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On the Eucharist

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The Eucharist and the Incarnation



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The Eucharist and the Incarnation

CHRIST INSTITUTED THE EUCHARIST FOR THE SAME REASONS THAT HE BECAME MAN

Why did Christ institute the Eucharist? We can expand our initial answer (given in talk 1) and say that Christ instituted the Eucharist for the very same reasons that He became incarnate. The motive for the Incarnation is the same as the motive for His Passion, and that is the same as the motive for instituting the Eucharist. This shows us that the Eucharist is not an afterthought, not something secondary, not a mere external rite, but inextricably tied up with the Incarnation and the Passion of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. It lies at the very center and heart of the Catholic faith. The Eucharist obeys the same divine logic as the Incarnation and the Passion, for it is their *prolongation*, as it were, throughout the life of the Church until Christ comes again in glory.

So what are the ends of the Incarnation? Why did the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity wish to take on a human nature in the womb of the Blessed Virgin? For pedagogical purposes, we can say that there were six principal ends:

1. To offer an expiatory sacrifice to satisfy for all human sin in perfect justice;
2. To show the divine love for man and give us a supreme motive for charity.
3. To teach us all the other virtues: faith, hope, humility, obedience, religion, magnanimity, fortitude, etc.
4. The Incarnation shows man his immense dignity to which he has been elevated by Christ: the dignity of entering into communion with the Blessed Trinity.
5. He partook of our humanity so as to give us a participation in his divinity through sanctifying grace, and to found the Church to be His Mystical Body and His bride.
6. He became man to give us the supreme merit of faith.

All of these ends serve both the glorification of God and the sanctification of man. Indeed, the sanctification of man is ultimately ordered to the glorification of God.

Expiatory Sacrifice of Atonement

Christ became man in order to be able to offer an expiatory sacrifice to satisfy for all human sins in perfect justice. Why was this necessary? Because of the gravity of sin, and the impossibility for man to offer a fitting reparation. Every mortal sin involves a rejection of the Law of God, and hence a rejection of God who is the author of that

law. And God is infinite Good. Therefore every mortal sin involves an infinite evil, a denial of our infinite Benefactor to whom we owe all honor and reverence. The gravity of sin is proportionate to the honor of the offended party.

The value of satisfaction, however, is determined by the dignity of the party who makes reparation. How could a mere man make satisfaction for an infinite evil, being both finite and rendered ignoble by sin? He could not do so. Therefore, God chose to make satisfaction Himself in our place, by taking on a human nature in order to suffer and die in it to expiate the sins of all men. Other men were born to live, but Christ was born in order to die for us.

St. Thomas Aquinas speaks of Christ's work of redemption as offering to God something more pleasing than all human sin is displeasing.¹ The life of the Word Incarnate, offered in His Passion with infinite charity for all men, atones for sin by being more pleasing to God than *all* human sin together—both that of Adam and all his descendants—is displeasing.²

However, as we mentioned above, Christ wished to mysteriously “prolong” that supreme moment of His life, and make it present *every day* in His Church throughout the Catholic world, on every Catholic altar. The Eucharist “contains” the expiatory sacrifice of our Redemption; it is mystically that very sacrifice because Christ Himself is immolated on the altar through the ministry of His priests who make His Priesthood present. In the Eucharist, the Victim of Calvary is made present on our altars, and His Blood is sacramentally poured out for the living and the dead. Christ's sacrifice has been given to the Church to be her perpetual sacrifice. We can see this in the very words with which Christ instituted the Eucharist during the Last Supper, calling it “my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Mt 26:28). This means that the offering of Christ in every Eucharist is more pleasing than all human sin combined is displeasing to God! Every Mass glorifies the Father more than all the combined sin of history tramples that glory.

