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Talk #6

*Why Did Christ Institute the Eucharist?*



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## 6. Why Did Christ Institute the Eucharist?

What is the Eucharist? It is the greatest conceivable gift of God to man. It is literally heaven on earth. In *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* 9, Bl. John Paul II writes: “The Eucharist, as Christ’s saving presence in the community of the faithful and its spiritual food, is the most precious possession which the Church can have in her journey through history.” This echoes what he wrote at the beginning of his papacy, in *Dominicae cenae* of 1980:

We cannot, even for a moment, forget that the Eucharist is a special possession belonging to the whole Church. It is the greatest gift in the order of grace and of sacrament that the divine Spouse has offered and unceasingly offers to His spouse. . . . We should remain faithful in every detail to what it expresses in itself and to what it asks of us, namely, thanksgiving.

He also said: “Holy Mass is the absolute center of my life and of every day of my life.”<sup>1</sup> After his election to the pontificate, Benedict XVI quoted this and made it his own in his address to the clergy of Rome on May 13, 2005 in the Basilica of St. John Lateran.

The Eucharist is the “greatest gift” of God to man. In this sacrament, Christ the Word Incarnate, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, Body, Blood, soul and divinity, becomes present throughout the life of the Church. Here on our altars we are in the presence of the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary, with Christ Himself as Priest and Victim, and we can join ourselves to Him in the most intimate Communion of grace and charity.

### Reasons of Fittingness for the Eucharist

Why did Christ choose to institute the Eucharist? There are three principal reasons: (1) to perpetuate His *presence* among men as our Redeemer and the divine Victim for our souls; (2) to unite Himself in intimate *communion* with us so as to be our spiritual food and drink; (3) to perpetuate His redemptive *Sacrifice*, the supreme act of His burning charity, and allow us to join with Him in offering it to the Father.

When Christ took on our human nature, He became subject to the limitations of space and time, and His public ministry was only some three years long. Yet as the Word Incarnate He is the man for all men, the Son of Man, the man in whom all men find fulfillment and salvation. He would not leave all of those born after His death deprived of contact with his sacred Humanity!

When men die, they usually leave an inheritance to their loved ones. Christ also wished to do this; as God, how-

<sup>1</sup> Address at a Symposium in honor of the 30th anniversary of the Decree “*Presbyterorum ordinis*,” Oct. 27, 1995, n. 4; *L’Osservatore Romano* English edition, Nov. 15, 1995, p. 7.

ever, He was not limited in His choices. He bequeathed a testament that would not be outdone by any other, which was *nothing less than Himself*, the Victim for our souls, to be offered up continually in every age to the Father for our redemption. *This testament would not only be His own living presence, but would specifically make present the very act by which He showed Himself as the Supreme Lover of our souls.*

Catholic doctrine describes these essential aspects of the Eucharist by the terms “sacrament” and “sacrifice.” The Eucharist is both a sacrament and a sacrifice. It is the sacrament of all sacraments by which Christ becomes present in our midst so that we can adore Him and receive Him in Communion, and the sacrifice of all sacrifices by which He sacramentally offers unceasingly to the Father the price of our Redemption.

### *The Eucharist as the Sacrament of Spiritual Nourishment*

We have seen above that the sacraments are religious rites instituted by Christ, in perfect accordance with our nature. These rites are *distinguished from all others in that they produce the invisible sacred effect that they represent.* Let us now apply this to the Eucharist. The Eucharist is (1) a perceptible or sensible sign of spiritual nourishment and of Christ’s sacrifice, (2) instituted by Christ, (3) which makes Christ present as our spiritual food and sacrificial offering to give us an increase of supernatural life

Christ wished to institute a sacrament that would nourish His divine life in us through sanctifying grace and supernatural charity. This nourishment is represented through the species of bread and wine under which Christ is made present as our spiritual sustenance. Thus the sacrament produces the spiritual nourishment that it symbolically represents by feeding us with grace, and strengthening our intimate union with Christ, whom we literally take into ourselves.

