

Real Presence of Christ in Eucharist

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It is unlikely that there is any single issue which is more defining to our Catholic faith than the belief of the real presence of Christ in our celebration of Eucharist. This belief is the core of our sacramental tradition and defines in many ways the approach in which other sacramental rituals are understood. Little of our understanding of this occurrence has changed since the Council of Trent and the theology which accepts this phenomenon as transubstantiation. Yet the historical road by which transubstantiation came to be understood and the meaning that this dogma holds for the experience of Eucharist in the twentieth century is interesting. Many questions arise from this declaration that have an effect on how we understand our worship and actions as Christians and what definition for real presence in the celebration means with regard to some modern issues facing the church today. In particular, how a belief in the real presence of Christ in our celebration would allow for the denial of this sacrament to those who fall outside of church teaching as well as how this particular sacrament has been used to both control and lift up the oppressed through history and in the present day. By looking at several aspects of the Eucharist in history and its role in social justice issues I hope to explore and come to a deeper understanding of my own belief and raise the questions that might move me further into an understanding of this sacred mystery.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church speaks about the real presence of Christ based on the Gospel of Mathew 25:31-46, several points are of interest. It is stated that “The mode of Christ’s presence under the Eucharistic species is unique. It raises the Eucharist above all the sacraments as “the perfection of the spiritual life and the end to which all sacraments tend.” In

the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist “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.”¹ Further explanation goes on to reference the Council of Trent as follows, “Because Christ our redeemer said that it was truly his body that he was offering under the species of bread, it has *always* been the conviction of the church of God, and his holy council now declares again, that by the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has *fittingly and properly called transubstantiation.*” (Emphasis mine).² In other words, it is the presence which is contained in the bread and wine that are the most crucial to the doctrine of the Church and the lens by which the church approaches the issues of faith which are addressed with each generation. To fully understand this approach it is important to look briefly at the evolution of this theology and the effects that it has had on Catholicism throughout time.

Much of what we know and understand about the first fifty to one hundred years of the early Christian community is conjecture. We know for instance that this early community was well rooted in Judaism and would be observant of their Jewish practices.³ The traditions of the Eucharistic meal were based in a large part on the meal traditions of the Jewish people. Vessels were most likely of common clay and simple baskets, representing something less

¹ Catechism, 383

² Ibid, 384-385

³ Foley, 27

than sacred in the actual dispensing of the meal, the real presence of Jesus or the sacred nature being in the gathering and actions of the community.⁴ This state of community would be the norm for the early church for perhaps the first one hundred years, but changes within the structure would be inevitable as the community grew in numbers as well as geographically. Nevertheless, as change occurred, the concept of the real presence of Christ within the context of the sacred meal would develop along with the community to meet the growing needs of a faith which was evangelistic by nature and actively sought out others to share in their belief. How this belief in real presence defined these early Christians and the way that their lives were experienced is largely guess work; however the fact that this Eucharistic meal with its words of institution was central to the ritual of faith connects to our own experience today.

Much of what we understand in our approach to the Eucharist is a direct result from the Council of Trent and its understanding of transubstantiation, for four hundred years this would remain the defining theology by which we as a church approached this sacrament of the mass. One of the more respected theologians of the twentieth century Cardinal Henri de Lubac studied the approach of the church and Eucharist during the middle ages and came to an interesting conclusion. It was his understanding that the Latin *corpus mysticum* or rather the mystical body of Christ was a reference to and had meaning as the consecrated bread while the real presence of Christ was to mean the gathered assembly, the community of believers present whose actions reflected the teachings of Jesus.⁵ And to take it a step further, Lubac claims that it was precisely because of the many controversies surrounding belief (or

⁴ Ibid., 28-29

⁵ Foley, 236

non-belief) in the presence of Christ in the Eucharist that the church emphasized this idea that Christ was indeed present and by so doing eventually created a distance between the community and the sacrament, their experience would change.⁶ Yet few of us today would be familiar with this history and the connotations of the process of this theology.

Deeply associated with the development and controversies of this theology is the reformer Martin Luther who despite popular belief was interested in “change” and not separation. As an Augustinian monk and an ordained priest he advocated the emphasis on faith and not simply good works as the means for salvation, hence, his opposition to the sale of Papal indulgences.⁷ Luther though, as a priest believed in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist since this was caused by an all powerful God and not by man (priest). Luther devised three elements to be applied to any sacrament, “The first is the sacrament or sign, the second is its significance, and the third is the faith required by these two... The sacrament must be external and visible, having some material form; the significance must be internal and spiritual, within the human soul; and faith must be applied to both” (*Treatise on the Blessed Sacrament and the Brotherhood*).⁸ So although Luther saw the sacrament as a “sign” grace was bestowed through faith by God, this was the framework by which he viewed the Eucharistic celebration. Hence Luther did not deny the theology presented by Aquinas and accepted by the Council of Trent to be known as transubstantiation where by the elements of

