

THE EUCHARIST

Talk given by P. Breen, O.Carm., at the annual Day of Recollection for Lay Carmel in Ireland, May 2012.

Introduction

For all of us here, when we talk about the Eucharist we are referring to the Blessed Sacrament. At some time or other we have probably all asked ourselves how an insignificant wafer or some unremarkable wine can become the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, the flesh of God? I don't intend to explore this too far because that would be a whole talk in itself. However, it is always very easy to say that the power of God through the Holy Spirit makes it so, and yet, in reality that is the answer. Theologians through the centuries have tried to express or explain the mechanism by which it happens. The one we are all familiar with is Transubstantiation which appears to have been first used by Hildebert de Lavardin, Archbishop of Tours (died 1133) and was later given great importance by St Thomas Aquinas. Many will say that if we examine the bread and wine under a microscope before and after the consecration that we will find in them no difference. This is true but their essential substance – the part we cannot see or touch or examine – that substance has changed to become the body and blood of Christ really, truly and substantially present under the appearance of bread and wine. For the Orthodox Churches of the East the most common term used is simply ‘change’ because for them, we are dealing with mysteries – mysteries which cannot be explained but which are to be believed and trusted in because they are underwritten by God.

The contrast between what is visible in the bread and wine offered on the altar, and what is invisibly present, the body and blood of Christ, requires an ever renewed impetus of faith. It is a matter of overcoming the distance between what we perceive with our senses and what the truth of the mystery imposes upon our belief. But Christian faith always musters the courage to make this leap into the invisible.¹

This is reminding us that while we might not understand or grasp how this incredible change takes place, in truth it makes little difference. What is key is our faith, and faith – religious faith – deals with mysteries rather than puzzles.

1. What do we mean by Eucharist?

The Eucharist comes from the Greek word for “thanksgiving.” Jews in the time of Jesus sometimes used the word eucharistia to describe “Thank-offering,” a special sacrifice that was celebrated in the Jerusalem Temple. The Gospels use forms of the word to describe Jesus’ action when he instituted the Mass: he “gave thanks” (Mark 14:23).²

So at its most basic the Eucharist is an offering of thanksgiving to the Father. But for us as Catholics there is another dimension because quite often, when we use the word Eucharist, we are referring to Holy Communion, to the consecrated wafer we receive towards the end of Mass or as part of Viaticum. On a very superficial level this is easy enough for people to grasp

¹ *The Eucharist, Gift of Divine Life.* Theological-Historical Commission for the Great Jubilee Year 2000. Crossroad Publishing Company: New York. 1999. Page 25.

² *The Mass: the Glory, the Mystery, the Tradition.* Cardinal Donald Wuerl & Mike Aquilina. Doubleday: New York. 2011. Page 41.

especially if we simply see Holy Communion in terms of mere symbolism. However, within the Catholic tradition, this is not how we see things.

The Eucharist, what we refer to more commonly as ‘the Mass’, was instituted by the Lord on Holy Thursday evening with the instruction – ‘*Do this as a memorial of me*’ (Luke 22:19; 1Corinthians 11:24-25). St John’s Gospel doesn’t record the Institution Narrative for us but instead we have the Bread of Life discourse in his Sixth Chapter. It is a long chapter in which Jesus speaks about himself as the bread of life and that those who ‘*do not eat of 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*’ (John 6:53-54). This raises a number of questions because we believe that through his death and resurrection the Lord restored us to life and destroyed the power of death over us – so why do we need to eat his flesh and drink his blood over and over again?

*How could we fail to wonder why the one who consummated his sacrifice on the Cross and crowned it with the triumph of his resurrection could have willed that his offering be repeated through all time in the Eucharistic celebration? If the offering of Calvary was sufficient, to overflowing, for obtaining salvation and grace for all human beings, then why must Jesus, why must God, invent a new presence in the Christian assembly?*³

