

“The LORD God planted a garden in Eden ... Out of the ground the LORD God made grow every tree that was delightful to look at and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden” (Gn 2:8-9). Fruit from this one tree was so good, so life-giving, that one could eat it and live forever (Gn 3:22-23). Unfortunately, Adam and Eve chose to eat bad fruit from a different tree, the knowledge of good and evil. In so doing, both paradise and immortality were lost.

Jesus became human to redeem mankind. In fact, he promises to restore our immortality if we have faith. “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink” (Jn 6:54-55). Truly, “Jesus says that anyone who eats the bread he gives will live forever. Jesus opens the way to paradise and offers the food that gives immortality.”ⁱ

This was very difficult for people to understand when Jesus spoke these words. As John wrote in his gospel, the Jewish people quarreled among themselves. “How can this man give us [his] flesh to eat?” (Jn 6:60). It was also a stumbling block for his followers. “As a result of this, many [of] his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him” (6:66).

It is still difficult for many to understand this teaching today. Recent polls indicate that many Catholics do not believe in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. “The Catholic Church professes that, in the celebration of the Eucharist, bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit and the instrumentality of the priest... The whole Christ is truly present, body, blood, soul, and divinity, under the appearances of bread and wine—the glorified Christ who rose from the dead after dying for our sins. This is what the Church means when she speaks of the ‘Real Presence’ of Christ in the Eucharist... The risen Christ is present to his Church in many ways, but most especially through the sacrament of his Body and Blood.”ⁱⁱ

Saint Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan tried to help his flock believe with this simple explanation. “If the word of the Lord Jesus is so powerful as to bring into existence things which were not, then it is easy to conclude those things which already exist can be changed into something else” (*De Sacramentis*, IV, 5-16). It is helpful to provide a little context as to who Saint Ambrose was.

Ambrose was not even baptized when he stepped into the middle of a contentious battle over who would succeed the just deceased bishop of Milan. Ambrose had been studying to become a Christian but had not yet made the decision to fully commit to a life of faith. As a well-respected civil servant in 4th century Milan, Ambrose tried to broker peace between the two contentious sides.

Someone from the crowd yelled out, “Ambrose for Bishop.” Soon, the whole city was chanting his name and he felt compelled by the Holy Spirit to complete his Christian Initiation. In short order, he received all the sacraments of initiation and ordination and accepted the heavy responsibilities of being a bishop. The LORD changed and transformed this man into one of the most effective bishops of the 4th century. If the involvement of God was so powerful as to initiate Ambrose into the Church and consecrate him as bishop, then it is easy for him to believe that all things are possible for God including the transformation of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ.

Let me explain using a slightly different analogy. In Genesis, God created the world out of chaos. It was the Word of God that spoke. It was the breadth of God, the Holy Spirit that swept over the waters. It was God, the Father and Creator, working in unison within the Holy

Trinity that helped to create all we know. If we believe this, then it is not so difficult to believe that as a priest prays the words of Jesus and invokes the Holy Spirit, doing as Jesus instructed, bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Jesus.

If we are having trouble understanding on our own, we might utter the prayer of the father looking for a miracle for his son, “I do believe, help my unbelief!” (Mk 9:24). The mysteries of our faith require God’s grace and our own cooperation to help us understand. “Jesus gives himself to us in the Eucharist as spiritual nourishment because he loves us... By eating the Body and drinking the Blood of Christ in the Eucharist we become united to the person of Christ through his humanity. ‘Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him’ (Jn 6:56). In being united to the humanity of Christ we are at the same time united to his divinity. Our mortal and corruptible natures are transformed by being joined to the source of life. ‘Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me’ (Jn 6:57).”ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Martin, Francis; Wright, William M. IV. The Gospel of John. Pg. 128

ⁱⁱ usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/the-mass/order-of-mass/liturgy-of-the-eucharist/the-real-presence-faqs

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.