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 80-81

⁸ Ibid., 84

bread and wine were changed in substance or reality⁹

Huldrych Zwingli, another theologian and a contemporary of Luther was to be an influence on our understanding of the Eucharist as well. Zwingli sought the reform of the Catholic Church but disagreed with Luther on some key points. Though both sought to amend what was perceived at the time of wide spread corruption with respect to the selling of Papal indulgences, the two were of a very different belief on the Eucharistic celebration. Zwingli came to develop a theology that was in opposition to transubstantiation and specifically to Eucharistic Adoration.¹⁰ By introducing questions such as to what is the meaning of the sacrament, Zwingli explores other possibilities for the ritual, such as gratefulness for the life of Jesus. His is a theology in opposition to the literal interpretation of the bodily presence in the bread and wine, hence his emphasis is on “memorial and thanksgiving”.¹¹

Of course much of this discussion was limited to academics, and clergy of the period, with an extremely low literacy rate, the life of the average person was brutal and awash in superstition which often spilled into the life of the church. The term “superstition” was used by both protestant reformers and Catholics to describe in a pejorative context the actions of the others.¹² It is probably safe to say that for the average person of this period religion was practiced with certain personal beliefs but a lack of understanding of the complexity of the theology that developed various sacramental practices and rituals, perhaps not unlike our

⁹ Ibid., 239

¹⁰ Stephens, 233-236

¹¹ Ibid., 249

¹² Parish, 1-5

present day experience. The history of western culture is linked to that of the church, both having complex structures of power and sadly the history of the Eucharist and the belief in the real presence of Christ within that sacrament went hand in hand with colonial expansion, desecration of indigenous peoples and the bloodletting of the crusades. The sacrament of the Eucharist at times became a tool for the strong to exploit and control the weak.¹³

With many of these concerns in mind liberation theology came to prominence after Vatican II and struck a chord with those who were interested in the humanistic aspects of Marxism in the southern hemisphere. This theological approach asked if there was not something more that could be offered to the suffering in conjunction with the sacramental nature of the church.¹⁴ Juan Luis Segundo a leader in this movement saw the sacraments as often being nothing more than magical rites that at times, not only allowed but encouraged people to accept political and economic oppression.¹⁵ For Segundo, the case was clear, the good news of the New Testament was a radical and transformational idea by which people had the power of God within their reach to effectively change the nature of their oppression by working at the community level while fostering a deep personal understanding of the Eucharistic sacrament. What he perceived was that Jesus did not actually institute, nor was he interested in magical rites but rather the power and sacredness of the community. It was through relationships with people that the transformational power of God is manifested in changing that which is unjust. This belief is the core of his theology and would have to take

¹³ Balasuria, 36-37

¹⁴ Martos, 142-143

precedence over the functions of religion.¹⁶ What was really being examined was an attempt at understanding the original Christian community and its communal nature to effect change and spiritual growth, the breaking of the bread suggested communal awareness and perhaps communal property (*koinonia*).¹⁷ Further it is thought that modern exegesis shows a clear distinction between the concept of Christ's resurrected body and the body of the community, thus this is illustrated and experienced by the early community when they symbolically break one loaf for the many.¹⁸ The rise of liberation theology would recognize these aspects of our understanding of the Eucharist and try to make sense of this paradox.

Other theologians were actively engaging the questions as to the meaning of the Eucharist at the same time that liberation theology was beginning to grow and make its mark. Edward Schillebeeckx began his reflections on theology incorporating anthropological and critical philosophies. He along with Karl Rahner moved the discussion of the sacraments from "nouns to verbs, from things to encounters".¹⁹ This effort caused a reevaluation of what was taking place and put needed emphasis on human experience.²⁰ Schillebeeckx says the following with regard to the Eucharist "What the sacramental forms of bread and wine signify, and at the same time make real, is not a gift that refers to Christ who gives himself in them, but Christ

¹⁵ Ibid., 144

¹⁶ Martos, 145

¹⁷ Avila, 55

¹⁸ Ibid, 56-57

¹⁹ Foley, 349

himself in living, personal presence. The phenomenal form of the Eucharistic bread and wine is nothing other than the *sign* which makes real Christ's gift of himself with the church's responding gift of herself involved in this making real to us, a sign inviting every believer to participate personally in this event."²¹

It is within this context that I come to a clearer understanding of this concept of the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist and the lens by which I try to understand this belief on a personal level. By examining the past and recent failings of the church, it is possible to understand its faults in the context of events that surrounded the institution and understand just how this unique message of liberation has been obscured by seemingly complicated and often outdated theology.²² It has been by seeking out the historical context of events that I have come to better understand the role of our Catholic faith in history and the present; learning how not only to be forgiven for my own weakness but to be able to forgive mother church as well. This then is the conflict that I continue to encounter, how the mystical power and presence of Jesus in our celebration can exist hand in hand with great injustice.

Liberation theology believes first and foremost that along with seeking out ways to minister to those who are oppressed and living in poverty, changes must be made to the power structures that cause the oppression and then create long term solutions.