Full Revelation of the Divine Love

God became man to fully reveal the infinite extent of the divine love for man, so that man would have the supreme motive to love God in return. This is summarized

1 St. Thomas, *ST III*, q. 48, a. 2.

2 See St. Proclus, Homily 1.6, in *Proclus, Bishop of Constantinople: Homilies on the Life of Christ*, trans. Jan Harm Barkhuizen (Brisbane: Centre for Early Christian Studies, Australian Catholic Univ., 2001), 67: “He not only has the value which counterbalances the weight of debt of those liable, but one which also outweighs all accounts!”

in John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Nothing could induce us to love God more powerfully than to know that God has become man for love of men, and has loved us to the point of shedding all His blood in torment for sinners.

The Eucharist continues the logic of divine love that prompted the Incarnation. The same love by which God became man and died on the Cross to save men is that by which He wills to remain sacramentally on the altars and in the tabernacles of the world, sacramentally pouring out His precious Blood and giving us His Body. John 13:1 highlights this by introducing the Last Supper, at which the Eucharist was instituted, as the culmination of Christ’s love: “Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, *he loved them to the end.*” The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1380 speaks of the Eucharist as “the memorial of the love with which he loved us ‘to the end,’ even to the giving of his life.”

Furthermore, He willed that this sacrament be the means by which the Church is nourished in that very love by which He became man and died for us.

Teaching Perfect Virtue

By becoming man, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity teaches us perfect virtue³ through His words and actions. In the Eucharist, Christ gives us supernatural virtue by infusing His grace into our hearts and nourishing us with an increase of grace and charity. However, in the Eucharist He is also a model of virtue—especially of charity, humility, and obedience—as in all the mysteries of His life. This truth has been admirably expounded by St. Peter Julian Eymard, a saint of the nineteenth century who dedicated his life to Eucharistic adoration, founding an order for that mission.

First of all, the Eucharistic presence of Christ is a perfect and inexhaustible model of **charity**. For charity is the gift of self for the sake of the loved one, and the Eucharist is precisely that. It is Christ who performs an incomprehensible miracle, every day, in every locality where there is a Catholic priest and a church, in order to give Himself to us as the bridegroom of our souls.

Charity seeks not its own. The Eucharist adds nothing to Jesus, but is entirely for our benefit. Christ present in the Eucharist is absolutely disinterested, for He is there entirely for us, for our welfare. Christ’s Eucharistic presence on our altars and in our tabernacles, day and night, adds nothing to Him, but everything to us. He is the divine

³ Christ is the perfect model of all the virtues with the exception of the theological virtues of faith and hope. Already in His earthly life Christ was united to God in glory, and thus He had no need for faith or hope. Mary, however, is said to be our perfect model of these virtues.

“*prisoner of the tabernacle*” in order to be able to give us audience whenever we wish it, to be available to give us the consolation of His presence whenever we need it, desire it and seek it, whenever we thirst for the face of God when all other consolations have run dry in this place of exile, this valley of tears.

Charity seeks no price. The Eucharist gives us the greatest treasure of the universe, free for the taking. Charity is patient. Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament endures all abuse, all irreverence, all sacrilege with the utmost meekness, for the sake of being perpetually present as divine Victim in our midst. Charity is delicate and discrete. Christ in the Blessed Sacrament does not impose Himself on anyone, but He is always there when we wish to pour out our hearts to Him.

Charity condescends to the level of the person loved, that the beloved feel no humiliation or intimidation. Could there be a greater example of the kindness of condescension than the Blessed Sacrament? Christ puts a veil on all of His divine and human greatness, and appears under the humble species of bread and wine, the most common of substances. If He appeared in all His glory as on Mount Tabor, we would be overawed and afraid. This condescension of Christ in the Eucharist thus serves to arouse us to respond to His charity with the greatest of confidence.

Finally, charity bears all things. What does Christ not bear in the Blessed Sacrament? He is received by those who have lost their faith in His presence and His divinity; by those in a state of mortal sin; by those who could not care less about Him; by those who knowingly commit sacrilege. And let us remember that Communion is meant to be the wedding embrace of the soul with its Bridegroom. What abominable embraces does He not receive at the hands of those who do not love Him! And why does He endure all of this? Because His charity would have it so, for the sake of those few souls who truly love Him as He deserves to be loved.

