



THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST IN THE EUCHARIST

In his *The Mysteries of Christianity*, Matthias Joseph Scheeben, one of the leading theologians of the 19th century, rhetorically asked the question, "What does faith teach us about the Eucharist?" He answered:

It teaches us that by the consecration of the priest the substance of the body and blood of Christ becomes present under the appearances of bread and wine, in place of the natural substances corresponding to these appearances. It teaches further that the substance of Christ's body and blood remains actually, truly, and essentially present as long as the appearances endure, yet in such a manner that it is present whole and indivisible under each species, as well as under any part thereof.

This succinct summary of the dogmatic teaching has been amplified in the magisterial documents of the 20th and 21st centuries.

From the Second Vatican Council, in its Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of 1963, known by its Latin title *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, at § 47 we find the statement:

At the Last Supper, on the night when He was betrayed, our Savior instituted the Eucharistic Sacrifice of His Body and Blood. He did this in order to perpetuate the Sacrifice of the Cross throughout the centuries until He should come again, and so to entrust to His beloved Spouse, the Church, a memorial of His Death and Resurrection: a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a paschal banquet in which Christ is eaten, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us.'

The most important scriptural passages for understanding the Eucharist are those pertaining to the feeding of the five thousand, mentioned in all four of the Gospels and those pertaining to Christ's words of institution at the Last Supper as found in the Synoptic Gospels. In chapter 6 of the Gospel of St. John, Jesus also reveals himself as the bread for the life of the world. In John 6:33 he says: 'For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world'.

The papal document that most directly addresses the question of how Christ is present in the Eucharist is the encyclical *Mysterium Fidei* of Pope Paul VI, promulgated in 1965. In its early sections Paul VI emphasised that Christ's eucharistic presence is a mystery of our faith: 'as St. Thomas says, the fact that the true body and the true blood of Christ are present in this Sacrament "cannot be apprehended by the senses but only by faith, which rests upon divine authority" (§ 18). Pope Paul also explicitly rejected the idea that the presence of Christ is merely something symbolic, 'as if this most sacred Sacrament were to consist in nothing more than an efficacious sign "of the spiritual presence of Christ and of His intimate union with the faithful, the members of His Mystical Body"' (§ 39). Rather, he declared:

1. Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity* (London: B. Herder & Co, 1954), 469-470.

While Eucharistic symbolism is well suited to helping us understand the effect that is proper to this Sacrament—the unity of the Mystical Body—still it does not indicate or explain what it is that makes this Sacrament different from all the others. For the constant teaching that the Catholic Church has passed on...all require us to profess that "the Eucharist is the flesh of Our Savior Jesus Christ which suffered for our sins and which the Father in His loving kindness raised again." To these words of St. Ignatius, we may well add those which Theodore of Mopsuestia [350-428]... addressed to the people: "The Lord did not say: This is a symbol of my body, and this is a symbol of my blood, but rather: This is my body and my blood. He teaches us not to look to the nature of what lies before us and is perceived by the senses, because the giving of thanks and the words spoken over it have changed it into flesh and blood." (§ 44)

As a consequence, Pope Paul VI suggested that we need to listen to the voice of the teaching and praying Church which assures us that 'the way in which Christ becomes present in this Sacrament is through the conversion of the whole substance of the bread into His body and of the whole substance of the wine into His blood, a unique and truly wonderful conversion that the Catholic Church fittingly and properly calls transubstantiation'. He acknowledged that 'as a result of transubstantiation, the species of bread and wine undoubtedly take on a new signification and a new finality, for they are no longer ordinary bread and wine but instead a sign of something sacred and a sign of spiritual food; but they take on this new signification, this new finality, precisely because they contain a new "reality" which we can rightly call ontological'. This word - 'ontological' - means related to being, to the very nature of things. There has been an ontological change because 'what now lies beneath the aforementioned species [after the consecration] is not what was there before, but something completely different'. Further, 'nothing remains of the bread and the wine except for the species—beneath which Christ is present whole and entire in His physical "reality," corporeally present, although not in the manner in which bodies are in a place'. (§ 46).

These statements of Paul VI were echoed by St John Paul II in his Apostolic Letter *Mane Nobiscum Domine* of 2004. He insisted that 'faith demands that we approach the Eucharist fully aware that we are approaching Christ himself. It is precisely his presence which gives the other aspects of the Eucharist — as meal, as memorial of the Paschal Mystery, as eschatological anticipation — a significance which goes far beyond mere symbol-ism'. (§16).

In the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* of 2007 Pope Benedict XVI remarked that 'the substantial conversion of bread and wine into his body and blood introduces within creation the principle of a radical change, a sort of "nuclear fission," to use an image familiar to us today, which penetrates to the heart of all being, a change meant to set off a process which transforms reality, a process leading ultimately to the transfiguration of the entire world, to the point where God will be all in all (cf. 1 Cor 15:28)'. (§11).

In his Wednesday Audience Address of February 5, 2014, Pope Francis explained that the 'Eucharistic celebration is much more than a simple banquet: it is exactly the memorial of Jesus' Paschal Sacrifice, the mystery at the center of salvation', while in his *Corpus Christi* Homily of 2025, Pope Leo XIV stated that 'the Eucharist, in fact, is the true, real, and substantial presence of the Saviour, who transforms bread into himself in order to transform us into himself'.