



The Holy Eucharist



FATHER BERNARD MULCAHY, O.P.

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The Holy Eucharist

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A NOTE ON TERMS AND PERSPECTIVE

The Catholic Church is a communion of believers from 21 autonomous churches who adhere to a specific form of theological elaboration, liturgical practice, spiritual life and canon law which is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. All 21 churches hold to the discipline of faith and loyalty to professed revealed Truth. Although the largest number of Catholics belong to the Latin Church, there are a number of smaller churches from the East who are Catholic and therefore part of the Church, such as the Maronite Church (Lebanese Catholics), Byzantine Church (among them are the Ruthenians, Ukrainians, Melkites and others), Armenian Church, Syrian Church and the Coptic Church (Egyptian Catholics). All of these different churches are in full communion with the Bishop of Rome (the Pope) and their sacraments are valid for Latin Catholics to receive. With the exception of the Maronites, the Eastern Churches have an Orthodox sister Church. For the sake of simplicity, this booklet uses the terminology common to Latin Catholics. For instance, the Eucharistic liturgy is called the Mass, although most Eastern Catholics would call it the Divine Liturgy; in the Latin Church the word *sacrament* is used whereas Eastern Catholics use the word *mystery*. Likewise, most descriptions of ritual refer to the practice of the Latin Rite, which is much more common in the United States.

In this Series, *Eastern Christians and Their Churches* (342), provides a brief overview of the rich history and heritage of the Eastern Catholic churches.

INTRODUCTION

At a certain point in the Catholic Mass, the priest says to the congregation, “Lift up your hearts!” *Sursum corda*, as it is in Latin. And the people reply, “We lift them up to the Lord.”

When it comes to God and the things of God, even believers need to be told, “Lift up your hearts!” Our hearts and minds alike, sad to say, are inclined to slip down and accommodate themselves not to God, but to the interests and demands of the flesh and of earthly life. In talking about the Holy Eucharist—and still more when we are actually at Mass or receiving Holy Communion—we need to do what we can, relying on God’s help, to have the thoughts of our hearts lifted up toward the height of what God is doing.

Before we talk about God’s deeds, we need to start with a word about the Most High Himself. God is all-sufficient in Himself. He does not need anything, and no creature can threaten or detract from the happiness of the Creator. Always and eternally, God is the Father of His everlasting divine Son and the source, together with the Son, of the Holy Spirit. Together always, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit live in the endless perfection of beauty, love, holiness, unity, life, and truth.

Since God did not need to create, it follows that He made the universe out of sheer goodness, freedom, and generosity. Moreover, He did not limit Himself to making stars, planets, plants, and animals, but elected also to create persons to share in His own eternal divine life and infinite happiness. These persons He made in two kinds, namely angels and men. God made the angels and us capable of receiving from Him the gift (or grace) of knowing and loving Him, of dwelling with Him, and of participating in His own divine joy and life.

Simply creating angels and men, however, is not the same as bringing them into the infinity and perfection of the divine life. In fact, we know that once they were created, man (in our first parents, whom the Bible names Adam and Eve) and some of the angels “fell” through sin. In man’s case, this resulted in alienation from God and in the disruption of much of the good order in which our bodies and souls had been created. We have been living with the consequences—sin, vice, unruly passions, forgetfulness of God, suffering, sickness and death—ever since.

Since God is all-knowing, our fall certainly did not take Him by surprise. We might even be tempted to ask, “Why didn’t He stop us?” Indeed we would be left wondering about all these things if God had not, in the fullness of time, begun to reveal himself anew and to bring about not only a restoration of fallen man, but the raising of man to a new and previously undreamed-of exaltation. However happy Adam and Eve were before their sin and its horrible consequences, their happiness cannot compare with the blessings, the joy, and the glory God decided to bestow on us in Jesus Christ. As a matter of fact, even God Himself could not possibly give us a greater gift, or raise us to a higher life, than He does in Christ: in being united to the Lord Jesus, we are not only forgiven and cleansed of our sins. No, more than this, we are made worthy and real sharers in God’s own divine life. God the Father is inviting us into the Holy Trinity in His Eternal Son, who “became man so that men might become God” (as Saint Augustine says). God is offering us membership in the Eternal Son, and so He is offering us Himself, and nothing less.

Just as the greatness of the generosity of God is too good for anyone to have guessed beforehand, so also the ways He arranged to execute His plan were too wonderful to be fully anticipated. As we know, after centuries of preparing a chosen nation, the Jewish People, God sent into the world his own Son. As we say in the

Apostles' Creed, the Eternal Son “was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.”

So far, then, we are looking at two facts. First, God has a plan for bringing creatures (ourselves) into an amazing intimacy with himself. Second, this plan is carried out through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is the Eternal Son of God come among us as perfect man. Now we turn to the sacraments to understand just how the saving action of Jesus Christ becomes present and effective for us in our own time and place.

Before his death, Jesus Christ gathered to himself disciples, particularly the Twelve Apostles. To these chosen men Christ passed on the mission of preaching his Gospel and of governing His followers (that is, the Church). More mysteriously, however, He also entrusted to them his work of sanctification—that is, of distributing the blessings of the divine life to those who believe. To cite but a single example, we can see this mission given to the Apostles at the end of the Gospel of Saint Matthew, where we read:

And Jesus came and said to [the Apostles], “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20).