The sacramental signs of bread and wine represent our union with Christ also in another, related way. Food and drink are converted into the substance of one’s body to strengthen and conserve it. Thus an intimate union is created: the food becomes one in being with ourselves. This union between our food and ourselves is another aspect of the sacramental sign of the Eucharist, for the Eucharist is a sacrament of communion: it creates an intimate union between ourselves and Christ whom we receive. As St. Augustine relates in his *Confessions*, he heard the voice of Christ as it were saying to him: “I am the food of strong men; grow, and you shall feed upon me; nor shall you convert me, like the food of your flesh, into you, but

you shall be converted into me.”<sup>2</sup> We change our physical food into our own substance, whereas the Eucharist transforms us spiritually into the image of Christ.

As a necessary consequence, it also works to deepen our communion with one another in the Mystical Body, and thus it is the sacrament of ecclesiastical unity.<sup>3</sup> St. Paul states this in 1 Corinthians 10:17: “For we, being many, are one bread, one body, all that partake of one bread.” The Eucharist binds us into one Body by strengthening our unity with Christ and with one another.

The sacramental sign of bread and wine thus symbolizes three things: spiritual nourishment, union with Christ, and union of the faithful with one another in the consolidation of the Body of Christ. And the sacrament is efficacious in producing these effects, when we receive it with the proper dispositions.

This wonderful symbolism of the bread and wine is combined with a sacramental presentation of Christ’s sacrificial act of pouring out His blood for us. His sacrifice is sacramentally presented in the separate consecration of the bread and wine, mystically making present the real separation of His Body and Blood in His death on the Cross. This significance is clearly shown in the words of the consecration: “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Lk 22:20).<sup>4</sup>

### ***Why Did Christ Choose the Last Supper as the Time to Institute the Eucharist?***

It is fitting that Christ instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper. He bequeathed it as His last testament, thus impressing it more deeply on His Apostles. Furthermore, since it is the sacrament of His bloody sacrifice, He wished to institute it as close to His crucifixion as possible. Finally, He wished to institute the Eucharist in the context of the Passover to show the continuity and passage between the great sacrament of the Old and the New Covenants.<sup>5</sup>

### **Christ Instituted the Eucharist for the Same Reasons That He Became Man**

Let us return to our initial question: Why did Christ institute the Eucharist? We can expand our initial answer and say that Christ instituted the Eucharist for the 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, 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* throughout the life of the Church until Christ comes again in glory.

Why did the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity wish to take on a human nature? There are six principal ends: to offer an expiatory sacrifice to satisfy for all human sin in perfect justice; to show the divine love for man and give us a supreme motive for charity; to be a model of all the virtues; to give us the supreme merit of faith; to show man his immense dignity to which he has been elevated by Christ, which is the dignity of entering into communion with the Blessed Trinity; and to give us a participation in His divinity through sanctifying grace, by founding the Church to be His Mystical Body and His bride. All of these ends serve the sanctification of man, which is ultimately ordered to the glorification of God. Let us go through them one by one.

### ***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. 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? Therefore, God chose to make satisfaction Himself in our place, by taking on a human nature in order to expiate the sins of all men.

St. Thomas Aquinas speaks of Christ’s work of redemption as offering to God something more pleasing than all human sin is displeasing.<sup>6</sup> 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.

