



Eucharist

Basic Catholic Catechist Home Study Course

Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J.

1. The Real Presence

The center of the whole Catholic liturgy is the Eucharist. The Eucharist is most important in the life of the Church because it is Jesus Christ. It is the incarnation continued in space and time. The other sacraments and all the Church's ministries and apostolates are directed toward the Eucharist.

The word "Eucharist" means "thanksgiving". This is explained by the fact that Christ "gave thanks" when He instituted the Eucharist and this is the supreme act of Christian gratitude to God.

The Eucharist is the sacrament which really, truly and substantially contains the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ under the appearances of Bread and wine. It is the great sacrament of God's love in which Christ is eaten, the mind is filled with grace and a pledge is given to us of future glory.

Christ instituted the sacrament of the Eucharist at the Last Supper on the night before He died on the cross. This is recorded by St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians (cf. I Corinthians 11:23-26) and in the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew (26:26-28), Mark (14:22-24), and Luke (22:19-20). St. John omitted the institution because he wrote his Gospel to supplement what the other evangelists had already written. The Eucharist was instituted in this way: "Jesus took some bread and when He had said the blessing He broke it and gave it to the disciples. 'Take it and eat,' He said, 'this is my body.' Then He took a cup and when He had returned thanks He gave it to them. 'Drink all of you from this,' He said, 'for this is my blood'" (Matthew 26:26-28).

Like Baptism, the Eucharist is necessary for salvation to be received either sacramentally or in desire. Christ's words, "if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you will not have life in you" (John 6:53), means that Holy Communion is necessary to sustain the life of grace in a person who has reached the age of reason. Those who, through no fault of their own, do not realize this can receive the necessary grace to remain in God's friendship through other means. This is similar to what happens with the baptism of desire to first receive the state of grace.

The sensible sign in the Eucharist is the appearance of bread and wine, that is, anything in these elements that fall under the senses such as size, color, shape, taste, weight and texture. After consecration, however, this sign contains the whole Christ, His Body and Blood, His Soul and Divinity.

The material necessary for the sacrament is wheaten bread and wine. In the Latin Rite, the bread must be unleavened; in the Eastern Rites of the Catholic Church, leavened bread is used. The wine is mixed with a little water before consecration. Christ chose bread and wine for the matter of the

sacrament in order to teach that as we daily partake of food for the body so we should daily receive this heavenly food for the soul. The necessary words for producing the sacrament of the Eucharist are "This is my body". "This is my blood".

Christ is present in the Eucharist not only with everything that makes Him man, but with all that makes Him this human being. He is therefore present with all His physical properties, hands and feet and head and human heart. He is present with His human soul, with His thoughts, desires and human affections. He becomes present in the Eucharist by means of transubstantiation.

Transubstantiation is the term used to identify the change that takes place at the consecration of the bread and wine at Mass. Therefore after the consecration, nothing remains of the bread and wine except their external properties. By this we mean the bread still looks like bread and tastes like bread, and the wine still looks and tastes like wine, but they are no longer bread and wine. Their substance becomes the living Body and Blood of Christ.

It is a matter of faith that Jesus Christ is contained under each particle of the species of bread and wine. No matter how great the number of parts into which the species are divided, the whole Christ is present in every portion. He is present in the Eucharist as long as the species remain. Therefore, we worship the Blessed Sacrament as we would worship the person of Jesus Himself.

The Eucharist is the most excellent of all the sacraments because it contains Christ Himself. All the other sacraments are channels of grace but they do not actually possess Jesus Christ, the Author of Grace. Moreover, the other sacraments point to the Eucharist as their purpose or end. Baptism enables us to receive the Eucharist; Confirmation perfects the Christian so that his faith in the Eucharist may remain strong; Penance and Anointing of the Sick cleanse the soul from weakness and sin and prepare it for the reception of the Eucharist; Holy Orders ordains the priests necessary to consecrate and offer the Eucharist; and Matrimony is the earthly sign of the purpose of the Eucharist, to unite the faithful with Christ in selfless love.

The doctrine of the Real Presence is, first of all, proved from Sacred Scripture. At the Last Supper, Christ simply declared that He was giving the disciples His Body and Blood. Nothing in the context of His words indicates He was speaking figuratively, whereas everything shows He meant it to be taken literally (cf. Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:19-20).

In the Gospel of John, when Christ foretold He would give His Body to eat and His Blood to drink, many of His disciples left Him because they would not believe this. Yet, instead of taking back what He said or qualifying His statement, He repeated the promise and even asked the Apostles if they also wanted to leave Him (cf. John 6:47-67).

Sacred Tradition from the earliest times teaches the Real Presence. St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote in A.D. 107, "The Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ" (Smyrneans, 6:2). And St. Justin wrote in A.D. 145, "As Jesus Christ our Savior was made incarnate by the word of God and had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so too, as we have been taught, the food which has been made into the Eucharist by the Eucharistic prayer set down by Him ...is both the flesh and the blood of that incarnate Jesus" (I Apology, 66).

The teaching of the Church on the Real Presence is defined revealed doctrine according to the Council of Trent. It declares that the whole Christ is truly, really and substantially present in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist immediately after consecration. It also declares that the whole Christ is present under each form, and under each part of particle of each species of both bread and wine. By the "whole Christ" in the Eucharist, we mean He is present in the fullness of His divine and human nature. He is present under the sacramental veils with the fullness of His divine attributes as well as all His human qualities.

We should worship Jesus in the Tabernacle because He is present there under the appearance of bread and wine as truly as He is in heaven. We should give Him the adoration given to God alone because of His infinite perfection and His supreme domination over all things created. The Church fosters devotion to the Real Presence through public adoration of the Holy Eucharist, notably exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, Benediction and Forty Hours Devotion. Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament is a special devotion that dates from at least the fifteenth century. It consists of Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, hymns, readings, prayers and the blessing of the people with the Holy Eucharist. Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament is the solemn placing of a consecrated Host in a monstrance, on the altar, to be viewed and adored by the faithful. The exposition is opened with a hymn and incensing by the priest or deacon. During the Exposition, public or private prayers are said, and the ceremony is commonly concluded with benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. Forty Hours Devotion is the public exposition of the Blessed Sacrament in the monstrance for forty hours, either consecutively or over a period of three days.

The sign by which the people know that Christ is present in the tabernacle is the sanctuary light which burns night and day before the tabernacle. Also a tabernacle veil or other suitable means may be prescribed by competent authority. We manifest our adoration outwardly by genuflecting before the place where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved.

No doubt, Christ is present in other ways besides the Real Presence.

- He is present when the Church prays;
- He is present when the Church performs her works of mercy;
- He is present in the Church as she governs the people of God;
- He is present in the pastors who exercise their priestly and Episcopal power;
- He is specially present in the Church when she offers in His Name the Sacrifice of the Mass;
- He is present when the Church administers the sacraments.

But the Real Presence is absolutely unique. It is the physical presence of Christ in our midst, no less truly present than He is now present at the right hand of the Father of Heaven. It is called the "Real Presence" because it is presence in the fullest sense possible. It is a substantial presence by which Christ, the God-man, is now on earth, no less truly that He was during His visible presence in history in the first century in Palestine.

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