It is significant that the Lord did not send the Apostles only to preach to the whole world and to instruct them under His divine authority. In addition, He sent them out with a new means of

prayer, blessing, and consecration—Baptism (as mentioned in this passage)—but also the other sacraments which Christ entrusted to His disciples.

All told, Jesus Christ gave His Church seven sacraments. By means of the sacraments, the Holy Spirit makes Jesus Christ's saving activity present and effective among us. The seven sacraments (and some of the Biblical texts that witness to them) are:

Baptism (Matthew 28:19),
Penance (John 20:23),
Confirmation (Acts 8:17, 19:6),
the Holy Eucharist (Luke 22:19),
Marriage (Eph. 5:25, Matthew 19:3-9),
the Anointing of the Sick (James 5:14ff),
and Holy Orders (2 Timothy 1:6, 2:2).

The Lord Jesus gave these sacraments to the Church as the chosen means by which He Himself would act in the world between the time of His ascension into heaven and His coming again in glory at the end of the world. In each sacrament, it is Christ who is acting through the natural, visible agency of His ministers. The sacraments do not depend on the holiness of their earthly minister to be effective, although anyone who receives them irreverently undermines their fruitfulness.

Six of the sacraments confer specific spiritual gifts: spiritual rebirth (Baptism), the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Confirmation), the forgiveness of sins committed after Baptism (Penance, also called Confession or Reconciliation), the life-long union of man and woman (Marriage), the spiritual strengthening of those in danger of death from sickness or the frailty of old age (Anointing of the Sick), and consecration in the sacred power to teach, rule, and bless in the Church (Holy Orders).

The seventh sacrament, the Holy Eucharist, is different from the other six in that it is not only a means by which Christ acts to produce an effect. Rather, the Holy Eucharist contains and delivers to us Jesus Christ Himself, in His complete reality as God and Man. In the Holy Eucharist, Christ is present substantially, that is, in the full and true being of His Divinity and of His Manhood—His bodily flesh and blood, His human soul. The Eucharist does not merely symbolize Christ, remind us of Christ, or stand for Christ: the Holy Eucharist is Christ, in the perfection of His bodily presence.

How can we say that the Eucharist is Jesus Christ? What does it mean, and how can we see it in Scripture? As our guide in answering this question, we will take the saint who is perhaps the greatest theologian of the Holy Eucharist: Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), a member of the Order of Friars Preachers (the Dominicans), a man of great holiness and one of the Church's most brilliant thinkers.

Aquinas did not only write theology books. Saint Thomas also wrote hymns. In fact, in the early 1260s Pope Urban IV asked Saint Thomas to put together prayers for the solemn feast of *Corpus Christi* (Latin for "the Body of Christ"), the day on which the Church especially celebrates the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist. The result was a collection of hymns that were not only beautiful, but rich in true faith and doctrine. The hymns were so fine that the Church has treasured them ever since, and in any one of them we can find an admirable summary of what Catholics believe about the Holy Eucharist.

This small booklet is also meant to summarize the Church's faith concerning the Holy Eucharist. Following the lead of Saint Thomas Aquinas, our explanation will trace over the hymn he wrote to be sung first thing in the morning on the Feast of Corpus Christi.

The hymn is known by its first two Latin words, *Sacris sollemniis*, and in English the lyrics are as follows.

At this our solemn Feast, let holy joys abound
And from the inmost breast let songs of praise resound;
Let ancient rites depart, and all be new around,
In ev'ry act and voice and heart.

Remember we that eve, when, the Last Supper spread,
Christ, as we all believe, the lamb with leavenless bread
Among His brethren shared, and thus the Law obeyed,
Of old unto their sires declared.

The typic lamb consumed, the legal Feast complete,
The Lord unto the Twelve His Body gave to eat;
The whole to all, no less the whole to each, did mete
With His own hands, as we confess.

He gave them, weak and frail, His Flesh their food to be;
On them, downcast and sad, His Blood bestowed He:
And thus to them He spake, "Receive this cup from Me,
And all of you of this partake."

So He this Sacrifice to institute did will,
And charged His priests alone that office to fulfill:
In them He did confide: to whom pertaineth still
To take, and to the rest divide.

Thus Angels' Bread is made the Bread of man today;
The living Bread from Heaven with figures doth away:
O wondrous gift deed! The poor and lowly may
Upon their Lord and Master feed.

O Triune Deity, to Thee we meekly pray,
So mayst Thou visit us, as we our homage pay;
And in Thy footsteps bright conduct us on our way
To where Thou dwell'st in cloudless light.¹

We will take these seven stanzas in three groups, to guide us through three vital parts of the Church's Eucharistic faith. First, we will look at stanzas one and two, and examine the Eucharist as a feast, and as the new and true Passover. Next we will unpack stanzas three, four and five to see how the Eucharist is the true Body and Blood of Jesus Christ—the reality, and not a mere symbol or figure. Here we will also see why the Church speaks of the Eucharist as a Sacrifice. Finally, we will look at stanzas six and seven of our hymn to consider how and why we should receive the Holy Eucharist. These final verses are certainly the best known of the hymn, since they are the text of the *Panis Angelicus*, a prayer that has been set to music by dozens of composers over the centuries.

