

THE REAL PRESENCE OF CHRIST IN THE EUCHARIST

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I propose to deal with the following objections to the Catholic understanding of the true presence of Christ (body blood, soul, and divinity) in the Eucharist:

Why does Christ hide Himself in a little wafer? If transubstantiation actually occurs, why do the so-called *species* of bread and wine remain? How can Christ be so many places at once? Did Christ hold His own body up at the Last Supper when He said, “This is my body”? Why do we Catholics re-sacrifice Him who was sacrificed “once and for all”? Why do we engage in the abominable practice of cannibalism? Why do we think we can break the Jewish law that strictly forbids the consumption of blood? How can it be an unbloody sacrifice if the wine actually becomes the blood of Christ? Worshipping the Eucharist is idolatry. We should not adore anything on Earth—especially not some little piece of bread. We should only worship Christ our savior in heaven. Christ is enthroned in heaven and therefore He cannot be bodily present on the altars around the Earth. He can be only spiritually present. In sum, we can only interpret the Biblical verses dealing with the Eucharist in a figurative manner.

Christ “hides” Himself in an unleavened wafer not only to fulfill Old Testament prophecies about Him, but to give us the very gift of Himself in the most intimate form possible. When we take Christ into our own bodies, both physically and spiritually, He becomes one with us and we become one with Him. The old axiom, “you are what you eat” rings true physiologically, and in the case of the Eucharist, metaphysically as well. Through the Eucharist, we become partakers of the divine nature, united to the whole body of Christ, which includes the community of all believers on Earth and in heaven. When we receive the Eucharist in sacrament we truly abide in Christ (John 6:56) as the apostle John later tells us we must do to bear fruit as Christians (John 15:4-7).

There are many ways in which Christ is present to us and with us. He is present spiritually when two or more are gathered in His name. He is present spiritually when we pray to Him. He is present in His creation, for He is the source of the Universe and master of all its laws. He is the first and the last, the alpha and omega. He is everywhere because He is the omnipresent God. But Jesus of Nazareth was God made man. He lived and breathed and walked among us. Christ was not an apparition, as some early heretics believed. He was not simply an illusion. He was physically present, in the flesh. Because of this, one could say that the second person of the blessed Trinity was present in a special way when He became man through the Incarnation. When Christ walked among the apostles he was present in a way that was different from the spiritual sense in which He had been present since the beginning of time. In the same manner, the Eucharist is Christ present in a special way, present not only spiritually but physically as well. In the Eucharist, we receive the body of Jesus of Nazareth, a body that was born and grew, was beaten and broken, and now reigns glorified in heaven.

The Book of Hebrews, verse 7:17, tells us that Christ is forever a priest according to the order of Melchizedek, the high priest who ruled Salem (future Jerusalem) in the Book of

Genesis. Melchizedek offered not animals to God, but a sacrifice of bread and wine. By this, we learn that a pleasing sacrifice to God can be un-bloody, and that Christ's *once and for all* sacrifice on Calvary was not just a sacrifice of his body and blood, but in some sense also a sacrifice of bread and wine. Melchizedek prefigures Christ. Like so many Old Testament figures he foreshadows and is a type of what was to come.

Furthermore, Christ's sacrifice on Calvary was prefigured by the Passover. In fact, Christ institutes the Eucharist while celebrating the Jewish Passover feast (Matthew 26:17, Mark 14:12, Luke 22:8), also called the Feast of the Unleavened Bread. The feast of Passover recalls the night in which the ancient Israelites were freed from the bondage of slavery in Egypt. The Lord commanded His people to sacrifice an unblemished male lamb, smear its blood on the door posts and lintels, and eat its flesh in order to be "passed over" by the angel of death that had come to kill all the first born males in Egypt. Besides the bitter herbs and unleavened bread eaten to commemorate the urgency with which the Israelites had to flee Egypt, the Passover meal also entails drinking four cups of wine and **eating the sacrificed lamb**. At the time of the Exodus, if a family failed to eat the Passover lamb, their first born son would surely die. We too must eat the unblemished lamb. Christ is the lamb, the perfect sacrifice offered to free us from the slavery of sin. He was sacrificed for our salvation, and now we must consummate His sacrifice by partaking of His flesh and blood. For the sixth chapter of John tells us that whoever eats His flesh and drinks His blood has eternal life (John 6:54). Just as the Pascal lamb was the sacrifice through which the nation of Israel was saved, so likewise, Jesus Christ offered Himself as a sacrifice to save the whole world (the new Israel—the Church). That is why the Apostle John sees Christ in heaven looking as a lamb that has been slain (Revelation 5:6). This is also why John the Baptist says, "Behold the Lamb of God" (John 1:29), when he sees Jesus approaching.

