

# The Eucharist and Sanctity

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The Eucharist as the Real Presence is the touchstone of sanctity. As evidence of this fact we have the witness of the saints who, when they speak or write about the power of the Blessed Sacrament to sanctify, seem to be positively extreme in their claims about what the Real Presence can achieve in making a sinful person holy. In order to appreciate the value of the Real Presence in the spiritual life, we must go back in spirit to the event described by St. John when our Lord, after He had worked the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, made the solemn promise of the Eucharist.

"I am the Bread of Life," Christ declared on that occasion. "He who comes to me will never be hungry. He who believes in me will never thirst. But, as I have told you, you can see me and still you do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me and whoever comes to me, I shall not turn him away because I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but to do the will of the one who sent me. Now the will of him who sent me is that I should lose nothing of all that he has given to me and that I should raise it up on the last day. Yes, it is my Father's will that whoever sees the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life and that I shall raise him up on the last day."

By now we have read and heard and meditated on these words many times, but they deserve further reflection because they contain so much mystery that after nineteen centuries of the Church's existence she has not begun to exhaust the richness of their meaning. Every time we go back, *every* time we go back to Christ's words of revelation, we always discover something new. Always! The key word in Christ's discourse on the Eucharist is the word *believe*. In fact, after He promised the Blessed Sacrament many of the Jews who heard Him did not believe. We might add that when we are told that the Savior knew who did not believe, that was not only contemporary, but all future knowledge. He foresaw who would and who would not believe, and let us make sure that the evangelist's juxtaposition of those who did not believe and those who would betray Him is the relationship of cause and effect. All the traitors of Christ have been those who, having believed, stopped believing.

There are, at this point, three questions we should ask ourselves about the Holy Eucharist as Real Presence. And on the answer to these questions depends in large measure whether we shall only know about sanctity or also attain it, whether holiness will remain only an idea or whether we shall actually become holy. What a difference! The questions are these:

Why do we believe when we believe in the Real Presence?

Why should we believe it? And,

How should we put our belief into practice?

## What Do We Believe?

The simplest way to express what Christ asks us to believe about the Real Presence is that the Eucharist is really *He*. The Real Presence is the *real Jesus*. We are to believe that the Eucharist began in the womb of the Virgin Mary; that the flesh which the Son of God received from His Mother at the Incarnation is the same flesh into which He changed bread at the Last Supper; that the blood He received from His Mother is the same blood into which He changed wine at the Last Supper. Had she not given Him His flesh and blood there could not be a Eucharist.

We are to believe that the Eucharist is Jesus Christ – simply, without qualification. It is God become man in the fullness of His divine nature, in the fullness of His human nature, in the fullness of His body and soul, in the fullness of everything that makes Jesus Jesus. He is in the Eucharist with His human mind and will united with the Divinity, with His hands and feet, His face and features, with His eyes and lips and ears and nostrils, with His affections and emotions and, with emphasis, with His living, pulsating, physical Sacred Heart. That is what our Catholic Faith demands of us that we believe. If we believe this, we are Catholic. If we do not, we are not, no matter what people may think we are.

Our faith is belief because we do not see what we believe. We accept on Christ's words that all of this is there, or rather, here in the Holy Eucharist. Faith must supply what, as the *Tantum Ergo* sings, "the senses do not perceive." And faith must reveal what the mind by itself cannot see. Let us never forget this phrase, first in Latin, *lumen fidei*, the light of faith. Faith reveals, faith discloses, faith enlightens, faith empowers the mind to see what the mind without faith cannot see.

Strange as it may sound, when we believe in the Real Presence, we believe in things twice unseen. We see only what looks like bread and wine, tastes and smells like bread and wine, and yet we are to believe that behind these physical appearances is a man. Faith number one. And we are further to believe that behind the unseen man is God. Faith number two.

Is it any wonder the Church calls the Eucharist, *Mysterium Fidei*, the Mystery of Faith? Those who accept the Real Presence accept by implication all the cardinal mysteries of Christianity. They believe in the Trinity, in the Father who sent the Son and in the Son who sent the Holy Spirit. They believe in the Incarnation, that the Son of God became man like one of us. They believe in Christ's divinity since no one but God could change bread and wine into His own body and blood. They believe in the Holy Catholic Church which Christ founded and in which through successive generations is communicated to bishops and priests the incredible power of making Christ continually present among us in the Blessed Sacrament. They believe, against all the betrayals by the Judases of history and all the skepticism of Christ's first disciples, in an unbroken chain of faith ever since Peter replied to Christ's question whether he and his companions also wanted to leave the Master. What a chance Christ took. "Lord," Peter looked around, "whom shall we go to?" (And he spoke for all of us.) "You have the message of eternal life, and we believe, we know, that you are the holy one of God."

### Why Do We Believe?

Why do we believe that the selfsame body that Christ had in His visible stay on earth is the body, now glorified, we now worship and receive invisibly on earth today? You see, Christ is *on* earth! The final reason is, of course, because this is what He told us. What He said must be true because Christ who is God cannot lie.

