

Is Communion really the Body and Blood of Christ

THE REAL PRESENCE

Some years ago, one of my nieces made her First Holy Communion. Wanting to find out what kids nowadays believe, I asked her what she had been taught about the Blessed Eucharist. She told me that the Blessed Eucharist symbolizes Christ's presence among us.

When I told her that the Blessed Eucharist not merely signifies Christ's presence among us but that Christ is really and truly present in the Blessed Eucharist, she said: "No, you're wrong. The Blessed Eucharist merely symbolizes Christ's presence". She was so sure of herself that I had to conclude that she was telling me what she had learned at CCD.

Well!! Is Christ really and truly present in the Blessed Eucharist? Or, as my niece maintains -- Does the Blessed Eucharist merely signify or symbolize Christ's presence among us? In answering these questions, I think it would be best to start with the Words of Christ Himself.

THE EUCHARIST IN SCRIPTURE

There are 4 accounts of the institution of the Blessed Eucharist in the New Testament:

-- Lk.22:7-20, ICor.11:17-34; Mt.26:17-29, Mk.14:12-25.

When the Evangelists came to writing their accounts of the Last Supper they simply incorporated into their Gospels pieces of early liturgy in which the origin of the Eucharist was commemorated. Thus, the accounts of the institution of the Eucharist in the New Testament should not be looked at from an historical point of view but from a liturgical point of view. (Diction. p.343).

What were Christ's original words?? We don't know.

By the time St. John was writing, the celebration of the Eucharist was so much a part of the life of the community that he did not feel the need to repeat the institutional narrative. But, in ch. 6 he does emphasize Christ's presence in the Eucharist. "The bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man & drink his blood you will not have life in you...". (Jn.6:51ff).

(i). St. Matthew (26:17-29): According to St. Matthew, on Holy Thursday evening, Christ took ordinary bread into his hands. When he had said the blessing, he broke the bread and gave it to his disciples: "Take and eat", he said, "this is my Body".

Then, he took the cup filled with wine, and when he had again given thanks, he gave it to them to drink, saying: "Drink all of you from this, for this is my Blood".

Notice the words that Christ uses. He does not say: "This bread signifies my Body". Neither does he say: "This cup of wine symbolizes my presence among you". Rather, pointing to the bread, he said: "This is my Body". Pointing to the cup of wine he said: "This is my Blood".

Oxford Commentary on the Bible I was reading what the Oxford Commentary on the Bible has to say about this passage.

The author points out that the original Aramaic would have no word corresponding to the Greek verb for "is". Thus, Christ, pointing to the bread, would have said: "This my Body".

Over the cup of wine, he would have said: "This my Blood".

According to this author, the Greek word for "is" has a range of uses and is, in itself, ambiguous. He concludes by saying that it is then highly unlikely that any clear ontological identification between the bread and Jesus' body is intended. The author acknowledges that many have taken the word "is" literally and identify the bread and wine with the Body and Blood of Christ.

Others have found here only a figurative representation – the bread symbolizes Jesus.

He goes on to say that we can't determine what St. Matthew believed about Christ's presence in the Eucharist.

As we saw a few weeks ago, the tradition which St. Paul received had no problem in interpreting the words of St. Matthew. (1Cor. 11:23-26)

Neither did St. Cyril of Jerusalem have any problem in determining what St. Matthew believed about Christ's presence in the Eucharist:

“Even of itself the teaching of the blessed Paul (1Cor. 11:23) is sufficient to give you full assurance concerning those Divine Mysteries, of which having been deemed worthy, you are become of the same body & blood with Christ. For you have just heard him say distinctly. ‘That the Lord Jesus Christ in the night in which He was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks He broke it, and gave to His disciples, saying ‘Take, eat, this is my Body’ & having taken the cup and given thanks, He said ‘take, drink, this is My Blood (Mt. 26: 26ff). Since He Himself declared & said of the bread, ‘This is My Body’, who shall dare to doubt any longer? And since He had Himself affirmed & said ‘this is my Blood’ who shall ever hesitate, saying, that it is not his Blood”

The author of the Oxford commentary asks the rhetorical question:

Is St. Matthew closer to Luther than to Zwingli? Notice the question: Is St. Matthew closer to Luther than to Zwingli? Is that the right question? What is the right question? Are either Luther or Zwingli interpreting Matthew correctly?