PART I: THE EUCHARISTIC FEAST

At this our solemn Feast, let holy joys abound
And from the inmost breast let songs of praise resound;
Let ancient rites depart, and all be new around,
In ev'ry act and voice and heart.

Remember we that eve, when, the Last Supper spread,
Christ, as we all believe, the lamb with leavenless bread,
Among His brethren shared, and thus the Law obeyed,
Of old unto their sires² declared.

The Holy Eucharist is celebrated as a feast, as a kind of solemn, ritual meal. This much is clear even to a non-believer who goes into a church to watch. Most obviously, there is the priest: a man in unusual clothing who apparently supervises the whole event; after some readings and perhaps a sermon, he goes to the altar (which looks more or less like a table) and after various prayers and gestures distributes to the people what looks like simple bread and wine. Then there are a few more prayers and everyone goes home. Anyone could guess that this food is what the people came for.

This outsider's view of the Holy Eucharist is superficial, but not entirely wrong. The Eucharist is indeed a banquet, and does make use of bread and wine—but the reality of what is happening far surpasses any appearance visible to the eye.

The hymn we are following gives us a clue to help identify the Holy Eucharist when it refers to the departure from “ancient rites” and to the eating of a “lamb with leavenless bread.” Anyone familiar with the Jewish religion will recognize this reference to the main event of the Old Testament: the Passover, when the children of Israel were rescued by God from their slavery in Egypt.

The connections between the Holy Eucharist and the covenants and sacrifices of the Old Testament are many. We may begin with the reference to the sacrificial lamb. Searching the Scriptures, we find that the lamb is an animal specially chosen for sacrifice to God. In Genesis 4:2, we see that Abel (the second son of Adam and Eve) pleased God by offering in sacrifice the first-born sheep of his flocks. Later in Old Testament history, when Abraham proved his willingness to obey God by offering his only son, Isaac, as a sacrifice, he said in prophecy, “God himself will provide the lamb for the holocaust” (Genesis 22:8). And over the centuries, the Jewish people followed God's command by offering lambs—among other animals—as sacrifices to God.³

By far the most important reference to lambs in the Old Testament, however, is in the account of the Passover. This is also where the sacrifice of a lamb becomes associated with “leavenless bread” (bread made without yeast, so it does not rise). The Passover was the night on which God brought the Israelites out of their slavery in Egypt. On that night, God sent an angel to kill all the firstborn sons in Egypt. Through Moses, however, God gave the Israelites instructions for a sacrificial meal that would ensure their sons' survival and strengthen the people for their hurried escape

from Egypt. God's command, related in the Book of Exodus, was this:

[The Lord said to Moses:] Tell all the congregation of Israel that... they shall take every man a lamb according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household; and if the household is too small for a lamb, then a man and his neighbor next to his house shall take according to the number of persons; according to what each can eat you will make your count for the lamb. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old; you shall take it from the sheep or from the goats; and you shall keep it to the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of Israel shall kill their lambs in the evening. Then they shall take some of its blood, and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat them. They shall eat the flesh that night....

...I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: for I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you, upon the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall fall upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt (Exodus 12:3-13).

The Passover was not celebrated just once. Instead, God told the Israelites to keep the feast of the Passover every year as a memorial of the original event. "This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as an ordinance for ever" (Exodus 12:14). And just as any of those who failed to keep the first Passover would be slain by the Angel of Death, so God told His people that when they kept the Passover through the ages, if

anyone failed to observe the feast “that person shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel” (Exodus 12:19).

The reason it was vitally important to keep the Passover, even after the original event, was that the “memorial” was not something that was *past* and simply to be remembered in the ordinary sense of that word. Instead, the memorial feast of the Passover involved *God’s* remembering His people—not “remembering” because He had forgotten them (which is impossible!), but “remembering” in the sense of “being mindful” of them in the present, thinking of them, and acting now on their behalf in keeping with His past promises.

The Passover was a special kind of memorial, one that brought a past event to bear in the present, and made the past event’s effects real, continuous and active at a later date. This is why God told the Israelites that even after they had left Egypt, they must throughout the ages explain the Passover to their children not as a mere symbol or a token reminder of what God had done in the past, but rather as the *same* sacrifice, the *same* Passover, the *same* observance that God was *still* using to single His people out from among their pagan neighbors. The Passover would continue to be what it was, and to do what it did, the first time it was kept by the people. Thus, the Lord said:

And when you come to the land which the Lord will give you, as he promised, you shall keep this service [the Passover]. And when your children say to you, “What do you mean by this service?” you shall say, “It is the sacrifice of the Lord’s passover...” (Exodus 12:25-27).

With all this in mind, we can turn to the Last Supper. This was the last meal the Lord Jesus Christ had with his twelve apostles, and it was his last meal before his death on the Cross. It was celebrated

on a Thursday evening, and it was not just any meal: it was a celebration of the annual Passover. And it was more.

At times Christ spoke of accomplishing an “exodus” in Jerusalem (see Luke 9:31), which could have made little sense to his disciples at the time. After all, there had been only one exodus, back when Moses had freed Israel from Egypt. Speaking more clearly, the Lord began connecting the feast of Passover with his own death, saying, “You know that after two days, the Passover is coming, and the Son of man will be delivered up, to be crucified” (Matthew 26:1). Then, when the day was at hand, “the disciples came to Jesus, saying, Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the Passover?” (Matthew 26:17). “And when the hour came, he sat at table, and the apostles with him. And he said to them, ‘I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer’” (Luke 22:14-15).