Why does Christ come to us in an unleavened wafer? Leaven is yeast, an additive, symbolizing an impurity added to a wholesome loaf of bread that was formed by the wheat of the earth. In the Eucharist, the leaven is withheld because the substance that is to become the Body of Christ must be pure as Christ is pure. Also, the Israelites used unleavened bread to commemorate the Passover, because the Israelites did not have time to let their bread rise with leaven when they were preparing for their hasty departure from Egypt. Christ Himself used unleavened bread at the Last Supper. Therefore, when we represent that loaf which becomes His body, we too use unleavened bread. In everything, we strive to imitate Christ.

When Christ breaks the unleavened Passover loaf with His Apostles, He says, "This is my body" (Matt 26:26-28, Mark 14:22-24, Luke 22:19-20, 1 Corinthians 11:24-26). Notice that He does not say, "This is a symbol of my body," or "this represents my body."

After transubstantiation, the bread is no longer bread, the wine no longer wine. Every particle has been transformed metaphysically into the body and blood of Christ. Why then, do they remain to our senses as bread and wine? Jesus, the author and finisher of our souls, knows our human nature. He knows that we are repulsed by the thought of

actually eating human flesh and drinking human blood, and so His body and blood remain under the *species* or *accidents* (physical properties observable by the five human senses) of bread and wine for our own sake.

Furthermore, the actual transformation is one that we must accept on faith. If a physical sign were given for every spiritual or metaphysical truth, there would be no need for faith. If the bread and wine actually took on the outward physical properties of flesh and blood, then no one would reject the Eucharist. There would be no atheists in the world. And Christ tells the Apostle Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not seen and believed.” God wants to give us reasons for faith, but He does not want to force faith upon us, lest it would cease to be faith.

The most comprehensive answer to this question can be summed up in one word: mystery. We accept God without fully understanding Him, for He is infinitely beyond our human understanding. We accept the concept of the Trinity, three divine persons in one God, a concept that makes no sense apart from faith. We acknowledge that Christ is a divine person, creator of the universe, born of a human virgin, with both a human and divine nature, and yet we draw the line at the Eucharist. When will we learn that all things are possible with the omnipotent God? When will we stop trying to understand everything in human terms and accept as little children the beauty of mystery? God is mystery. I am not suggesting that we discard reason and resort only to a simplistic and ignorant faith. Certainly, the Church has always taught the opposite. In fact, the great doctors of the Church are so revered for their use of reason applied to matters of faith. Through reason, we can better understand our faith, but without faith, our reason is blind, haughty, and doomed to error.

We have good reason for believing in God. We have good reason for accepting Christ as His ultimate revelation to the world. And yes, we have good reason for believing that Christ offers Himself to us on the altars of His Churches around the world in the Eucharist. For He Himself guarantees that He will be with us until the end of the age. He Himself guarantees that those who eat His flesh and drink His blood will share in everlasting life. He Himself says that as often as we celebrate His sacrifice for us, He will be present. St. Paul tells us that those who do not discern the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist are offending God, blaspheming the sacrament. He warns Christians not to partake of the Eucharist in an unworthy manner. Overwhelmingly, the earliest Christian Fathers (some of whom were students of the Apostles themselves) spoke of the Eucharist as the actual body and blood of Christ. Even in the first century after Christ’s death, men such as St. Ignatius of Antioch, St. Clement of Rome, St. Irenaeus, and later, men like St. Jerome, St. John Chrysostom, and St. Augustine (to name a very few) professed belief in the real presence. Even in this present day, three fourths of the world’s Christians profess a faith that proclaims the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Certainly those who heard Christ’s words as recorded in John 6 understood that He was not speaking figuratively. Otherwise, there would not have been such a tumult in the crowd, and Christ would have not lost so many followers that day. Remember that many of His own disciples left Him that very day after they heard the “bread of life” sermon

because they could not stand to hear it (John 6:60,64,66). They knew He was not speaking in parables or exaggerating. Otherwise, they would have remained to hear the symbolic message behind His words. Instead, they took Him for His word, and they simply could not believe it. At the very least, Christ would have taken His Apostles aside later to explain the symbolic significance of His claims if He had only meant them as figurative statements. But He does not. We must examine the text itself. What does it actually say? Did Christ say to the crowd, “No wait, don’t go! I am only speaking in a symbolic sense.” He says nothing of the kind. Rather, He intensifies His statements as the sermon continues, making no mention of parable or hyperbole. At least four different ways, He asserts and re-asserts over and over that He is speaking of the necessity of eating and drinking His actual body and blood, at times using words for *eat* that are better translated “to munch” or “to chew”.¹ In the face of all of this overwhelming spiritual evidence, are we to conclude that for Christians, belief in the Eucharist is unreasonable? Certainly not!