The Blessed Sacrament is the perfect model of **humility**, self-abnegation, and poverty. Christ, being God, is even more humbled by His sacramental state in the Eucharist, than He was in Bethlehem or Calvary. In Bethlehem and Calvary, He veiled His divinity so that only His weak and vulnerable humanity would be seen by men, and seen in an attitude of humiliation. However, in the Blessed Sacrament, even His sacred Humanity is veiled under the species of ordinary bread and wine—common food and drink, the most ordinary of ordinary things. He foregoes not only the appearance of the omnipotent power which He possesses as God; He also foregoes the beauty of His sacred humanity. This is the utmost extreme of poverty as well. He has divested Himself not only of all possessions, as on Calvary, but even of the appearance and sensible clothing of His human nature.

Humility entails hiding our talents and gifts if we can do so without loss to our neighbor. What better model of this than the Holy Eucharist, where the King of glory, the Creator of the world, appears as if He were but a piece of bread or a bit of wine! If there is anything that could teach humility to the proud sons of Adam, it is this divine self-abnegation! It is greater than that revealed in Bethlehem, or even on Calvary, where the centurion or the good thief could see the ineffable nobility of the suffering of the Son of God. But here self-abnegation has gone to the extreme of clothing itself with the appearances of common bread and wine, incapable of heroism or of any individuality, to humble our pride!

Finally, Christ in the Blessed Sacrament is the most perfect model of **obedience**. As He was obedient in Nazareth to St. Joseph and Mary, and on Calvary to His executioners, so likewise in the Eucharist He is perfectly and perpetually obedient, submitting to His priests and those who receive Him in Holy Communion, unto the end of the world. Christ obeys His priests absolutely and unconditionally in the Blessed Sacrament. He comes when they validly consecrate, and He stays present until the sacred species of the bread and wine are digested or corrupted. He comes regardless of whether the ceremony is solemn or irreverent (as long as it is valid). He comes whether or not the priest or the communicant is in a state of grace. He obeys even the greatest of sinners, although to their own great guilt. His obedience and humility is such that He remains present even in the face of great and willful sacrilege, such as Satanic rites.

The Merit of Faith

The Incarnation makes possible the greatest merit of faith, because of all God's works, the Incarnation is the most arduous to believe and the mystery that most transcends reason. St. Thomas remarks: "Indeed, among divine works, this most especially exceeds reason: for nothing can be thought of which is more marvelous than this divine accomplishment: that the true God, the Son of God, should become true man."⁴

All faith involves a conversion from what is seen to what is unseen, for faith is of things unseen, according to Hebrews 11:1: "*Faith is the substance⁵ of things to be hoped*

4 St. Thomas Aquinas, *SCG*, IV, ch. 27, n. 1, trans. Charles J. O'Neil.

5 See Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Spe salvi*, 7: "Faith is a *habitus*, that is, a stable disposition of the spirit, through which eternal life takes root in us and reason is led to consent to what it does not see. The concept of 'substance' is therefore modified in the sense that through faith, in a tentative way, or as we might say 'in embryo'—and thus according to the 'substance'—there are already present in us the things that are hoped for: the whole, true life. And precisely because the thing itself is already present, this presence of what is to come also creates certainty: this 'thing' which must come is not yet visible in the external world (it does not 'appear'), but because of the fact that, as an initial and dynamic reality, we carry it within us, a certain perception of it has

for, the evidence of things that are not seen." Nothing could be more arduous than to see a man, and to believe, unseen, that He is God, the second Person of the Trinity.