The apostles would learn soon enough why Jesus was so eager to eat the Passover with them, and what He meant when He spoke of a new exodus. For at this Passover, the Last Supper, Christ would introduce something miraculous and new, something the old rites of the Passover had only prefigured: the new and everlasting covenant, the new Passover of His own perfect sacrifice.⁴

At the Last Supper, Christ revealed Himself as the sacrificial lamb, the Passover lamb, of the new covenant. This had been prophesied throughout the Old Testament, and was revealed at the beginning of Christ’s public ministry through the words of Saint John the Baptist. One of the more mysterious events of the New Testament comes when Jesus Christ goes to the Jordan River to be baptized by Saint John. In the Gospel we read that John “saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’” (John 1:29). This title, Lamb of God, must have puzzled all who heard it. Why did John call Jesus the

Lamb of God? What does that have to do with “the sin of the world”? The answer would only start to become clear at the Last Supper.

As Scripture tells us, Christ instituted the Holy Eucharist after eating the Passover meal with His Twelve Apostles. Through the Last Supper, through his passion, death, resurrection, and ascension into Heaven, Christ brought to fulfillment the covenants and promises of the Old Testament. This is why He speaks of “the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20), and why He says His blood will be “poured out for many” (Mark 14:24).

We can only imagine what the disciples thought of this gift at the Last Supper, since it is not clear how well they understood what was happening. Certainly they would not have long to think about it, for that very night Jesus would be betrayed by Judas, arrested by the Jewish authorities, and finally handed over to the Romans. At dawn, He appeared before Pontius Pilate, and was flogged, condemned, and led off to crucifixion.

Only on the third day after his death—on the morning of Easter—would the apostles begin to learn what Jesus intended at the Last Supper. At first, of course, they must have been stunned, overjoyed, and fearful all at once. But Jesus would appear to them again and again over the next forty days, instructing them and impressing upon them the truth of His real, material, bodily resurrection from death.

... Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, “Peace to you.” But they were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a spirit. And he said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do questionings rise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet (Luke 24:36-39).

We learn from Saint John's Gospel that the Apostle Saint Thomas (sometimes called "doubting Thomas") was absent when the Lord first appeared to the Apostles.

Now Thomas, one of the twelve, ...was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his [pierced] side, I will not believe.

Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (John 20:24-29).

We can be sure that the Apostles did not quite understand what they were supposed to do until the day of Pentecost, when they were "clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49) and when the Holy Spirit taught them to understand Christ's teaching and instructions (see John 16:13). Instead, the Apostles spent the time between Easter and the Ascension learning the truth of Christ's bodily resurrection. For Jesus Christ rose from the dead in His human body, in the same flesh that was born of the Virgin Mary. His body did not stay in the tomb, nor did His human soul enter heaven by itself: rather, He rose bodily, with flesh and bones, in the fullness and perfection of His sacred manhood. To be sure, the resurrected body of Jesus was transformed (see 1 Corinthians 15:42-53), so that it became imperishable and more than physical: but it remained a true body, while being set free of the limits of its original nature.

It was only through the Holy Spirit that the Apostles were able to recall and make sense of all Jesus had told them. Then, too, they understood what the Lord had accomplished on the Cross, and what the Eucharist was and is. As the Letter to the Hebrews explains, the followers of Christ understood that in Christ God had fulfilled His promise to “establish a new covenant with the house of Israel... not like the covenant I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out from the land of Egypt” (Hebrews 8:8-9), but rather a covenant that would accomplish a greater rescue and lead to a greater and more lasting intimacy with God than anything delivered in the Old Testament.⁴

Jesus Christ the Lord did not deliver us from everlasting death and from sin only by a spiritual action, or only by a mental prayer or a command. Rather, He saved us through the outpouring of His own blood in sacrifice, and by the offering of His own body. In this way, His sacrifice was complete and all-encompassing. Christ submitted and surrendered Himself to the Father, and as a priest offered a sacrifice infinitely more precious than any other: for Christ offered Himself. And this self-offering was not only an act of obedience, but an offering of His entire will, His whole life, His entire body and all His blood. Nothing was withheld, nothing kept back in this perfect sacrifice. And through this act, in which everything offered was penetrated by the Spirit of God, the whole Christ—divinity, human soul, human body and blood—became our salvation and our life. Christ provided what Scripture calls “the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh” (Hebrews 10:20). Thus, to enter into heaven, we do not go through a merely mental or spiritual route, but through the real flesh of Jesus Christ, offered in sacrifice.

How is this done? We could never guess how if Jesus Christ had not told us Himself. Our way is the way through His body, through a union with the Lord that is not only spiritual but bodily,

and which unites us to Him by an intimacy which could not be more close and complete.

PART II: THE EUCHARIST, TRUE SACRIFICE OF CHRIST

The typic lamb consumed, the legal Feast complete,
The Lord unto the Twelve His Body gave to eat;
The whole to all, no less the whole to each, did mete⁶
With His own hands, as we confess.