However, as mentioned above, Christ wished to mysteriously “prolong” that supreme moment of His life, and make it present *every day* in His Church throughout the world as a perpetual sacrifice. The Eucharist is mystically that very sacrifice because Christ Himself is immolated on the altar through the ministry of His priests who make His Priesthood present. Since it is the same sacrifice, it follows that the offering of Christ in every Eucharist is more pleasing than all human sin combined is displeasing

2 St. Augustine, *Confessions* 7.10.16, trans. J.G. Pilkington, NPNF1, vol. 1.

3 St. Thomas Aquinas refers to the Eucharist as the “Sacrament of Church unity” (*ST* III, q. 82, a. 2, ad 3).

4 See Mt 26:28: “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

5 See St. Thomas, *ST* III, q. 73, a. 5.

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

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 His love for man, so that man would have the supreme motive to love God in return. This is summarized 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, 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 is that by which He wills to offer Himself sacramentally on our altars and remain with us in the tabernacles of the world. 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.

### **To Teach Perfect Virtue**

By becoming man, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity teaches us perfect virtue through His words and actions. In the Eucharist, Christ gives us supernatural virtue by nourishing us with an increase of grace and charity. In the Eucharist He is also a model of virtue, especially of charity, humility, patience, and obedience.<sup>7</sup>

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. The Eucharist adds nothing to Jesus, but is entirely for our benefit. Charity seeks no price, and it 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.

The Blessed Sacrament is the perfect model of **humility** and poverty. Christ, who is God, foregoes not only the appearance of His omnipotent power, but also the beauty of His sacred humanity. 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

<sup>7</sup> See the works of St. Peter Julian Eymard, who founded an order dedicated to Eucharistic adoration.

King of glory appears as if He were but a piece of bread or a bit of wine!

Finally, Christ in the Blessed Sacrament is the most perfect model of **obedience**. As He was obedient in Nazareth to 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, until the end of the world.

### **The Merit of Faith**

The Incarnation makes possible the greatest merit of faith, because it is the mystery that most transcends reason. St. Thomas remarks: “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.”<sup>8</sup> 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.

Like the Incarnation, the Eucharist presents 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.<sup>9</sup> On the Cross the humanity was visible but the divinity veiled. In the consecrated host, both the divinity and the humanity are veiled, hidden under 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.<sup>10</sup> St. Thomas admirably expressed this truth in his great hymn on the Eucharist, *Adoro te devote*. He writes: “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.”

### **Dignity of Man**

The Incarnation shows man his immense dignity as made in God’s image and elevated to share in the divine life. It 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,’<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *SCG*, IV, ch. 27, n. 1, trans. Charles J. O’Neil.

<sup>9</sup> 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.”

<sup>10</sup> 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.”

<sup>11</sup> 2 Peter 1:4.

<sup>12</sup> St. Leo the Great, sermon 21 on the Nativity, in *Sermons*, trans. Jane Patricia Freeland and Agnes Josephine Conway (Washington,

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 . . . 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.

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.

### ***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 a startling way, explaining that God became 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, but that man is transformed into the full image and likeness of God through 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 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 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. The Son of God takes on weakness, so that we may be clothed with the glory of the Resurrection; He takes on humiliation 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 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 2 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, and blurs the distinction between creatures and especially between the Creator and the creature. This does not happen in the divinization spoken of in Christianity. The members of Christ’s bride, the Church,

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D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 79.

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 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 in fact a means for fulfilling this end of the Incarnation. It 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. This divinization 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.”

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.

Let us not misunderstand this doctrine. The divinization of man worked by the Eucharist 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 beautiful, we become beautiful. The best way to acquire virtue is to love it intensely. If we love God with supernatural charity, we become like God.

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 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.

## **The Eucharist Is the Nuptials of the Lamb with His Church**

We mentioned that the Incarnation was ordered to realizing a mystical marriage between the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, with the head of that Body, the Incarnate Son of God. We have seen that Christ spoke of this mystical wedding in parables. How is the wedding to be accomplished?

We can say that its realization has two moments. The final culmination is 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 did not wish to consummate His nuptials with us in such a way that would take away the merit of faith and good works. The wisdom of God devised a wedding feast that would not be inappropriate to her state of trial. And that feast, of course, is the Eucharist.

