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THE REAL PRESENCE OF CHRIST IN THE EUCHARIST

Samuel French

*“Godhead here in hiding, whom I do adore,
Masked by these bare shadows, shape and nothing more,
See, Lord, at thy service low lies here a heart
Lost, all lost in wonder at the God thou art.*

*Seeing, touching, tasting are in thee deceived:
How says trusty hearing? that shall be believed;
What God's Son has told me, take for truth I do;
Truth himself speaks truly or there's nothing true.”*

- Saint Thomas Aquinas

1. Introduction

Understanding the doctrine of the *Real Presence* is especially important for Catholics living in today's social climate. In this ever increasing age of “scientism”, obsessed solely in the discovery of empirical truths, faith claims are under ever increasing levels of ridicule. The influence of this environment can often lead Catholics, like myself, to feel foolish and *unreasonable* among their peers. In response to this, one thing must be first understood: the Eucharist is a matter of faith! No amount of biblical or theological study of the Eucharist can ever hope to satisfy a strict empiricist. Theology can, however, offer a means for one to grow in one's understanding of the magnificent reality of Our Lord's Real Presence in the Eucharist. An enlightened understanding can offer immense solace to those Catholics who desire reasonable foundations for their faith. My aim is to assist in building these foundations by delivering to you a brief sketch of the rich theology of this most Blessed Sacrament, starting with the Scriptures and skimming across its long and turbulent history up until the present day.

2. Biblical Foundations

In order to examine the Eucharistic doctrine of the Real Presence, we must first turn to the Scriptures. There are some who might argue that the doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist is unbiblical. This might be true only on the most superficial level that the

precise phrase, “real presence,” never appears in the Gospels or letters of Paul. However, any honest investigation into the development of this most crucial Catholic doctrine will undoubtedly reveal that this belief is firmly rooted in the Scriptures. First and foremost, we must turn to Christ’s institution of the Eucharist, narrated in all three of the Synoptic Gospels:

And he [Jesus] took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ And likewise the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.’¹

Christ’s words here are explicit, He declares the bread and wine to be His very own body and blood; the same body and blood which is to be given and poured out for *many* on Good Friday.² The Lord thereby instituted a sacrificial meal that would represent the mystery of the Cross; which can only be understood in light of the whole Paschal mystery.³ We must also note that Christ bade His Apostles to “do this in memory of me,” making clear that He wanted the celebration of this meal to be forever repeated.⁴ These words are particularly significant within the context of a Jewish Passover celebration.⁵ When the Hebrews celebrated the *memorial* of the Passover, they did not view the past as dead history, but as an event *present* now. Just as God was present with them during the Exodus, so He is present with them now and into the future.⁶ Therefore, Christ was not simply asking His Apostles to “do this and *think* of me,”⁷ but continually to make the reality of Christ’s body present in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. This was a practice clearly upheld by the Apostles in Acts.⁸ These assertions are further supported by Saint Paul in his letter to the Corinthians where he says: “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?”⁹ In his letter, Paul not only confirms the ongoing celebration of the Lord’s Passover, but uses the language of “*participation* in the body

¹ Lk 22:19-20; cf. Mt 26:26-28; Mk 14:22-24; 1 Cor 11:23-25

² Mt 26:26-28; Mk 14:22-24

³ John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, Encyclical Letter, Vatican Website, April 17, 2003, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/special_features/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_20030417_ecclesia_eucharistia_en.html, sec. 14

⁴ Pope Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei*, Encyclical Letter, Vatican Website, Sep 3rd, 1965, w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_03091965_mysterium.html, sec. 28.

⁵ Mt 26:18-19; Mt 14:14-16; Lk 22:11-13

⁶ Giles Dimock, *101 Questions & Answers on The Eucharist* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006), 39-40.

⁷ Dimock, *101 Questions*, 39.

⁸ “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Acts 2:42

⁹ 1 Cor 10:16

[and blood] of Christ;” undoubtedly describing a reality that goes beyond mere symbolism or sentimental recollection.

The Lord’s bodily presence in the bread and wine is certainly a hard truth to accept. This is especially made clear in the Gospel of John where Christ declared Himself to be the “bread of life,”¹⁰ and said: “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”¹¹ Upon hearing this, many disciples turned away saying “this is a hard saying, who can listen to it?”¹² In response, Christ did not renege, but obstinately persisted in preaching this mysterious truth. So, while there is no explicit biblical mention of Christ’s “presence” in the Eucharist, we can certainly ascertain from these accounts that the bread and wine truly contain the body and blood of Jesus; a reality which Christ willed to be made *present* both now and forever.¹³