He gave them, weak and frail, His Flesh their food to be;
On them, downcast and sad, His Blood bestowed He:
And thus to them He spake, "Receive this cup from Me,
And all of you of this partake."

So He this Sacrifice to institute did will,
And charged His priests alone that office to fulfill:
In them He did confide: to whom pertaineth still
To take, and to the rest divide.

In the Gospel according to Saint John, we discover that Christ the Lord spoke to His disciples about giving them His flesh, the Eucharist, long before the Last Supper. As a matter of fact, what He had to say caused many of His followers to abandon Him, since they refused to believe what He was telling them. What did Jesus say that was so shocking?

[Jesus said,] "I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh."

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "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 at 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." ...After this many of his disciples drew back, and no longer went about with him (John 6:51-6, 66).

What bothered the unfaithful disciples of Jesus was His insistence that He would give them His real flesh and blood. Even more shocking is the idea that we are supposed to *eat* His body and *drink* his blood. Why would such a thing be necessary or appropriate? And how is it even possible?

To be certain, the Holy Eucharist does not *look* or *taste* like human flesh or blood. On the contrary, the bread and wine used for Mass appear to remain bread and wine. And if we were to conduct a chemical analysis, we would discover no evidence of any physical or empirical change in the course of the Liturgy. It is only reasonable to ask how there can be a real change when our senses tell us that everything remains the same.

We should begin any explanation by saying that the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist is something that is accomplished by God. The Eucharist is not a natural phenomenon, with natural physical causes, but rather is one that occurs by the direct action of the Holy Spirit. It is only through the power of the God who made the universe that the Eucharist is possible.

Second, we should recognize that our knowledge of material things comes through our five human senses: through hearing, taste, touch, smell, and sight. We get to know things, and to recognize them, according to the way they look, sound, feel, and so on. We observe similar things (such as small, cool, greenish, bumpy,

jumping, water-loving animals that say “ribbit”) and identify them as particular instances of a single kind of thing (such as “frogs”).

Sometimes, of course, we make incorrect judgments about what our senses report. For example, we may see what looks like a plum. It may be the right size, the right color, the right weight, and have the right skin texture. But perhaps it is only a cleverly made piece of wax; in this case, our eyes have not fooled us, but we may have fooled ourselves by hastily putting too much stock in mere visual appearance. By using another physical sense, such as our sense of taste, we can easily (if unhappily) discover the truth about the object we had thought was a plum.

Unlike the real-looking wax plum, the Most Holy Eucharist not only looks like something it isn't (that is, bread and wine), but also tastes, smells, feels, and in all ways appears to be what it isn't. In the case of the Eucharist, every sense appearance is misleading to our natural, everyday judgment. Our knowledge of what the Eucharist really is comes not through what our senses tell us about the Sacrament, but through what God tells us—that is, through faith in what we hear Jesus say: “This is My Body. This is My Blood.”

When we ask how the Holy Eucharist can be one thing while appearing to be another, we come up against the weakness of our own means of knowing. For all the power of the human senses, of our abstract thinking, and of human judgment, it remains true that our knowledge of things comes from observing them on the “outside” (so to speak). We know things very imperfectly, and not as God (or for that matter, the angels) know them. For God does not deduce the identity of things by observing them and gathering sense perceptions; rather, God knows what things are “inside,” in the depths of their being. We call the fundamental *whatness* of a thing its essence. And when we point at any particular thing and

say “that,” we are referring neither to its mere sensible appearance nor to *what kind* of thing (essence) it is, but rather to a *substance*, to the thing itself.

For the purposes of our present discussion, it must suffice to say that in the Holy Eucharist there is a unique and miraculous change. What starts out as bread and wine undergoes, by God’s power, a marvelous transformation and becomes Jesus Christ Himself: body, blood, soul, and divinity. The manner of the Lord’s bodily presence, however, is different from the manner of His natural body and even His resurrected body; for in the Holy Eucharist each piece of the host and each drop from the chalice is the whole Christ. He is not divided when the Eucharist is broken, and He is not destroyed when the Eucharist is consumed. We are left to conclude that in the Holy Eucharist the whole Christ is contained—not a “piece” of Him. At the same time, we must say that the Eucharist does not imprison or exhaust the Body of Christ, since He is always complete, even bodily, in Heaven. The way forward from this mysterious fact of the Lord’s presence—the way that brings its reality and significance to light—is to consider why the Lord is present bodily in the Eucharist. And for this we must recognize the Eucharist as a sacrifice.

The Supreme Sacrifice

Using our imagination, we could invent a variety of ways by which God might have saved us. Certainly, He could have arranged for the Lord to be born, to suffer and to die in another time and place than first-century Palestine. Or perhaps God could simply have willed our salvation, and accomplished it by a sudden, invisible change. Or perhaps Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, could have suffered some small injury to save us. After all, as true God and true man, any sacrifice He made for our sake would

have been supremely valuable. As Saint Thomas Aquinas points out, however, since God chose to accomplish the work of our salvation through the death of Christ, it is fitting for us to consider why this was the preference of divine wisdom and love. If there had been another way to save mankind, why would God have chosen the way of sacrifice, the way of the Cross?