## ***The Dogma of the Real Presence***

Surveys tell us that great numbers of Catholics no longer have faith in the Catholic doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. For example, a Gallup poll of 1992 reported that only about thirty percent of Catholics believe this infallible Catholic teaching. This is not something that we can afford to be indifferent about, for it is the source and summit of the life of the Church!

Catholic doctrine on the Eucharist is indeed a difficult doctrine! It was felt to be difficult when it was first proclaimed in the synagogue of Capernaum by Jesus Christ on the day after the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves. The Gospel of John tells us that many of the first disciples murmured and left Him, saying: “This teaching is difficult, who can accept it?” (Jn 6:60).

This dogma is founded on the words of Christ at the Last Supper. He did not say, “This is a sign or a symbol of my Body”; but rather, “This  *is*  my Body.” Furthermore, what St. Paul says about the sacrilege committed by those who receive the Body and Blood of Christ unworthily only makes sense if we believe in the Real Presence. He says that unworthy reception of Holy Communion makes one guilty of “ *profaning the body and blood of the Lord* .”

The  *Catechism of the Catholic Church*  1374 clearly states the doctrine of the Real Presence:

“In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist “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* .” This presence is called ‘real’—by which is not intended to exclude the other types of presence as if they could not be ‘real’ too, but because it is presence in the fullest sense: that is to say, it is a  *substantial*  presence by which Christ, God and man, makes himself wholly and entirely present.

In a metaphorical or analogical sense, something may be said to be present in a symbol or sign, or in our memory or intention, or present in our hearts through love. None of these senses of “presence” are what we mean by the Real Presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. For this reason, the *Catechism* tells us that it is a “substantial presence,” which means that Christ’s *whole substance* is present in the Eucharist. In other words, Christ is present in the Eucharist with His *whole being*, with His full underlying reality, whole and entire. For substance refers to the being and the essence of a thing.

Father John A. Hardon, S.J. explains this very well:

The simplest way to express what Christ asks us to believe about the Real Presence is that the Eucharist is really He. The Real Presence is the real Jesus. We are to believe that . . . the flesh which the Son of God received from His Mother at the Incarnation is the same flesh into which He changed bread at the Last Supper; that the blood He received from His Mother is the same blood into which He changed wine at the Last Supper. . .

We are to believe that the Eucharist is Jesus Christ— simply, without qualification. It is God become man in the fullness of His divine nature, in the fullness of His human nature, in the fullness of His body and soul, in the fullness of everything that makes Jesus Jesus. He is in the Eucharist with His human mind and will united with the Divinity, with His hands and feet, His face and features, with His eyes and lips and ears and nostrils, with His affections and emotions and, with emphasis, with His living, pulsating, physical Sacred Heart. That is what our Catholic Faith demands of us that we believe. If we believe this, we are Catholic. If we do not, we are not, no matter what people may think we are.<sup>13</sup>

We can go even further, and say that Jesus is present in the Eucharist in the fullness of His glorious life in Heaven. It is not so much that He comes down to earth to be with us, as that the Eucharist brings us to Him. . . The Eucharist is not a disembodied substance, but the glorious and risen Lord, as He lives and moves and acts now in Heaven.<sup>14</sup>

This doctrine was infallibly defined at the Council of Trent, in Session 13, chapter 1: “The holy Synod teaches, and openly and simply professes, that, in the august sacrament of the holy Eucharist, after the consecration of the bread and wine, our Lord Jesus Christ, true God and man, is truly, really, and substantially contained under the species of those sensible things.” The same (infallible) doctrine is expressed in negative form in Canon 1:

If any one denies that 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 in the sacrament of the most holy Eucharist, but says that Christ is present in the Sacrament only as in a sign or figure, or by his power: let him be anathema.

