

PulledQuote: "...the next time you receive our Lord in Holy Communion, offer that communion for someone who has lost faith in the Eucharist. By your prayerful intercession, you can open a door for a brother or sister, even a stranger, so they too can come to know that Jesus is truly with us in the gift of the Eucharist." –Bishop John Folda

Headline: The Eucharist: Source of the Church's life

A national polling organization recently did a survey of U.S. Catholics about their belief in the Eucharist. The report gave a rather alarming statistic that only one-third of all Catholics in the U.S. believe in the Church's teaching on the Eucharist: that during Mass, when the priest takes bread and wine and says the words of consecration, the bread and wine change in substance, into the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus. In other words, the Eucharist is the true and real presence of Jesus himself, the Son of God. Now, for those who attend Mass at least weekly, the percentage who believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist goes up substantially. I'm sure for those who read this column, it's 100 percent! But even so, the survey results are alarming because the Eucharist is at the heart of our faith as Catholics.

Jesus himself gave the Eucharist to his Church so that he might dwell among us and so that we might share in the power of his life, death, and resurrection. By our adoration and reception of the Eucharist, we share in his very life, the life without which we cannot dwell with him in heaven. Our era has become skeptical of faith and of anything supernatural. It doubts anything that hints of the divine, and apparently some of our fellow Catholics have been infected with this skepticism too. But the Church's faith in the Eucharist has been constant, and through the Eucharist we encounter Christ in the great outpouring of his love. He gives us the beautiful gift of his presence among us, and we should never reduce it to a mere symbol or a nice representation of something Jesus did long ago.

Since the time of the apostles, the Eucharist has always been a part of the Church's life. Paul speaks of it in his First Letter to the Corinthians, which is probably the earliest written scriptural testimony about the Eucharist. We find it in all four of the Gospels. When Jesus spoke of the Eucharist as his own body and blood in the famous sixth chapter of John's Gospel, many of his followers left him because they could not accept this teaching. Did Jesus call them back and change the teaching so they would stay? No, he would not reduce the Eucharist to anything less than it was. When he said "This is my Body," and "This is my Blood," he meant what he said.

The Eucharist is written about by all the early fathers of the Church, like Irenaeus, Cyprian, Augustine, and many others. It has been a constant in the life of the faithful, who have always recognized Christ himself in the Eucharist. So convinced have Christians been of this truth, that many have died for their faith in the Eucharist. Early Christians risked their lives to gather for the celebration of the Mass in catacombs so that they could receive the Eucharist, even when doing so was outlawed during the Roman persecutions. And closer to our own times, during World War II small groups of the faithful would gather around priests who were imprisoned with them in concentration camps. Using small fragments of bread and a bit of smuggled wine, they would celebrate the Mass in secret, knowing that discovery would probably lead to torture and death. Is it likely that anyone would risk their lives in this way for a mere symbol?

Ours is not the first era that has been skeptical and doubted the Real Presence of Christ, and through the centuries Jesus has worked many miracles of grace to strengthen our faith in the Eucharist. There have been countless healings, endless conversions, and miracles that defy our comprehension. It is reported that Pope Francis himself, as a bishop in Buenos Aires, witnessed a desecrated host that took on the characteristics of human flesh and blood. He submitted this to medical testing by a New York heart physician, who concluded that the Eucharistic host had all the physical properties of living human heart tissue and human blood. In all of these miraculous stories, we find that Jesus continues to abide with his Church, and he continues to pour out his transforming grace on his people. The Eucharist itself is a miracle, and we experience this miracle at every Mass we attend.

It is well known that fewer Catholics are attending Mass on Sundays, and this seems to be in parallel with loss of faith in the Eucharist. In a similar way, the less committed we are to the Mass, the

more likely it is that our faith in Christ in the Eucharist will diminish, especially among the young. If we brush off attendance at Mass, then the message to our children is clear: the Eucharist must not be very important. But if we make Mass our first priority on the Lord's Day and on other days too, then we are telling our children and others that this is Christ, and we would not dream of missing his celebration. By our actions we witness to our faith, and if we live our faith in the Eucharist, then others may come to greater faith too.

Many Catholics have adopted the practice of Eucharist adoration, which I can't recommend enough. To spend time quietly in the presence of our Eucharistic Lord is an ideal way to experience his love for us and his desire to be with us. And the more regularly we come to him, the more convinced we will be that it is Jesus himself whom we approach. Our faith will be strengthened and our hearts will be inflamed with his love. I would offer this suggestion the next time you pray before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament: offer your prayer for someone who doubts this truth of our faith. And the next time you receive our Lord in Holy Communion, offer that communion for someone who has lost faith in the Eucharist. By your prayerful intercession, you can open a door for a brother or sister, even a stranger, so they too can come to know that Jesus is truly with us in the gift of the Eucharist.