Yet at the same time, the Incarnation makes possible not only the greatest merit and difficulty of faith, it also makes possible its greatest certainty, for nothing could be more certain than the words of the Word Incarnate. St. Augustine expresses this beautifully:

In order to give man's mind greater confidence in its journey towards the truth along the way of faith, God the Son of God, who is himself the truth, took manhood without abandoning his godhead, and thus established and founded this faith, so that man might have a path to man's God through the man who was God.⁶

The Eucharist is related to the Incarnation in that both establish the merit of faith by presenting to us a divine reality whose divinity is *veiled*. The Eucharist continues the logic of the Incarnation by increasing both the difficulty and the corresponding merit of the act of faith.⁷ On the Cross the humanity was visible but the divinity veiled. In the consecrated host, both the divinity and the humanity are veiled. Neither of Christ's two natures are visible, and yet we believe that Christ is present, body, blood, soul, and divinity. In the Incarnation, the veil was Christ's sacred humanity. In the Eucharist, Christ is *doubly veiled*. His sacred humanity itself is hidden under the veil of the species of the bread and the wine. We believe this most veiled truth only because it is affirmed by Christ's word, which is the word of Truth.⁸

St. Thomas admirably expressed this truth in his great hymn on the Eucharist, *Adoro te devote*. He writes:

"Visus, tactus, gustus, in te fallitur, sed auditu solo tuto creditur: credo quidquid dixit Dei Filius. Nil hoc Verbo veritatis verius."

"Seeing, touching, tasting, all are here deceived,
But by hearing only safely 'tis believed:
I believe whatever God's own Son averred:
Nothing can be truer than Truth's very Word."

The Eucharist perfects in us the merit of faith. St. Thomas continues:

"On the Cross Thy Godhead only was concealed,
Here not e'en Thy Manhood is to sight revealed:
But in both believing and confessing, Lord,
Ask I what the dying thief of Thee implored."

even now come into existence." The RSV, on the other hand, translates *hypostasis* as "assurance."

6 St. Augustine, *The City of God*, 11.2, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 430–31.

7 See St. Thomas, *ST* III, q. 75, a. 1: "And since faith is of things unseen, as Christ shows us His Godhead invisibly, so also in this sacrament He shows us His flesh in an invisible manner."

8 See *ibid.*: "The presence of Christ's true body and blood in this sacrament cannot be detected by sense, nor understanding, but by faith alone, which rests upon Divine authority."

I do not, like Thomas, see Thy Wounds appear,
 But with him confess my Lord and God is here.
 Grant this faith in me may evermore increase,
 And my hope in Thee, and love, may never cease.

Dignity of Man

Another end of the Incarnation is to show man his immense dignity as made in God's image, and elevated to share in the divine life. The Incarnation is the most fitting means to show us the dignity of man, for God has assumed a true human nature and, with it, all ordinary human realities. Pope St. Leo the Great says in a sermon on the Nativity: "Realize, O Christian, your dignity. Once made a 'partaker in the divine nature,'⁹ do not return to your former baseness by a life unworthy [of that dignity]. Remember whose head it is and whose body of which you constitute a member."¹⁰

Vatican II also took up this theme in *Gaudium et spes* 22, a text quoted again and again by Bl. John Paul II:

The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him Who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.... Since human nature as He assumed it was not annulled, by that very fact it has been raised up to a divine dignity in our respect too. For by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man. He worked with human hands, He thought with a human mind, acted by human choice and loved with a human heart.

If through the Incarnation "the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man," how much more true that is by the institution of the Eucharist! For in Holy Communion we receive His very Self into ourselves so that we may be assimilated into Him.

The Eucharist continues the logic of the Incarnation. What more could God do to show man His dignity than give him the most frequent opportunity to receive the Incarnate Word in His Body, Blood, soul and divinity to be our spiritual nourishment, and to offer our lives together with His? Furthermore, all the upright aspects of our daily life are given infinite dignity by the Eucharist, for we can offer and unite them with Christ's sacrifice so as to offer them to the Father together with the sacrifice of Calvary!