Although it is possible to think of several reasons why death—and a painful and humiliating death at that—was the most appropriate and fruitful way for Christ to save us, three reasons are outstanding.⁷

First, by His suffering and death Christ demonstrated the depth of His love for us, and in this way moves our hearts to love him in return. After all, dying shows that there was no restriction on how far Christ would go for our sake, even while we were His enemies. He did not wait for us to earn His favor, but instead went as far as possible and sacrificed Himself entirely. As Saint Paul explains in his Letter to the Romans,

While we were yet helpless, at the right time Christ died for the unrighteous. Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man—though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (5:6-8).

Love like this, so generous and freely given, is the kind of love that best evokes from our hearts a similar response. It gives us some view of how much God loves us and desires our love. And since union with God in love is, after all, the goal of the work of salvation, Christ's death can be seen as wisely fitted to the final goal of redemption.

Second, Christ's saving death stands as an unparalleled example of the virtues: of justice, faithfulness, humility, obedience,

self-sacrifice, and all the rest. He did not teach anything he was unwilling to demonstrate and fulfill by his own example, and by dying for our sake he made plain the way we are to follow. So we can see that the passion and death of the Lord, his perfect generosity and willingness to accept all things that were ordained for him in the plan of God, provide a model for us, an example of the way of life and holiness. Thus the manner of our redemption not only delivers us, but teaches us how to be shaped to the new life won for us by Christ.

Third, the passion and death of the Lord show the great price, and so hint at the value of man's salvation. When we see what it costs to free us from sin, we can gain some impression of what is at stake in our daily life. Instead of seeing sin as rule-breaking, we can begin to recognize it as the hideous and deadly disease that it is. Thus we can see what is at stake in the life of holiness. Saint Paul writes about holiness and the price paid by Christ when he says to the Corinthians,

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither [fornicators], nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor [sodomites], nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.... Shun immorality.... You are not your own; you were bought at a price (1 Corinthians 6:9-11, 18-20).

We find the same teaching in the First Letter of Saint Peter.

Therefore gird up your minds, be sober, set your hope fully upon the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is

holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (Leviticus 11:44-45). And if you invoke as Father him who judges each one impartially according to his deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile. You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot (1 Peter 1:13-19).

From all these thoughts, we can form some idea of why it was best for Christ to present himself as a sacrifice on the Cross on our behalf. This alone should fill us with awe and gratitude, and we could never come to the end of meditating on its richness. However, in the Holy Eucharist we see that the Lord did not intend His offering for us to be something done once, and left behind in the past. Rather we see that the Lord stands as our Priest forever, and is continually present before God the Father, making intercession for us in the wounded, slain, and resurrected manhood he assumed for our sake. By divine revelation, we know that the Lord did not stop being our Sacrifice and our Priest when He rose from the dead. Rather, by ascending into Heaven Christ perfected His sacrifice, since by entering Heaven in His human body He became our mediator, our Priest continually interceding and continually showing His wounds to the Father as tokens of his Passion, of the total sacrifice of the Cross.

The celebration of the Holy Eucharist—the Mass, or the Divine Liturgy—is no mere remembering of something done in the past. Rather, it is the making present to us on earth of what Christ does continually in Heaven. Christ is victorious over death and no longer suffers, but even in victory he is “a lamb, standing as if it had been slain” (Revelation 5:6). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,

quoting the Council of Trent (1545-1563), tells us that the Mass is called a sacrifice for three reasons.

The Eucharist is thus a sacrifice because it *re-presents* (makes present) the sacrifice of the cross, because it is its *memorial* and because it *applies* its fruit.

[Christ], our Lord and God, was once and for all to offer himself to God the Father by his death on the altar of the cross, to accomplish there an everlasting redemption. But because his priesthood was not to end with his death, as the Last Supper “on the night when he was betrayed,” [he wanted] to leave his beloved spouse the Church a visible sacrifice (as the nature of man demands) by which the bloody sacrifice which he was to accomplish once for all on the cross would be re-presented, its memory perpetuated until the end of the world, and its salutary power be applied to the forgiveness of the sins we daily commit (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1366).

It is worth emphasizing the Council of Trent’s remark that the visible Eucharistic sacrifice is “as the nature of man demands.” We are still as Saint Thomas describes the Apostles in his hymn, “weak and frail,” and often “downcast and sad.” Thus Christ not only offers Himself to the Father continually in heaven, but He offers Himself to us, He makes His own sacrifice—the very same sacrifice—present to us by letting it be offered to the Father in the Mass by visible, human priests. And more than this, Christ invites us to join in the Sacrifice as a Passover, as a banquet at which we feed upon the Lamb of God and through this most profound bodily intimacy enter into the life of Heaven. As God is the life and food of the angels, so through the Eucharist He becomes our food, food for the soul that does not ignore the flesh but comes to us in a way matched to our own way as bodily and spiritual creatures.

PART III: RECEIVING THE HOLY EUCHARIST

Thus Angels' Bread is made the Bread of man today;
The living Bread from Heaven with figures doth away:
O wondrous gift deed! The poor and lowly may
Upon their Lord and Master feed.

O Triune Deity, to Thee we meekly pray,
So mayst Thou visit us, as we our homage pay;
And in Thy footsteps bright conduct us on our way
To where Thou dwell'st in cloudless light.