3. Historical & Theological Developments

The biblical interpretation of the Real Presence outlined above is the consistent and confident interpretation held, and passed on through history, by some of the earliest Church Fathers. This fact is plainly laid out by early Church historian J.N.D. Kelly, “Eucharistic teaching, it should be understood at the outset, was in general unquestioningly realist.”¹⁴ That is to say the bread and wine of the Sacrament were always taken to be, and treated as, the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁵ One of the many who demonstrate this fact is Ignatius of Antioch, an Apostolic Father living in the first and second centuries, who, in opposition to the Docetists, wrote in his *Epistle to the Romans*:

I have no delight in corruptible food, nor in the pleasures of this life. I desire the bread of God... which is the *flesh* of Jesus Christ...and I desire the drink of God, namely His blood, which is incorruptible love and eternal life.¹⁶

Later in the middle of the third century, Origen reaffirmed the reality of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, saying: “At that time the manna was food ‘in an enigma,’ but now, ‘in reality,’

¹⁰ Jn 6:35

¹¹ Jn 6:53, cf. read Jn 6:32-71 for broader context and emphasis on this point.

¹² Jn 6:60,60

¹³ “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” 1 Cor 11:26

¹⁴ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 4th ed. (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1968), 440.

¹⁵ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 440.

¹⁶ Ignatius, “The Epistle of Ignatius to the Romans,” in *The Complete Ante-Nicene & Nicene and Post Nicene Church Fathers Collection*, ed. Philip Schaff (London: Catholic Way Publishing, 2014), Kindle Edition, 7:3.

the flesh of the Word of God is ‘true food.’”¹⁷ These historical examples demonstrate the consistency of belief in the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, held firmly by the Church throughout the ages.

A great deal of the development to Eucharistic theology and language is owed to the speculative strife of the Middle Ages. From the 9th Century onwards, there was much debate about the *mode* of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist.¹⁸ An abbot named Paschasius, from Corbie in France, wrote an exceedingly realist book on the Eucharist which failed to distinguish between Christ’s *earthly* and *sacramental* presence in the Eucharist.¹⁹ Drawing upon several spiritual texts from Augustine, his fellow monk Ratramnus wrote a rebuttal which defended an overly symbolic view of Christ’s presence.²⁰

By the 11th Century, such debates had intensified and the symbolic view had gained traction due to its adoption by one figure named Berengar of Tours.²¹ In response to his error, at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, the Church decreed that Christ’s body and blood is made *truly* and *substantially* present under the forms of bread and wine.²² This phenomenon was described as “transubstantiation.”²³ Soon after, Thomas Aquinas incorporated this Aristotelian language into his systematic exploration of the Eucharistic mystery. He explained that “the whole substance of the bread is changed into the whole substance of Christ’s body, and the whole substance of the wine into the whole substance of Christ’s blood.”²⁴

For Thomas, *transubstantiation* is not a formal change, nor can it be considered natural; rather, it transcends the natural order and is enacted purely by the power of God.²⁵ So, while this language is helpful for approaching an understanding of the mystery of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, it must be understood that Thomas was only using the notion of transubstantiation as an analogous description of a supernatural reality, which can only be truly perceived through the eyes of faith.²⁶ Thomas’ language of transubstantiation was eventually

¹⁷ Origen, “Homily 7,” in *Homilies on Numbers*, trans. Christopher A. Hall, ed. Thomas P. Scheck (Illiois: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 26.

¹⁸ Gerard Kelly, “The Eucharistic Doctrine of Transubstantiation,” in *The Eucharist: Faith and Worship*, ed. Margaret Press (Sydney: St Paul’s Publications, 2001), 59.

¹⁹ Kelly, “Eucharistic Doctrine”, 59.

²⁰ Kelly, “Eucharistic Doctrine”, 59-60.

²¹ Kelly, “Eucharistic Doctrine”, 60.

²² Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils: Nicaea I to Lateran V*, (Michigan: Sheed & Ward, 1990), 230.

²³ Tanner, *Decrees*, 230.

²⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, (California: Coyote Canyon Press, 2010), III, Q.75, art.4.

²⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, Q.75, art.4.

²⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, Q.75, art.5.

declared as “most apt” by the Church during the thirteenth session of the Council of Trent in 1551.²⁷ What the Church meant by the term “apt” will be discussed later on.

4. Current Understanding and Development of the Real Presence

The language and theology concerning the Real Presence declared at the Council of Trent has held fast even today. The current *Catechism of the Catholic Church* echoes the Council in saying: “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.”²⁸ This statement clearly reveals a continuity of Eucharistic Tradition throughout the history of the Church. In addition to this core understanding, during the last century there has been some development to what is meant by the term “real.” The Vatican II document, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, when speaking on the subject of the Lord’s presence in the liturgy, declares that Christ is present in the Word, the minister, and the sacraments, but most “especially under the Eucharistic species.”²⁹ Due to this understanding, the Eucharist is properly given the title of: “Real Presence.” Pope Paul VI, in his encyclical, *Mysterium Fidei*, explains that “real” in this sense does not negate the reality of the other sacraments, but rather indicates a quintessential presence of Christ, because He is made present wholly and substantially in the sacramental elements.³⁰ In addition, the current teaching of the Church is that the Eucharistic presence of Christ begins at the consecration, and lasts as long as the Eucharistic species subsists.³¹ This summarises the most current understanding of the Real Presence as it is taught by the Church today. However, these teachings do not go unchallenged.

