

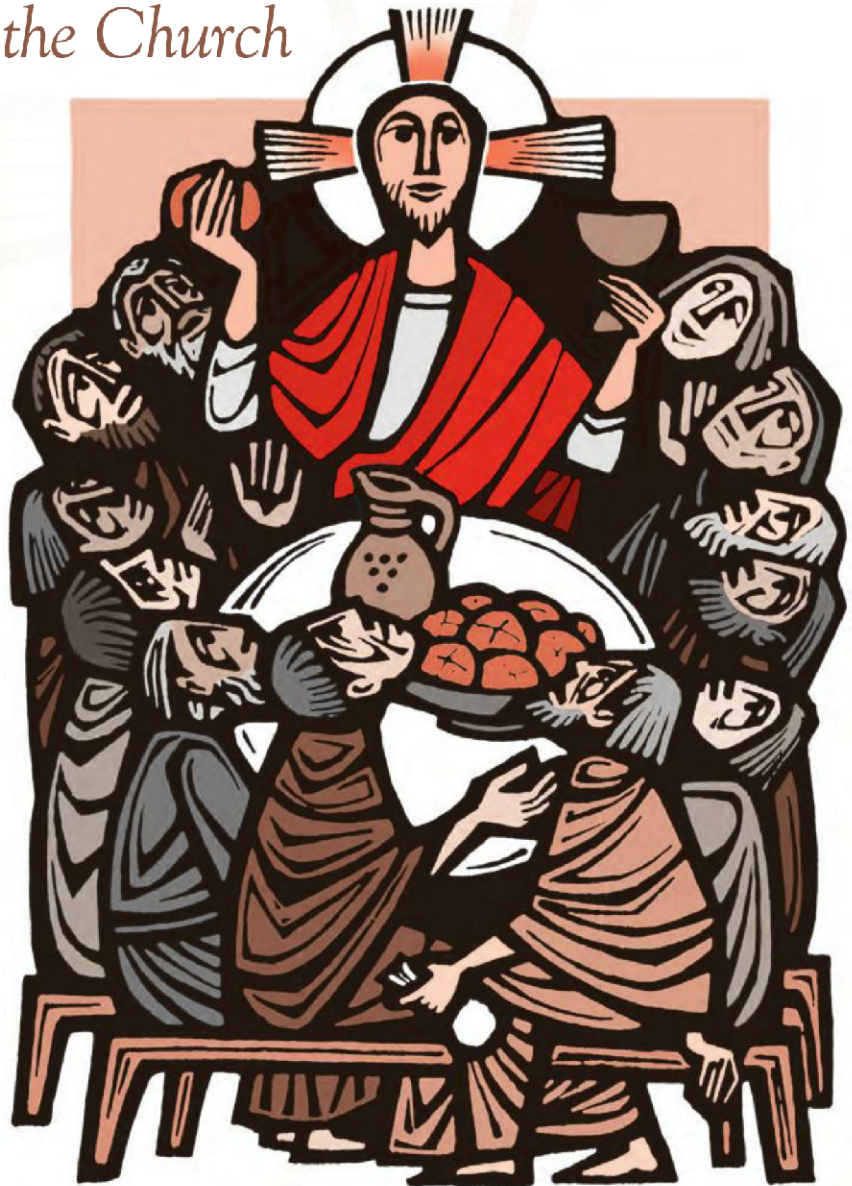
THE REAL PRESENCE

Jesus' Gift to the Church

by John Bookser Feister

Ask Catholics about the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist and you're likely to hear a variety of personal experiences. Once I was in a faith-sharing group with a man who was known as one of the "pillars of the parish." He was always available for parish committees, helped with the festival, occasionally led the rosary during prayer services and was very devoted to his family. He told our group about his *feeling* the real presence of Christ during quiet moments of prayer one Sunday after he had gone to Communion.

On that Sunday, he had visualized the body and blood of Jesus, consumed in the form of bread and wine, breaking down into smaller and smaller pieces, all the way down to the tiniest element, being carried to every part of his own body by his beating heart. He felt literally "nourished by Jesus" throughout.



He also felt deeply connected to those around him, he said. He felt the Eucharist, the presence of Jesus, at the very center of his being and at that point, he felt connected to that same central point in everyone else who had just received Communion. He experienced, in a mysterious way, the real presence of Jesus, an experience of both transcendence with God and of communion with the the Body of Christ, the Church, indeed the whole world. His experience points to an authentically Catholic understanding of the Eucharist.

