

Is Jesus really
present in the
Eucharist?



by Bishop Michael Evans

Catholic Truth Society Publications Distributed by Ignatius Press

Catholic Truth Society and Ignatius Press have joined forces to make CTS's outstanding booklets available in North America. CTS booklets explain the faith, teaching, and life of the Catholic Church. They are based on Sacred Scripture, the Second Vatican Council documents, and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. These booklets provide authentic Catholic teaching; they address issues of life and truth which are relevant to all. They aim to inform and educate readers on the many issues that people have to deal with today.

www.ignatius-cts.com

All rights reserved. Copyright © 2004, The Incorporated Catholic Truth Society of London. Distributed in North America by Ignatius Press, San Francisco, CA.

ISBN 978 1 86082 283 4

Front cover image: *Communion of the Apostles* by Joos van Gent © Arte & Immagini srl/CORBIS.

**IS JESUS REALLY
PRESENT IN THE
EUCHARIST?**

by
Bishop Michael Evans

*All booklets are published thanks to the
generous support of the members of the
Catholic Truth Society*



CATHOLIC TRUTH SOCIETY
PUBLISHERS TO THE HOLY SEE

CONTENTS

Introduction	5
The Witness of the Scriptures	8
The Messianic Banquet and the Covenant Meal.....	8
The Passover Meal	9
The Words of Jesus	11
The Lamb of God	13
One Body in Him	15
The Bread of Life	16
The Breaking of Bread	19
The Church's Growth in Understanding	23
The Early Church	23
The Middle Ages.....	27
St Thomas Aquinas	29
The Protestant Reformers.....	32
The Council of Trent.....	34
What Kind of Presence?	37
The Glorified Christ	37
A Substantial Presence	38
A Sacramental Presence	42
A Personal Presence	44
A Saving Presence.....	46
A Unifying Presence	47
A Permanent Presence.....	48
A Missionary Presence.....	49
The Lord of Heaven and Earth.....	50
Growing in Unity	53
Become What You Are	57

FOREWORD

On the Solemnity of *Corpus et Sanguis Christi* (The Body and Blood of Christ) in 2004, Pope John Paul announced a special Year of the Eucharist, beginning with the World Eucharistic Congress in Guadalajara, Mexico, in October 2004 and ending with the Synod of Bishops in Rome in October 2005. The Synod's theme sums up the centrality of the Mass: 'The Eucharist - source and summit of the life and mission of the Church.'

This booklet focuses on just one vital teaching about the Eucharist: the special presence of Jesus Christ. First published in 1986, this new edition has been revised slightly to take account of the publication since then of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1993), the teaching document *One Bread One Body* by the Catholic Bishops' Conferences of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland (1998), and Pope John Paul's encyclical letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003).

The Eucharist stands at the centre of the Church's life, and Pope John Paul has sought to rekindle the sense of amazement that should always fill us when we gather for Mass. Why should we be amazed, and filled with a sense of joyful wonder? Because the Risen Christ is with us as he promised:

The Church draws her life from the Eucharist. This truth does not simply express a daily experience of faith, but recapitulates the heart of the mystery of the Church. In a variety of ways she joyfully experiences the constant fulfilment of the promise: “Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (*Matthew 28:20*), but in the Holy Eucharist, through the changing of bread and wine into the body and blood of the Lord, she rejoices in this presence with unique intensity. (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 1)

✠ Michael Evans
24th August 2004

INTRODUCTION

‘And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’ According to St Matthew’s Gospel (28:20) these were the last words of Jesus to his disciples. However we understand Jesus’ Ascension into heaven, it clearly does not mean he has left us. The accounts of the early Church are full of deep faith in the continued presence of the risen Jesus working with and in his disciples (cf. *Mark* 16:20).

Jesus fulfils his promise to be with the Church in many different ways, but most of all in its liturgical celebrations. In its Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), the Second Vatican Council stated:

He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of his minister... but especially under the Eucharistic species. By his power, he is present in the sacraments, so that when someone 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, finally, when the Church prays or sings, for he promised: ‘Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them’ (*Matthew* 18:20).