## The Doctrine of Transubstantiation according to St. Thomas

### *Substance and Accidents*

A beautiful example of the interaction between Thomistic metaphysics and Catholic theology is given by the doctrine of transubstantiation, a doctrine which can only be understood with the metaphysical notions of substance and accidents. How does Christ come to be present in the Eucharist in this real and substantial way affirmed by the Church, given the fact that we continue to perceive the appearances of bread and wine? Since this is a mystery of faith, it cannot be verified by scientific means, nor demonstrated by philosophy. We believe it solely because of Christ’s words at the Last Supper, and those earlier words at the synagogue in Capernaum, and because the Church’s infallible Magisterium has defined the way those words must be interpreted. However, some basic elements of the perennial philosophy must be brought in, not in order to prove the mystery, which is impossible, but simply to grasp what Christ has proclaimed and what the Church teaches. This philosophical analysis is also useful in order to show that a doctrine of the Church is not contradictory. For a mystery of faith, although it is above reason, can never be directly contrary to reason or in contradiction with itself.

First of all, we must distinguish between substance and accidents. Accidents are the changeable conditions which do not directly belong to the essence of a thing, but which answer the question of *how* a thing is. Many of these accidents are perceptible by the senses, such as sensible qualities (color, taste, smell, sound, heat, texture), and size, position, movement, etc.

“Substance” refers to the inner identity of the thing, that reality which underlies all its outward and changeable appearances or “accidents.” Substance answers the question of *what* a thing is. It is the substance that has being in itself; the accidents have being through the substance. The substance is the abiding subject in which the accidents inhere.

The doctrine of the Church is that the words uttered by Christ at the Last Supper: “*This is my Body. . . This is the chalice of my blood,*” through the divine omnipotence, convert the *substance* of bread and wine into the *substance* of Christ’s Body and Blood. However, the outward appearances or accidents of bread and wine are not changed.

The pronoun “this” before the consecration refers to the substance of the bread. After the words of consecration have been uttered, “this” reality in the priest’s hands becomes the Body of Christ. We generally use demonstrative

<sup>13</sup> Available online at <http://www.therealpresence.org/eucharst/realpres/a12.html>.

<sup>14</sup> See St. Thomas, *ST III*, q. 76.

pronouns to refer to the substance of things: *this* is a man, a dog, a cat, a piece of bread, a rock, etc.

### ***The Eucharistic Conversion***

So how does Christ come to be really and substantially present in the Eucharist? The answer of the Church is that this occurs through a marvelous *conversion* of the substance of the bread and wine on the altar into the substance of the Body and Blood of Christ. Prior to the consecration of the bread and the wine in the Eucharistic prayer, Christ was not present on the altar. After the priest pronounces the words of the consecration, Christ is substantially present. St. Thomas Aquinas explains that the only way this can come about is through the *conversion* of the entire substance of the bread and substance of the wine into the entire substance of Christ.

Are there any other options? One might think that Christ comes to be present by moving into the bread. This was the position of Martin Luther, who sought to maintain the Real Presence while denying the conversion of the substance of bread and the substance of wine into the substance of Christ. He held that the substance of the bread and the substance of the wine remain after the consecration, but Christ comes to be present *in addition to the bread and wine*. Such a position is referred to as consubstantiation or impanation, and it is not compatible with the faith of the Church for two fundamental reasons. First of all, it is incompatible with the words of Christ: “This is my body.” If the substance of bread remained, Christ would have had to say: “Here is my body”; or “Here, where the bread is, there is also my Body.” But instead He said: “*This* is my body.” The meaning has to be: “This substance—which was bread—is now my Body.”<sup>15</sup> Christ’s words imply a conversion of substance from one “this” into another “this.” Secondly, St. Thomas argues that such a position would make the substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist impossible. St. Thomas reasons that a thing can begin to be present in a new place in only two ways: by moving to the new place, or by something already in that place converting into it. For example, fire can begin to be present in a room by being carried there from somewhere else, or it can begin to be present there by being ignited there, and transforming other things into itself, such as the wood and furniture, etc. Now Christ does not begin to be present in the Eucharist through being “moved,” as is presupposed in Luther’s theory. Christ did not “move” from heaven to the altar, for if that were true, He would cease to be present in heaven, which is false. Therefore, Christ becomes present on the altar because the bread and wine are converted into Him.<sup>16</sup>