Recent years have seen a growing concern about Catholics' understanding of the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. Some surveys show that a number of practicing Catholics are not clear about the doctrine of real presence. Some think of consecrated bread and wine as only symbols of Jesus' presence rather than a genuine change of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, the long-standing Catholic understanding. In 1999 a large group of U.S. bishops petitioned their fellow bishops to join them in addressing the problem. They termed confusion about the real presence to be a "grave" situation.

The first result of the bishops' efforts is a 2001 pastoral statement, *The Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Sacrament of the Eucharist: Basic Questions and Answers*, published by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. That document, which was introduced to the bishops' conference as a resource for pastors and religious educators, presented 15

questions and answers, some of which are, by the bishops' own admission, a bit technical. There was nothing new in the document; it was merely a presentation of existing Catholic teaching. There was a plea from some of the bishops for easy-to-understand resources that would explain real presence for everyone. In this *Update* we'll take a look at the principal themes of the bishops' questions and answers, including some of the renewed insights about real presence expressed at Vatican II.

Why do we even need the Eucharist?

The Eucharist is, for Catholics, both a meal and a sacrifice. The Lord gave us the Eucharist at the Last Supper because he wanted us to share in the life of the Trinity, the loving communion of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We become united to God at our Baptism, and receive a further outpouring of the Holy Spirit at our Confirmation. In the Eucharist we are nourished spiritually, brought closer to God, again and again: "By eating the Body and drinking the Blood of Christ in the Eucharist we become united to the person of Christ through his humanity," write the bishops. They remind us of the words of Jesus in John's Gospel: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him" (Jn 6:56).

This meal of fellowship and unity, though, also is understood as a sacrifice. Why is that? Because Jesus died for our

sins. Human sin was so great that we could never share fully in the life of God. Jesus came to reunite us. The bishops write, "Through his death and resurrection, he conquered sin and death and reconciled us to God. The Eucharist is the memorial of this sacrifice. The Church gathers to remember and to re-present the sacrifice of Christ in which we share through the action of the priest and the power of the Holy Spirit. Through the celebration of the Eucharist, we are joined to Christ's sacrifice and receive its inexhaustible benefits."

At the Eucharist, we re-present the outpouring of Christ's life so that our life can be restored. This gift of life is happening in eternity, always. We remember this in a special way when we sing the Holy, Holy, Holy at Mass, recalling the words of Isaiah 6:3, the hymn of the angels before God. We sing our praise before the "lamb of God," slain to take away the sin of the world, all that separates us from God (see Jn 1:29).

Why does Communion still look like bread and wine?

This perhaps is the greatest stumbling block for belief in the real presence. We are not the first generation of Christians to ask the question. Each generation has found the answer through the eyes of faith.

The Church teaches that the transformation into the Body and Blood of Christ is taking place "below the surface"—that is, in the "substance" of the bread and wine. What can be seen, tasted, touched and smelled is indeed the same as the bread and wine. But there has been a real change that requires faith to accept.

Medieval theologians, following the inspired genius St. Thomas Aquinas, talked of this transformation using the word *transubstantiation*, a technical theological term of that era. The recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church* discusses this term in Section 1376. In brief, we Catholics believe that, at their deepest reality, but not in physical characteristics, the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ when they are consecrated at Eucharist.



*"Whoever eats
my flesh and
drinks my blood
remains in me
and I in him."*

—John 6:56

After consecration, they are no longer bread and wine: They are the Body and Blood of Jesus. "As St. Thomas Aquinas observed, Christ is not quoted as saying, 'This bread is my body,' but 'This is my body.'"

Once the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ, they remain so "as long as the appearances of bread and wine remain" (see also the *Catechism*, #1377). They never revert back to bread and wine, because a real and permanent change has taken place. That is why we reserve the Blessed Sacrament, as we will see below.

Christ is fully present in every fragment of the consecrated host and fully present in every drop of consecrated Precious Blood. So a person receiving only the consecrated bread or wine receives Christ fully. Yet it is preferable, a more complete sign of the heavenly banquet, to receive the sacrament under both forms rather than only under one.

If it's real presence, why symbols?

It is particularly fitting that Christ should come to us in the Eucharist, write the bishops, for "Jesus Christ gives himself to us in a form that employs the symbolism inherent in eating bread and drinking wine. Furthermore, being present under the appearances of bread and wine, Christ gives himself to us in a form that is appropriate for human eating and drinking. Also, this kind of presence corresponds to the virtue of faith, for the presence of the Body and Blood of Christ cannot be detected or discerned by any way other than faith."

The bishops here are reminding us that, even though real—not merely symbolic—change has taken place, there is still tremendous symbolism at work. All sacraments use symbols, because symbols help us to understand the deepest connections between things. Here are two of my favorite examples: Just as food nourishes us, God nourishes us. Or again, just as grain of wheat must die to become bread, so, too must we. The symbolism of the Eucharist is a deep and nearly inexhaustible topic. It in no way diminishes the fact that a real, substantial change has taken

Vatican II on FORMS OF CHRIST'S PRESENCE



The following excerpt is from Vatican II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, #7.