Divinization of Man

The principal end of the Incarnation is to give us an incomparable, inconceivable gift: a share or participation in God's own divine nature through incorporation into Christ's Mystical Body. The Fathers of the Church

frequently stated this in the startling phrase: God become man so that man could be divinized, *so that man could partake of God through charity*. This divinization of man does not mean that man takes the place of God. God cannot lose His throne or His divine majesty. On the contrary, the divinization of man is the transformation of man into the full image and likeness of God through the gift of sanctifying grace and supernatural charity.

Through grace we are given a participation in the divine nature, as St. Peter tells us in his second Letter, 1:4: "that you may be made partakers of the divine nature." Through sanctifying grace and charity, we are given a share in the inner life of God Himself. God became man so as to give us "a sharing in His divinity." God could have given us grace without becoming man, if He had wished, but the divine wisdom determined that all grace after Adam's fall should come to us through the Incarnation. Grace was given to the Jews and the other just men before Christ through Christ's future Incarnation and merits.

The Fathers of the Church love to describe this divinization of man through the Incarnation of the Son of God as a kind of divine interchange or "commerce" by which the God of majesty takes on the condition of frail mortal man in order to clothe man in the divine garments of sanctifying grace and supernatural charity, and bring him to the beatific vision of God in heaven.¹¹ The Son of God takes on weakness, so that we may be clothed with the glory of the Resurrection; He takes on humiliation and ignominy, so that we may be crowned with the glory of Redemption; He takes on excruciating suffering so that we may be freed from the pains of hell; He takes on death so that we may be clothed in immortality; He suffers "abandonment" from His Father on the Cross so that fallen man may be released from his exile and united to God.

The Greek Fathers spoke of this divine interchange as the "divine economy" or "economy of salvation." This divine interchange or commerce initiates a matrimonial bond. In the Incarnation, God betroths Himself to us, in His Church. He is the divine bridegroom and we, the Church, are the bride. Through this mysterious betrothal, the unworthy bride is adorned with the dignity of her

¹¹ See St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.19.1 (ANF, 1:448–49): "For it was for this end that the Word of God was made man, and He who was the Son of God became the Son of man, that man, having been taken into the Word, and receiving the adoption, might become the son of God. For by no other means could we have attained to incorruptibility and immortality, unless we had been united to incorruptibility and immortality. But how could we be joined to incorruptibility and immortality, unless, first, incorruptibility and immortality had become that which we also are, so that the corruptible might be swallowed up by incorruptibility, and the mortal by immortality, that we might receive the adoption of sons?" See also St. Thomas Aquinas, *Opusculum 57, in festo Corporis Christi*, lectio 1: "The only-begotten Son of God, wishing to make us participants in his divinity, assumed our nature so that, having been made man, He might make men gods."

⁹ 2 Peter 1:4.

¹⁰ St. Leo the Great, sermon 21 on the Nativity, in *Sermons*, trans. Jane Patricia Freeland and Agnes Josephine Conway (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 79.

bridegroom; although of lowly origin, she is elevated to His level. This betrothal is announced in the Old Testament prophets. For example, in Hosea 2:19, God promises: “And I will espouse thee to me forever, and I will espouse thee to me in justice and in judgment, in steadfast love and in mercy.” Seven centuries later, St. John the Baptist proclaimed that the promised bridegroom was come at last, saying to his disciples: “He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled” (Jn 3:29).

Jesus Christ Himself then taught the same truth in various parables. For example, He explained that His disciples did not fast as the Pharisees did because “the wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them. . . . The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast” (Mt 9:15). The most solemn of these parables concerns the wedding of the son of the king, to which those invited did not deign to come, and so the King said: “The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet” (Mt 22:8–9). Obviously, the wedding feast signifies the wedding of the divine Bridegroom, the Messiah, with His Church, His bride. The realization of these sacred nuptials was the end and purpose of the Incarnation of the Son of God.

