

The Eucharist – just a symbolic memorial?

Dominic Baster – 1 November 2009

When this series of four talks and discussions on ‘Hot Topics’ facing Catholics today was first envisaged, it seemed right and proper that the first talk should be on the Sacrament of the Eucharist. This isn’t because it’s the easiest and most straightforward topic to talk about, because it’s actually a huge subject that has preoccupied Christian theologians, scholars, saints and sceptics for nearly 2,000 years. It’s because the Eucharist lies at the very heart of Catholic life and worship, and has done since the very beginning. It’s something that’s highly relevant to each of us here this evening, and to every Catholic throughout the world. It’s one of the keystones of our faith, but at the same time it’s proved to be an extremely controversial issue and hard for anyone to really grasp and fully appreciate. So, here goes then!

, 1967) described the Eucharist as “the culmination both of God’s action sanctifying the world in Christ and of the worship men offer to [God]”. This is why the Catechism of the Catholic Church describes the Eucharist as simply the “sum and summary of our faith” (1327).

The Second Vatican Council described the Eucharistic sacrifice as “the source and summit of the Christian life” (*Lumen Gentium*) while a slightly later document (*Eucharisticum Mysterium*

Nevertheless, or perhaps because of this, the Eucharist has also been a pivotal issue on which Christians have been at odds, especially since the Reformation. In our own time some Catholics attempt to water down or add nuances to the Church’s teaching on the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, or the sacrificial nature of the Mass. Sometimes they do this because they believe it’s in the interests of Christian unity, because Catholic teaching on this issue is just too difficult for other Christians to accept and has, therefore, become a stumbling block to unity. However, I cannot stress enough that the Eucharist is absolutely central to our faith and can never be stripped away. The Holy Eucharist, as Vatican II declared, “contains the Church’s entire spiritual wealth: Christ himself” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*).

It is quite clear that I can only touch the surface of this great mystery in a 20-minute talk, and that what I will say here will be necessarily brief and incomplete. It will also be a personal perspective. But I'll try to summarise what the Church teaches on the Eucharist – especially what *happens* to the bread and wine at Mass – say a little about the history of the Church's teaching and then introduce some thoughts and reflections on what this *means for us*.

So, first of all, to the Church's teaching. Very briefly, and as we all know, Jesus instituted the Eucharist during the Last Supper on the night before he died. The Last Supper was a Passover meal, and Jesus was *becoming* the Passover Lamb of Sacrifice completing and surpassing all the sacrifices that went before. He was slain on the Cross for the salvation of the world, and that very sacrifice is made present for us every time we celebrate the Last Supper at Mass, as he told us to in memory of him. It has been the unbroken teaching and witness of our Church that during the Eucharistic Prayer, by the words of institution first used by Christ himself and uttered by the ordained priest acting in the person of Christ, the bread and wine are *changed*. The bread *becomes* the body of Jesus, the Lamb of God slain in the perfect Passover sacrifice, and the wine *becomes* the blood that was shed and initiated the New Covenant. A memorial, yes, but far more than that because the bread and wine really do become the same body and the same blood that were sacrificed on the Cross.

Now this is something amazing, something truly awe-inspiring, and this sense of awe is what I'm hoping to convey in this talk. It's undeniable that being truly awe-struck by the Eucharist is not easy, what with all the distractions we face when we come to Mass, but it is – I think – something we can try in our own ways to nurture so that every time we hear the words of consecration, we can inwardly exclaim with the apostle Thomas, "My Lord and my God!"

Focusing on the Liturgy of Eucharist, which is just one part of the Mass as a whole, it's interesting to note that there are so many distinct parts to it – all with their own significance, history and spiritual depth. In fact, each of the parts could very easily be a

subject for a talk far longer than this one. By way of illustration, I'll just outline some of these parts:

- Firstly, there is the preparation of the altar and the Gifts
- Then the bringing of the gifts to the priest
- We then have the prayers of Presentation, and the water is mixed with wine, emphasising the humanity and divinity of Christ.
- The priest then washes his hands in a ritual act of cleansing
- He calls down the Holy Spirit on the gifts at the *Epiclesis*
- Then the Last Supper is recalled in the Institution Narrative, during which the bread and wine are consecrated
- The consecrated elements may then be elevated (which is actually a rather recent development), and the priest genuflects – signifying his worship of Christ now truly present on the altar.
- The saints and angels are mentioned, as are the Pope, diocesan bishop and clergy, and the dead are prayed for. This is because the Mass in a wonderful way transcends divisions, and unites earth with heaven and all members of the Church on earth with one other.
- Finally there is the Doxology (glorifying God) and the Final Amen.

The various elements of the Liturgy of the Eucharist are extremely old. From at least as early as the mid-second century, the Mass had many of the same elements as the Mass we celebrate today.

Now I'd like to move on to what actually happens at the consecration. The Catholic teaching on what happens to the bread and wine during the Eucharistic Prayer is often referred to as transubstantiation. This doctrine states that, after the consecration, the whole substance (or the reality) of the bread and wine change entirely to become Jesus's body and blood, even though the accidents (or external appearance and characteristics) of bread and wine remain.

The word 'transubstantiation' was first mentioned by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, and was developed by St Thomas Aquinas later in the thirteenth century in line with the thinking of the Greek

philosopher Aristotle. The doctrine was defined by the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century as “that wonderful and singular conversion of the whole substance of the bread into the Body, and of the whole substance of the wine into the Blood – the species only of the bread and wine remaining – which conversion indeed the Catholic Church most aptly calls Transubstantiation”.

The doctrine had become a big issue in the Reformation of the 16th Century, including in England. An illustration of this is provided by the Church of England’s 39 Articles of Faith, to be found in the Book of Common Prayer, which explicitly condemn transubstantiation as superstitious and “repugnant to the plain words of Scripture”, while also condemning the reservation, carrying about, lifting up or worshipping of the Eucharist.

It is interesting to note, however, that even the Council of Trent’s definition of the doctrine only stated that ‘transubstantiation’ was an “apt” word to use for the Catholic Church’s view regarding the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. In other words, our belief that the bread and wine change into the body and blood of Jesus at Mass is not dependent on a belief in an archaic system of Aristotelian Metaphysics. The word really only affirms the essential belief that the bread and wine do *really* change.

What, then, *is* the essential belief about the consecrated bread and wine? As Catholics we are bound to believe that the transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ is *real, objective and complete*. In other words, a miracle takes place at every Mass – wherever it is celebrated throughout the world – which means that this same miracle is happening somewhere in the world about once every four seconds. This is quite amazing if we really think about it – and if we really believe it. Over and over again, somewhere in the world, heaven is being miraculously joined to earth.

Another way to understand what the Catholic Church believes about the consecrated bread and wine is to be clear about what it *does not* believe. The Church *does not* believe that the bread becomes ‘special bread’; or that the bread and wine simply ‘represent’ Jesus’s body and blood. The bread and wine are not *just*

symbols – the term for which would be trans-signification. No, as Catholics we believe far more than this.

A telling example of what the Catholic teaching on the Real Presence is most certainly *not* is provided by the Church of England's order of service. In the version of the Anglican liturgy that most closely follows the form of the Catholic Mass, the Anglican minister says at the *Epiclesis*, "grant that by the power of your Holy Spirit these gifts of bread and wine *may be to us* his body and blood". Now there is a huge difference between 'may be to us' and what Catholic priests say – which is "may they *become* for us". We believe that the change to the bread and wine is *objective*, and happens objectively whether those at Mass – or even the priest – believe it or not. To mainstream Anglicans, the change is *subjective* – meaning that the bread and wine *only change* if we believe that they do. A mainstream Anglican view is that the change in the bread and wine is located in the brains and hearts of the communicants, rather than in the bread and wine themselves. So, people only partake of the body and blood of Christ *by faith*, and if they don't have faith in the Eucharist, then for them the bread and wine remain nothing more than just bread and wine. The Eucharist is, for them, like a drama that *seems* very real, but not the reality itself.

A good illustration of this was provided by the chaplain at my university college, who considered himself very much a high-church Anglican. In a side room of his college chapel was a tabernacle set into the wall. Next to this tabernacle was a candle burning constantly, signifying the presence of Christ inside. At every weekday Eucharist, the chaplain would genuflect to the tabernacle, and a sign at the entrance to the room explained that the Blessed Sacrament was reserved there and that, therefore, this was a special place of prayer.

After four years in post, a friend of mine who prayed regularly in that chapel before the tabernacle and had a great devotion to the Blessed Sacrament discovered that in all those four years, the chaplain had never known where the keys to the tabernacle actually were. He would have known, therefore, that any bread inside it would have rotted away years previously, and that therefore the box

was empty. Still, however, he kept the candle burning, genuflected to it every day and let others believe that it contained the consecrated bread – and his conscience was clear because all that mattered to him was what people *believed*, not what was *actually real*. It was a drama, nothing more.

In contrast, for Catholics there is nothing *more real*, nothing *more true* than the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. It is not a subjective mind game but an *objective fact*. The bread and wine are *changed in their substance*, or reality, not just in their significance. This is what transubstantiation really means, and explains why desecrating the Blessed Sacrament is considered so serious that it is one of the five sins reserved to the Holy See for absolution.

Speaking personally, I remember how, in my mid-teens and before I became a Catholic, I was very moved by the candle burning continuously in front of the Blessed Sacrament in my local Catholic Church. Most of us take that candle for granted and perhaps don't even notice it, but back then I marvelled in the fact that even when the church doors were locked in the middle of the night, still the candle burned even though no one was there to see it. This was because it denoted something real, something objective in itself – namely the abiding presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament reserved in the tabernacle. This contrasted with the Baptist church I had been attending, and with the middle-of-the-road Anglican church I was brought up in. It was clear to me that the candle burning continuously meant that in Catholicism there was something *real*, something *true*, which wasn't just for show.

The belief in the Real Presence is also as old as the Church itself. We only need to read St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, probably written between AD 53 and AD 57 – within clear living memory of Jesus himself – to see that the change to the Eucharistic bread and wine was considered objective and not dependent on the belief of the person receiving it. In chapter 11, St Paul criticises the community for dreadful abuses during their celebration of the Lord's Supper, reminds them of the way in which the Eucharist was initiated and warns: "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before

he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks *without recognising the body of the Lord* eats and drinks judgement on himself.”

Just 50 years later, in about AD 106, Saint Ignatius of Antioch, warned Christians to “stand aloof from such heretics who confess the Eucharist not to be the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ”. Then, in AD 150, St Justin Martyr wrote, “Not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; [for]... the food which is blessed ... is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.” There are many other quotes from figures in the early Church along the same lines.

The same is true of the sacrificial nature of the Mass. The *Didache*, a teaching document probably written towards the end of the First Century, refers to the Eucharist as a sacrifice when it instructs the early Christians to “assemble on the Lord’s day, and break bread and offer the Eucharist; but first make confession of your faults, so that your sacrifice may be a pure one”.

Likewise, Clement of Rome wrote in about AD 96 that “our sin will not be small if we eject from the episcopate those who blamelessly and holily have offered its sacrifices.”

The Eucharist is literally a ‘making present’ of the one efficacious sacrifice of Calvary, not as a symbol or a memorial, but as the very sacrifice itself. Indeed, it is the Sacrifice of the Mass that we are bound as Catholics to attend on Sundays – whether or not we receive Communion. How astounding it is that at every Mass we are present at the central act of all history – the sacrifice of Christ for the salvation of the world – but that is what the Church proclaims!

Of course, there are other dimensions to the Mass. It is not just a sacrifice but also a communal celebration – a Passover meal in fact. Many Catholics hark back to the days before Vatican II when the sacrificial dimension of the Mass was far clearer and obvious in the way it was celebrated than, arguably, it is today – but in my opinion, the old Tridentine Mass emphasised the sacrificial aspect almost to the exclusion of the communal dimension. Having said

that, there is a strong argument that we've now gone too far the other way so that the communal dimension is emphasised to the exclusion of the sacrificial dimension so that many Catholics may not even realise it's also a sacrifice and fall into the error of regarding the Mass as little more than a communion service. Indeed, a church I once visited had a weekly Sunday Mass followed only an hour later by a weekly Service of Word and Communion, with many church-goers presumably opting for the latter instead of the former. This is wholly un-Catholic.

Another dimension of the Eucharist that is often misunderstood or passed over is its unitive aspect. The Eucharist is described as the Sacrament of Unity. This is something real because the Eucharist actually creates the unity that it signifies. We are united with the body of Christ, which is the Church. As St Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, 'Though we are many, we are one body because we all share the one bread.'

This is why non-Catholics should not receive the Eucharist, for this would be a sign of their unity with us which sadly is not actually there.

Now, it's all very well to talk about the theology of what *happens* to the bread and wine during the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and what it signifies, but it's equally important and perhaps more relevant for us here this evening to consider what receiving Our Lord under the form of bread and wine *means for us*.

When we come to Mass, receive Holy Communion and go away again, what *difference* does it make to us? Sometimes it can be difficult to feel any change, and we go away simply relieved that we've fulfilled the Sunday obligation. But in truth, being present at the Sacrifice of the Mass and receiving the body and blood of Christ Himself into our frail, sinful bodies is the *most amazing, wonderful, awe-inspiring and earth-shattering* thing we can possibly do.

To express this more eloquently than I could possibly do, I'd like to turn to an Eastern Orthodox saint you probably won't be familiar with, but whose writings on the Eucharist I personally have found really helpful.

The Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church share the same valid sacraments *and* the same beliefs in so many areas – including the nature of the Eucharist. St Nicholas Cabasilas was an Eastern Orthodox believer who lived from about 1320 until around 1391. He was a highly educated man and pursued a political career in his younger years. Then, later in life, he composed two great works – *The Life in Christ* and *A Commentary on the Divine Liturgy*. He remained a layman, never being ordained or professed a monk.

His basic belief was that the sacraments are essential in any Christian life because they are the way in which we commune with God, and God communes with us. He wrote, “Through the intermediary of the sacraments as through a great opening the Sun of Righteousness shines into this dark world.” To Cabasilas, the greatest of the sacraments was undoubtedly the Eucharist.

He regarded the effect of partaking of the Eucharist as nothing less than *deification* – for it is the moment and place in which Christ’s divine humanity becomes ours. He wrote: “Partaking of the body and blood of his humanity, we receive God Himself in our souls – the Body and Blood of God, and the soul, mind and will of God – no less than his humanity.”

In what I have found myself to be a really profound and moving passage (and I really love this quote) he goes on to write this: “So it is evident that when Christ enters into us and becomes one with us [when we receive the Eucharist], we are transfigured – **we are immersed in him as a single drop of water is lost in a vast ocean of perfume.**”

For Cabasilas, God is so great that by eating Christ’s body and drinking his blood, we are immersed in God and become divinised. *We are changed, taken over, possessed by God.*

Cabasilas had a very vivid understanding of how real the presence of Christ is in the Eucharist. It can be really hard for us really to engage with what has happened after the consecration, what with all the many thoughts that constantly go through our heads. It is helpful, therefore, to quote Cabasilas one more time. If only we

could really remember these words when we are in church in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, or immediately after the consecration next time we go to Mass. Cabasilas writes:

“The splendid victim, the divine oblation, slain for the salvation of the world, lies upon the altar. For it is no longer the bread... it is the true victim, the most holy body of the Lord, which *really* suffered the outrages, insults and blows; which was crucified and slain, which under Pontius Pilate bore such splendid witness; that body which was mocked, scourged, spat upon, and which tasted gall. It is that body and blood formed by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, which was buried, which rose again on the third day, which ascended into heaven and sits on the right hand of the Father.”

So, how can we live our belief in the reality of God’s presence in the Blessed Sacrament more effectively? In our own ways, and in our own personal situations, I suggest that we simply try to develop a sense of awe in the fact that God is with us so imminently in this sacrament.

Practical ways of doing this could be to make sure we always observe the one hour Eucharistic Fast, make sure we go to Confession regularly so that we never receive Communion unworthily, and try to find the time somehow to pray occasionally before the tabernacle. There used to be a tradition in Ireland, I know, of making the sign of the cross whenever one passed a Catholic church – as a recognition of the living presence of God within. Perhaps we could do this ourselves, or just bow our heads to acknowledge the presence in our midst of the Lord of Life.

To bring this talk to an end I’d like to read a short passage from another great man of faith, this time our late Holy Father Pope John Paul II. At the end of his last encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, written as his health was gradually failing, he suddenly departed from his usual rather dense style and wrote very personally and movingly from his heart about the importance of the Eucharist in his life and in the lives of all of us. This is what he wrote:

“Allow me, dear brothers and sisters, to share with *deep emotion*, as a means of accompanying and strengthening your faith, my own

testimony of faith in the Most Holy Eucharist... *Here* is the Church's treasure, the heart of the world, the pledge of the fulfilment for which each man and woman, even unconsciously, yearns. *A great and transcendent mystery*, indeed, and one that taxes our mind's ability to pass beyond appearances. Here our senses fail us... yet faith alone, rooted in the word of Christ handed down to us by the Apostles, is sufficient for us. Allow me, like Peter at the end of the Eucharistic discourse in John's Gospel, to say once more to Christ, in the name of the whole Church and in the name of each of you, 'Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.'