

THEOLOGY FOR BEGINNERS

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Chapter 18—Eucharist And Mass

The Real Presence

The Blessed Eucharist is <the> Sacrament. Baptism exists <for> it, all the others are enriched by it. The whole being is nourished by it. It is precisely food, which explains why it is the one sacrament meant to be received daily. Without it, one petition in the <Our Father>—"Give us this day our daily bread"—lacks the fullness of its meaning.

Early in his ministry, as St. John tells us (ch 6), Our Lord gave the first promise of it. He had just worked what is probably the most famous of his miracles, the feeding of the five thousand. The next day, in the synagogue at Capernaum on the shore of the sea of Galilee, Our Lord made a speech which should be read and reread. Here we quote a few phrases: "I am the Bread of Life"; "I am the Living Bread, which came down from heaven. If any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever: and the bread that I will give, is my flesh for the life of the world"; "He that eats my flesh, and drinks my blood, has everlasting life: and I will raise him up in the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed: and my blood is drink indeed. He that eats my flesh, and drinks my blood, abides in me, and I in him"; "He that eats me shall live by me."

He saw that many of his own disciples were horrified at what he was saying. He went on: "It is the spirit that quickens: the flesh profits nothing." We know what he meant: in saying they must eat his flesh, he did not mean dead flesh but his body with the life in it, with the living soul in it. In some way he himself, living, was to be the food of their soul's life. Needless to say, all this meant nothing whatever to those who heard it first. For many, it was the end of discipleship. They simply left him, probably thinking that for a man to talk of giving them his flesh to eat was mere insanity. When he asked the Apostles if they would go too, Peter gave him one of the most moving answers in all man's history: "Lord, to whom shall we go?" He had not the faintest idea of what it all meant; but he had a total belief in the Master he had chosen and simply hoped that some day it would be made plain.

There is no hint that Our Lord ever raised the matter again until the Last Supper. Then his meaning was most marvelously made plain. What he said and did then is told us by Matthew, Mark, and Luke; and St. Paul tells it to the Corinthians (1 Cor 10 and 11). St. John, who gives the longest account of the Last Supper, does not mention the institution of the Blessed Eucharist; his Gospel was written perhaps thirty years after the others, to be read in a church which had been receiving Our Lord's body and blood for some sixty years. What he had provided is the account we have just been considering of Our Lord's first promise.

Here is St. Matthew's account of the establishment: "Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke: and gave to his disciples, and said, Take ye and eat: This is my body. And taking the chalice he gave thanks: and gave to them, saying: Drink ye all of this. For this is my blood of the New Testament, which shall be shed for many unto remission of sins."

Since they deal with the food of our life, we must examine these words closely. What we are about to say of "This is my body" will do for "This is my blood" too. The word is need not detain us. There are those, bent upon escaping the plain meaning of the words used, who say that the phrase really means "This represents my body." It sounds very close to desperation! No competent speaker would ever talk like that, least of all Our Lord, least of all <then>. The word <this>, deserves a closer look. Had he said, "Here is my body," he might have meant that, in some mysterious way, his body was there as well as, along with, the bread which seems so plainly to be there. But he said, "<This> is my body"—this which I am holding, this which looks like bread but is not, this which was bread before I blessed it, this is now my body. Similarly this, which was wine, which still looks like wine, is not wine. It is now my blood.

Every life is nourished by its own kind—the body by material food, the intellect by mental food. But the life we are now concerned with is Christ living in us; the only possible food for it is Christ. So much is this so that in our own day you will scarcely find grace held to be Christ's life in us unless the Eucharist is held to be Christ himself.

What Our Lord was giving us was a union with himself closer than the Apostles had in the three years of their companionship, than Mary Magdalen had when she clung to him after his Resurrection. Two of St. Paul's phrases, from 1 Corinthians 11 and 10, are specially worth noting:

"Whosoever shall eat this bread, or drink the chalice of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and of the blood of the Lord"; and "We, being many, are one bread, one body, all that partake of one bread"—a reminder that the Eucharist is not only for each man's soul but for the unity of the Mystical Body.

