

has always encouraged devotion to the Blessed Sacrament (CCC 1378, 1418). We come to the Christ of the Eucharist with our present sorrows, and we ask him to unite them to his, which were nailed to the Cross. For through the Cross, we hope to share in the Resurrection. The eucharistic Jesus is a consolation but also a challenge: to be all that we are meant to be, to become one family because we are fed with one Bread, to love one another as he has loved us.

The Controversies Surrounding the Eucharist

Ironically enough, this sacrament of unity and peace has so often been a Sacrament of division, in the sense that so many controversies have surrounded its interpretation. Our age is no different.

Some Christians, for example, argue that the Eucharist is merely a symbolic feeding. But even a cursory reading of John 6 reveals that our Lord meant the Eucharist to be understood and received as his very Body and Blood. How else explain the negative reaction of the crowd and their subsequent departure from his company (cf. Jn 6:59 and 67; CCC 1336)? How else explain martyrs giving their lives rather than profane the sacred species? No, we are in touch with something very real here.

Others question the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist, holding for only a sacred meal. The meal aspect is, of course, important. However, the meal takes its significance from the sacrifice. This is most obvious from all the scriptural texts that speak of the Body to be given up and the Blood to be poured out as future events. Holy Thursday's covenantal

meal of promise is fulfilled in Good Friday's covenantal sacrifice (cf. 1 Cor 11:26).

Is it possible to receive the Eucharist too often? Perhaps the better way to frame the question is: Are there times when one should not receive the Eucharist? The answer is a clear and resounding "yes": when one is in the state of mortal sin or when one is engaged in a mere routine action (CCC 1385). It has always been a source of distress to priests that so many people now approach the altar with little or no preparation or examination of conscience. The Holy Father alluded to this recently in noting that the phenomenon of increased reception of the Eucharist is positive only if the frequent encounters are worthy. In this he merely echoed St. Paul's concern of two millennia ago (1 Cor 11:38).

Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we invite the Unknown Guest to stay with us. And, like them, we are led to recognize that neither Peter nor Mary Magdalene was any better off than we, for, like the Blessed Virgin herself, we bear Christ within our very selves—through the gift of the Eucharist.

Originally published by Ignatius Press in *Understanding the Sacraments: A Guide for Prayer and Study*. Used with permission of the author.

The Evangelization Station

Hudson, Florida, USA

E-mail: evangelization@earthlink.net

www.evangelizationstation.com

Pamphlet 427

The Eucharist

Rev. Peter M. J. Stravinskias

*Through the Consecrated Bread and Wine,
Jesus Remains with Us Now and Forever*

How does the believer maintain contact with the Risen Christ? Did the first apostles and disciples of Jesus have an advantage over those to follow in developing a relationship of intimacy with the Lord?

Such questions have been matters of concern to Christians throughout the ages, and even within the New Testament itself we get hints of such concern. We also see how the sacred writers attempted to answer those questions.

The sixth chapter of John's Gospel deals with such issues insightfully and effectively. But Luke does so with poetry, art, and sensitivity. He tells a story. The Emmaus passage (Lk 24:13-35) is a story of rare charm and beauty and teaches theology by means of a drama. To the plea of the disciples ("stay with us"), the Stranger responds, not with a dissertation, but with a ritual, familiar action ("the breaking of the bread"). At the very moment the disciples recognize their Guest as the Risen One, he vanishes from their site.

What is Luke's point? This story is his answer to the two questions we noted at the outset. The contemporary disciple encounters the Risen Christ in the Eucharist. And, no, those disciples of yesteryear who walked and talked with Jesus during his earthly life had no advantage over us today, because we encounter the very same Christ that they did. The proof is that Jesus in his glorious and risen body disappears the minute the disciples

recognize him in the signs and symbols of the Eucharist, for the physical Christ is a redundancy when the sacramental Christ is present.