- **Christ is always present in His Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations.** He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of His minister, "the same now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the cross," but especially under the eucharistic species.
- **By His power He is present in the sacraments, so that when a man baptizes it is really Christ Himself who baptizes.**
- **He is present in His word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church.**
- **He is present, lastly, when the Church prays and sings, for He promised: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20).**

place. In the bishops' words, "God uses...the symbolism inherent in the eating of bread and the drinking of wine at the natural level to illuminate the meaning of what is being accomplished in the Eucharist through Jesus Christ."

Why the tabernacle?

As we saw above, the Body and Blood of Christ, once consecrated, do not revert back to bread and wine. Although it all could be consumed at Eucharist, the Church, from early times, has found good reason to preserve that which was not consumed during the community's celebration of Eucharist. First of all, the Blessed Sacrament is reserved to be administered as "food for the journey" (*Viaticum*) for the dying. It is also used for the sick of

the community and for those who were, for some good reason, unable to be present for the community celebration.

Another pastoral practice arose as the faithful, centuries ago, began to see the value of being in the presence of the sacramental Body and Blood. Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament allows an opportunity to adore God, whether in eucharistic exposition or benediction, or in eucharistic processions. The Body of Christ in the form of bread in the tabernacle provides an excellent opportunity for private prayer. "Many holy people well known to American Catholics, such as St. John Neumann, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, St. Katharine Drexel, and Blessed Damien of Molokai, practiced great personal devotion to Christ present in the Blessed Sacrament," write the bishops.



Being in the presence of the sacramental Body and Blood... allows an opportunity to adore God... [and] provides an excellent opportunity for private prayer.

The presence of the Blessed Sacrament is cause for the greatest reverence, write the bishops, both during and after the celebration of the Eucharist. Canon Law states that the tabernacle in Church is to be in a place "distinguished, conspicuous, beautifully decorated, and suitable for prayer."

"According to the tradition of the Latin Church, one should genuflect in the presence of the tabernacle containing the reserved sacrament," write the bishops. They also instruct that greetings and conversations are best reserved for the vestibule, not the main portion of the church: "It is not appropriate to speak in loud or boisterous tones in the body of the church (that is, the nave) because of the presence of Christ in the tabernacle."

Fasting before receiving Communion, in accordance with Church law, is another form of reverence for the sacrament.

What if someone receives who doesn't believe?

Even though the Body and Blood of Christ are really present in the Eucharist, faith plays a strong role in how we respond to (or accept) that presence. It is commonly asked whether or not a nonbeliever has received the Body and Blood of Christ if he or she receives Communion. The answer is yes, in the sense that what

the nonbeliever has consumed is really Christ. But a lack of belief prevents someone from receiving the spiritual benefit of the Eucharist, "communion with Christ."

A related question arises about a person receiving Communion while in a state of mortal sin. Once again, the disposition of the recipient cannot change the fact that Jesus is truly present in the elements of the Eucharist. "The question here is thus not primarily about the nature of the Real Presence, but about how sin affects the relationship between an individual and the Lord," write the bishops. "Before one steps forward to receive the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion, one needs to be in a

right relationship with the Lord and his Mystical Body, the Church—that is, in a state of grace, free of all mortal sin. While sin damages, and can even destroy, that relationship, the sacrament of Penance can restore it."

How else is Jesus really present to us?

The Church teaches that Christ is present to us in other ways at the Eucharist besides in the Blessed Sacrament. He is present in the priest, the assembly gathered to worship, in the holy Scriptures (see box on p. 3).

It is indeed a mystery that God became flesh in Jesus, and that Jesus becomes present to us in sacrament and Scripture. *Mystery*, our bishops remind us, refers not to a puzzling reality, but rather, to "aspects of God's plan of salvation for humanity, which has already begun but will be completed only with the end of time."

"St. Paul explained that the mysteries of God may challenge our human understanding or may even seem to be foolishness, but their meaning is revealed to the People of God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 1:18-25, 2:6-10; Rom 16:25-27; Rev 10:7). The Eucharist is a mystery because it participates in the mystery of Jesus Christ and God's plan to save humanity through Christ." ■

John Bookser Feister is managing editor of Catholic Update. He holds master's degrees in humanities and theology from Xavier University, Cincinnati.

UPDATE

Question Box

- 1) How would you explain Christ's real presence in the Eucharist?
- 2) Discuss the various ways Christ is present in the Church.
- 3) Why is the doctrine of the real presence important to you?

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