I can see why a Christian might be unable to bring himself to believe it, finding it beyond his power to accept the idea that a man can give us his flesh to eat. But why should anyone <want> to escape the plain meaning of the words?

For the Catholic nothing could be simpler. Whether he understands or not, he feels safe with Peter in the assurance that he who said he would give us his body to eat had the words of eternal life. Return again to what he said. The bread is not changed into the whole Christ, but into his body; the wine is not changed into the whole Christ, but into his blood. But Christ lives, death has no more dominion over him. The bread becomes his body, but where his body is, there he is; the wine becomes his blood but is not thereby separated from his body, for that would mean death;

where his blood is, he is. Where either body or blood is, there is Christ, body and blood, soul and divinity. That is the doctrine of the Real Presence.

Transubstantiation

Besides the Real Presence which faith accepts and delights in, there is the doctrine of transubstantiation, from which we may at least get a glimpse of what happens when the priest consecrates bread and wine, so that they become Christ's body and Christ's blood.

At this stage, we must be content with only the simplest statement of the meaning of, and distinction between substance and accidents, without which we should make nothing at all of transubstantiation. We shall concentrate upon bread, reminding ourselves once again that what is said applies in principle to wine as well.

We look at the bread the priest uses in the Sacrament. It is white, round, soft. The whiteness is not the bread, it is simply a quality that the bread has; the same is true of the roundness and the softness. There is something there that has these and other properties, qualities, attributes—the philosophers call all of them accidents. Whiteness and roundness we see; softness brings in the sense of touch. We might smell bread, and the smell of new bread is wonderful, but once again the smell is not the bread, but simply a property. The something which has the whiteness, the softness, the roundness, has the smell; and if we try another sense, the sense of taste, the same something has that special effect upon our palate.

In other words, whatever the senses perceive—even with the aid of those instruments men are forever inventing to increase the reach of the senses—is always of this same sort, a quality, a property, an attribute; no sense perceives the something which has all these qualities, which is the thing itself. This something is what the philosophers call substance; the rest are accidents which it possesses. Our senses perceive accidents; only the mind knows the substance. This is true of bread, it is true of every created thing. Left to itself, the mind assumes that the substance is that which, in all its past experience, has been found to have that particular group of accidents. But in these two instances, the bread and wine of the Eucharist, the mind is not left to itself. By the revelation of Christ it knows that the substance has been changed, in the one case into the substance of his body, in the other into the substance of his blood.

The senses can no more perceive the new substance resulting from the consecration than they could have perceived the substance there before. We cannot repeat too often that senses can perceive only accidents, and consecration changes only the substance. The accidents remain in their totality—for example, that which was wine and is now Christ's blood still has the smell of wine, the intoxicating power of wine. One is occasionally startled to find some scientist claiming to have put all the resources of his laboratory into testing the consecrated bread; he announces triumphantly that there is no change whatever, no difference between this and any

other bread. We could have told him that, without the aid of any instrument. For all that instruments can do is to make contact with the accidents, and it is part of the doctrine of transubstantiation that the accidents undergo no change whatever. If our scientist had announced that he had found a change, that would be really startling and upsetting.

The accidents, then, remain; but not, of course, as accidents of Christ's body. It is not his body which has the whiteness and the roundness and the softness. The accidents once held in existence by the substance of bread, and those others once held in existence by the substance of wine, are now held in existence solely by God's will to maintain them.

What of Christ's body, now sacramentally present? We must leave the philosophy of this for a later stage in our study. All we shall say here is that his body is wholly present, though not (so St. Thomas among others tells us) extended in space. One further element in the doctrine of the Real Presence needs to be stated: <Christ's body remains in the communicant as long as the accidents remain themselves>. Where, in the normal action of our bodily processes, they are so changed as to be no longer accidents of bread or accidents of wine, the Real Presence in us of Christ's own individual body ceases. But we live on in his Mystical Body.

This very sketchy outline of the doctrine of transubstantiation is almost pathetic. But like so much in this book, what is here is only a beginning; you have the rest of life before you.

The Sacrifice of the Mass

Upon Calvary Christ Our Lord offered himself in sacrifice for the redemption of the human race. There had been sacrifices before Calvary, myriads of them—foreshadowings, figures, distortions often enough, but reaching out strongly or feebly towards the perfection of Calvary's sacrifice.