But why do we believe in terms of the promises He made? What blessings and benefits did He assure those who believe in this Eucharistic Mystery? All the blessings that Christ promised to those who believe in the Holy Eucharist are summed up in His own masterful promise of *life*. Those who believe will receive *life* and the life that He promised was *zoé* – the kind of life that belongs to God, the kind of life that Father, Son and Holy Spirit shared and interchanged from all eternity. Those who believe will receive this life. Those who do not believe will die. What kind of life was Christ talking about? It must have been the supernatural life of grace in our souls, of partaking or participation in His own divine life. Suppose we go on asking a series of questions where the answer can be yes or no:

Is it possible for a person to be physically alive, but spiritually dead? Yes or no? YES.

Is it possible for a person to be just barely alive? Yes or no? YES.

Is it possible for a person to be more alive than just scarcely breathing supernaturally? YES

Is it finally possible for a person to be very alive with divine grace, vitally alive, brimming, tingling, vibrating, bursting with God's life in his soul? Yes or no? An emphatic YES

This, in homely language, is what the Savior promised those who believed in His Real Presence. He assured them and, therefore, assures us, that we shall be not only alive, but filled with His life, full of brimming and flowing over with strength and power and wisdom and peace and all manner of holiness. This is what sanctity is all about. It is the muchness of the good things of God. It is the more and more and still more of the life of God in our souls. More still, He promises that, provided that we believe in Him in the Eucharist, He will sustain this life in our souls into eternity. In other words, being alive now we shall never die. And most marvelous, He will even make this life pour from our souls into our bodies risen from the grave on the last day and glorified by the vision of God.

No wonder the Eucharist is called *panis vitae*, the Bread of Life. It is that, and let us remind ourselves, and here is the condition, one condition, that before we eat this bread with our lips, we take it by faith into our hearts. Indeed, unless we first have faith, we shall, as Paul tells us, "eat it to our malediction." Only believers can benefit from this Bread of Life, only believers can profit from the Blessed Sacrament, and only believers can grow in spirit by partaking of the Eucharist depending *always* on the measure of their faith. Those who believe deeply in the Real Presence will benefit greatly from the Real Presence; those who believe weakly will also benefit accordingly.

The Eucharist is capable of working miracles in our lives. So it can – the Eucharist is Jesus. He worked – change the tense – He works miracles, but as it depended then (remember, Christ could not work miracles in certain places for lack of faith), the same now. It depends on the depth and degree of our faith.

## How To Believe?

This must seem like an odd question: how are we to believe in the Real Presence? By believing, we might answer. How else do you believe? True enough. But more concretely, how are we to express our belief? We are to express our belief by doing on our part what Christ does on His part. He comes to us. So we must come to Him, and this is not locomotion through space. He comes down to us. We must come up to Him. He is present in the Eucharist in order to be near to us. We must be present – change the accent – *we* must be present to the Eucharist in order to be near to Him. He went to the superhuman length of becoming man, then changing bread and wine into Himself, then giving His Apostles the power to do the same, then giving them the power to pass on this power to others to do the same. And in virtue of that power, He is *now* here with us. He wants us, in turn, also *now*, here, to be with Him. And here nobody cheats.

It is impossible in human terms to exaggerate the importance of being in a church or chapel before the Blessed Sacrament as often and for as long as our duties and state of life allow. That sentence is the talisman of the highest sanctity. What I am expressing is not a pious practice or a luxury of the spiritual life. I am talking about its essence. Those who believe what I am saying and act on their belief are in possession of the greatest treasure available to man in this valley of tears. As by now thousands of saintly men and women have testified from experience, this is somewhere near the key to holiness. For this reason, I strongly recommend that each of us make a resolution – no matter how much the decision may cost us – to make a holy hour before the Blessed Sacrament exposed or reserved at least once a month or, if possible, once a week, and if we have the grace and our vocation in life permits it, even several times a week. Think of the empty hours that people spend weekly before the television screen – an average I am told of some twenty hours per man, woman and child in America. God help America!

Someone may object, "But you are talking about mystics or saints, and I am neither. I am just an ordinary Catholic trying to save my soul." My reply: there can be no ordinary Catholics today, not with the revolution through which society is passing and the convulsion in the Church on every level. The Church today needs strong Catholics, wise Catholics, Catholics who are not swayed by public opinion or afraid to stand up for the truth. She needs Catholics who are willing to suffer for their convictions and, if need be, shed their blood for the Faith.

Where, we ask, can they obtain this strength and wisdom, this patience and conviction and this loyal love of God that is faithful unto death? They can obtain it from the one who said, "Have courage, I have overcome the world." He is not two thousand years away, or absent from the earth in a distant heaven that cannot be spanned. No, He is right here in the Eucharist. And He wants nothing more than that we also be with Him as much as we can. If we are, and the more we are - as the great Eucharistic saints tell us – He will not only make us holy, but He will use us as He used those in Palestine who, when He first made the promise of the Eucharist, did not walk away. He will use us as channels of His grace even to the ends of the earth and until the end of time