It would be a mistake to presume that the confusion surrounding the doctrine of the Real Presence is limited to the past. Even in recent times, there has been much debate among theologians about the terminology and underlying theology of Eucharistic doctrine. Shortly after the Second Vatican Council, writer John Coventry, among others, proposed that the term “transubstantiation” had become a pastoral issue. He argued that the idea of “substance” used for explaining the Real Presence is rooted in out-dated Aristotelian categories. He believed these outmoded categories, in the context of new epistemological understandings, were

²⁷ Tanner, *Decrees*, 10.

²⁸ CCC, 1374.

²⁹ Second Vatican Council, “*Sacrosanctum Concilium: Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*,” Vatican Website, Dec 4th, 1963, www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html, sec. 7.

³⁰ Pope Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei*, 39.

³¹ CCC, 1377.

ultimately lost on the modern faithful.³² Coventry suggested that by using metaphysical categories the Church is implying a *natural* (physical) change in the bread and wine, resulting in what he calls “sacramental physicalism.”³³ Upon these foundations he justifies a position called “transignification” as opposed to “transubstantiation;” where Christ is made present to our faith, and not in physical reality.³⁴

While one could argue that Coventry’s catechetical concerns are somewhat justified, the foundations for his position are deeply flawed. His argument rests on a false assumption, namely, that the metaphysical language used to describe the Real Presence is employed *literally*.³⁵ In Pope Paul VI’s aforementioned encyclical *Mysterium Fidei*, he not only condemns the notion of *transignification*, but expels the misunderstanding that forms the substance of its foundations. He explains that the formulas used to propose dogmas of faith are not tied to culture, scientific progress, or certain theological schools. Instead, they set forth what the human mind grasps of reality through universal experience, using apt and exact words, whether it be in ordinary or refined language.³⁶ Tampering with this universal language simply to “keep with the times” is ultimately to change the core meaning of the words;³⁷ such an act can never be justified. For, as the First Vatican Council declared: “the meaning that the Holy Mother Church has once declared, is to be retained forever, and no pretext of deeper understanding ever justifies any deviation from that meaning.”³⁸

5. The Real Presence for Us

The Church’s understanding of the Real Presence has had a profound impact on the spiritual life of Catholics. The Lord’s presence in the Eucharist is the “perfection of the spiritual life.”³⁹ This is most expressly demonstrated in Eucharistic worship. In the liturgy of the Mass, we acknowledge Christ’s presence under the species of bread and wine by genuflecting as a sign of adoration.⁴⁰ Even outside the Mass, the Church has recognized the significance of silent

³² John Coventry, “The Presence of Christ in the Eucharist,” *The Furrow* 20, no. 2 (1969): 69.

³³ Coventry, “Presence”, 70.

³⁴ Coventry, “Presence”, 71.

³⁵ This is of course in direct contrast with Thomas Aquinas’ *analogous*, yet *apt*, use of the term “transubstantiation,” mentioned earlier in this paper.

³⁶ Pope Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei*, 24.

³⁷ Pope Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei*, 25.

³⁸ Pope Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei*, 25.

³⁹ CCC, 1374.

⁴⁰ CCC, 1378.

adoration of Christ under the Eucharistic species.⁴¹ Jesus promised His disciples He will be with us until the “close of the age.”⁴² He fulfills this promise daily by being ever present to us throughout the world in the most Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist.

6. Conclusion

In this short paper on the Real Presence, I have endeavoured to touch on each of the fundamental elements that play a role in this most essential Catholic doctrine. In summary, it was first demonstrated that the Real Presence is firmly rooted in Scripture. The reality of Christ’s body and blood present in the bread and wine, is a reality expressed in each of the Gospels and supported by Saint Paul. A quick glance at two prominent Fathers of the Church, namely Ignatius and Origen, revealed that the aforementioned Scriptural interpretation was affirmed in the Early Church and passed through history. The language of “transubstantiation”, used to illuminate the doctrine of the Real Presence, has been preserved from the Scholastic period, and has proved itself “most apt” in the face of heresies both old and new. More recent theology has been effective in clarifying what is meant by the word “real” when comparing the presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the other sacraments. Finally, the implications of the Real Presence for Catholics today is most expressly demonstrated in Eucharistic worship in the form of adoration, both within and outside of the liturgy. So, while the theology presented in this paper is by no means an extensive treatment of the Real Presence, I hope on behalf of my readers that it succeeds in providing some accompaniment to faith in the contemplation of this magnificent truth.

⁴¹ CCC, 1379.

⁴² Mt 28:20

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