These represented an awareness in men, a sort of instinct, that they must from time to time take something out of that vast store of things God has given them and give it back to him. Men might have used the thing for themselves but chose not to; they offered it to God, made it sacred (that is what the word <sacrifice> means). In itself, sacrifice is simply the admission that all things are God's; even in a sinless world this would be true, and men would want to utter the trust by sacrifice. With sin, there was a new element; sacrifice would include the destruction of the thing offered—an animal, usually.

We can study these sacrifices, as they were before Calvary at once perfected and ended them, in the Temple sacrifices of the Jews, the Chosen People. The whole air of the Old Testament is heavy with the odor of animals slain and offered to God. The slaying and the offering—immolation and oblation—were both necessary elements. But whereas the offering was always made by the priests, the slaying need

not be done by them; often it was the work of the Temple servants. For it was not the slaying that made the object sacred, but the offering. The essential thing was that the priest offer a living thing slain.

With Christ, we have said, sacrifice came to its perfection. The priest was perfect, for Christ was the priest. The victim was perfect, for he was the victim too. He offered himself, slain. But not slain by himself. He was slain by others, slain indeed by his enemies.

What he did was complete, once for all, not to be repeated. It accomplished three things principally—atoned for the sin of the race, healed the breach between the race and God, opened heaven to man, opened it never to be closed. His is "the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but for those of the whole world" (1 Jn 2:1).

With such completion, what was still to be done? For something <was> still to be done. Christ is still in action on men's behalf, as the Epistle to the Hebrews tells us. Jesus has entered "into heaven itself, that he may appear <now>, in the presence of God for us" (9:24). He is "always living to make intercession for us" (7:25). What still remains to be done is not an addition to what was done on Calvary, but its application to each man—that each of us should receive for himself what Our Lord won for our race.

The "intercession" just spoken of is not a new sacrifice but the showing to God of the sacrifice of Calvary. The Victim, once slain, now deathless, stands before God, with the marks of the slaying still upon him—"a Lamb standing, <as it were> slain" (Rv 5:6).

We are now in a better position to understand the Sacrifice of the Mass. In heaven Christ is presenting himself, once slain upon Calvary, to his heavenly Father. On earth the priest—by Christ's command, in Christ's name, by Christ's power—is offering to God the Victim once slain upon Calvary. Nor does this mean a new sacrifice, but Calvary's sacrifice presented anew—in order that the redemption won for our race should produce its fruit in us individually.

In the Mass the priest consecrates bread and wine, so that they become Christ's body and blood. Thus the Christ he offers is truly there really there. The Church sees the separate consecration as belonging to the very essence of the Mass. It is a remainder of Christ's death—and he had told his first priests at the Last Supper that, in doing what he had just done, "they should show forth the death of the Lord, until he come (1 Cor 11:26). They should <show forth> Christ's death, remind us of his death, not, of course, kill him, any more than he had killed himself on Calvary.

The priest offers the sacrifice. But we are, in our lesser way, offerers too. Twice we are told so in the Ordinary of the Mass. We have already seen how after the Consecration the priest says, "We thy servants but also thy holy people [<plebs tua

sancta>] . . . offer . . . a pure, holy and immaculate Victim." To see ourselves merely as spectators at Mass is to miss the opportunity to take our part in the highest action done upon earth.

One element in the Mass remains to be mentioned. We, united with Christ's priests, have offered Our Lord to God. And God gives him back to us, to be the Life of our life. That is what Holy Communion means. God, while retaining Christ for his own, also shares him with us. So that God and man, each in his own way, receive the slain and risen God-man.

Chapter 18 — Eucharist and Mass *Theology for Beginners* (c) 1981 by F. J. Sheed
Available from Servant Books
Box 8617
Ann Arbor, MI 48107
ISBN 0-89283-128-6 (hardback) ISBN 0-89283-124-3 (paperback)
Nihil Obstat: B. E. Fontaine Imprimatur: Most Reverend R. F. Joyce, Bishop of Burlington

Provided Courtesy of:
Eternal Word Television Network
5817 Old Leeds Road
Irondale, AL 35210
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