Catholic theology speaks of this extraordinary conversion with the term “transubstantiation,” which refers to

the conversion of the substance of bread and wine into the substance of Christ. In transubstantiation, it is not only the form that changes, while the substrate of matter remains, as is the case in all substantial changes that we experience in the world. In transubstantiation, the entire substance of the bread and wine—matter and form—are transubstantiated into the Body and Blood of Christ. The accidents of the bread and wine alone miraculously remain.

The Council of Trent infallibly teaches:

And because Christ. . . declared that which He offered under the species of bread to be truly His own body, therefore it has always been a firm belief in the Church of God, and this holy Synod now declares it anew, that, by the consecration of the bread and of the wine, a conversion is made of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord, and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of His blood; which conversion is, by the holy Catholic Church, suitably and properly called Transubstantiation. (Session 13, chapter 4)

God can work the miracle of transubstantiation because of His omnipotent power over all being. Since He is the Lord of being, He alone can convert any being into any other being directly and immediately, without there being any proper substrate of the change.

The use of the term “transubstantiation” shows that this conversion of the bread and wine has no parallel in the natural world. However, God is not bound by the normal laws of nature; He framed that order through His omnipotence, and hence He can also operate outside the natural order He has created.

Christ wished His presence on our altars and tabernacles to be an article of faith and not of vision. He did not wish us to see His glorious presence made present by the words of consecration, so that we would not lose the merit of faith, which is firm belief in that which is unseen.<sup>17</sup> Thus He chose to have the appearances of bread and wine remain in the sacrament as *sacred veils*, although their substance has been changed into the substance of Christ.

### ***The Whole Christ Is Present in the Eucharist: Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity***

Another unique property of this conversion is that the whole substance of Christ is present “under” any part of

<sup>17</sup> See St. Thomas, *ST III*, q. 75, a. 5, in which St. Thomas gives two other reasons for the preservation of the appearances of the bread and wine: “It is evident to sense that all the accidents of the bread and wine remain after the consecration. And this is reasonably done by Divine providence. First of all, because it is not customary, but horrible, for men to eat human flesh, and to drink blood. And therefore Christ’s flesh and blood are set before us to be partaken of under the species of those things which are the more commonly used by men, namely, bread and wine. Secondly, lest this sacrament might be derided by unbelievers, if we were to eat our Lord under His own species.”

<sup>15</sup> See St. Thomas, *ST III*, q. 75, a. 2. See also next paragraph.

<sup>16</sup> St. Thomas, *ST III*, q. 75, a. 2; see also *ST III*, q. 75, a. 4.

the appearances of bread and wine. If we break the consecrated host in half, Christ remains whole and entire in each half. And the same thing is true each time the consecrated host is subdivided. This truth has tremendous practical consequence for priests charged with responsibility over the Eucharist, and in general for all those who distribute and receive Communion! Just as before the consecration the full substance (or nature) of bread was present under every part of the extension of the host, so now the full substance of Christ is present under every part of the appearances of bread and wine. This truth of faith is admirably expressed in the hymn composed by St. Thomas, *Lauda Sion*: “The Sacrament has just been broken, fear not, but remember: there is as much contained in one fragment as in the whole. No rending of the reality but only of the sign takes place; neither the state nor the stature of what is signified is lessened.”<sup>18</sup>

The closest analogy to this reality that the substance of Christ is present everywhere under the appearances of the bread and wine is that of the human soul, which is fully present “in” every part of our body, making it alive and responsive to our wills. Our bodies are animate because of the presence of the soul in them. It is not a divisible part of the soul that is present in the various parts of our bodies, but our whole soul, which forms an indivisible unity and cannot be divided into separate parts. In like manner, Christ is present whole and entire, in an indivisible unity, “in” or “beneath” any part of the extension of the sacramental species (appearances).