2. Why do we have the Eucharist?

The Lord lived as a human being just like us for 30 odd years and so he knows the strengths and weaknesses of the human race. He was aware of Peter’s weaknesses and yet placed him as head of the Apostles because he was also aware of Peter’s strengths. He was aware that Judas Iscariot would betray him and yet he kept him as one of his closest advisors and eventually encouraged him to do what he had to do.⁴ So, knowing our weaknesses, knowing our difficulties in understanding or simply accepting mysteries and that we don’t have all the answers, why did the Lord institute the Eucharist and then tell us to repeat it? Writing about the Divine Liturgy in the Orthodox Churches – the Orthodox Mass – Nicholas Cabasilas said the following:

What was his reason for giving us this command; what was his aim in asking us to commemorate him thus? In order that we might not be ungrateful and forgetful. Now those with a debt of gratitude can in a way repay their benefactors by preserving their memory and that of the favours they have received from them. Mankind has invented several such aids to memory: funeral monuments, statues, pillars, festivals, assemblies, public games; they all have but one purpose – to prevent the memory of great and good men from falling into oblivion.

The Saviour did likewise. He says: “Men seek all sorts of remedies against forgetfulness, in order to preserve the memory of their benefactors. DO this in memory of me.” Cities have inscribed on the pillars commemorating their heroes the names of the victories by which they were saved, or which brought them increased prosperity; in the same way we inscribe on our offerings the death of the Lord, which won a complete victory over the powers of darkness. In their statues, cities have mere representations of their benefactors; but in this offering we possess, not the image of our Master, but the very body and blood of him who bore himself so bravely.

³ *The Eucharist, Gift of Divine Life.* Theological-Historical Commission for the Great Jubilee Year 2000. Crossroad Publishing Company: New York. 1999. Page 14.

⁴ ‘What you are going to do, do quickly’ (John 13:27).

The Old Testament thus fulfilled in symbol what Christ has now ordained in actual fact. There was, for example, the Passover, the sacrifice of the lamb, in remembrance of the slaying of the sheep whose blood preserved the lives of the first-born of the Hebrews in Egypt.
This then is the purpose of the commemoration.⁵

There is quite a lot in that excerpt but it answers so many questions. Our Eucharist comes from the Jewish Festival of Passover, possibly from the Seder meal. The Passover Festival goes back to the original Passover in Egypt when the Jews left Egypt for freedom. In the thirteenth chapter of the Book of Exodus this festival is described with the instruction that it be repeated annually. But it is not simply a memorial as we have today as we remember some natural disaster or victory won. For the Jews it was to become something still present, something still taking place as if today's Jews were the ones who had just trekked across the desert to freedom. This makes it far more than a simple reminder and this is what Jesus was doing when he gave the instruction to '*Do this as a memorial of me*' (1Corinthians 11:25). Our celebrating the Eucharist does not create a new sacrifice but simply makes the Lord's one and ultimate sacrifice present throughout the ages and keeps its memory and its significance before us always.

Jesus accomplishes the only sacrifice, the one great sacrifice, when, as priest and victim, he offered himself on the altar of the cross. His sacrifice need not and cannot be repeated. But it can be re-presented so that we are able, sacramentally and spiritually, to enter it and draw spiritual nourishment from it.⁶

The Church calls us not just to a commemoration of long-ago events, as great as that might be, but also to enter the mystery itself – today. We are not bystanders, but participants.⁷

Cabasilas said that it was also necessary so that we wouldn't forget this incredible act of love for us even as we continue to push the boundaries and fall into sin. We can all be very quick to accept a gift or a favour or a good deed and to express our thanks or appreciation at the time only to forget that deed as time moves on and memory grows dim. The story of the Jewish Exodus from Egypt reminds us of this when we read of the Jewish people complaining bitterly time and again after they had left slavery. As he celebrated the Passover Festival the Lord would have had this very much in mind and so gave us an instruction to do this time and again. Speaking of the Sunday obligation to attend Mass, Cardinal Donald Wuerl, current Archbishop of Washington, said the following:

This law of the Church imposes a sweet obligation. The Church commands us to do something that will benefit us anyway! The Sunday obligation is a “duty” to draw near to God, experience Christ’s love, and worship him in a beautiful way.⁸

I quote this here because if we substitute Christ for the Church then it reads as follows:

⁵ A Commentary on the Divine Liturgy. Nicholas Cabasilas. SPCK: London. 1960. Page 38.

