obvious—*our ordinary human experiences*—to help make sense of Eucharist and



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real presence. Why does it make sense for Catholics to believe in what traditionally has been called *transubstantiation* (the changing of the whole substance of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ)? Why is it important to say that the Eucharist is a concrete encounter of the *community* with Jesus and not just a spiritual thing between an individual and God? In our own human experience we can discover why real presence and the body-and-blood presence of Christ are important to us and to God.

FLESH-AND-BLOOD RELATIONSHIPS

We often think of spiritual as invisible. But who wants an invisible relationship with a loved one?

Consider this example. A father leaves work early on a weekday, drives five hours to another city to be present at his son’s college basketball game, and then drives home the same night. The father arrives home about 5 a.m., catches an hour of sleep, then goes to work.

He does this often. Perhaps it would be enough to tell his son over the phone that he is thinking about him and cheering and praying for him. But think how much more it means to the child that his father is not just there in spirit—he is there in flesh. He is providing a *real presence* for his son. What a big difference!

When we love someone we want a concrete relationship, and the loving Spirit of God always seeks a body-and-blood relationship with us. That’s what we celebrate in the Incarnation at Christmas and in the death and resurrection of Jesus on Good Friday and Easter. The Spirit dwells in us so we might experience God, who wants a real relationship with us.

We need a body-and-blood relationship with God in Christ. Yet we can only begin to understand the body and blood of Jesus when we understand true love in relationships involving friends, family, and marriage.

SACRIFICE AND LIFE

Think in terms of word associations. When I say “green,” someone might think of grass. When I say “blue,” one might think of sky. In our culture, when someone says “blood,” we probably think of something terrible, of violence or loss of life. When we hear about body and blood as sacrifice, as in the sacrifice of the Mass, we think somebody or something has been killed. But in the ancient Hebrew mentality, if an animal was sacrificed to God, the people did not think the animal was killed to appease an angry God. Instead, they thought of blood as the presence of life. Sacrifice was not so much giving up their best lamb or the

first and best part of their crop. Sacrifice meant communion of life.

This brings to mind the wonderful image of an infant in the mother's womb. The infant is being nourished through the umbilical cord by the body and blood of the mother. The baby is receiving life! The mother's body is making all kinds of changes and sacrifices for the infant in her womb, and the mother is very conscious of the communion she has with her infant. The bond between mother and baby is truly a body-and-blood relationship.

The bond between us and God, our loving parent, is just as strong and concrete. God wants a body-and-blood relationship with us, and this concrete relationship is made possible in Christ. God so loved the world that he sent his only son. Christ's sacrifice in becoming one like us in the Incarnation and in his passion on the cross establishes a communion of life, a real presence in which we are assured that God desires us as much as we desire him.

The bread and wine are not simply *like* the body and blood of Christ; they are the body-and-blood presence of Christ. This is because our relationship is that concrete, that real, that wonderful! Jesus is God revealing God's self to us. Neither we nor God wants an invisible relationship—we want the real thing!

We can increase our understanding of God's presence during the eucharistic prayer and Communion by thinking about being in the womb of God where we are fed concretely through the umbilical cord of the Holy Spirit.

Demonstrating the importance of this sacrament, a Catholic visionary once said, "If I had a choice between a vision and the Eucharist, I would choose the Eucharist."

Truly the Eucharist is a real, interpersonal encounter between God and the worshipping community precisely because Christ is body-and-blood present. Our human experiences of love and relationships tell us that any lover seeks concrete union with the beloved.

The love expressed in the Eucharist is as old as Christmas. It is like the love between a mother and her infant in the womb. It is the love of God in Christ for his people not yet fully born into the reign of God: "... the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world. . . . 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" (Jn 6:51-56).

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BEING REALLY PRESENT

"True, real, and substantial" are very abstract terms when applied to *presence*. In day-to-day life, we do not speak about people whom we love being "truly, really, and substantially" present to us. More often than not, we speak about presence in terms of intimacy. In the Eucharist, Jesus wants to be intimately close to each of us. Jesus is not simply present by being in the same building as we are or by being physically close to us but not caring about us.

Rather, Jesus, in the Eucharist, wants to be and is deeply present to us in love and in compassion. Only when we begin to understand the Eucharist as a time when Jesus is not distant, but close; not aloof, but very intimate; not above us, but profoundly near us; not judging us, but compassionate toward us, will we truly be able to relate this teaching of the Church to our faith and devotion. —Kenan B. Osborne, OFM, *Sacramental Guidelines: A Companion to the New Catechism for Religious Educators* (Paulist Press, 1995), p 80.

THE DIFFERENT MODES OF CHRIST'S PRESENCE

In order that they should achieve a deeper understanding of the mystery of the Eucharist, the faithful should be instructed in the principal ways in which the Lord is present to his Church in liturgical celebrations.

He is always present in a body of the faithful gathered in his name (see Mt 18:20). He is present, too, in his Word, for it is he who speaks when the Scriptures are read in the Church.

In the sacrifice of the Eucharist he is present both in the person of the minister, "the same now offering through the ministry of the priest who

formerly offered himself on the cross," and above all under the species of the Eucharist. For in this sacrament Christ is present in a unique way, whole and entire, God and man, substantially and permanently. This presence of Christ under the species "is called 'real' not in an exclusive sense, as if the other kinds of presence were not real, but *par excellence*."

—Sacred Congregation of Rites, *Instruction on the Worship of the Eucharistic Ministry*, #9

DIG DEEPER

In what ways does the Church see Jesus as really present in the Eucharist?

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What does real presence in the Eucharist mean to you?

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Describe an experience where real presence made a difference in your life.

THE BODY OF CHRIST

There is no doubt that a body-and-blood relationship exists between a mother and her child. But they don't think of each other as body and blood. They think about the human relationship between them, whether or not it is mutually loving. It's the same way in the eucharistic celebration. We have a body-and-blood relationship with God in Christ. In this encounter, we no longer get stuck on the elements of bread and wine, body and blood. This is because we experience persons instead of things, relationships instead of magic. Real reverence has to be for the person of Christ and for all people for whom he died—the two are inseparable. That is why people are called the body of Christ.

We cannot have reverence for the body and blood of Christ—the person of Christ—if we knock down those for whom he died out of love. For this reason, people are the body of Christ. Scripture always says it so well: “Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me” (Mt25:45).

“If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ but hates his brother, he is a liar ...” (1 Jn 4:20). In speaking of the condemnation of the unjust steward, Matthew's Gospel says, “So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart” (Mt 18:35).

It is simple: we must have reverence for one another. We cannot help but want a community of

compassion, mercy, peace, and justice if we recognize that we all come from the same womb of God, the love of God poured out into our hearts through the outpouring of the Spirit, signed and sealed in the body-and-blood relationship we have in Christ.

—Jeffrey D. VonLehmen



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