

The Mass

In the midst of the CoronaVirus pandemic, and the restrictions it has placed on our ability to gather and worship as a community of faith, I thought it might be an excellent time for us to reflect upon the rich and beautiful Catholic theology of the Mass. It is my experience that quite often Catholics have been horribly catechized about their faith. Maybe this reflection will help us all appreciate the gift Christ gave us at the Last Supper. My hope is to post a part of this reflection twice per week on the Parish website, so please check back regularly.

Part 2

The Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist:

The central mystery of the Eucharist is that it contains the real presence of Jesus. Of the many forms that Christ takes to his people, our faith tells us that he is uniquely present in the Eucharist. The bread and wine consecrated at Mass become Our Lord's body and blood, soul and divinity.

Unlike our Protestant brothers and sisters, the Catholic Church has always been very clear to teach that the Eucharist is far more than just a mere symbol of Jesus. He is not simply spiritually present in the consecrated bread and wine. He is not present in the Eucharist simply by virtue of the faith community gathered in worship. Instead, Catholic theology has always harkened back to the Last Supper where Jesus took bread and wine and said, "This is my body...this is the cup of my blood...do this in memory of me." We believe that when the priest says the words of Jesus at the moment of consecration, the bread and wine are literally changed into the body and blood of Jesus. Theologically, we call this moment of change transubstantiation. The Catechism of the Catholic Church in #1376 says that at the time of consecration, "there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood."

The change that takes place at transubstantiation is unique. It is neither a chemical change, nor does the outward appearance of the bread and wine change. As anyone who has attended Mass and received communion can attest, the host and the wine still taste the same as they did prior to the consecration. Underneath these appearances, however, Jesus' body and blood is really present in the Eucharist.

The Church came to this understanding of the Eucharist because Jesus, himself, used profoundly realistic language when describing it. Not only did Jesus speak of the bread and wine being his body and blood at the Last Supper, but he gave an even more extensive teaching in what has become known as the “Bread of Life discourse” in the Gospel of John. In that section of John’s Gospel, Jesus made it clear that we must really and truly eat his flesh and drink his blood. So essential is our feeding on the Eucharist that he taught, “Truly, truly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.” (John 6: 53-56) Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, one of the early Church fathers, taught his people that Christians must trust the words of Christ about truly being his body and blood: “Do not, then, regard the Eucharistic elements as ordinary bread and wine: they are in fact the body and blood of the Lord, as he himself has declared. Whatever your senses may tell you, be strong in faith.”

For Reflection:

“On the night he was betrayed our Lord Jesus Christ took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples and said: *“Take, eat: this is my body.”* He took the cup, gave thanks and said: *“Take, drink: this is my blood.”* Since Christ himself has declared the bread to be his body, who can have any further doubt? Since he himself has said quite categorically, this is my blood, who would dare to question it and say that it is not his blood?

Therefore, it is with complete assurance that we receive the bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ. His body is given to us under the symbol of bread, and his blood is given to us under the symbol of wine, in order to make us by receiving them one body and blood with him. Having his body and blood in our members, we become bearers of Christ and sharers, as Saint Peter says, in the divine nature.

Once, when speaking to the Jews, Christ said: *Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you shall have no life in you.* This horrified them and they left him. Not understanding his words in a spiritual way, they thought the Savior wished them to practice cannibalism.

Under the old covenant there was showbread, but it came to an end with the old dispensation to which it belonged. Under the new covenant there is bread from heaven and the cup of salvation. These sanctify both soul and body, the bread

being adapted to the sanctification of the body, the Word, to the sanctification of the soul.

Do not, then, regard the Eucharistic elements as ordinary bread and wine: they are in fact the body and blood of the Lord, as he himself has declared. Whatever your senses may tell you, be strong in faith.

You have been taught and you are firmly convinced that what looks and tastes like bread and wine is not bread and wine but the body and the blood of Christ. You know also how David referred to this long ago when he sang: *Bread gives strength to man's heart and makes his face shine with the oil of gladness.* Strengthen your heart, then, by receiving this bread as spiritual bread, and bring joy to the face of your soul.

May purity of conscience remove the veil from the face of your soul so that by contemplating the glory of the Lord, as in a mirror, you may be transformed from glory to glory in Christ Jesus our Lord. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.”

Saint Cyril of Jerusalem (315–386 A.D.)

Cat. 22 Mystagogica 4, 3-6 PG 33. 1098-1106