⁶ The Mass: the Glory, the Mystery, the Tradition. Cardinal Donald Wuerl & Mike Aquilina. Doubleday: New York. 2011. Page 153.

⁷ Ibid. page 164.

⁸ Ibid. Page 59.

This law of Christ imposes a sweet obligation. Christ commands us to do something that will benefit us anyway! This is a “duty” to draw near to God, experience Christ’s love, and worship him in a beautiful way.

The Lord has given us a command, therefore, for our own good, he has given us an instruction which reminds us of his great love for us, a mandate which draws us closer to God and to eternal life. And, as instructions go, it is really quite easy to fulfil, even if only once a week.

3. What does the Eucharist do for us?

The Eucharist, then, is the presence of Jesus Christ under the appearance of bread and wine. The Eucharist is a reminder to us to give thanks to God for all that we have received. The Eucharist is a way of drawing closer to God. The Eucharist displays the immense love of God for each and every one of us. Apart from all of this, what does the Eucharist do for us?

The Eucharist brings about our unity and it creates the Church. In ‘The Eucharist, Gift of Divine Life’ we read:

The meal at which Christ is offered as food not only joins to Christ each of those who share in it; it also joins the participants with one another, since they are nourished by one food, and one which crowns them with an identical life.

The Eucharist not only constitutes a sign of unity, but also contributes to forming the unity of the Church.⁹

In Youcat – the Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church – we are told that

We are not Church because we get along well, or because we happen to end up in the same parish community, but rather because in the Eucharist we receive the Body of Christ and are increasingly being transformed into the Body of Christ.¹⁰

In reality the Church is what happens daily in a mysterious way at the altar. God gives himself to each one of us individually, and he wants to transform us through communion with him. Once we are transformed, we are supposed to transform the world. Everything else that the Church is besides that is secondary.¹¹

Without the Eucharist, then, there is no Catholic Church. We are further reminded that

...it is not possible to follow Christ without believing in the Eucharist . . . Christian faith can only be a Eucharistic faith. Acceptance of the Eucharist is an essential condition for acceptance of Christ.¹²

In attending the Eucharist, or the Mass, we join with other Catholics who share the same faith, who struggle as we struggle, who ask the same questions as we ask. We join with

⁹ *The Eucharist, Gift of Divine Life*. Theological-Historical Commission for the Great Jubilee Year 2000. Crossroad Publishing Company: New York. 1999. Pages 21-22.

¹⁰ YOUCAT (Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church). Catholic Truth Society: London. 2011. Number 211.

¹¹ Ibid. Number 217.

¹² *The Eucharist, Gift of Divine Life*. Theological-Historical Commission for the Great Jubilee Year 2000. Crossroad Publishing Company: New York. 1999. Pages 25.

Catholics not just in our own parish but across our country and around the world which gives a visible expression of the definition of the word ‘catholic’ as being universal. The hymns we sing, the language we use may be different, but the Eucharistic celebration is the same and has the same impact.

The Eucharist can also give meaning to our lives particularly for those who suffer. We are all very much aware of the Lord’s Passion and death having celebrated those events just six weeks ago. The Lord celebrated the Eucharist against the background of what was about to happen to him. As he instituted the Eucharist he told Judas Iscariot to do what he had to do – within twenty-four hours both men would be dead. But as the Lord suffered for us he left us a means to remind us that suffering does not end in eternal death and nothingness. In thinking of the Lord’s Passion and death we must also think of his resurrection to new and everlasting life. We are reminded that in the post-resurrection appearances the disciples didn’t recognise Jesus immediately because his appearance had changed, in other words, he wasn’t restored to his previous bruised and battered existence with wounds still bleeding – he was resurrected to a new life without suffering, to a life of radiant glory bearing simply the five marks of his triumph. That awaits us also but where the Lord’s suffering was somewhat short lived before he rose to glory – in reality his physical suffering can be counted in hours – it may be that the time between our starting to suffer and our entry to eternal life may be much greater and the connection harder to see. Reception of the Eucharist, of the body and blood of Jesus Christ can help us along the path, can be for us Viaticum – food for the journey – which gives us the strength to continue moving forward in faith and hope, to continue believing and praying no matter what set-backs might come our way.

