

THE EUCHARIST AS THE FORM OF CHRISTIAN LIFE

• Nicholas J. Healy, Jr. •

“When he hands over the substance of his life to the Church, Christ communicates a form or a way of life that can include or embrace every aspect of human existence, and ultimately the entire material order of creation.”



Christianity’s new worship includes and transfigures every aspect of life. . . . There is nothing authentically human—our thoughts and affections, our words and deeds—that does not find in the sacrament of the Eucharist the form it needs to be lived to the full. Here we can see the full human import of the radical newness brought by Christ in the Eucharist: the worship of God in our lives cannot be relegated to something private and individual, but tends by its nature to permeate every aspect of our existence. Worship pleasing to God thus becomes a new way of living our whole life, each particular moment of which is lifted up, since it is lived as part of a relationship with Christ and as an offering to God.¹

These words of Pope Benedict XVI are an invitation to think more deeply about the cosmological and social implications of the eucharistic mystery. The gift of Holy Communion is not only the innermost sanctuary of the faith of the Church—“the source and summit

¹Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum caritatis*, 71.

of Christian life”²—it is also the key to discovering the original truth or logos of creation in all of its distinct dimensions. “The Christian faithful,” suggests Pope Benedict, “need a fuller understanding of the relationship between the Eucharist and their daily lives. Eucharistic spirituality is not just participation in Mass and devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. It embraces the whole of life.”³

In order to better understand how the eucharistic mystery can “include and transfigure every aspect of life,” it is necessary to meditate on the mode of Christ’s presence in the sacrament. The Church’s faith in Christ’s real or substantial presence in the Eucharist signifies that the whole of Christ’s life—including his hidden life of work in Nazareth—is eucharistic. The Eucharist is the all-encompassing form of Christian life because it is first the inner form of Christ’s own life both as man and as God.

1. *Real presence*

At the end of the Orthodox Coptic Liturgy according to Saint Basil there is a solemn confession of faith:

Amen, Amen, Amen, I believe, I believe, I believe. To the last breath of my life, I will confess that this is the life-giving body that your only-begotten Son, our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ took from our lady, the lady of us all, the most pure mother of God. He has united it to his divinity without mingling, without confusion and without alteration. . . . He gave it up for us upon the holy wood of the cross, of his own will, for us all. I believe that his divinity has never, for a single instant, been separated from his humanity. It is he who is given to us for the remission of sins, for eternal life and eternal salvation. I believe, I believe, I believe that all this is true!

For two thousand years, the Church has safeguarded this mystery of faith that Christ is truly present in the sacrament of the Eucharist. As Paul VI indicated in *Mysterium Fidei*, “this presence is called ‘real’—by which is not intended to exclude the other types of presence as though they could not be ‘real’ too, but because it is presence

²*Lumen gentium*, 11.

³*Sacramentum caritatis*, 77.

in the fullest sense: that is to say, it is a substantial presence by which Christ, God and man, makes himself wholly and entirely present.”⁴

One way to approach this mystery of bread and wine being changed into the body and blood of Christ is to reflect on the relationship between the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper and the Crucifixion of Jesus. In a series of homilies delivered in Munich in 1978, Joseph Ratzinger presents an extended argument showing how each of these events illumines the other and, in fact, requires the other to be understood in its full significance. He writes:

The words he spoke at the Last Supper represent the final shaping of his [life and mission] . . . the institution of the Eucharist is an anticipation of his death; it is the undergoing of a spiritual death. For Jesus shares himself out, he shares himself as the one who has been split up and torn apart into body and blood. Thus, the eucharistic words of Jesus are the answer to [the] question about how Jesus underwent his death; in these words he undergoes a spiritual death, or, to put it accurately, in these words Jesus transforms death into the spiritual act of affirmation, into the act of self-sharing love; into the act of adoration, which is offered to God and then from God is made available to men. Both are essentially interdependent: the words at the Last Supper without the death would be, so to speak, an issue of unsecured currency; and again the death without these words would be a mere execution without any discernible point to it. Yet the two together constitute this new event, in which the senselessness of death is given meaning.⁵

Christ’s Resurrection is the final word that confirms the essential unity between the words of institution and the death on the Cross: “The death would remain empty of meaning, and would also render the words meaningless, if the Resurrection had not come about, whereby it is made clear that these words were spoken with divine authority, that this love is indeed strong enough to reach out beyond death.”⁶ In the Resurrection, the body of Christ that has been given up for us and given to the Church is definitively included within the exchange of love between Father, Son, and Spirit. The

⁴Pope Paul VI, *Mysterium fidei*, 39.

⁵Joseph Ratzinger, *God Is Near Us: The Eucharist, the Heart of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 43.

⁶*Ibid.*

Resurrection seals the whole event of the Paschal Mystery as a communication of divine love and a promise of eternal blessedness for those who partake of Christ's life.

We can summarize Ratzinger's teaching as follows: it is precisely the institution of the Eucharist before the Passion that allows us to understand in faith that Jesus' suffering and his violent death are, at the deepest level, a loving self-surrender or gift of self. As the Gospel of John says, "he loves us to the end" (13:1). At the same time, his death on the Cross reveals that what we receive in the sacrament of the Eucharist is nothing less than the very Person of Jesus Christ. The fruit of this giving and receiving is a communion or covenant with God. God's incarnate love is "strong enough to reach out beyond death." Christ's flesh and blood contain and mediate a personal communication or gift of self.

