

Our Lord Jesus, truly, really and substantially present in the Most Holy Eucharist

In our survey of the Holy See's 1998 *Doctrinal Commentary* and its examples of doctrines that all Catholics must believe with divine faith, we next come to 'the doctrine of the real and substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist'. The *Commentary* refers here to the teaching of the Council of Trent in 1551: 'The holy council teaches and openly and straightforwardly professes that in the Blessed Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, after the consecration of the bread and wine, our Lord Jesus Christ, true God and man, is truly, really and substantially contained under the appearances of those perceptible realities.' (DS 1636)

Those words 'true', 'real' and 'substantial' each have their own specific meaning. The word 'true' is intended to rule out merely symbolic understandings of Our Lord's words at the Last Supper. In unusually strong terms, the Church said at Trent that she 'detested as satanical' the interpretation that his words over the bread and wine were mere figures of speech. (DS 1637)

Then we have the expression, the 'real presence'. The word 'real' indicates that something exists independently of our minds. Christ's presence in the Eucharist is not simply 'because we believe it to be such', or 'because of our faith', or 'because of our way of thinking about it'. Once the words of consecration are spoken, Christ is actually objectively present – even if we all sinfully decided to abandon our faith and disbelieve it.

The term 'Real Presence' should convey the supreme greatness of this gift, but even this is sometimes explained in a watered-down way. The term 'substantial presence' prevents that. The 'substance' of a thing is that which answers the question, 'What *is* this, most basically?' Regarding the Eucharist, Jesus himself has given the answer from the start: 'This *is* my body... This *is* my blood'. What is before us in the Eucharist, most basically, *is* simply Christ himself and nothing else – 'the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity' (DS 1651).

At the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther himself did not hold the merely symbolic view of the Eucharist of some other Protestants. He believed in consubstantiation – that the substance of the bread and wine remained present *along with* the substance of Christ's body and blood. But the Catholic Faith, as infallibly defined by the Council of Trent, is that the substance of the bread and the wine cease to exist, being entirely converted to the substance of Christ's body and blood, with only their species (i.e. appearances) remaining. (DS 1652) This is the mystery of 'transubstantiation, one of the articles of faith'. (Pope St Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei* [MF] 54)

In 1968 Pope Paul VI proclaimed the *Credo of the People of God*, a wonderful statement of the whole faith of the Church, and he especially dwelt on the Eucharistic change. He declared: 'Every theological explanation which seeks some understanding of this mystery must, in order to be in accord with Catholic faith, maintain that in the reality itself, independently of our mind, the bread and wine have ceased to exist after the Consecration...' (25)

Vatican II, in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy promulgated by Paul VI in 1963, wanted to highlight that Christ is present in his Church in a whole spectrum of ways: 'He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of his minister, "the same now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the cross", but especially under the Eucharistic species. By his power he is present in the sacraments, so that when a man baptises it is really Christ himself who baptises. He is present in his word, since it is he himself who

speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church. He is present, lastly, when the Church prays and sings, for he promised: “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (*Mt 18:20*).’ (*Sacrosanctum Concilium 7*)

But Paul VI was also aware of the danger of reducing Christ’s presence under the Eucharistic species to simply being on a level with other manners of his presence. So in his 1965 Encyclical *Mysterium Fidei*, he explained why, among all the different ways Christ is present to us, the Eucharist ‘surpasses all the others’. (*MF 38*) This presence, he wrote, ‘is called “real” not as a way of excluding all other types of presence as if they were “not real”, but because it is a presence in the fullest sense: a substantial presence whereby Christ, the God-Man, is wholly and entirely present’. (*MF 39*)

‘After the change of the substance or nature of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, nothing remains of the bread and wine but the appearances under which Christ, whole and entire, in His physical “reality” is bodily present, although not in the same way that bodies are present in a given place.’ (*MF 46*)

Regarding that last phrase, theologians explain that Christ is not present in a *spatially extended* way (as though his hand, for example, might be in one part of the host, and his foot in another). No, ‘Christ is present whole and entire in each of the species and whole and entire in each of their parts, in such a way that the breaking of the bread does not divide Christ.’ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church 1377*) Our Lord is not physically affected by anything that happens to the Eucharistic species. (This answers the ridiculous ‘cannibalism’ objection one sometimes hears.)

Because the Eucharist *is* simply Jesus, God the Son made man, we can and must give to it the supreme honour called *latria* – worship and adoration that may be given to God alone. (*MF 55*; Council of Trent DS 1656) This is another difference in relation to the other ways Christ is present to the Church.

Without disparaging any of them, still, the fact that in the Eucharist the substance of the bread and wine have literally ceased to exist is not paralleled in the other presences of Christ. We obviously don’t say that Christ’s presence in the faithful, or in the priest, means that those persons literally no longer exist in their substance. So the worship of *latria* we give to the Eucharist obviously isn’t extended to adoring our fellow Christians, or the priest-celebrant! And Pope Benedict XVI distinguished with reference to the ‘two tables’ of the Word and of the Eucharist, ‘the Church has honoured the word of God and the Eucharistic mystery with the same reverence, although not with the same worship’. (*Verbum Domini 55*)

We return to the *Credo of the People of God*, where Pope Paul proclaims: ‘The unique and indivisible existence of the Lord glorious in heaven is not multiplied, but is rendered present by the sacrament in the many places on earth where Mass is celebrated. And this existence remains present, after the sacrifice, in the Blessed Sacrament which is, in the tabernacle, the living heart of each of our churches. And it is our very sweet duty to honour and adore in the blessed Host which our eyes see, the Incarnate Word whom they cannot see, and who, without leaving heaven, is made present before us.’