As the Council of Trent solidified the theology of the Eucharist so then some four hundred years later would the Second Vatican Council give this same theology a chance to breathe

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Schillebeeckx, 139

²² Ibid., 3-4

new life, although fifty years later the grand experiment in renewal of our liturgical practices may be sliding backwards. Although liberation theology has remained an element of our modern discussion it has sadly lost much of its momentum. John Paul II who was raised under a communist regime could not reconcile Marxist philosophy with Christianity.²³ With political unrest in South America and the assassination of Archbishop Romero, new bishops were appointed with more conservative views as vacancies opened up in the hierarchy.

As I look into the issue of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist and try to make connections with some historical aspects I must contemplate my own reality in both the sacramental experience that has been a part of my faith journey and what I have witnessed in the last few years as I observe what I can only interpret as a rejection of much of the Second Vatican council by the ruling authority of the church. Although I do not at this present time believe that Christ is literally present in the substance of bread and wine, I would acknowledge a deep mystery with the sacrament that is a part of my belief in Eucharistic theology. What I have witnessed in the actions of the institutional church affected my belief in the real presence in a profound way. It seems that at times this church is bent on self destruction, with its mishandling of the sexual abuse scandal, lack of inclusion of the gay community and refusal to extend ordination for woman as well as the more recent investigation into women's religious orders by which an effort is being made to subdue the more liberal practitioners, I see no presence of Christ. When our own Archbishop recently disclosed that ten thousand dollars of the diocesan funds were used to support anti-gay legislation in Maine, I search for the presence of Christ. And when I watch with dismay how

²³ Martos, 149

the prolife movement has come to be known by a single issue, “anti-abortion” at the expense of a real opposition to two wars being fought in Iraq and Afghanistan and possibly one million dead according to a Johns Hopkins study and countless refugees, I beg for the presence of Christ. And quite possibly what I see as the greatest indignation by our American bishops is the denial of communion to those elected officials who would support a woman’s right to abortion no matter what other prolife issues are on the table. If these Bishops believe in a Eucharistic presence of Christ by what authority can they possibly deny this sacrament to those with who they are in disagreement? By their own actions they themselves have reduced the sacred nature of the Eucharistic meal to nothing more than a political tool of discipline, exactly what our liberation theologians were opposed to. The former Archbishop of St. Louis, Raymond Burke has been very vocal in his opinion that Sen. Edward Kennedy should not have had a Catholic Mass celebrated for his funeral, again because of the abortion issue. How can I possibly fault those who see the church and her actions as hypocritical at best and destructive at worst? How do I come to explain my own understanding and experience of Christ in our community? At times the hierarchy makes it extremely difficult.

Yet, as one who is still coming to terms with my faith I would be negligent if not to mention my own experience of Christ and what that suggests in my life. I cannot honestly say that I have not had the experience of intimacy with the Eucharist; on the contrary it has been a constant thread. I will never forget grieving for my father and spending a few days at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Georgia. Sitting for hours in front of the Blessed Sacrament and being overwhelmed with a feeling of “gratitude”. I will forever remember this experience as a deep mystery as I felt the presence of Christ in a real and profound way. Recently I was allowed to be present as my niece began to awaken from a deep coma as a result of severe

head trauma which she had sustained three weeks earlier. That moment of her own personal resurrection and the experience of all of us who were present was a real immersion into the presence of God, which I can no more explain theologically than the first encounter. What I can say though is that these were real occurrences for me of the actual presence of Christ, and what I have come to understand is that I must never be so arrogant as to assume that the real presence experience is not a reality for someone else as they receive communion. When I minister to the prisoners, they tend to have a very literal belief in all that the Church teaches, and that is not entirely wrong, rather I understand that we all have different roads by which we have come to our common point of communion. My responsibility however, as a Eucharistic minister is to honor these men by showing respect to the Hosts which I am privileged to take to them and by so doing respect the belief and integrity of that community. In a very real sense I allow myself to become a simple vessel to serve their spiritual needs at that moment.

How we come to terms with the sacramental nature of our church and allow those rituals to become meaningful is a journey in of its self. I do not claim to have a distinct answer on the issue of real presence in the Eucharist that would be workable each day of my life as my faith and belief often wax and wane like the moon. If there is one consistent issue that I revisit on a regular basis it is that not all are welcome at the table and this is contrary to the life of Jesus who invited everyone to his banquet. Fr Peter Phan has encouraged us to envision a round rather than rectangular altar, one in which all have equal access. An altar in which the main celebrant would not be limited by gender would be a good first step. A celebration where all who desire might participate equally would be envisioned. A celebration in which not only the Bible but other sacred texts and stories of the local community might be included to enhance

the sacred nature of the celebration.²⁴ These are the kinds of ideas that resonate with me as I contemplate my role in the Church and what sort of a future that has for me. I have been witness to the real presence at many levels and it is that experience which keeps my connection to the Catholic community. My greatest concern for this community is that by allowing issues of faith to become politicized there is a real danger that the beautiful and sacramental nature of the Church could become entangled in secular issues and therefore lose the sacred meaning of some of our most beautiful rituals.

²⁴ Phan, 254-55

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