Here we have an initial key to understanding why the Church has always affirmed the "real" or "substantial" presence of Christ in the sacrament: *the gift communicated is nothing less than Christ himself.*

The next point to consider can be framed as a question: What is included in this gift? The answer, of course, is everything. To give one's self is precisely to give the totality of one's life. The language of transubstantiation signifies that Christ's being or substance, and thus the entirety of his life, is present in this sacrament and communicated to the faithful. The presupposition undergirding the Church's confession that Christ is "wholly and entirely present" in the sacrament is that Christ's entire historical life was, in some sense, already eucharistic.⁷ It would make no sense to say that the totality of his life is communicated in the Eucharist if the form of his daily life were unrelated to the bestowal of this gift.

⁷In *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 11, John Paul II indicates that the "saving work" of Christ ("all that he did") is included in the gift: "The Church has received the Eucharist from Christ her Lord not as one gift—however precious—among so many others, but as *the gift par excellence*, for it is the gift of himself, of his person in his sacred humanity, as well as the gift of his saving work. Nor does it remain confined to the past, since 'all that Christ is—all that he did and suffered for all men—participates in the divine eternity, and so transcends all times.' When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, the memorial of her Lord's death and resurrection, this central event of salvation becomes really present and 'the work of our redemption is carried out.'"

2. Giving thanks to the Father

The intelligible roots of the idea that Christ's historical life was already eucharistic are hidden in the meaning of the Greek word *eucharistia*—thanksgiving. Both as God and as man, Christ receives his existence as a boundless gift from the Father. The form of his life is a thanksgiving to the Father and an offering of himself back to the Father. His food, he tells us, is to do the will of the one who sent him (cf. Jn 4:34). The gift of the Eucharist, then, does not simply come at the end of Christ's life; it is an expression of who he is: the eternal Son of the Father.

The question that was posed earlier in the context of real presence—what is included in this gift?—can be re-framed in terms of the reciprocal receiving and giving exhibited in the life of the Incarnate Son. What is included in the Father's gift to the Son? What is included in the Son's offering of himself back to the Father? The answer to both questions is *everything*. Christ not only receives his own existence as a gift, he receives the entire created order as a gift from the Father to be offered back to the Father in gratitude. In other words, the mission of the Son is catholic or universal, extending to the whole of humanity and the entire cosmos.

The thesis that the historical life of Christ is eucharistic goes beyond the level of moral intentionality to reach the truth or logos of creation itself. In every phase of his historical life—his birth and childhood, his hidden life of work in Nazareth, his public ministry, and the culminating mystery of his death and Resurrection—Christ receives creation as an expression of the Father's love. In receiving creation as a gift and offering it back to the Father, Christ discloses the deepest truth of creation. The world was created for him and all things hold together in him (cf. Col 1:17).

The Incarnate Son gives thanks to the Father in all that he does. Of particular importance in this context is Christ's hidden life of work. As noted in the *Catechism*, “during the greater part of his life Jesus shared the condition of the vast majority of human beings: a daily life spent without evident greatness, a life of manual labor.”⁸ This “daily life” of working with the material forms of creation is an essential part of how the Incarnate Son receives creation as a gift and offers creation back to the Father.

⁸*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 531.

Without ceasing to be truly human work, which means work that is done well and that respects the order of nature, Christ's manual labor is included within the eucharistic sacrifice of his life.⁹

The eucharistic form of Christ's historical life is the living source of the Church's cosmic liturgy. When he hands over the substance of his life to the Church, Christ communicates a form or a way of life that can include or embrace every aspect of human existence, and ultimately the entire material order of creation. To receive this gift in the Spirit in which it was given is to offer the whole of one's life in communion with the Son.

What Paul describes as "spiritual worship" (*logikē latreia*) (Rom 12:1) requires a giving thanks by including the matter, so to speak, of our daily lives in an all-embracing worship of God. In a key passage in the *City of God*, Augustine draws a connection between the "spiritual worship" of the faithful, the Church as the body of Christ, and the sacrament of the Eucharist:

The true sacrifice is offered in every act which is designed to unite us to God in holy fellowship, every act, that is, which is directed to that final Good which makes possible our true felicity The whole redeemed community is offered to God as a universal sacrifice, through the great Priest who offered himself in his suffering for us—so that we might be the body of so great a head. . . . This is the sacrifice which the Church continually celebrates in the sacrament of the altar, a sacrament well-known to the faithful where it is shown to the Church that she herself is offered in the offering which she presents to God.¹⁰

There is no aspect of our embodied human lives that falls outside of this holy exchange of gifts whereby the Church offers and is offered in a sacrifice pleasing to the Father. "The Eucharist," Ratzinger writes, "is the genuine reality. This is the yard-

⁹In *Sacramentum caritatis*, 47, Pope Benedict XVI reflects on the symbolic meaning of the presentation of the gifts of bread and wine. "This humble and simple gesture," he tells us, "is actually very significant: in the bread and wine that we bring to the altar, all creation is taken up by Christ the Redeemer to be transformed and presented to the Father. . . . God invites man to participate in bringing to fulfillment his handiwork, and in so doing, gives human labor its authentic meaning, since, through the celebration of the Eucharist, it is united to the redemptive sacrifice of Christ."

¹⁰Augustine, *City of God*, X, 6.

stick, the heart of things; here we encounter that reality against which we need to learn to measure every other reality.”¹¹ The Eucharist is the all-encompassing form of Christian life because it is the form of Christ, who is the firstborn and head of all creation. □

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¹¹Ratzinger, *God Is Near Us*, 88.