

» Appendix III «

Theological and Liturgical Formation

Articles on the Eucharist:

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1. Theology of the Eucharist

Rev. Jeffery Kemper

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes. (1 Cor. 11:23-26)

For Catholics, no act of worship is as sacred as the celebration of the Eucharist, no food more precious than the Body and Blood of the Lord. The meaning and value of the Eucharist is so central to Christian life because it is the source and summit of Christian life.⁴¹ It is the remembrance of the Paschal Mystery – the core act of our salvation, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – and in this act we receive the Body and Blood of the Lord as both strength and commitment to live in him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. The fullest understanding of this great sacrament occurs only when one understands the Eucharist as both an act under the Headship of Christ and the Eucharist as the presence of Christ. One informs the meaning and value of the other.

The Act of Doing Eucharist: The Mass

The Greek word *eucharistien* means to give thanks. To celebrate the Eucharist, therefore, means to give thanks; to do what the Lord Jesus did at the Last Supper. Yet it is much more than simply obeying a command of giving thanks. It is to join ourselves as the Church to Christ's continual sacrifice of praise to the Father, an act filled with great implications for Christian living.

What appears to the human eye to be the work of people is in reality the work of Christ leading his people in prayer. Christ gathers the members of his Church from all different walks of life to celebrate the Eucharist. He speaks to us in Scripture, and through the homily reveals its meaning for our own age.

At the altar, after the gifts are prepared, the Church, under the headship of Christ and animated by his Spirit, prays the Eucharistic Prayer. In this prayer, we give thanks for the redemption won for us by Jesus Christ always recalling the institution of the Eucharist and culminating in the remembrance of the death and resurrection of the Lord. This act of remembering is not simply a calling to mind of past events, but a

sacramental remembering, by which the acts of salvation – especially the Paschal Mystery – are rendered present, transcending time and space. Through the power of the Holy Spirit and the word of Christ, the bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of the Lord. In response to the wonders God has done for humanity, the Church offers to the Father the perfect sacrifice of praise, Jesus Christ. Through baptism, we who have been joined to Christ as members of his Body, are part of this offering as well. The Church asks to be united more perfectly to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. An ordained priest who is empowered by the Holy Spirit to consecrate and offer in a unique manner leads the Eucharistic Prayer, but it is the prayer of all who are gathered together. This is evident by the words of the presider, such as, “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God,” as well as in the Great Amen, by which the people acknowledge the prayer as their own.

The Breaking of the Bread reveals the unity that is found in the Eucharist. Saint Paul writes:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. (1 Cor. 10:16-17)

What is symbolized in the Breaking of the Bread becomes reality in the reception of the Eucharist. By feeding his people with his own Body and Blood, those who receive are united to Christ in the deepest union possible. Yet, in this act we are not only joined to Christ, we are joined to all people who are joined to Christ. For there is only one Christ, and all who are joined to him are joined to each other. While the act of receiving the Eucharist is the most intimate act with the Lord, it is also the ultimate communal act. This is revealed in Saint Thomas Aquinas’ teaching that reception of the Eucharist establishes unity with Christ and the Church.⁴²

To eat and drink the holy Sacrifice ratifies and confirms all that is prayed in the Eucharistic Prayer. We are joined to what we have offered, and therefore we become part of the Offering. To receive the Eucharist means to conform our minds, hearts, wills, and actions to the heart, mind and will of Christ. This is what it means to participate in the Body of Christ, as Saint Paul wrote. What we have offered to the Father becomes God’s gift to us, so that we may more fully live in Christ.

Finally, enlightened by the Word of God, nourished with his Body and Blood, Christ sends the Church out into the world, to live our baptismal mandate more fully, to bring the Good News of salvation to others in the living of everyday life. This is the meaning of Saint Augustine’s expression, “The Church makes the Eucharist; the Eucharist makes the Church.”

The Eucharist as Real Presence of Christ

Central to Catholic Eucharistic theology is the belief in the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharistic elements. We believe that the ultimate reality – in scholastic theology, the term is substance – is changed from bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Lord, while maintaining the appearances – accidents – of bread and wine. (The term used to express this change is “transubstantiation”.) What we receive, however, is not simply Christ’s human body or his human blood; we receive the *totus Christus* – “the whole Christ” as Saint Augustine taught. We receive Christ, body and soul, the eternal Word of God, both human and divine, who suffered, died, and rose to new life and ascended into glory, and who, in his resurrection exists in a new way of being at the right hand of the Father and in his Church.

This presence is called ‘real’ by which is not intended to exclude other types of presence as if they could not be ‘real’ too, but because it is a substantial presence by which Christ, God and man, makes himself wholly and entirely present.⁴³

By being present, Christ does not intend simply to be with us on the altar but to be taken into our very persons through our receiving of his Body and Blood in order to grow to “full stature of Christ”⁴⁴ Christ’s Eucharistic presence is not the only mode of his being present to his Church:

...Christ is always present in his Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of his minister, “the same now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the cross,” but especially under the Eucharistic species. By his power he is present in the sacraments, so that when a man baptizes it is really Christ himself who baptizes. He is present in his Word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the Church. He is present, lastly, when the Church prays and sings...⁴⁵

These modes of presence do not compete with the Eucharistic presence; rather they lead the Church to a deeper realization of the Eucharistic presence. The presence of Christ in those gathered in his name leads us to recognize that Christ the High Priest works in and through his Church. The recognition of Christ’s presence in the ministry of priests leads us to recognize Christ the Head of the Body; Christ’s presence in the Scriptures leads us to listen to the Lord and discern his will in anticipation of the unity that Holy Communion creates. In fact, to ignore these modes of presence is to weaken the significance of the implications of Christ’s Eucharistic presence, in which he is joined to our whole being – body and spirit.

The Eucharist: Symbol and Reality

Great debates have taken place in the history of the Church down to our present day about whether the Eucharist is symbol of Christ or the reality of Christ. In fact, the Eucharist is both. In its substance – its ultimate reality, the bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of the Lord. They are not just pointers or reminders of Christ; they are his very Being. In the Eucharist, one receives God made human to save us from sin and death.

Yet, the Eucharistic elements in their accidents – their appearance, taste, smell, feel, molecular structure – are symbol. The accidents of bread and wine are not inconsequential to the understanding of Christ’s Real Presence. Rather the accidents reveal a context in which Christ gives himself to his Church, and that is life-giving food and drink. In the culture in which Jesus lived, as in many places to this day, bread is the main food, the staple of life; wine is the daily drink. Bread and wine are products of nature and human toil. Bread is broken and shared among family and friends not just for physical nourishment, but as a source and sign of unity. Wine is “spiritous,” lifting the spirits of those who imbibe. From ancient times, in almost all cultures, bread and wine have been understood to reveal the mystery of life and death. Nature’s elements – wheat and grapes – are destroyed by grinding and crushing, to be transformed into something better – bread and wine. The wheat and grapes “give their lives” so that human life can be sustained and nurtured. The act of sustaining life is one of the greatest signs of love, as revealed by a nursing mother feeding her child with her own milk or the Christian symbol of the pelican feeding her young with drops of her own blood.

Christ comes to us under the forms of bread and wine for a deliberate purpose: so that we may realize that we are to be nourished and strengthened with his very self, and that this is the greatest act of love. The Eucharist, therefore, is the symbol and reality of divine love and presence that not only accompanies us on the journey through life but joins our beings to Christ’s own Being. As Saint Augustine said, “You are what you eat.”⁴⁶ In the Eucharist, we receive the Lord so that we may become more fully Christ to the world, a member of his Body, and a dwelling place of his Spirit.