Christ is omnipresent, and His metaphysical, resurrected body is capable of amazing feats. He passed through a locked door to appear to the Apostles in the upper room. He ascended into heaven. Even before His death, He walked on water. If Christ wishes to multiply His one body to feed the whole world, He can do so. If He wished to hold His own body in His hands at the Last Supper, who are we to tell Him, “No, sorry, that’s not possible, God.” To distribute His body, He does not have to make millions of little Christs. All over the world, the Eucharist is all the same body. Christ does not have to be reduced when He shares Himself. On the contrary, this act—like all acts of perfect love—does not take away from the giver, but magnifies Him, glorifies Him. All things are possible with Him. He is God.

This is the reason that the Apostle John describes the *multiplication of the loaves* miracle just before he describes the “bread of life” sermon in John 6. God, speaking through John, uses the story of this wondrous miracle to prepare us for a truth that is mysterious and surpasses our human reason. Jesus turns a few loaves of bread into many loaves. These many loaves feed the multitude of people who have come to hear the words of Christ. Likewise, with His body, He multiplies one loaf to feed the multitude with the true manna, the bread of life, the one food that will not leave us hungry—the flesh of Christ Jesus the Lord. Remember, just like the ancient Israelites in Egypt, to be saved from slavery and death, **we must eat the lamb.**

The sacrifice on the altar at Mass is not a re-killing of Christ. He has died once and for all. Christ is no longer suffering. We do not kill Christ again, and this is why we call the Eucharist an un-bloody sacrifice. The Book of Hebrews explains to us the once and eternal nature of the sacrifice of Christ. He is glorified in heaven for all times and places.

The common misunderstanding of Catholic teaching describes the Mass as an additional sacrifice, up and above the sacrifice of Calvary, and thus a superfluous sacrifice. If the Mass were an additional sacrifice, it would certainly not be in line with orthodox Christian teaching, for Christ’s sacrifice rendered all other sacrifices unnecessary and perhaps even blasphemous. In truth, however, the Mass is simply a sharing in the *once*

and for all eternal sacrifice of Christ. Christ, being God, exists outside of time (in addition to existing in time when He came into the world as Jesus). Therefore, His eternal sacrifice touches all believers at all times in all places, not just those present in Jerusalem around 30 A.D. The ONE sacrifice of Christ is re-presented on the altar. We share in the very same sacrifice. No element of the sacrifice is new except our participation in it. The loaf of Christ's body is eternally the same.

What about the Jewish prohibition against eating blood? Blood contains the life of a thing; it was used in ceremonies to idols, and thus its consumption was forbidden to the Israelites. Christ is the new Covenant. His rule completes and then supercedes all Old Testament laws. For this reason, Christians no longer have to sacrifice animals. For this reason, Christians can now enjoy pork and chose whether or not to circumcise their male children. The Old Law served a purpose for its time, but the fullness of truth is revealed in the person of Christ, and His word is the Law to which we now must pledge allegiance. If God tells us to eat His flesh and drink His blood, then the previous prohibition has been lifted. In fact, Christ cannot even symbolically tell us to do something that violates the law. So to say that He meant what He said at the Last Supper figuratively is to admit that He instructed the Apostles to symbolically break the Law. Christ would never give an instruction to sin, even figuratively. Perhaps the ancient prohibition against blood was given to the people in anticipation of the only time that it would be acceptable to drink blood—the blood of the Son of the true and living God. If the blood contains the life, then we should drink the blood of Christ so that His divine life will live within us.

It is not cannibalism, because Jesus can no longer be killed. He gave Himself as a willing sacrifice. We are not killing and then taking from a limited human body, rather a divine person is offering His own super-abundant self to us through a miracle.

In virtually all cultures, there are few ideas more repugnant and few taboos more inviolable than those regarding cannibalism. Most people would rather die than eat the flesh of a fellow human being. Hence, we can understand the consternation that Jesus followers felt when he told them that unless they ate his flesh and drank his blood they would have no life in them. What a jolt that must have been! He hadn't given them the class on the Eucharist yet. There's a saying in our culture that gives a good insight as to where Jesus was leading them. It says, "You are what you eat." In a spiritual sense, that's exactly what Jesus wants for us, to become a part of him and to replicate in each part of our life and character his goodness. Our bonding with him, especially by sharing the Eucharist, will give us the strength and energy to grow into his goodness. That strength and energy is what we call "grace." What a remarkable destiny we have: To become brothers and sisters of the Lord, in the truest and fullest sense.

It is not idolatry to worship Christ in the Eucharist, just as it was not idolatry to worship Him when He walked the Earth. Wherever Christ is present body and blood, soul and divinity, it is appropriate to worship Him. Since, we Catholics believe that after the bread and wine are consecrated they become the actual body and blood of Christ, leaving no actual trace of bread or wine behind, we are worshipping Christ Himself, and not an idol.

Again, this is a great mystery. While on earth, we will never be able to fully understand it. We will never be able to understand the Trinity or the hypostatic union (Christ being both man and God) or the Incarnation or what happened to Elijah or how matter was created, so why are we so much more disturbed by the mystery of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist? Are we like those disciples of Christ who simply could not receive this teaching and decided to walk with Him no more (John 6:66)? The Eucharist is the greatest gift that God ever gave to man—the Gift of His own Son to deliver us from our sin and to bring us to life everlasting. It is tragic that so many refuse this gift, preferring instead a watered-down, easily palatable understanding of a truth so profound that it could change the face of the world if it was only recognized for what it is. Eucharistic adoration has had an unbelievably powerful effect on those parishes that have fostered it. The results can be measured. Parishes that have adopted continual Eucharistic adoration produce tangible differences in the faith life of believers, and dead parishes begin to flourish again. I have seen some of these results and they are truly amazing-- not to mention the effect the Eucharist has had in my own life, leading me into communion with God in the most intimate way I know. I hunger for the Eucharist now, as if I would starve without it. Like the Bible, the Eucharist is the Word of God, a gift of which I cannot get enough.

Christ is with us always. But in the Eucharist, He comes to us in the most complete and perfect way, giving us all of Himself. As a husband gives himself to his wife, so Christ gives Himself to His Church (see Ephesians 5). And just as the husband gives himself totally to his wife in the marital act, Christ gives Himself to us totally in the Eucharist. By virtue of their marital covenant with each other before God, a husband and wife remain together until death, part of each other, no matter how distant they may be from each other in space and time. But when they come together in the physical marital act, they renew their marital covenant and become one flesh in an even more intimate way. And so it is with Christ. He is the bridegroom, and we the Church are His bride. He is always with us, but in the Eucharist, His covenant relationship with us is consummated and we become one flesh with Him, physically, spiritually, totally.

This is the reason that non-Catholics cannot receive the Eucharist in a Catholic Church. Just as there can be no consummation of the marriage between a woman and a man before their wedding, there can be no consummation of the marriage between Christ and a person until that person becomes united to His holy spouse, the Church. A man and woman who are betrothed can truly love each other, perhaps more than some married couples, yet they still do not have the right to perform the marital act, since they have not formally and properly established their covenant before God. Likewise, until a person is properly united to the Church, he or she cannot partake of the Eucharist, despite a burning, perhaps saving love of Christ and desire to receive Him body and soul in Holy Communion. This prohibition is also the result of the sad divisions that have separated the faithful, since so many denominations now deny transubstantiation.

The Church is not just an invisible body of believers. The Church is a physical reality, as Christ is a physical reality. If the Church were not a physical entity, there would be no

reason for Christ to appoint Apostles, men who would become bishops over the early Church. Christ can only establish real offices (like apostle, elder, prophet, and teacher), in a real institutional Church. Likewise, if Christ were not physical, He would not have been able to die on a cross for us in excruciating pain. St. Paul tells us that the Church, married to Christ, is one flesh with Christ. Elsewhere, St. Paul tells us that the Church is the body of Christ. This follows, since the two are one flesh. Now if the Church is the Body of Christ, and Christ exists both spiritually and physically, how can the Church remain merely spiritual? The Church must be, like Christ, both spiritual and physical.

Therefore, if Christ is bridegroom to a visible Church that He established (Matthew 16:15-19), which Church is it? There is only one Church that has existed since the time of Christ, with a succession of leaders that can be traced back to the Apostles themselves, and a body of teaching that has remained consistent with Christ, His Apostles, and their successors for 2000 years. That Church is the Catholic Church. Only through the ordained priesthood in the Catholic Church does any man have authority to consecrate the Eucharist. This is not because the priest is more holy than the rest of the congregation or because he takes the place of Christ. Rather, the priest has been ordained, as the Apostles were, to a special ministerial role within the Church. The role of the priest carries special responsibilities, given to him by Christ, so that Christ's will might be accomplished for us. Christ is the one who offers Himself on the altar of Calvary. The priest stands as a representative of Christ for the people, offering the same sacrifice in Christ's name. God has ordained it that man might participate in His glorious mysteries. God condescends to our level so that He might lift us up to His. That is why Christ told the Apostles that they would be able to perform even greater miracles than He performed in His lifetime. One of the greatest ways that God works in this world is through His people. This is why He chose to send His prophets and Apostles out to preach His Word, rather than coming as Jesus Christ to each person individually. In addition to the people God sends us, however, we must remember that He does send Jesus to each and every one of us. If we are open to Him, we will see His work in nature, His presence in prayer, and his body and blood, soul and divinity in the holy sacrament of the altar, the blessed and mysterious Eucharist.

Q) How long is Jesus present in the Eucharist after we've received Communion? -

A) It is generally assumed that the Eucharistic species of bread remains for about 15 minutes after reception. This is based on simple biology and reflects the *Catechism's* statement that the presence of Christ "endures as long as the Eucharistic species subsist." This is why many saints have recommended offering 15 minutes of prayer after receiving the Eucharist as a thanksgiving to God. This allows the soul to savor the presence of God and have a true "heart-to-heart" with Jesus <https://aleteia.org/2017/05/17/how-long-is-jesus-present-in-the-eucharist-after-weve-received-communion/>.

Additional Info:

- *The Words of Institution are timeless and fruitful and continue to produce their effects into eternity [MYSTAGOGY – Enrico Mazza, p.183]*

- Article: 'The Bread we Offer' ...The Jewish matzo used at Passover is analogous to our unleavened bread required for the Roman Rite. [*Adoremus Bulletin* - Vol X. No. 6 Sept 2004]
- *LECRISTO SPRING 2006 p.6*] – A child asked, 'In preparing me for my 1st Communion day, my catechist told me that Jesus is present in the Eucharist. But how? I can't see him!' Pope Benedict XVI answered, 'No, we cannot see him, but there are many things that we do not see – but they exist and are essential. For example: we do not see our reason, yet we have reason. We do not see our intelligence, and we have it. In a word: we do not see our soul, and yet it exists and we see its effects, because we can speak, think and make decisions, etc. Nor do we see an electric current, for example, yet we see that it exists; we see this microphone, that it is working, and we see lights. Therefore we do not see the very deepest things, those that really sustain life and the world, but we can see and feel their effects. This is also true for electricity; we do not see the electric current, but we see the light. So it is with the risen Lord: we do not see him with our eyes, but we see that wherever Jesus is, people change, they improve...Therefore, we do not see the Lord himself, but we see the effects of the Lord, so we can understand that Jesus is present. And as I said, it is precisely the invisible things that are the most profound, the most important. So let us go to meet this invisible but powerful Lord, who helps us to live well.'
- Matter - are the vessels of God's action upon us. They are water, bread, wine and oil. All 4 of these are mentioned in Psalm 104:13-16 From thy lofty abode thou **waterest** the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of thy work. 14. Thou dost cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth, 15. and **wine** to gladden the heart of man, **oil** to make his face shine, and **bread** to strengthen man's heart. 16. The trees of the Lord are **watered** abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon which he planted.
- Wisdom 16:20 "Instead of this, you nourished your people with food of angels and furnished them bread from heaven, ready to hand, untoiled - for, endowed with all delights and conforming to every taste."

ⁱ "The word used in the Greek for "eat" is "**phagein**," which designates the way human beings consume their food. The word used in John 6 is "**trogein**", which designates the manner in which animals eats, something along the lines of gnawing. This is how Christ's life becomes our own [Fr Robert Barron; "[A Light Unto My Path](#)" ; Magnificat, Yonkers, NY; August 2012, Vol.14, No.6, p.262].