However, although this analogy of the soul present in every part of the body is helpful, it is nevertheless deficient, for the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist is altogether unique. It is *not just a presence of His soul*, but also of His body and everything else that is part of His Person. The words of consecration directly make His body present under the species of bread, and His blood present under the species of wine. However, since Christ’s body after the Resurrection is now inseparably united to His blood and to His soul, these also are made present in the Eucharist by *concomitance*. This means that the body is *necessarily accompanied* by the blood and the soul; and the precious blood is necessarily accompanied by the body and the soul. Furthermore, Christ’s divinity is inseparably united to every part of His sacred humanity by the hypostatic union. This union of the divinity with Christ’s body and blood was not even interrupted in His death and burial. The dead body in the tomb was still the dead body of the Second Person of the Trinity. Therefore, Christ is present in the Eucharist with His human body, blood, and soul all inseparably united to His divine Person.

This is an important point. At the moment of his death on the Cross, Christ’s body and blood were physically

<sup>18</sup> Translation by Victor Szczurek, in Journet, *The Mass: the Presence of the Sacrifice of the Cross*, 167.

separated from each other and from Christ’s soul (although they all remained united to His divinity). In the moment of His glorious resurrection, however, Christ’s body was again united to His blood, and both were again animated by His human soul, and all three—body, blood and soul—remained inseparably united to His divinity.

St. Thomas Aquinas holds that if Holy Mass had been celebrated on Holy Saturday before the Resurrection, while Christ’s physical body was still in the tomb, the words of consecration would have made Christ’s inanimate body present, separated from His soul and from His blood, but still united to His divinity. Likewise, the words of the consecration of the species of wine would have made only His blood present, separated from His body and from his soul, but still united to the divinity.<sup>19</sup> (However, no Mass was actually celebrated on that day.)

After the Resurrection, however, until the end of time, Christ’s physical body and blood have been reunited to one another and to His soul; and all three are inseparably united to His divinity. Therefore, the words of consecration in every Mass make Christ’s *entire reality as it currently exists*—body, blood, soul, and divinity—present under every part of the consecrated species.<sup>20</sup> This has been infallibly taught in the Council of Trent, Session 13, Canon 3: “If anyone denies that in the venerable sacrament of the Eucharist *the whole Christ* is contained under each species and under each and every portion of either species when it is divided up: let him be anathema.”

For this reason, anyone who receives Communion under one or the other species has received Christ, whole and entire, *with everything that forms part of His person*. Thus it can be seen that the traditional custom in the Latin Church of distributing Communion only under the species of bread, motivated probably by the practical concern to avoid the spilling of the sacred blood, is legitimate.<sup>21</sup>

Someone may wonder why Christ instituted the Eucharist under the two species of bread and wine if it is not necessary to receive Communion under both kinds. The answer is that the dual and separate consecration of the two species of bread and wine is necessary for the fullness of the sacramental sign. For the double consecration of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ sacramentally signifies His violent death consisting in the pouring out of His blood for us on the Cross. The separate consecration is necessary for the sacramental representation of Christ’s sacrifice, which is mystically made present in this way. The sacraments produce precisely the invisible reality that they outwardly signify.

<sup>19</sup> See *ST* III, q. 76, a. 1, ad 1.

<sup>20</sup> St. Thomas explains this doctrine of concomitance in *ST* III, q. 76, a. 1.

<sup>21</sup> See the Council of Trent, session 21, July 16, 1562, canons 1–3.