Personally, if I wanted to know how to interpret the words: "This is my Body", I would not ask either Luther or Zwingli. I would look at how it was interpreted during the previous 16 centuries.

I would ask: Since Apostolic times, how has the Church interpreted these words of Christ in St. Matthew's Gospel?

(3). Taken Literally: From the very beginning, the Church has taken Christ's words literally. The Church believes that every time the priest says the Eucharistic Prayer, during the celebration of the Eucharist, this ordinary bread becomes the Body of Christ. The Church believes that every time, during Mass, that the priest takes the Chalice of wine and repeats the words of Christ, this wine becomes the Blood of Christ. To the human eye the Consecrated Bread and Wine are still bread and wine. However, with the eyes of faith, we know that they are no longer bread and wine but the Body of Christ & the Blood of Christ.

This is what Cyril of Jerusalem has to say about the Eucharist(d. 444): "Do you think of the elements as mere bread and wine? They are, according to the Lord's declaration, his body and blood. Though the perception suggests the contrary, let faith be your stay. Instead of judging the matter by taste, let faith give you an unwavering confidence that you have been privileged to receive the body and blood of Christ".

(4). Body & Blood: The meaning we attach to the words "Body" & "Blood" is much different to the meaning attached to them by Christ and the Jews of Christ's time. When we use the word "body" we are usually referring to that part of ourselves which we call our physical body. However, when Christ used the word "body" he meant not merely his physical body but his whole person -- his body, blood and spirit. In a word, his entire self. Thus, when Christ, indicating the bread, said: "This is my Body", he meant that "this bread is me.. this bread is I myself". In the same way, the term "blood" stands for the entire Glorified Christ. Thus, when Christ, indicating the cup of wine, said: "This is my Blood" he meant "This wine is me.. This wine is I myself, who am present here with you". Put simply, the word "body" can mean "physical body" but it can also mean "person" or "self".

(5). The Patristic Church: The theme running through the writings of the Fathers (2nd.-5th. c.) is that the consecrated bread and wine are no longer bread and wine but the Body and Blood of Christ. Cyril of Jerusalem wrote the following.

"You have learned and become quite convinced that the perceptible bread is not bread, though it is bread to the taste, but the Body of Christ and that the perceptible wine is not wine, though taste will have it so but the Blood of Christ...".

- 1 St. Augustine, speaking to recent converts, has this to say about the Blessed Eucharist.

"Until now, as you see, it is bread and wine, but once the consecration is added, this bread will be the body of Christ and this wine will be the Blood of Christ".

Like the other Early Fathers, Augustine points out the importance of distinguishing between what is seen from what is believed. Remember that, at this time, ordinary bread and wine, which people brought from their homes, were used to celebrate the Eucharist.

(6). The Medieval Theologians: The early medieval theologians continued this emphasis on the Consecrated Bread and Wine being the Body and Blood of Christ. One author

sums up this period by saying that belief in Real Presence is the hallmark of the medieval theology of the Lord's Supper.

(I). How Is Christ Present In The Eucharist?: During the middle ages, theologians began to ask the question: How is Christ present in the Eucharist? over the next 4-5 centuries we find different answers to this question. In the early 11th. c. Berengar, a theologian, held that the bread & wine, used in the Liturgy, remained bread & wine. Thus for Berengar, the Lord is present in the Eucharist only in a spiritual sense. The bread & wine are a sign of Christ's spiritual presence.

Here we already have the seeds of the Reformation

A Synod was held in Rome in 1059, which condemned Berengar. It drew up an oath which Berengar had to take. The central section of the oath reads:

Here we have two extreme approaches to the Real Presence.

1. Berengar speaks of Christ's presence as a spiritual presence.
2. The Synod speaks as if it was the physical body of the Earthly Christ that is present in the Eucharist. One author describes this Synod statement as one of the most unfortunate and theologically inept statements ever put forward by the Church on the subject of the Eucharist.

(7). Transubstantiation: Since the 11th. century, theologians have used the word "transubstantiation" in relation to the Eucharist. The word Transubstantiation is used in an official Church document for the first time at the 4th. Lateran Council. (1215).

(a). St. Thomas Aquinas: Although it was used before him, the word "transubstantiation" will always be associated with St. Thomas Aquinas. Using Aristotle's notion of "substance" and "accident", he says that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the substance of bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of the Risen Lord.

The "accidents" — the outward appearances i.e. that which we see and taste as bread and wine, remain the same, as they were before. Here St. Thomas is trying to steer a middle course between a too physical understanding of Christ's presence in the Eucharist and a purely symbolic presence.