Thus, the Eucharist furnishes a reply to the “whys” inevitably provoked by human sufferings. In the face of the most painful trials, as well as in comparatively minor sufferings, many are tempted to ask, resentfully, “Why?” The Eucharist replies, proving it by the gladness it secures for us, that suffering does not have the last word. The suffering of the Cross is not our only vessel of salvation; it also carries us to joy. In all suffering, then, is the promise of greater gladness, which causes the wisdom and goodness of the divine design to appear in a better way.¹³

The Eucharist also gives us the strength to live out the gospel precepts and to be able to do all that the Lord asks of us.

The Eucharist responds to every situation of weakness. To those who complain of helplessness in the face of temptation, the Eucharistic meal offers the guarantee of strength that was that of Jesus himself at the moment of confronting the temptations of his earthly life. To those who have received a mission and fear the obstacles arising in its fulfilment, the Eucharist secures the certitude of an unshakeable perseverance in the realization of the task that they have received.¹⁴

4. What should our response to the Eucharist be?

Given what has been said so far, what should our response to the Eucharist be, and by this I mean what effects should it bring about in us? It joins us with fellow believers who gather to celebrate and receive the Eucharist and it builds up the Church as will be demonstrated in the Eucharistic Congress in Dublin next month when believers from around the world will attend the various sessions and the majority of whose talks will be given by foreign guests. This is also seen when we travel abroad on holidays and attend Mass in whatever country we

¹³ Ibid. Page 19.

¹⁴ Ibid. Page 133.

find ourselves and recognise all the key elements of the Eucharistic Celebration even if we don't speak the language. In this way the Eucharist helps us to see that we are part of the Church, part of the wider Body of Christ. The Eucharist joins us in a very definite way with God our Father:

Jesus declares: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" (John 6:56). Thus, the purpose of the Eucharistic meal consists not in a temporary union, but in a lasting one. The one who receives the body of Christ in Communion receives it to create an intimacy destined to be prolonged.¹⁵

This is a unity which is not a once off union but one which is to extend through all time.

Meals secure for persons the strength of which they have need in order to live and act. In instituting the Eucharistic meal, Jesus has wished to place at the disposition of believers the necessary strength for the development of the entire Christian life.¹⁶

The development of the Christian life is not simply a deepening of our faith but it is also a commitment to living out the gospel values. One of these is worshipping together as a community but another is reaching out to the poor and the less fortunate as we are reminded of in the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

The Eucharist commits us to the poor. To receive in truth the Body and Blood of Christ given up for us, we must recognise Christ in the poorest, his brethren.¹⁷

We remember the parable of the Last Judgement where the sheep and goats are separated on the last day and in which Christ tells us that he is to be found in every man and woman to whom we reach out. And so Blessed Teresa of Calcutta says to us:

Your life must be woven around the Eucharist. Direct your eyes to him, who is the light; bring your hearts close to his divine heart; ask him for the grace to know him, for the charity to love him, for the courage to serve him. Seek him longingly.¹⁸

To seek the Lord outside of the Eucharist is to look for him among the poor and marginalised and we can truly only do that if we know him within the Eucharist.

These quotations – from the Catechism and Blessed Teresa of Calcutta – remind us that the Eucharist and our faith must permeate all that we do. To be Christian, to be Catholic, is not something which we can switch on and off – it is a full-time job and is to be part and parcel of what it is to be you and me. By going to Church and receiving the Eucharist we are reminded of this fact and we are encouraged to be witnesses to Christ – not witnesses who saw something happen but who witness to the presence and life of Christ in the here and now by how we live. In a world which shuns religious faith, in a society which has drawn back from institutional religion (and understandably so) it is hard and perhaps embarrassing to wear our Catholicism on our sleeve and yet that is what is required of us as baptised Christians. The source of that strength is found in the Eucharist because in calling to mind the Lord's great sacrifice on our part we realise how small our problems are in comparison to the great gift that lies ahead.

¹⁵ Ibid. Page 125.

¹⁶ Ibid. Page 132.

¹⁷ Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC). Geoffrey Chapman: London. 1994. Number 1397.