This lesson was not lost on the Apostles. St. Paul understood his apostolic ministry as working to extend the realization of this promise, espousing men to God through incorporation into the Church. In the Second Letter to the Corinthians, 11:2, he writes: “I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.” In Revelation 21:2, John sees “the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband . . . the bride, the wife of the Lamb.”

It must be observed that the divinization of man through the Incarnation of Christ has nothing to do with a pantheistic proclamation of the divinity of nature. Pantheism, common to many oriental religions, teaches that nature is naturally divine, divine in itself, blurring the distinctions between all things, and especially blurring the distinction between the Creator and the creature. This does not happen in the divinization spoken of in Christianity. The members of the Christ’s bride, the Church, are divinized not by their own nature, not by a blurring of all distinctions and a blending into the all, not by proclaiming that we take the place of God and arrogate unto ourselves His prerogatives, but rather we are divinized by being *espoused to God*, by being *betrothed* to God in Christ, the bridegroom of the Church, who took on our lowliness so that we might be clothed with a share in His dignity.

Now let us look at how the Eucharist is intimately connected with this end of the Incarnation: the divinization of man and the giving of sanctifying grace by incorporating us in the Mystical Body of Christ. This end is most perfectly accomplished in the Eucharist, which was instituted precisely to be the celestial nourishment of our spiritual life, feeding us in grace by giving us sacramentally the very Author of all grace, Christ Himself. The Eucharist is a fountain of grace for all those who are correctly disposed to receive it (that is, for all those who already are constituted in grace through Baptism and Penance). It is that fountain of living waters that Christ promised to the Samaritan woman at the well.

In the Incarnation Christ became a partaker of our manhood, assuming a human nature to His divine Person. In the Eucharist, Christ gives Himself to be our nourishment, so that our humanity may be nourished by what is present in the Eucharist: Christ’s Body, Blood, Soul and *divinity*. In other words, the Eucharist is the divine means chosen to realize and perfect the divine interchange by which He who took on our humanity gives to us a mysterious share in His divinity, in His divine Life. This occurs through the gift of sanctifying grace, charity, the other infused virtues, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

This end of the Eucharist is admirably expressed in the prayer of the Offertory of the Mass: “By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.” In the offertory prayers, we ask God to grant the proper effects of the Eucharist, which is nothing less than that we may come to share in His divinity.

The Eucharist is not the only channel by which God gives us sanctifying grace and charity. It begins in Baptism, in which we are first incorporated into Christ’s mystical Body. Sanctifying grace is then increased through our good works and prayers performed in a state of grace, as well as the worthy reception of the other sacraments. The Eucharist, however, is the principal channel for the increase and nourishing of supernatural charity, for that is its reason for being. The Eucharist was instituted precisely for this end. It is the sacrament of Love and sanctification or “divinization.”

Let us not misunderstand this doctrine. The divinization of man worked by the Eucharist and the other sacraments is a divinization *through the union of love*. We are divinized through becoming spouses of God, sons of God, members of Christ’s mystical body. Love has a unitive effect, uniting us to what we love. We become what we love. If we love what is bestial, we become beasts. If we love what is sinful, we constitute ourselves in a state of sin and offense to God. By the same token, if we love what is beautiful, we become beautiful ourselves. The best way to acquire virtue is to love it intensely. If we love spiritual and heavenly things,

we become spiritual and heavenly ourselves. If we truly love God with supernatural charity, we become like God.

In fact, supernatural charity enables us to love God with a mysterious participation of the same love which unites the three divine Persons in the ineffable inner life of the Blessed Trinity. This supernatural love is fed and nourished in us by the Holy Eucharist, in proportion to the worthiness of our disposition in receiving it and the fervor of our devotion. Of course, it is but a tiny and infinitely feeble participation, but a true one nonetheless, which admits of as many grades as there are grades of sanctity.