### ***Transubstantiation Is Above Reason but Not Against Reason***

The Eucharist certainly cannot be explained by reason, but nevertheless, reason is equally impotent to show that Catholic doctrine on the Eucharist is contradictory or impossible. Certainly the Eucharist is naturally impossible, for it is a stupendous miracle, and entirely supernatural. But it is not contradictory. The Council of Trent addresses this question in its definition of the Real Presence:

It is not contradictory to say that our Savior always sits at the right hand of the Father in heaven according to his natural way of existing and that, nevertheless, in his substance he is sacramentally present in many other places with us. We can hardly find words to express this way of existing; but our reason, guided by faith, can know that it is possible for God, and this we should always believe unhesitatingly.<sup>22</sup>

The Catholic doctrine of the Real Presence is not contradictory, but simply rests on the omnipotence of God. 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.

Likewise, the omnipotence of God, which created the substance and appearances or accidents of things, such as the substance and accidents of bread and wine, is powerful also to disjoin by miracle what He put together in composing the natural order of things. For God has complete dominion over His creation. The only limit on God’s omnipotence is contradiction, for even God cannot make a square circle, or make something bread and not-bread at the same time and in the same way. After the consecration, the Eucharist is not both bread and not-bread. It is Christ, and it is not bread. Only the appearances or “accidents” of bread remain, without the underlying substance of bread, for the substance has been converted into Christ. God, the creator of substance and accidents, can do this. Given that He could do this, how do we know that He did in fact do this? Because He Himself said so at the Last Supper: “This is my Body.”

Belief in transubstantiation does not involve a contradiction, because accidents are one thing and substance is another. The accidents remain, whereas the substance is converted into Christ. And this distinction is a truth of common sense, for the accidents of things are subject to constant change, whereas the substance or essence remains the same until it ceases to be what it is and is transformed into something else.

### ***Sacramental Mode of Christ’s Presence in the Eucharist***

Christ’s presence in the Eucharist is mysterious because He is present in a sacramental way, which is distinct from the way a natural body is present in a location with parts outside of parts and measured by surrounding bodies. Christ’s Body is not present in the Eucharist in that way, as a body is in a place. Rather, He is present in the Eucharist “by way of substance, and not by way of quantity.”<sup>23</sup> This mysterious mode of presence of Christ in the Eucharist is a consequence of how Christ comes to be present in the Eucharist through transubstantiation, which is the conversion of the substance of bread into the substance of Christ. Before the consecration, the substance or essence of bread was present whole and entire under every part of the dimensions of the bread. At the completion of the words of consecration, the substance of bread is converted into the substance of Christ. This means that Christ comes to be present in the Eucharist in the same way that the substance or essence of bread was previously present under every part of the dimensions of the bread. Therefore Christ is present in the Eucharist not in the way in which a body is present in a particular place with each part of the body present in a different place, but in the way a soul or a nature is present in a body, whole and entire under every part of the sensible appearances.

### ***Transubstantiation Does Not Imply Any Change in Christ***

One of the keys to understanding the mystery of transubstantiation is that it does not involve any change in Christ; all the change is on the part of the substance of bread and wine. Christ is not bi-located, nor moved, nor multiplied, nor divided. He comes to be substantially present in the Eucharist not through a change in Him, but through a conversion of the bread and wine into Him.

Since this is a unique occurrence, we would look in vain for something similar in nature. An imperfect analogy can be made, however, to the Incarnation. The Incarnation did not make any change in the divine nature of the Word, which is immutable. All the change was on the part of the humanity assumed by the divine Person. Likewise in the Eucharist, all the change is on the part of the substance of bread and wine which are converted into Christ.

Christ Himself, present in the Eucharist, is neither changed by the action of transubstantiation, nor by anything that happens to the sacramental species, such as division or consumption. But under every part of the dimensions of the sacramental species, Christ is made present, whole and unchanged. Indeed, as mentioned above, the Eucharist not only brings Him to us, but also brings us to Him as He is in heaven!

22 Ibid., session 13, chapter 1.

23 See St. Thomas, *ST III*, q. 75, a. 1; *ST III*, q. 76, a. 1, ad 3.