These last two stanzas of the hymn *Sacris sollemniis* have often been set to music all by themselves, and are known by the first words of stanza six, “Panis angelicus”—the Bread of Angels. The expression, “bread of angels” comes from Psalm 78:25 (“Man ate the bread of the angels; he sent them food in abundance”), and is repeated in Wisdom 16:20: “thou didst give thy people the food of angels, and without their toil thou didst supply them from heaven with bread ready to eat, providing every pleasure and suited to every taste.”

Scripture, in speaking of the “Bread of Angels,” is not telling us about a heavenly bakery—angels, being pure spirits, do not literally eat bread. This figure of speech, “bread of angels,” refers to the Eternal Son of God as the sustenance and joy of the holy angels. They do not receive him by eating, however, but only through contemplation: by beholding his face, by adoring him who is the perfect “image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15).

The Eternal Son, to bring us into the joy and life known by the holy angels, became man and took to himself complete and bodily manhood. Both on earth and in heaven, He is our life *in His manhood, in His glorious body* as God and Man. Here on earth, we enjoy a shadowy contemplation of Him through faith, but our

greatest intimacy with the Lord comes in our bodily contact with him in Holy Communion: here He touches us, and here He nourishes our souls with His own life. In heaven, this will change. There we will see Him face to face, like the angels; and there we will no longer feed on Him through the Sacrament, but will see Him face to face with our eyes, and be able to touch Him with our bodily hands. Through the Holy Eucharist, then, we can see that the Lord is giving us a foretaste of heaven—a promise, a first installment if you will, of the perfect intimacy the saints enjoy in his Kingdom.

Here at last, after considering the Eucharist as the new Passover Feast and after considering the reality of the Lord's bodily presence in this Sacrament, we can gather some sense of the benefits or fruits of the Holy Eucharist. First, Holy Communion is an intimate union with Christ, and serves as spiritual food for our souls, to enrich us with the living presence of Jesus Christ. Second, Holy Communion separates us from sin, both by wiping away the minor sins of life and by preserving and strengthening us against future temptation. Third, the Holy Eucharist perfects the union of the Church, and transforms us into the mystical Body of Christ. Finally, the Eucharist makes us mindful of the unity of the Church and of the solidarity we ought to have with the poor and suffering. In short, to receive the Holy Eucharist is to receive the gift of all that the Lord wants us to be: it makes us one with him, one with each other, and is the healing of our internal divisions and wounds.

The reality of the presence of Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist depends upon the power of God. It is not determined by the worthiness of the priest offering the Mass, or by the worthiness of the congregation. However, the benefit we receive at Mass and in Holy Communion does depend upon us to a great extent. To our sorrow, we are only too able to undermine the gifts of God and to throw away untasted the good things He gives us.

The Holy Eucharist only benefits those who receive it worthily—that is to say, who receive it with some portion of the faith and love Christ wants us to have. This is indeed a serious and awesome matter, for as Saint Paul says, whoever receives Communion “in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 11:27).

How does one receive Holy Communion worthily? First of all, one must be baptized and in the state of grace. Although there are two important exceptions, the Sacrament is properly received only by Catholics.⁸ Normally any Catholic who has committed a grave sin must first approach the sacrament of reconciliation (confession) and be absolved before receiving Holy Communion. Through repentance and reform of life, we are conformed to the Lord whom we receive. To receive without repentance and reconciliation would be sacrilegious, a terrible act of irreverence for the body and blood of the Lord.

In connection with Confession, it is good to remember that while Catholics must attend Mass on all Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation, we are only bound to receive Holy Communion once a year. Naturally, it is better to approach both Confession and Communion more often! The faithful may receive the Eucharist as often as twice a day, and should confess their sins frequently (weekly or monthly, for example) and as often as they commit any grave sin. If we give God only minimal attention by going to Confession or receiving Communion only once a year, then we can hardly think that we are responding to his love with the whole-hearted generosity he deserves.

To prepare for Holy Communion, Catholics fast for at least one hour before receiving the Sacrament. (Water and medications do not break the fast, and the elderly and the sick, as well as those taking care of them, may receive Communion even if they have not been

fasting.) More important than the Eucharistic fast, however, is prayer.

Naturally, one needs to pray at the time of receiving Holy Communion. This means paying attention to the Liturgy, and realizing that we are presenting ourselves to God, and uniting ourselves with the offering of the priest. It also means recognizing Who it is we are about to receive in Communion. At this time, we may pray spontaneously in our hearts, and may also find it useful to pray in some of the words given us by Scripture and tradition as preparation for the Sacrament. A few such prayers are these:

Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.

(Roman Missal)

Receive me now, O Son of God, as a partaker in your mystic supper; for I will not give you a kiss like Judas, nor will I reveal your mysteries to your enemies, but like the good thief I confess you, saying, Remember me, Lord, in your kingdom!

(Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom)

My Lord and my God!

(John 20:28)

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, by the will of the Father and the work of the Holy Spirit your death brought life to the world: by your holy Body and Blood free me from all my sins and from every evil; keep me faithful to your teaching, and never let me be parted from you.

(Roman Missal)

Lord Jesus Christ, with faith in your love and mercy I eat your Body and drink your Blood; let it not bring me condemnation, but health in mind and body.