¹⁸ Quoted in YOUNG CATECHISM (Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church). Catholic Truth Society: London. 2011.

As bodily nourishment restores lost strength, so the Eucharist strengthens our charity, which tends to be weakened in daily life; and this living charity ‘wipes away venial sins’ (Trent). By giving himself to us Christ revives our love and enables us to break our disordered attachments to creatures and rest ourselves in him.¹⁹

The key in all of this is our cooperation. The Eucharist is a freely-given gift from Christ just as all of life is gift. But it is for each of us to decide whether or not we are going to accept that gift because the Lord loves us so much that he has given us the freedom to choose what it is that we want to do – a gift forced on someone is no longer gift. It is true that if we want to enjoy eternal life with God then we have no choice but to accept the gift being offered and the gift being offered, ultimately, is eternal life with God and it is for each of us to decide how we want to respond to that gift. If we opt to accept that gift then there is only one course of action to be followed and that course of action has its life in the Eucharist.

5. How should we approach the Eucharist?

So if the Eucharist is such an important gift and a necessary part of life, can anyone turn up and simply receive the Eucharist? The answer is very much ‘no’ but with a bit of ‘yes.’

Obviously the Eucharist is such an incredible gift and one which is so intimate with Jesus Christ that we should be in a state of grace as we approach. The Thirteenth Session of the Council of Trent had the following to say:

It is not right that anyone should participate in any sacred functions except in a holy manner. Certainly, then, the more Christians are aware of the holiness and the divinity of this heavenly sacrament, the more careful they should be not to receive it without great reverence and sanctity [cf 1536], especially since we read in the apostle the fearful words: “Those who eat and drink unworthily, without discerning the body of the Lord, eat and drink judgement upon themselves” [1Cor 11:29 Vulg.]. Therefore, whoever desires to communicate must be reminded of the precept: “Let them examine themselves” [1Cor 11:28].²⁰

It is clear from this that we must avoid sin before approaching the Eucharist given what it is that we are receiving. I doubt many people would turn up to an award ceremony without first cleaning themselves up and looking their best. For the Eucharist, that also means preparing our inner selves, our souls, for this most precious moment. But the Council of Trent also said:

His will was that this sacrament be received as the soul’s spiritual food [cf Mt 26:26] which would nourish and strengthen [cf N. 1530] those who live by the life of him who said: “He who eats me will live because of me” [Jn 6:57]; and that it also be a remedy to free us from our daily faults and to preserve us from mortal sin.²¹

Whether we wish to acknowledge it or not we are all sinners, we each have the ability, the weak tendency to do or say the wrong thing. This is not something for which we should beat ourselves up – it is part and parcel of being human – but it is something that we have to acknowledge. The vast majority of what we do is venial – daily faults – and Trent is telling us

¹⁹ Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC). Geoffrey Chapman: London. 1994. Number 1394.

²⁰ *The Christian Faith*. Josef Neuner, SJ & Jacques Dupuis, SJ. Alba House: New York. 2000. Number 1522 – Trent, Session 13.

²¹ Ibid. Number 1515.

that the Eucharist is a remedy for them in that it helps the soul to overcome them. This is not an excuse to avoid the Sacrament of Reconciliation – if anything it should encourage us to go more often. We are also told that the Eucharist preserves us from mortal sin. This doesn't mean that a protective force field is thrown up around us but that in making the Eucharist the centre of our lives we are better equipped to remove mortal sin from our lives.

Cardinal Donald Wuerl looks at things outside of the realm of sin and has this to say:

*Before we can truly say "Amen" to the priest who presents us with the Body of Christ, we must be able to say "yes" to the Church as the Body of Christ. We must practice "the obedience of faith."*²²

He further says:

*Before we can say "Amen" to Holy Communion we must say "yes" to this Church as Christ established it. We must be able to say "yes" to all that it teaches. Otherwise we cannot honestly say "Amen" to the priest or minister who holds up "The Body of Christ". An "Amen" with reservations is not a true Amen.*²³