He maintained that his approach to Christ's presence in the Eucharist is the only way to avoid a too physical understanding of the presence and a purely symbolic presence. St. Thomas maintained that the presence of the Lord remained until the "accidents" are no longer recognizable as bread and wine. In other words, Christ is present in the Eucharist as long as the bread & wine are recognizable as bread and wine.

Thomas' understanding of Christ's presence in the Eucharist was adopted by the Council of Trent. By using the word "transubstantiation" the Church is affirming, not only the Real Presence of Christ, but also the mysterious & radical change that takes place in the bread and wine. The word does not imply a material or a physical change in the bread and wine. In other words, by using the word "transubstantiation", theologians are saying 2 things:

(a). Through the power of the Holy Spirit, during the Eucharistic Prayer, a mysterious & radical change takes place in the bread and wine.

(b). At the same time, the outward appearances (i.e. that which we see & taste as bread and wine) remain the same.

Before the Eucharistic Prayer, to the question: "What is that?", the believer answers: "It is bread".

After the Eucharistic Prayer, to the same question, he answers: "It is truly the Body of Christ, the Bread of life".

(B). REFORMATION

Let's now turn to the Reformers & the role they played in formulating our Eucharistic doctrine. The Reformers generally were united in rejecting the Catholic teaching that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ. After agreeing on this point, their paths diverge.

(a). Zwingli (died 1531): Zwingli, one of the Reformers, denied the Real Presence. He described Christ's presence in the Eucharist as a spiritual presence, or a mere memorial presence. He maintained that the physical body of Christ could only be present in one place and that is in Heaven. Zwingli seems to have forgotten that it is the Glorified Christ we are talking about.

(b). Luther: It may surprise you, but one of the staunchest defenders of the Real Presence is Martin Luther. Luther retained the traditional teaching that Christ is really & truly present in the Eucharist – not dependent upon subjective feelings and considerations. But he had difficulties in explaining how or the manner in which Christ is present. He argued that the bread remained bread and the wine remained wine. The Body and Blood of the Lord are present along with the bread and wine. Or, more exactly, Christ is present "in, with and under" the bread and wine. i.e. Consubstantiation.

Thus, for Luther, the bread, while still remaining bread, is the Body of Christ. And the wine, while still remaining wine, is the Blood of Christ. Put simply, Luther is rejecting the Catholic teaching on the mysterious and radical change in the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ.

Here is what St. Cyril of Jerusalem has to say:

"For as the bread and wine of the Eucharist before the invocation of the Holy and Adorable Trinity, were simple bread and wine, while after the invocation the bread becomes the Body of Christ and the wine becomes the Blood of Christ". Notice the word "becomes".

The bread becomes the Body of Christ & the wine becomes the Blood of Christ.

Luther believed that the worthy and the unworthy received the Body and Blood of the Lord. The reception, of course, meant damnation for the unworthy and salvation for the worthy. I don't know whether he would admit it or not but, on this point, Luther is

following the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas. Calvin disagreed with Luther on this point. He says that the unworthy do not receive the Body of the Lord.

(a). Luther and Transubstantiation: Luther rejected the word “transubstantiation”. He said that Scripture and not Aristotle's metaphysics should be the foundation of all Christian thinking on the Eucharist.

We all agree with Luther that the Scriptures are the foundation for our faith in Christ's presence in the Eucharist. But a very important question is: Who is going to interpret the Scriptures for us? The Reformers themselves have different interpretations of Christ's words at the Last Supper. We need someone or some group to authoritatively declare: This is what the words of Christ mean. We need someone or some group to say – Since Apostolic times, this is how these words of Christ have been interpreted.

Luther & Zwingli had a meeting during which Luther tried to convince Zwingli that his understanding of the Eucharist was the correct one. But Zwingli refused to accept Luther's theology.

Luther told Zwingli to pray to God that he would come to a correct understanding of the Eucharist. Luther himself has rejected 16 centuries of Church teaching on the Eucharist.

(c). Calvin: After his death, Zwingli's teaching was developed and continued by Martin Bucer and John Calvin. For Calvin the Blessed Eucharist symbolizes Christ's presence among us. Or, Christ is merely spiritually present in the Blessed Eucharist. In this view, the bread and wine are means of grace much like the water in the Sacrament of Baptism.