In the Eucharist, Christ gives Himself to us as the bread of our life, and so gives us the possibility of becoming like Himself, if we receive Him with love, a love which He Himself nourishes in us through the gift of the Eucharist.

The Eucharist Is the Nuptials of the Lamb with His Church

We mentioned that the Incarnation was ordered to accomplishing a mystical marriage between the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, with the head of that Body, the Incarnate Son of God. This nuptial union is the heart of the New Covenant. We have seen that Christ spoke of this mystical wedding in parables. How is the wedding to be realized?

We can say that its realization has two moments. There is the final culmination in the heavenly Jerusalem, in the beatific vision in which we shall see the glory of the Lamb and be united to Him forever in a celestial eternal embrace. This is the goal of all of our hope, described enigmatically in the last chapters of Revelation.

However, that heavenly embrace was not to be entirely deferred for heaven. Our divine Spouse chose to consummate His nuptials with His Church even in the course of this life so that we would not faint from longing and weakness. He knows our weakness. But how was He to accomplish this mystical union with frail sinning men in this valley of tears, in which we walk by faith and not by vision? He did not wish to consummate His nuptials with us in such a way that would take away the merit of faith, or remove the essential conditions of our exile in the world in which we must fight the good fight of faith. How can this wedding be consummated with a bride in exile, who must remain in exile until the appointed time for the Second Coming of the Lord? How can this wedding be consummated with those who walk in darkness and fatigue? The wisdom of God devised a wedding feast fit for her exiled bride that would not be inappropriate to her state of trial. And that feast, of course, is the Eucharist.

In the Eucharist we receive the divine Bridegroom of our souls in the most intimate embrace that can be conceived, for we take Him into us as our spiritual nourishment and repast. However, instead of changing our divine food into

ourselves, as we do with other food, here we become gradually transformed into the likeness of our celestial bread.

The Eucharist is a consummation of union with our divine bridegroom perfectly fitting to our present state of trial, precisely because it is a union entirely realized in the plane of faith, a union that we cannot grasp with our external senses, conceive with our intellect, or demonstrate by any empirical means. It is a union that we believe, because it was taught to us and enjoined on us by the Word of Truth.

A rich analogy can be drawn between the Eucharist, as the consummation of the New Covenant, and the act proper to the marital covenant by which the spouses unite themselves in one body. As the conjugal act has two meanings: unitive and procreative, so the Eucharist can be said to have these two meanings. It unites us with the Bridegroom in the most intimate way, and nourishes us with an infusion of charity to enable us to exercise spiritual maternity/paternity in the world.

Conclusion

The Eucharist contains the entire mystery of Christ. First of all, it contains Christ Himself in His full substantial presence, body, blood, soul, and divinity. There is no mystery of Christ's life that is not somehow contained in the Eucharist.

Christ is present in the Eucharist with the very same humanity that He received from the virginal womb of His Blessed Mother on the day of the Annunciation, and which was born in Bethlehem, which shone in resplendent glory in the Transfiguration on Mt. Tabor and which, scourged, mocked and bloody, hung on the Cross on Calvary and expired.

It contains Christ's glorious body as He now exists in heaven at the right hand of the Father, but at the same time it mysteriously makes Christ present as the Victim of Calvary who offers the sacrifice of His human life and pierced Heart to the Father for the forgiveness of sins.

The Eucharist works a miracle like unto that of the Incarnation, for it introduces the bodily presence of God Incarnate into our midst, on the altar as once in the womb of the Virgin. And it works the Redemption of mankind gained for us on the Cross, whose efficacy it "prolongs" through the centuries and "applies" for the salvation of our souls¹².

The Eucharist thus suspends, as it were, the natural limitations of space and time, making the adorable person of Christ and His redemptive sacrifice present to all men in all places and succeeding times, so as to enrich His mystical Body with His sacrifice and nourish us spiritually with His body and blood.

¹² Cf. *Mediator Dei* 29, in which Pius XII says that Christ "is constantly atoning for the sins of mankind" in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.