(Roman Missal)

Certainly these are not the only prayers we can use to prepare for Communion. In practice, we will probably need to vary our prayers at different times, depending on our needs and the time available to us. Ideally, one would spend time reading the Scriptures, meditate on the mystery of the Passion, ask the intercession of the Saints, and spend time adoring the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament for some time before Mass. However, doing all these things is not always possible. We do, however, need to make some preparation to receive the Lord worthily, which is one reason it is important for us to remain faithful to our daily prayers. If we are in the habit of thinking of Christ, of speaking with Him, and listening to Him speak to us in Scripture, then we will be well-disposed to receive Him intimately in the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

Likewise, just as we pray before Communion, so we must pray once we have been given the Sacrament. This may take the form of a hymn or of silent prayer, but in any case each of us should individually make some act of thanksgiving to God for the gift of the Holy Eucharist. In a very real sense, this is a matter of divine hospitality: we welcome Christ the Lord by receiving Him bodily, and it would be quite disrespectful to ignore this divine Guest once we have received Him.

Our welcoming of the Lord in his precious body and blood is something limited by the endurance of the Sacrament. For the bodily presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist lasts only as long as the accidents (or the appearances) of the Sacrament remain—that is, until the Eucharist is digested, physically destroyed, or decays by some natural process. Thus, the Church normally preserves some portion of the Eucharist and does not give all of it to be consumed by the faithful at Mass. This ensures that the Sacrament is available to be brought to the sick and dying, and also provides the continuing, real presence of Jesus Christ in our churches.

In the tabernacle, where the Holy Eucharist is preserved, Christ remains living and present in his body among us. Thus Jesus Christ can be approached *bodily*, as we would approach a friend or brother, in the conversation of prayer and devotion. While the Lord is spiritually present everywhere, he is materially and substantially present in the Holy Eucharist, the “Blessed Sacrament” reserved in the Catholic churches of the world.

Since the medieval period, the Western Church has also practiced solemn Exposition and Adoration of the Holy Eucharist, as well as the rite called Benediction. In these rites, the reserved Sacrament is displayed in a special stand called a monstrance. This allows the faithful to see the Holy Eucharist, and provides an avenue to deepening devotion to the Lord in his bodily presence. On occasion, the Holy Eucharist is even carried in processions (in the monstrance), and it is normal to conclude periods of Exposition by blessing those present with the Eucharist in the monstrance—that is the rite known as Benediction.

Throughout the world, there are monasteries that practice “Perpetual Adoration,” that is, round-the-clock exposition of the Holy Eucharist, with some member of the community always at prayer before the Lord. In other places, there are periods of Exposition and Adoration at different intervals of the day, week, month, or year. Currently, the practice of Exposition and Adoration is becoming increasingly popular in ordinary parishes, as more and more people discover the graces of spending time in the bodily presence of the Lord. Certainly, to become familiar with Christ in this generous way is among the best ways to prepare to receive the Holy Eucharist worthily and well.

* * *

“No one eats that Flesh unless he has first adored it, . . .and we sin by not adoring,”⁹ wrote Saint Augustine in the early fifth century. Only to eat the Holy Eucharist, or only to attend Mass, is not enough. For all who are able, mind and heart must join in adoring and welcoming the King of All, who comes to us as our Lord and our Brother in the same flesh He took from the Virgin Mary. This way of receiving, with attention and adoration and love, bonds us to Christ and equips us for the combat of life. Moreover, in the words of Saint John Chrysostom, it brings us to heaven in triumph:

Christ did this to bring us to a closer bond of friendship, and to signify his love toward us, giving himself to those who desire him, not only to behold him, but also to handle him, to eat him, to embrace him with the fullness of their whole heart. Therefore as lions breathing fire do we depart from that Table, rendered objects of terror to the devil.¹⁰

END NOTES

- ¹ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Sacris sollemniis*, Matins hymn for the Feast of Corpus Christi. Translation: cento based on J. D. Chambers (1805-1893).
- ² “Sires,” that is, “fathers.”
- ³ See, for example, Lev. 3:7, 5:6, 12:6, 14:10-25, 23:12-19; Num. 6:12-14, 7:15-81, 15:5, 28:7-29:15; 1 Chron. 29:21; 2 Chron. 29:21-32; Ezra 6:9; Is. 1:11, 34:6; Ezek. 46:4-15; Dan. 3:40).
- ⁴ The New Testament tells us of the institution of the Holy Eucharist in similar, but slightly varied words. See Matt. 26: 26-28, Mark 14: 22-24, Luke 22: 19-20 and 1 Cor. 11:23-26.
- ⁵ See Heb 9:11-26.
- ⁶ “Metete,” that is, distribute.
- ⁷ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, 46, 3.
- ⁸ See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 1399-1401. There are two exceptions, which concern the faithful of those Eastern Churches not in full union with Rome and—in extreme circumstances—certain Protestants who have full faith in the Sacrament. Naturally, the Orthodox regularly receive the Holy Eucharist in their own churches. See the principle outlined by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in *Directory for Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (1993), nn. 129-131.
- ⁹ Saint Augustine, Ennaration on Psalm 98, 9. Cited by J. T. O’Connor in *The Hidden Manna*, p.59.
- ¹⁰ Saint John Chrysostom, Homilies on Saint John, 46. Cited in J. Chapin, *The Book of Catholic Quotations* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1956), s.v. “Blessed Sacrament of the Altar.”

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