In *The Elusive Presence*, Samuel Terrien demonstrates that the whole of the divine-human relationship chronicled in the Scriptures is one of progressive intimacy: from the conversations between God and Adam in Eden, to the covenant with Abraham, to the giving of the Law, to the Incarnation. In fact, the story of God's involvement with his people is merely the fulfillment of his desire to be near to those he loves. The Eucharist is the special way that the Lord Jesus makes good on his promise to be with us until the end of time (cf. Mt 28:30).

Just what is the Eucharist? Definitions are always inadequate, but let us hazard this one: The Eucharist is a sacrificial meal commemorating and offering salvation. It is the "making present" again of the Lord's Supper in which Jesus realizes his destiny, committing himself to his act of self-giving in fidelity and love (CCC 1323).

The Significance of the Eucharist as a Meal

Jesus chose a meal to do this for many reasons. A meal is a very significant human experience. One shares a table only with friends and family; inviting someone to dinner is an expression of esteem. Jews looked on a meal as a ritual action, and the particular meal that Jesus chose (the Passover) was replete with religious meaning. By using the Passover meal, Jesus could take advantage of past Jewish history to illustrate what he was about to do; because of its religious and instructional character, he could teach his disciples the

basics of being his follower (cf. Jn 13-17; Lk 22:14-36; CCC 1339-40). Familiarity with the twelfth chapter of Exodus is most beneficial for a proper understanding of the Christian Eucharist, for notions like blood, sacrifice, lamb, and memorial feast have their roots firmly planted in the Passover experience.

The Perfect and Acceptable Sacrifice

Thus the Last Supper points toward Calvary, where all men of all time were saved (cf. Heb. 9). If all people were saved in that one momentous occasion, why does the Church continue to offer the Sacrifice of the Mass? Because the salvation promised and earned is conditional; it is contingent upon our acceptance of Jesus, our desire to be saved, and a lifestyle that demonstrates our understanding of what life in Christ means. Because we were not present, we need to be reminded of what God has done for us. Our remembrance and ritual reenactment of the event make it happen again—for us (CCC 1362-67).

Jesus offers his Body and Blood; his death brings us life, just as the blood of the Lamb saved the Hebrews. Washed in his Blood, we are cleansed from sin (cf. Heb 9:14) and made alive to God's design for our salvation. Receiving the Body of Christ makes each of us as individuals to form the Body of Christ, which is his Church (CCC 1396). In other words, the eucharistic Body of Christ is offered to us, so that we can become more clearly the Body of Christ as the Church. Herein lies the Catholic rationale for refusing to practice intercommunion, that is, receiving Communion with other Christians (CCC 1398-1401). This sacrament celebrates union

with Christ but also union with the Church. To feign such unity, when significant differences of doctrine and beliefs separate us as Catholics from full communion with other Christians, is to make of the Eucharist a countersign.

How does the marvelous exchange of gifts occur—Christ for bread and wine? Jesus told us to remember him, for memory is a most powerful human faculty. For a Jew, to remember someone or some event was to represent the benefits of that relationship. That is why, of all Christ's commandments, the one to remember him was the most crucial. If we fail to remember Jesus, if we fail to renew his sacrificial meal, we will cease to be Christians, because we will no longer hear those words of love, no longer receive his Body and Blood as their proof, no longer be challenged and inspired to love our fellowman as he commanded us. Therefore, memory is key; sacred memory leads to sacred reality.

The Words of Consecration

Furthermore, when the Church gathers in faith to do what Jesus commanded and speak his words, "this is my Body to be given up for you... This cup is the new covenant of my Blood, which will be shed for you...", our words are no longer our own but God's. The Word overtakes the elements of bread and wine and transforms them into the divine Presence (CCC 1373-77, 1413). Jesus, our God comes among us again. Through faith, we acknowledge him as present and look forward to that time when he will come again in glory and no longer under veiled signs.

The Jesus who comes to us in this mysterious manner also remains with us under the sacred signs. For this reason, the Church