The whole life and work of the Church as a community of faith is founded on the promise of the constant, real and living presence of its Lord. Pope Paul VI developed the thought of the Constitution on the various forms of Christ's presence in his encyclical letter *Mysterium Fidei* (1965). There he writes of the supreme form of that presence, the Eucharistic presence:

It is called the 'real' presence, not in an exclusive sense as though the other forms of presence were not 'real', but by reason of its excellence. It is the substantial presence by which Christ is made present without doubt, whole and entire, God and man (no. 39).

Any reflection on the Eucharistic 'real presence' of Jesus must be seen in the context of his manifold presence in the Church rather than in isolation, but it is this Eucharistic presence which is his presence in the fullest sense.

The Eucharist lies at the heart of the whole life of the Church, precisely because at the heart of the Eucharist is the real presence of the crucified, risen and glorified Lord, continuing and making available his saving work among us. The Vatican II Decree on the Priestly Ministry and Life (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*) sums it up:

The most blessed Eucharist contains the Church's entire spiritual wealth, that is, Christ himself, our Passover and our living bread (no. 5).

In the end, the whole mystery of the Eucharist makes sense only within the ultimate mystery of the wonder of God's love. The Eucharist is a mystery of love in which the Divine Bridegroom gives to us all that he is and all that he has:

Truly, in the Eucharist, he shows us a love which goes "to the end", a love which knows no measure. (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 11)

The rest of this booklet is divided into three parts. First, a section on the Scriptural texts concerning the Eucharist; second, a brief look at how the teaching on the real presence developed in the Church; and third, a few thoughts on how we understand that unique presence of Jesus. It will be important to see the booklet as a whole, as some ideas which are mentioned early on are given some further treatment towards the end.

THE WITNESS OF THE SCRIPTURES

The Messianic Banquet and the Covenant Meal

As with most aspects of our Christian faith, the meaning of the Eucharist cannot be well understood without setting it within its Old Testament and general Jewish background.

The people of Israel were looking forward to the coming of the Messiah, the anointed king sent by God. Associated with this would be a *great banquet* of superabundant rich food and fine wines (*Isaiah 25:6*). Some Jews expected also a reappearance of the *manna*, the bread from heaven, which had been their food for forty years of wandering in the desert.

There are close links in Jewish thought between the ideas of *covenant*, *sacrifice* and *meal*. This is seen best in *Exodus 24:1-11*, when God's bond of friendship (*covenant*) with his people was sealed by the pouring out of blood (*sacrifice*) and concluded with the eating of some of the sacrificial food (*meal*). Moses says of the blood, 'This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you' (v. 8). The Israelites began to look forward to a *new and everlasting covenant* between God and themselves (*Jeremiah 31:31-34*).

Christians see Jesus, the new and greater Moses, as the one who brings about this unique bond of love between God and us by pouring out his own blood in sacrifice. Echoing Moses' words, he says at the Last Supper, 'This is my blood of the covenant' (*Matthew* 26:28), or, in Luke's version, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood' (22:20). Jesus tells us to take and eat, to take and drink - in other words, to ratify the new covenant he has made by eating some of the sacrificial food: in this case, Jesus himself, given for us and poured out for us.

Jesus is the promised Messiah, providing us with the rich food and fine wine of himself. He gives us the new manna, the bread of life, his own body and blood as food and drink.

The Passover Meal

Most of the New Testament writers see the Last Supper as the Jewish Passover Meal. St John is the only exception, but he too keeps up the Passover theme by setting the crucifixion of Jesus at the same time as the Passover lambs were being slain in the Temple. The Passover was a ritual meal, celebrated as a *memorial* of the great escape from slavery in Egypt, the Exodus.

The world 'memorial' is very important in Eucharistic theology, and means far more than simply a recalling or remembering. For the Jews, celebrating a *memorial*

involves evoking the past and reliving it in such a way that a past event is made effective and fruitful here and now. Really, the heart of the event itself is made present: the covenant-bond with God and the benefits of that covenant. In our remembering, God brings the past event more and more firmly into effect, so that we can share its benefits and look forward in hope to its final fulfilment.

Jesus took the ritual of the Passover Meal, and brought its deepest meaning to its fulfilment. He did not institute new rituals, but rather transformed the celebration from a memorial of the rescue from slavery in Egypt under Moses into the memorial of the liberating death and resurrection of Jesus himself.

