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**THE TASTE AND PERFUME OF THE VIRGIN:
MARY AND THE NUPTIAL MEANING OF EUCHARISTIC SACRAMENTALITY**

Rev. Mr Noel Custodio

1. Introduction

A survey of standard texts of Eucharistic theology reveals that theological discussions on the relationship between Mary and the Eucharist “find a relatively minor place.”¹ As Eucharistic theologian, James O’Connor, observes, such a discussion would more readily be regulated to mere “homilizing or devotional exhortation than to theological reflection.”² And yet, if one surveys the *history* of the understanding of the Eucharist, we find there were, at times, strong affinities and connections made between Our Lady and the Eucharistic mystery.

Though there are many aspects to this connection, this paper will only examine a specific aspect of the relationship between Mary and the Eucharist – namely, that between Mary and the *sacrament* of the Eucharist.³ We find, in Mary, the perfect fulfilment of the sacramental principle, whereby, in the sacramentality of the Eucharistic mystery, in its consummate reality, is a profoundly Marian mystery.

2. Mary and the Eucharist in the Middle Ages

The relationship between Mary and the Eucharist can be neatly expressed through the fourteenth century prayer, written by Pope Innocent VI (1352-62): *Ave verum Corpus natum de*

¹ For example, see Roch A. Kereszty’s work, *Wedding Feast of the Lamb* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2004), where such a connection is made in a three-page appendix at the end of the work. In Lawrence Feingold’s latest 700 page work on the Eucharist [*The Eucharist: Mystery of Presence, Sacrifice, and Communion*, (Steubenville: Emmaus Academic, 2018)], only a few pages are dedicated to Mary and the Eucharist. It seems that the most ample treatment seems to come from James T. O’Connor, *The Hidden Manna: A Theology of the Eucharist*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 349-361.

² James T. O’Connor, “Mary and the Eucharist,” *Marian Studies* 34, no. 14 (1983): 48.

³ Other aspects regarding Mary’s relationship to the Eucharist involve themes surrounding Mary’s sacrifice, co-redemption, bodily Assumption and eschatology, as well as Mary’s role in the liturgy.

Maria Virgine.⁴ As such, we find during the Middle Ages an increasing awareness of the intrinsic link between Mary and the Eucharist. Lawrence Feingold writes that “[b]ecause of its intimate relationship with the Incarnation, the Eucharist has a profoundly Marian dimension.”⁵ As such, the major focus of the Eucharistic controversies during the Middle Ages surrounded the *mode* of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist.

Though it is not within the scope of this paper to rehearse these controversies, it is clear that one of the theological preconditions for the doctrine of the Real Presence was Mary’s own presence. Paschasius Radbertus, for example, said that the “flesh and blood of Christ ... certainly is no other flesh than that which was born of Mary.”⁶ Radbertus was not the first to express such a sentiment, for he echoes Ambrose,⁷ Augustine,⁸ and John of Damascus,⁹ in emphasising the material dimension of the Eucharist and Mary’s connection with the natural body of Christ. Furthermore, under Pope Gregory VII in 1079, Berengar of Tours signed a profession of faith which affirmed “after consecration [the Eucharist] is the true body of Christ that was born of the Virgin [which was] offered for the salvation of the world.”¹⁰

Interestingly, Aquinas, following Ambrose, introduces the doctrine of “transubstantiation” by means of comparison with Mary’s significance in the Incarnation: “It is clear that a Virgin gave birth to Christ beyond the order of nature. And that which we consecrate is the body born from the Virgin.”¹¹ That sense of “beyond the order of nature” expresses how the mystery of Mary set the precedent for the sacramentality of the Eucharist, for God used nature (Mary’s flesh), and yet went

⁴ Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 156. Cf. 142-147; 309.

⁵ Lawrence Feingold, *The Eucharist: Mystery of Presence, Sacrifice, and Communion*, chap. 1. Kindle Edition.

⁶ Paschasius Radbertus, “De Corpore et Sanguine Domini”, in Paul H. Jones, *Christ’s Eucharistic Presence: A History of the Doctrine*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1994), 73.

⁷ St. Ambrose continued to battle the Arian controversy by consistently emphasizing Mary’s contribution to redemption by giving a human nature to Christ by offering her own flesh: “The flesh of Christ did not come from heaven, because he assumed it from the Virgin on earth.” Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 195. cf. 189-203.

⁸ St. Augustine, in his commentary of Psalm 98, says: “He [Jesus] took earth from the earth; because flesh is of the earth, he took flesh from the flesh of Mary. And because he walked here in his flesh, he also gave us this flesh to eat for our salvation.” In Jones, *Christ’s Eucharistic Presence: A History of the Doctrine*, 39.

⁹ St John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith*, IV, 13: “The body, that is the body which was derived from the holy Virgin, is truly united to Godhead... that the bread and wine itself is transmuted into the body and blood of God. But if you inquire as to the method, how this comes to be, it is enough for you to hear that it is by means of the Holy Ghost, as also from the Mother of God.” In Jones, *Christ’s Eucharistic Presence: A History of the Doctrine*, 61-2.

¹⁰ “Synod of Rome: Profession of Faith of Berengar of Tours” (February 11, 1079), in Heinrich Denzinger (ed.) *A Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations of the Catholic Church*, 43rd ed. trans. Robert Fastiggi and Anne Englund Nash, eds. Peter Hünermann, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), n700, 237.

¹¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q.75, art 4, in O’Connor, “Mary and the Eucharist”, 53.

beyond nature. For Aquinas, the Eucharist is not a “kind of natural movement”, nor is it a formal conversion, “but a *substantial* conversion.”¹² Yet one must ask how Mary’s flesh participates in this conversion, for throughout the Middle Ages we find the cultural impact of Eucharistic doctrines in pious devotion, leading to a skewed take on Mary’s own presence in relationship to the Eucharist.

3. The Struggle for Clarity

Concomitant with the greater interest of Christ’s presence in the Eucharistic host during the Middle Ages was the deepening grasp of Mariological doctrines, as exemplified by the Medieval debates surrounding the Immaculate Conception. As such, there was freshness of piety and devotion, yet this was not without its theological difficulties. Wendy Anderson notes how the culture struggled with “the complexity of late medieval Marian devotion as it intersected with both eucharistic controversy and definitions of orthodoxy.”¹³ Medieval historian, Miri Rubin, narrates how Mary “became a mediator, celebrant, the person who intimately constituted the sacred.”¹⁴ In an artwork within Santa Maria Novella in Florence, a traditional Madonna and Child image emphasised a strong Eucharistic connection: the Child held a scroll which read [Jn 6:51]: “Ego sum panis vivus qui de celo descendi.”¹⁵ The relationship between the Eucharist and Annunciation was increasingly becoming prevalent in altarpieces around Europe,¹⁶ as well as dramatic plays performed during feasts and Corpus Christi processions.¹⁷

Mary, in a sense, became the “progenitor of the body which was subsequently reborn at the very altar which her image so often adorned.”¹⁸ With the rise of the understanding of the Real Presence came also the increased usage of tabernacles and Eucharistic devotion such as adoration,

¹² Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q.75 art. 4. [My Emphasis]

¹³ Wendy Love Anderson, “The Real Presence of Mary: Eucharistic Disbelief and the Limits of Orthodoxy in Fourteenth-Century France,” *Church History* 75, no. 8 (2006): 749, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27644870>.

¹⁴ Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 142.

¹⁵ Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 143.

¹⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 81. Many examples are also noted in Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 143-147. Also see Donna Spivey Ellington, *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul: Understanding Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 134-140.

¹⁷ One example involves an Annunciation play that would occur in December whereby the “altar was censed to represent the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Virgin to effect the Incarnation, just as he descends to perform the miracle of transubstantiation.” Ellington, *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul*, 134.

¹⁸ Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 143.

processions and private visits to the tabernacle. Mary herself was “depicted or imagined as the tabernacle, vessel, container, robe and clothing of Christ.”¹⁹ William Durandus (1285-1291), in his explanation of the Mass, said that that the “pyx or tabernacle or reliquary in which the host is kept *signified Mary’s body*.”²⁰

The convergence, therefore, between Mary and the Eucharist is their common bond with Christ’s *flesh, body and blood*. Mary gives Christ his sacramental form by means of her own humanity. And yet, it is important to note the criticism of the period of the Middle Ages, for in the attempt to use Mariology as a “unique guiding principle” for theology, instead tended to “make Mariology a closed system.”²¹ That is, Mary’s relationship to the Eucharist started to take on a life of its own. It went as far as Mary being “cast as the celebrant of the Mass” with the “dignity, grace, and powers” of the sacrament of Holy Orders.²² Moreover, Richard of St. Laurent (d.1245) asserted that “in the sacrament of her son we also eat and drink *her* flesh and blood.”²³ For some theologians and preachers, it was the *flesh of Mary* that we receive in the Eucharist: “Give me *your* bread which makes the heart whole and purifies the soul”²⁴ Furthermore, San Bernadino of Siena asserted that the very substance of the Eucharist was quite literally “cut off” [*excisa*] from Mary’s body as *her flesh* becomes the most excellent sacrament.²⁵

As we progress into the contemporary understandings of Mary and the Eucharist, we find a noble departure from the many ornamentations that surrounded Mary’s relationship to the Eucharist that potentially and actually blurred theological distinctions and hence doctrine. Pope John Paul II, in an address during the Feast of Corpus Christi, gave a purified summary of medieval piety with regards to Mary and the Eucharist as being “enclosed in the expression ‘*Caro Christi*,

¹⁹ Anderson, “The Real Presence of Mary: Eucharistic Disbelief and the Limits of Orthodoxy in Fourteenth-Century France,” 760.

²⁰ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 81. [My emphasis].

²¹ René Laurentin, *A Short Treatise on the Virgin Mary*, trans. Charles Neumann, S.M. (Washington: AMI Press, 1991), 117.

²² Laurentin, *A Short Treatise on the Virgin Mary*, 117.

²³ Richard of St. Laurent, *De laudibus sanctae Mariae*, in Ellington, *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul: Understanding Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, 137. [My emphasis]

²⁴ This is from Jean Gerson – composer of poems and religious treatises dedicated to Mary. The rest of the quote reads: “this unleavened bread which, drawn from human nature, repairs that nature.” in Ellington, *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul*, 139. [My emphasis]

²⁵ San Bernadino of Siena: “De carne enim virginis benedictae et in parte corporis excisa consistit, perficitur et terminatur totum decus et pondus sacramentorum Ecclesiae Dei. Certum est enim quod omnis institutione sacramentorum et omnia alia sacramenta, tamquam in ultimum finem et ad illud Sacramentum omnium sacramentorum excellentissimum, quod est Eucharistia, ordinatur.” in Ellington, *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul*, 140. [My emphasis]

Caro Mariae: the flesh of Christ in the Eucharist is, sacramentally, the flesh received from the Virgin Mary.”²⁶

4. The Body of Christ and the Body of Mary

How are we ought to understand the proper relationship between Mary’s role in the Incarnation and the Eucharistic species? After all, this kind of speculation did not begin in the Middle Ages. As early as the 2nd century, we find an affinity between the bodies of Mary and Christ. Melito of Sardis (d.180), in an Easter Homily, described Mary as the beautiful, fair, and “wholly innocent *Agna* (she-lamb) from whom comes the sinless Angus (Christ) led to the slaughter for our redemption.”²⁷ In this sense, do we receive the body of Mary in the Eucharist? Or, in another sense, does the Annunciation and the moment of consecration at Mass express the same reality of Christ’s presence? One could see this potential confusion with regard to Eucharistic monstrances today that take the image and form of Mary herself. As such, there *is* a difference, for the Eucharist commemorates the Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension of Christ – *not* the Annunciation.

John Paul II, in *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, articulates the difference clearly. He says that the Eucharist, “while commemorating the passion and resurrection is also in *continuity* with the incarnation. At the Annunciation Mary conceived the Son of God in the physical reality of his body and blood, thus *anticipating* within herself what to *some degree* happens sacramentally in every believer.”²⁸ For John Paul II, the mystery of the Eucharist is a *continuation* of the Marian-Incarnational mystery, where through this continuity “we are asked to believe that the same Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Mary, becomes present in his full humanity and divinity under signs of bread and wine.”²⁹ There is a *continuity* of elements, so to speak, between Mary and Christ, for the Body of Christ is derived from Mary’s body. But the substantial form and matter of Christ’s body is not Mary’s because Christ is a distinct *substance* in and of himself. Christ is his own person

²⁶ John Paul II, “Feast of Corpus Christi”, Angelus Address, 13 June, 1993, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/angelus/1993/documents/hf_jp-ii_ang_19930613.html.

²⁷ Peter M. Fehlner, F.I., “The Predestination of the Virgin Mother and Her Immaculate Conception” in *Mariology: A Guide for Priests, Deacons, Seminarians, and Consecrated Persons*, ed. Mark Miravalle (Goleta, CA: Queenship Publishing, 2007), 239.

²⁸ John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, Encyclical Letter, Vatican Website, April 17, 2003, (hereafter, EE), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/special_features/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_20030417_ecclesia_eucharistia_en.html, sec. 55. [My emphasis].

²⁹ EE, 55.

with his own soul. For that reason, the Eucharist is not the flesh of Mary in the substantial sense. As such, John Paul II makes the distinction and highlights Mary's relationship by asserting that "she became in some way a 'tabernacle;' – the first 'tabernacle' in history".³⁰

5. Mary and the Sacramental Principle

But how are we to understand this continuity? Moreover, how does Mary anticipate in "some degree" what happens for us, sacramentally, when we receive the Eucharist? The first clue leads us back to the Middle Ages to the Fourth Lateran Council (1215). In its account of transubstantiation, what readers might skip over is the *purpose* by which Christ's Body and Blood is truly contained under the appearances of bread and wine: "to the effect that what we receive from what is his what he has received *from what is ours* in order that the *mystery of unity* may be accomplished".³¹ Firstly, the Lateran Council affirms that *our* humanity, represented in Mary, becomes the means by which God reveals himself. Oliver Treanor writes that the "very *possibility* of God's self-disclosure to us – depends upon his establishing a way of communicating that is consonant with our nature."³² Thus, there is an ontological bond between our humanity and the sacrament of the Eucharist. Such a bond is fulfilled in Mary's own person.

Pope Benedict XVI, in *Sacramentum Caritatis*, writes that in "Mary most holy, we also see *perfectly fulfilled* the "sacramental" way that God comes down to meet his creatures and involves them in his saving work."³³ In other words, Mary is the perfect fulfilment of sacramentality proper. This, first and foremost, expresses an anthropological reality. In *Gaudium et Spes*, it reads that man, "through his bodily composition... gathers to himself the elements of the material world."³⁴ With this understanding, the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine are representative of the material world and therefore these elements find their fulfilment and sacramental signification in

³⁰ EE, 55.

³¹ "Fourth Lateran Council (November 11-30, 1215), in Denzinger (ed.) *A Comendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations of the Catholic Church*, n802, p267.

³² Oliver Treanor, *Maelstrom of Love: The Eucharist – Source and Centre of Sacramental Life*, (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2014), 12.

³³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Apostolic Exhortation, Vatican Website, February 22, 2007, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20070222_sacramentum-caritatis.html, sec. 33. [My emphasis]

³⁴ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Vatican Website, December 7, 1965, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html, sec. 14.

the person of Mary. Through Mary's body, the cosmos itself is incorporated into the sacramental economy, where her personhood becomes representative of *materiality* and *created nature* proper. As such, Treanor writes that "since Christ's body is the *sacramentum* of him who is the sacrament of God it follows that Mary is the matrix of all sacramentality, being the formative mould of Jesus the man."³⁵

6. The Nuptial Meaning of Eucharistic Sacramentality

It can be argued that Mary is thus the fulfilment of the sacramental principle. The second aspect of the Fourth Lateran Council's statement regards that Eucharistic sacramentality expresses the purpose that the "*mystery of unity* may be accomplished" through the Eucharist. This mystery of unity can be understood as a nuptial mystery. According to Martin D'Arcy, the principle of sacramentality operates such that "nature and the supernatural action of God have been wedded together, and to divorce them is, however salutary the purpose, a desecration."³⁶ This is significant because it points to the nuptial meaning of nature as being a wedding point. Specifically, this wedding point is precisely "what is ours", that is, our humanity.

Mary Prokes examines the anthropological significance of Mary's body through the lens of John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*.³⁷ The body expresses the person, and, as such, the body's meaning is nuptial. The 'original solitude' experienced by Adam is fulfilled by a "mutual *being for*, a communion in which each could be *gift* to the other."³⁸ Since the body "gathers to himself the elements" (GS 14), then "ordinary food and drink combined from the elements of the universe are 'taken up' and assumed into the possibility of participation in *personalized matter*... In the human person they are sacramentally signed and share in the capacity for nuptial meaning."³⁹ In a similar vein, Hans Urs von Balthasar claims that in the Eucharist, "Jesus shows that his body has 'room enough' for the whole Church, so that 'Jesus' body is everything but a private body."⁴⁰

³⁵ Treanor, *Maelstrom of Love: The Eucharist – Source and Centre of Sacramental Life*, 220.

³⁶ Martin D'Arcy SJ, "The Sense of History: Secular and Sacred", quoted in Tracey Rowland, *Catholic Theology*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 33.

³⁷ Mary T Prokes. "The Nuptial Meaning of the Body in Light of Mary's Assumption". *Communio* 11.2 (1984), 157-176.

³⁸ Prokes, "The Nuptial Meaning of the Body in Light of Mary's Assumption". 159.

³⁹ Prokes, "The Nuptial Meaning of the Body in Light of Mary's Assumption", 171. [My emphasis]

⁴⁰ Balthasar's idea is expressed by Matthew Levering, *Mary's Bodily Assumption*, (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 60.

Furthermore, sacramentality must fulfil itself in a person rather than any other part of creation because it is only the human person that is capable of rational response. In other words, the sacramental principle fulfilled is a principle that is capable of love. In Mary, this principle reaches its perfection. For it is not merely Mary's matter that becomes a conduit of Christ's grace and presence. Rather, it is her *mind* and matter; body and *soul*. It is the *entire* person – capable of love and consent – which constitutes the true sense of sacramentality and thereby signifies the marriagability of nature and the supernatural. As Oliver Treanor asserts: “Mary is the matrix... not only of sacramental things but of *sacramental persons*. For sacramentality is ultimately *receptivity*: that fruitful, personalizing and liberating openness to God in Christ.”⁴¹ Therein lays the mystery: the perfection of the sacramental principle is ultimately fulfilled in a Marian “Yes”—a *fiat*. This is why Ratzinger claims that the Eucharist as the Body of Christ “remains within the proper measure only when it includes the mystery of Mary: the mystery of the listening handmaid who—liberated in grace—speaks her *Fiat* and, in doing, becomes bride and thus body.”⁴²

7. Conclusion: The Taste and Perfume of the Virgin

In *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, John Paul II notes that “there is a profound analogy between the *Fiat* which Mary said in reply to the angel, and the *Amen* which every believer says when receiving the body of the Lord.”⁴³ Therefore, one could say that the fulfilled sacramental principle as expressed in the Marian mystery also extends to us. We participate in the fullness of sacramentality for, like Mary, we receive in the Eucharist the God who now dwells in us. As James O'Connor, quoting St. Augustine, writes: “It is *our* mystery which is present on the paten and in the cup.”⁴⁴

This paper sought to clarify the medieval misunderstandings of Mary and the Eucharist by means of exploring Mary's own sacramentality. Mary expresses the perfection of the sacramental principle as the wedding point between God and man. It is a nuptial mystery that expresses the beauty of Mary's (humanity's) flesh as the sacramental fulfillment of God's indwelling love. As

⁴¹ Treanor, *Maelstrom of Love: The Eucharist – Source and Centre of Sacramental Life*, 223. [Emphasis in original]

⁴² Joseph Ratzinger, “Thoughts on the Place of Marian Doctrine and Piety in Faith and Theology as a Whole”, in Hans Urs von Balthasar & Joseph Ratzinger, *Mary: The Church at the Source*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 26-27.

⁴³ EE, 55.

⁴⁴ O'Connor, “Mary and the Eucharist”, 59.

John Paul II asserts, Mary's sacramental relationship to the Eucharist is so intimate that the Eucharist "carries within itself, as fragrant bread, the *taste* and the *perfume* of the Virgin Mother."⁴⁵ The Eucharist is indeed Christ's Real Presence, but it is a Real Presence that nuptially incorporates Mary – who represents humanity and creation proper – into Himself. Like the perfumed and fragrant lovers in the *Song of Songs*, the Eucharist makes present the nuptial and paschal reality that "love is strong as death."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ The full quote reads: "E se il Corpo che noi mangiamo e il Sangue che beviamo è il dono inestimabile del Signore risorto a noi viatori, esso porta ancora in sé, come Pane fragrante, il sapore e il profumo della Vergine Madre." John Paul II, "Angelus Address of 5 June 1983" (Feast of Corpus Christi), Vatican Website, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/angelus/1983/documents/hf_jp-ii_ang_19830605.html

⁴⁶ *Song of Songs* 8:6 (RSVCE).

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