I agree with one author who says that translations such as "represents" and "symbolizes" fail to do justice to the realism of Christ's words over the bread and the cup.

Calvin agreed with Zwingli that a real body can only be in one place and that was in Heaven. The Holy Spirit raises us up to Heaven and unites us with the living Christ, body and soul.

(B). COUNCIL OF TRENT

The Catholic bishops got together in a place called Trent to address the teaching of the Reformers. This meeting became known as the “Council of Trent”. The bishops did not start with Catholic teaching on the Eucharist. Rather they concentrated on certain statements, which were considered the teaching of the Reformers. These statements were considered contrary to Catholic teaching.

(a). Trent & Calvin : With Calvin's teaching mind, the Council of Trent declared that Jesus Christ, true God true man, is really, truly and substantially present in the Blessed Eucharist, under the appearances of bread and wine.

Canon 883: "If anyone 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 a sign or figure or by his power: let him be anathema".

Thus, Christ's presence in the Blessed Eucharist is not merely spiritual or symbolic but is a real and substantial presence. The Glorified Christ, whole and entire, is present under the appearance of bread. The Glorified Christ, whole and entire, is present under the appearance of wine.

(b). Trent & Luther: With Luther's teaching mind, the Council declared that, during the celebration of the Eucharist, the substance of bread changes into the Body of Christ and the substance of wine is changed into the Blood of Christ.

Canon 884 (493): "If anyone says that the substance of bread and wine remains in the Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist together with the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and denies that wonderful and extraordinary change of the whole substance of the bread into Christ's body and the whole substance of the wine into his blood while only the species of bread and wine remain, a change which the Catholic church has most fittingly called "transubstantiation": let him be anathema.

To put it in simple terms, the Council states that, during the Eucharistic Prayer, through the power of the Holy Spirit, that reality, which makes bread to be bread, is no longer bread but becomes the Body of Christ. And that which makes wine to be wine is no longer wine but becomes the Blood of Christ.

I have another quotation from St. Ambrose of Milan. (d. 397): "Perhaps you will say 'I see something else, how is it that you assert that I receive the Body of Christ? And this is the point which remains for us to prove. And what evidence shall we make use of? Let us prove that this is not what nature made, but what the blessing consecrated, and the power of blessing is greater than that of nature because, by blessing, nature itself is changed".

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, nature itself is changed.

CHRIST IS REALLY, TRULY AND SUBSTANTIALLY PRESENT

In the light of 2,000 years of Church teaching, I feel that we have to disagree with my little Calvinist niece when she says that the Blessed Eucharist merely symbolizes Christ's presence among us. We believe that Christ is really present in the Eucharist. We believe that the Consecrated Bread is not just a sign or symbol of Christ's body. We believe that the Consecrated Bread is Christ's Body.

We believe that Christ is truly present. He is not there just because we believe he is there. He is truly there. We believe that Christ is substantially present. We believe that the Glorified Christ, in his humanity and divinity, is present in the Blessed Eucharist.

Before the Eucharistic Prayer, to the question: "What is that?", the believer answers: "It is bread".

After the Eucharistic Prayer, to the same question, he answers: "It is truly the Body of the Glorified Christ, the Bread of life".

As we receive Holy Communion, the priest says: "Body of Christ" & we answer: "Amen". Through our "Amen" we are expressing our belief that the Bread we are receiving is really and truly the Body of the Glorified Christ.

TRENT AND TRANSUBSTANTIATION

What did Trent have to say about “transubstantiation”? – that which makes bread to be bread is no longer bread but the Body of Christ & that which makes wine to be wine is no longer wine but the Blood of Christ.

The primary objective of a theology of “transubstantiation” is to safeguard the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. Trent's main purpose in using the word was to affirm as strongly as possible its belief not only in Christ's Presence in the Eucharist but also in that mysterious and radical change, which takes place in the bread and wine.

Some theologians are asking whether the word “transubstantiation” is necessary to explain Christ's presence in the Eucharist. For the first 11-12 centuries, the Church spoke of Christ's presence in the Eucharist, without using the word.

The Church hierarchy insists that we retain the word. It is afraid, that if we drop the word “transubstantiation”, we run the risk of watering down the doctrine of the Real Presence and especially the mysterious & radical change that takes place in the bread & wine.

Fr John Morrissey, Pastor of St. Sebastian Catholic Church, and a former seminary professor has prepared a comprehensive explanation about the most important doctrine of the Catholic faith.