From now on, Jesus' disciples are to 'do this' (i.e. celebrate the Passover Meal) not so much as the memorial of the Exodus as the memorial of himself: 'do this as the memorial of me'. This new Passover Meal is a personal memorial. The heart of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is made present and effective for us here and now. In other words, in the Eucharist, Jesus himself is personally present as Saviour. The whole of his saving work is available to us there: the sacrificial self-giving of Jesus Christ who is the new covenant in person, God and man bound together in total at-one-ment and unity. 'To receive communion is to receive Christ himself who has offered himself for us' (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1382). What is above all 'really

present' in the Eucharist is Christ's whole work of salvation. The Mass is the sacrament of salvation. But everything we mean by salvation is centred on the person of Christ himself.

The Words of Jesus

Behind the slightly different accounts of the Last Supper in the New Testament (*Matthew* 26:26-29, *Mark* 14:22-25, *Luke* 22:19-20, 1 *Corinthians* 11:23-25) there is a basic common tradition, truly faithful to what Jesus himself did in the Upper Room on the night before he was crucified.

After the first rituals of the Passover Meal, Jesus takes the unleavened bread, bread already solemnly identified as the 'bread of affliction', a symbol of the suffering of God's people. He takes the bread, says the traditional words of blessing, breaks it and hands it to his disciples. Normally, the bread would be eaten in silence, but Jesus breaks into the silence to give a deeper and radically new interpretation of this 'bread of affliction'. Saying 'This is my body', he identifies the bread with himself, about to take on his people's suffering (cf. *Mark* 14:22-25 for the order of the meal).

'This' clearly means the bread itself. Not too much can be made of the word 'is', since it would not have been there in the Aramaic or Hebrew used by Jesus, and 'is' could anyway mean either 'is literally' or 'is metaphorically'. We need the light of the Church's Tradition for us to be sure

Jesus meant ‘This *really is* my body, not just symbolically or metaphorically so’, but this interpretation is strongly implied by other New Testament Eucharistic texts. We are not sure whether Jesus would have said ‘This is my *body*’ or ‘This is my *flesh*’, but both words really meant the whole bodily-existing human being, the whole person, rather than just one element of him.

Once the bread has been eaten, the Passover lamb previously slaughtered in the Temple is served (since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans, the lamb has been symbolised in the Passover meal by a roasted shank bone). This is followed by the drinking of the third cup of wine, the Cup of Blessing. Jesus takes the cup, says the blessing, and passes it to his disciples. Normally it would be drunk in silence, already a symbol of tragedy (*Mark* 10:38, 14:36) as the ‘blood of grapes’ (*Genesis* 49:11), but once again Jesus breaks into the silence with his words of interpretation, identifying the cup of red Passover wine with his blood. ‘Blood’ in Jewish thought is above all a symbol of life itself (see for example *Deuteronomy* 12:23, ‘the blood is the life’), and the cup of wine is being identified with the whole living Jesus.

‘Flesh and blood’ is a common Old Testament expression for human life. It is the whole living Lord that we receive in the Eucharist, under either the bread or the cup, and Jesus is saying of both of them, ‘This is me, giving myself in love for you!’

The Lamb of God

The New Testament accounts of the Last Supper pick out only two elements of the meal, the words of Jesus about the unleavened bread and the cup of blessing. The main part of the meal, the eating of the Passover lamb, is almost totally ignored. The writers were not trying to give a precise course-by-course description of the meal but to draw out the meaning of the Eucharist for the communities for whom they were writing, communities already celebrating the Eucharist as the memorial of the continued presence of their Lord.

The eating of the lamb is passed over in silence because it is now Jesus himself who is the new Passover Lamb, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (*John* 1:29, 36). The first Christians knew that they shared the Lamb among themselves at the Eucharist precisely by eating the bread and drinking the cup with which Jesus had identified himself. This is why the priest says of them before we receive communion, ‘This is the Lamb of God.’

Given and shed for us - the sacrificial Christ

The symbolism of Jesus as the new Passover Lamb, slain for us and for all, is central to our understanding of the Eucharistic ‘real presence’ of Jesus. It is not just a static, motionless Jesus who is present and available to us. The

New Testament writers do not have Jesus saying simply, 'This is my body' and 'This is my blood', but rather, 'This is my body which is *given for you*' (*Luke* 22:19, *1 Corinthians* 11:24) and 'This is my blood of the covenant which is *poured out for many* for the forgiveness of sins' (*Matthew* 26:28, *Mark* 14:24; cf. *Luke* 22:30). (In passing, it should be noted that 'many' here means 'the multitude' or 'the many without reserve' rather than 'less than all', and its translation in the Eucharistic Prayers at Mass as 'all' is correct: this can be seen clearly for example by comparing *Romans* 5:15 and 5:18, where 'many' and 'all' are synonymous.)

The important point here is that it is the sacrificial Jesus who is present in the Eucharist, the Lord giving himself for us and shedding his blood for us: Christ as Priest and Victim. It is the self-giving and self-offering Jesus Christ that we receive. By celebrating the memorial of his saving work, we are taken up into his sacrifice to the Father. We enter into the movement of his self-offering. We are welcomed and accepted by the Father along with his Son, and so brought into the new and everlasting covenant between God and his people.

Jesus is salvation in person. His saving and 'at-one-ing' work can only be available to us and fruitful in us if he himself is personally present in a way which enables us to become truly at-one with him, one body and one flesh with him, one blood and one life with him. The

heart of the meaning of the Eucharist is its sacrificial content, the saving presence of the Saviour in his total offering of himself to his Father. This means that the whole Christ (Jesus himself as Head and ourselves as his Body) can offer the whole Christ (our lives united with the once-for-all sacrifice of the Lord upon the cross). The Eucharist is our communion, our sharing, in the saving death and resurrection of Jesus. As St Paul wrote, 'For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (1 *Corinthians* 11:26). At the Eucharist, Jesus' death is not just announced but effectively proclaimed, because Jesus himself is present in a unique way, making effective among us his work of salvation.

One Body in Him

This saving presence of Jesus is not intended simply to deepen our personal unity with him. Salvation involves our unity with each other in Christ. We are brought into closer communion with Jesus as members of a community, the Body of Christ. Through the Eucharist, above all, this community is brought into deeper and deeper unity with its Head. St Paul shows how communion with each other and communion with the Lord go hand-in-hand:

The cup of blessing that we bless,
is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ?

The bread that we break,
is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?
Because there is one bread,
we who are many are one body,
for we all partake of the one bread.
(1 *Corinthians* 10:16-17)

The Eucharist involves our unity both with the self-offering Jesus and with each other in him. It is the sacrament of the unity of the whole Christ, Head and members, a unity founded on the total self-giving of the Head to his Body. We become ever more intimately bound up with him because of his unique presence in the Eucharist. St Paul stresses the reality of that presence, so vital for the whole life of the Church, when he warns that:

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread
or drinks the cup of the Lord in an
unworthy manner will be answerable
for the body and blood of the Lord.
(1 *Corinthians* 11:27)

The Bread of Life

This understanding of the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist is developed by St John in chapter six of his Gospel. Although far less of the chapter may be explicitly about the Eucharist than some writers have presumed,

there is little doubt that it reaches a climax in a strong statement of the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.

Some scholars see the whole chapter as in some sense directed towards the Eucharist, even if not explicitly so. Verses 1-15 describe the miraculous multiplication of loaves, with the plentiful distribution and much left over, perhaps alluding to the inexhaustible and imperishable character of Jesus' Eucharistic presence. Verses 16-21 describe Jesus walking on the water, giving a heightened sense of the mystery of Jesus: perhaps again this is intended to stress the mysterious nature of the Son of Man whose presence in the Eucharist transcends the normal conditions of being human.

The rest of the chapter is set in the context of the need for faith in Jesus. The people ask for a sign to show that they should believe in him, pointing out that Moses had provided manna in the desert, bread from heaven for them to eat. Jesus responds by speaking of the true bread: 'the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world' (v. 33). His hearers ask for that bread, and Jesus replies, '*I am the bread of life*' (v. 35). The context is still the need for faith in Jesus, and the mystery of his person, come down from heaven (v. 41). He contrasts the material food of manna with the living bread of himself. We need to receive him into our lives. But how are we to receive him? It is true that 'to eat bread' can mean 'to receive doctrine' (see *Proverbs* 9:5),

but in verse 51 we reach the real turning-point of the chapter:

I am the living bread that came down from heaven.
Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever;
and the bread that I will give for the life of the
world is my flesh.

The immediate response of the people is to ask, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' Jesus replies not with some qualifying figurative interpretation, but with the strongly realistic language of verses 53-57:

Very truly, I tell you,
unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man
and drink his blood,
you have no life in you.
Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood
have eternal life,
and I will raise them up at the last day.
For my flesh is true food,
and my blood is true drink.
Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood
abide in me, and I in them.
Just as the living Father sent me,
and I live because of the Father,
so whoever eats me will live because of me.

The Eucharistic sense of these words is inescapable, and the effects of his presence are drawn out clearly. We will be raised up by Jesus, united with his risen body, and we will draw the life of God himself from our union with him. This is St John's way of putting across the ideas of sacrifice and new covenant: by our union with Jesus in the Eucharist, we are raised up with him to the Father, and so come to share in the ultimate covenant relationship of mutual indwelling - God living in us and us living in God.

The response of many of his followers to this teaching was to say, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' (v. 60). Jesus answers by stressing once again the ascended and glorified Son of Man. Without in any way undermining the realism of the Eucharistic reception of Jesus, the Gospel emphasises that it is a spiritual eating of the glorified body and blood of Christ, no longer subject to the same conditions as his earthly body and blood. St John is keeping a careful balance between two extremes. On the one hand, he gives a strongly realistic teaching on the eating and drinking of the Lord against any merely symbolic interpretation and yet, on the other hand, he highlights the mysterious spiritual nature of the glorified Son of Man against any cannibalistic understanding.

The Breaking of Bread

In St Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles 'the breaking of bread' seems to be a term for the Eucharist.

The breaking (or tearing) of bread was the prayerful ritual with which any Jewish meal began, and the meals shared by Jesus and the Twelve would have been an important part of their three years together.

Every Jewish meal is a sacred meal, sharing the blessings of God and the fellowship of one's family and friends. The Last Supper was the *Last Supper*, the last of a long series of meals shared by Jesus and his closest disciples including the traditional Jewish fellowship supper. They had become used to expressing and deepening their unity with their Master in this way, and accustomed to watching him begin each meal by breaking bread and sharing it among them.

Once they had encountered Jesus risen from the dead, it was only natural that they should want to continue these intimate fellowship meals with their Lord, now victoriously present among them and working with them. St Luke recounts the meeting of two disciples with the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus. Jesus was with them, walking by their side, but something prevented them from recognising him (*Luke 24:16*). This reminds us once again that the risen body of Jesus, though the same body that hung on the cross, is now a glorified body, transfigured and renewed in a mysterious way. Jesus explains the passages in the Scriptures that refer to himself, and accepts their invitation to stay with them in

the village, but they still fail to recognise him. The account goes on:

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognised him; and he vanished from their sight (*Luke 24:30-31*).

Like the other Gospel writers, St Luke is not simply narrating an incident. He is telling the disciples of his own day: Jesus is always with you, walking by your side - recognise his presence at the breaking of bread, when you come together to celebrate the Eucharist. As Pope John Paul writes,

Whenever the Church celebrates the Eucharist, the faithful can in some way relive the experience of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus: “their eyes were opened and they recognised him” (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 6).

To eat and drink with others in Jewish thought means to welcome them into one’s life and to express a deep unity with them. To share a meal is a sign of fellowship, a sharing of lives. That is why there was so much hostile reaction to Jesus eating and drinking with sinners (*Matthew 9:10*). By eating with them, he was accepting

them and expressing his unity with them, in the name of his Father! At the Eucharist, Jesus accepts us into his *company* (from the Latin *cum* and *panis* - really, bread-sharers!), and by being there and eating and drinking with our fellow Christians we accept them into our company. We become the community of the companions of the Lord, sharing together the Bread of Life himself.

In the Acts of the Apostles we are told how the disciples 'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers' (2:42). They still continued with the observances of Judaism, going to the Temple for example, but met in their homes for the distinctive Christian rite, the breaking of bread. In this way they maintained and deepened their living contact with the risen Jesus.

It is clear from these different New Testament accounts that the early Christian community was firmly convinced of the living presence of their risen Lord in the Eucharist, present in a unique way which made the Eucharist itself the very heart of the community's life.

THE CHURCH'S GROWTH IN UNDERSTANDING

The Early Church

All the early Fathers have in common their teaching on the main effect of the Eucharist: *the unity of the Church* which is drawn ever more deeply into the life of its Head by receiving him, truly present as food and drink. The early Church held fast to a firm faith in the real presence of Christ. At the beginning of the second century *St Ignatius of Antioch* wrote that 'the Eucharist is the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ' (*Smyrna*, 7) and *St Justin* wrote around A.D. 150 that by the words of Christ 'the Eucharistic food is the flesh and blood of Jesus incarnate' (1 *Apology*, 66).

The faith of Christ's followers from the earliest days was that the bread and wine are in truth his body and blood, yet they clearly remain bread and wine as far as the senses are concerned. How can this be? This is where theology comes in, faith's never quite adequate attempt to understand itself and to give an account of itself to intelligent enquirers. Like many who heard Christ's words, our first response may well be, 'This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?' The doctrine of the real presence does not seem possible! Theologians do not pretend that this mystery can be made perfectly intelligible, but they try to show that our faith is

reasonable, and that there are no contradictions and absurdities involved. Over the centuries, while faith in the real presence has remained constant, our understanding of that faith has been enriched and deepened with long reflection.

The Eucharist is a mystery of love, and it is always difficult to put love into adequate words. As Pope John Paul writes,

Before this mystery of love, human reason fully experiences its limitations. One understands how, down the centuries, this truth has stimulated theology to strive to understand it ever more deeply. (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 15)

In order to be faithful to the belief of Christians in the reality of Christ's presence, many early theologians used the idea of a *change* or *conversion* of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Others stressed the *symbolic* or *sacramental* character of the Eucharistic presence. Writers such as *Tertullian* spoke of the Eucharistic bread and wine as 'figures' or 'signs' of Christ's body and blood, but not in a way that denied the reality of Christ's presence. In ancient thought a mysterious relationship was recognised between the symbol and what it symbolised. A symbol was not understood as a purely arbitrary sign, like an asterisk directing a reader to a

footnote. Whereas the 'diabolic' tears things apart, the 'symbolic' brings things together. A symbolic 'figure' or 'sign' renders present the other reality without being completely identified with it. *St Cyril of Jerusalem* wrote in his classic exposition of the real presence:

Since Christ himself declared and said of the bread, 'This is my body', who shall dare to doubt any longer? And since he himself declared, 'This is my blood', who shall ever hesitate, saying that it is not his blood? For in the figure of bread is given to you his body, and in the figure of wine his blood, so that partaking of the body and blood of Christ, you may be made of the same body and the same blood with him. (*Catechesis*, 22)

St Cyril warns us not to judge the matter by taste, but by faith. He was the pioneer of conversion language, stressing however that we are speaking of an *interior change* of the bread and wine, only perceptible by faith. Other writers were less careful in their language, suggesting that the faithful actually sink their teeth into the flesh of Christ. Some Catholics today will remember being taught something very similar, especially with regard to whether or not our teeth should touch the host, but it is important to distinguish popular teaching from the solemn teaching of the Church.

In the western Church, *St Ambrose* (died 397) stressed the change of the bread and wine by the infinite power of God, a change in the nature of the elements; it is the historical body of Jesus that we receive, but it is given to us as spiritual food. *St Augustine* (died 430), no less convinced of the reality of Christ's presence, tried to stave off any cannibalistic understanding of the Eucharist, and some of his writings stress the sacramental nature of that presence: the body and blood of Christ are not consumed with our senses, but sacramentally, under the signs of bread and wine. These two approaches really complement each other, and it is only once the ideas of 'real presence', 'conversion' and 'sacramental symbolism' are held together in a healthy tension that a truly balanced theology of the Eucharist can be formulated.

Almost inevitably, however, some thinkers veered towards extremes: on the one hand, towards a crude and materialistic understanding of the belief in the change in the bread and wine, and on the other, towards a purely symbolic or figurative understanding. This was not helped by a gradual change in emphasis in Eucharistic theology. The early Church had seen the Eucharistic presence of Christ as his 'mystical body' which was given in order to build up and unite the Church as the 'real body' of the Lord. By about 800, the Church was being seen as the 'mystical body' which brought about the 'real body' of the Eucharistic presence. