

## CATHOLIC BELIEF AND PRACTICE

by Fr. John Ramsay

### CHAPTER 12 – THE EUCHARIST

Now let us examine the greatest of all the Sacraments - The Eucharist. The Catechism defines it as “the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, together with His soul and divinity under the appearances of bread and wine.” Since the sign is obviously FOOD, then the work that Jesus Christ is doing is FEEDING us. There is, however, this great difference between the Eucharist and the other Sacraments. In the other Sacraments, the signs point to the presence of Jesus Christ. In the Eucharist, the sign IS Jesus Christ, under the appearance of bread and wine. He comes to us as food and drink so that He can NOURISH our souls with His very self: uniting us with Himself in the most unique and intimate union. It goes without saying that our meeting here with Christ - our union with Him should be as perfect as we are capable of making it. The Mass, at which the Eucharist is made present, is called a SACRIFICE and we will examine that aspect of it later. First of all, however, we will look at what is called the doctrine of the REAL PRESENCE - what it is; how we explain it; and our grounds for believing it.

By the Real Presence we mean that Jesus Christ is really and truly present - wholly present - Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity, under the appearance of bread and wine. Notice REALLY and TRULY present NOT symbolically present, not PHYSICALLY present, but SACRAMENTALLY present, under the sign of bread and wine. Unlike Christians of other traditions, Catholics accept and believe what has always been taught. What we see APPEARS to be bread and wine. Our Faith tells us that it is Jesus Christ Himself who is there. Not IN the bread but IN PLACE OF the bread; only the appearance of bread and wine remains. He said it would be so....SO IT IS. To help us grasp what is, of course, a mystery, the Church puts forward a way of EXPLAINING the Real Presence which She calls TRANSUBSTANTIATION. This is not a doctrine of the Church but a way of explaining that doctrine. Mediaeval philosophers made use of two words: SUBSTANCE and ACCIDENTS. Substance meaning what a thing really is and accidents meaning the visible signs of that substance such as its colour, shape, texture and so on. These ACCIDENTS may change but the reality remains the same. Let me give you an example: Mum is giving the family eggs for tea. Dad wants his eggs fried, Tommy asks for scrambled eggs, Jeanie wants an omelette while Mum herself has a boiled egg. When she has finished cooking, all the eggs LOOK quite different but they are all still egg. The accidents have changed: the substance remains the same. Now, in the doctrine of the Real Presence, we say that the opposite has taken place. The accidents or outward appearance looks the same - it appears to be still bread and wine. But the substance or inner reality has changed. It is no longer bread and wine. It is the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. This change, then, from one substance to another, is what we call TRANSUBSTANTIATION. So - we say that Jesus Christ IS truly present and we believe it because it has been revealed.

What does Scripture say? There is a long passage in the sixth chapter of St. John’s Gospel about Our Lord speaking in the synagogue at Capernaum. In this passage Our Lord describes Himself as the BREAD OF LIFE and that they, His audience, must EAT that bread. I will now take certain verses to show WHAT He actually said, HOW His audience reacted, what He then said by way of clarification and what finally happened. He started by saying (verse 27) “Do not work for food that cannot last, but work for the food that endures to eternal life.” And a little later (verse 33) He said, “The Bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world”. His audience then reacts (verse 34) by saying, “Sir, give us that bread always.” To which Jesus replies (verse 36) “I am the Bread of Life. He who comes to me will never be hungry.”

Now see how His audience reacts, (verses 41,42) “Meanwhile the Jews were complaining to each other about Him, because He had said, ‘I am the living bread which came down from heaven’. Surely this is Jesus, son of Joseph.” they said. “We know his father and mother. How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’.” Jesus answers them (verse 43) “Stop complaining to each other”, and a little further on He says, (verses 48 - 52) “I am the Bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the desert and they are dead; but this is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that a man may eat it and not die. I am the living bread which has come down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I shall give is my flesh, for the life of the world.” Now watch how his audience reacts to that, (verse 53) “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”- so it seems that they took Him literally! Had He been speaking metaphorically he would have corrected them as He corrected Nicodemus who took literally his remark “unless a man is born again....” However, on this occasion, instead of correcting them, He emphasises His point because He goes on (vv: 54 - 59) “I tell you most solemnly, if you do NOT eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you will not have life in you.

Anyone who DOES eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life, and I shall raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is REAL FOOD and my blood is REAL DRINK. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in Him. As I, who am sent by the living Father, myself draw life from the Father, so whoever eats me will draw life from me. This is the bread come down from heaven; not like the bread our ancestors ate: they are dead, but anyone who eats this bread will live for ever.”

And what happens? The account goes on (verse 60) “He taught this doctrine at Capernaum. After hearing it, many of his followers said ‘This is intolerable language, how can anyone accept it?’” and then a little further on it says (verse 67) “After this many of his disciples left Him and stopped going with Him.”

So, well before His death, He said He was the Bread of Life: His body was real food: His blood was real drink: that unless we eat His flesh and drink His blood we would not have life in us but that if we did eat His flesh and drink His blood, We would live in Him and He in us. - A doctrine many of His followers found too much to swallow. Then, the night before He died, as we saw when we were studying the Church, He took a piece of bread and said “THIS IS MY BODY”: He took a cup of wine and said, “THIS IS MY BLOOD” and then He said “DO THIS IN MEMORY OF ME” and His Church has done so ever since.

Now let us look at the Eucharist from a different angle - that of SACRIFICE. We describe Mass as the HOLY SACRIFICE of the Mass. What do we mean by ‘sacrifice’? The word has become so debased nowadays. So we find ourselves saying that we will have to ‘sacrifice’ television tonight if we want to attend a talk in the Parish Hall! The word ‘sacrifice’ comes from two Latin words meaning to ‘make holy’ in the sense that we dedicate it to God. From the dawn of time man has tried to express his worship of God - his dependence on God - in some tangible way. So he would take something he valued and offer it to God, destroying it, usually by burning it. Thus he might take a lamb out of his flock or a calf from his herd. All these sacrifices unconsciously foreshadowed the one great sacrifice - that of the LAMB OF GOD, JESUS CHRIST. Two things were required for a sacrifice - that which was to be sacrificed - THE VICTIM, and a man specially chosen to make that sacrifice on behalf of everyone - THE PRIEST. And in Jesus Christ we have both. He is the Victim, the Lamb of God, offered to God on the cross and He is also the priest, offering Himself.

And at every Mass, He continues to do so, offering His body and blood, under the appearance of Bread and Wine. So that for all time man would have the privilege of being present at a mystical Calvary. So, we are present when Jesus Christ re-enacts his self-offering to God! The victim is the same - JESUS CHRIST, THE LAMB OF GOD; and the priest is the same - JESUS CHRIST, THE ETERNAL HIGH PRIEST. It is only the MANNER of offering which is different. On Calvary it was offered PHYSICALLY - at Mass it is offered SACRAMENTALLY.

Now, hopefully, we have some idea of the PRIVILEGE it is to be present at Mass. We are witnessing GOD WORSHIPPING GOD - Mass is HIS way of worshipping! So the Sacrament of the Eucharist is the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ under the appearance of bread and wine. It is the Bread of Life, feeding us so that we will live in Him and He in us. It is the Lamb of God, offering Himself to the Father continuously until He comes again so that we can associate ourselves in that perfect act of worship! What can we possibly say but: “BLESSED BE GOD!”.