The necessity to be in a state of grace, or at least free from mortal sin, is easily understood and accepted. The conditions laid out by Cardinal Wuerl are rather different and certainly give pause for thought; they certainly make us look at the Body of Christ which is the Church. We can see this easily enough when it comes to non-Catholics receiving in the Church. If our 'Amen' to the words 'The Body of Christ' signifies our acceptance that these words are literally true, that it is Jesus Christ really, truly and substantially present under the appearance of bread and wine, and if that goes against my belief, then my 'Amen' is false and I should not approach to receive the Blessed Sacrament. But Cardinal Wuerl is also saying that not alone must I be able to believe in this real presence as I receive, I must also be able to accept and to say 'Amen' to everything the Church teaches as the Body of Christ and whose head is Jesus Christ. I think that were we to apply this rigidly the numbers attending church would drop significantly in one go and yet the cardinal does have a very serious and important point to make.

Through the activity of Christ and the Holy Spirit "*The Church produces the Eucharist and the Eucharist produces the Church,*"²⁴ in other words, we cannot separate the two as we require both as a totality and therefore we cannot pick and choose the pieces which we like or which suit us.

Having said all that,

*According to the recommendation of [Pope] Pius X, Eucharistic Communion must be seen not as a reward for the pure and perfect, but as a strength for the small and weak.*²⁵

There is none of us perfect – the only ones who are perfect are the saints who now enjoy the beatific vision, or Our Lady who was immaculately conceived – we are sinners in need of grace, we sin even in the most simplest of ways on a regular basis but the Eucharist is still

²² *The Mass: the Glory, the Mystery, the Tradition.* Cardinal Donald Wuerl & Mike Aquilina. Doubleday: New York. 2011. Page 46.

²³ Ibid. Page 47.

²⁴ *The Eucharist, Gift of Divine Life.* Theological-Historical Commission for the Great Jubilee Year 2000. Crossroad Publishing Company: New York. 1999. Page 22.

²⁵ Ibid. Page 133.

available to us. Our feeling small and weak should not be a reason to stay away from Holy Communion but should be the very reason why we draw closer.

We are all in need of grace whether we see that free gift from God as his unbounded love, or never ending mercy for us, or the state of our soul free from sin and assured of eternal life. The Sacraments are sources of that grace.

The Eucharist is not above the other sacraments or the source of grace for the other sacraments – they must all be seen together. The Eucharist is not the only channel of grace or source of grace – Christ alone is the source of grace.²⁶

“Christ alone is the source of grace” but we encounter him in the most intimate of ways in the Eucharist.

*After Baptism and Confirmation, the Eucharist is the third sacrament of initiation of the Catholic Church. The Eucharist is the mysterious centre of all these sacraments, because the historic sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross is made present during the words of consecration in a hidden, unbloody manner. Thus the celebration of the Eucharist is “the source and summit of the Christian life” (Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium*, 11). Everything aims at this; besides this there is nothing greater that one could attain. When we eat the broken Bread, we unite ourselves with the love of Jesus, who gave his body for us on the wood of the Cross; when we drink from the chalice, we unite ourselves with him who even poured out his blood out of love for us. We did not invent this ritual. Jesus himself celebrated the Last Supper with his disciples and therein anticipated his death; he gave himself to his disciples under the signs of bread and wine and commanded them from then on, even after his death, to celebrate the Eucharist.²⁷*

The Eucharist as a lasting memorial of the Lord’s sacrifice for us, the Eucharist as the true presence of the Lord among us, is the most precious thing that we have and that we can do. St John Mary Vianney, the Curé d’Ars, put it this way:

God would have given us something greater if he had had something greater than himself.²⁸

To answer some of the earlier questions as to why the Lord instituted the Eucharist we can say:

To all of this astonishment, and to all of these questions, there is but one response: Everything in the Eucharist derives from love carried to extremes. All emerges from a limitless will to give.²⁹

²⁶ Ibid. Page 21.

²⁷ YOUCAT (Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church). Catholic Truth Society: London. 2011. Number 208.

²⁸ Quoted in YOUCAT (Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church). Catholic Truth Society: London. 2011.

²⁹ *The Eucharist, Gift of Divine Life*. Theological-Historical Commission for the Great Jubilee Year 2000. Crossroad Publishing Company: New York. 1999. Page 14.

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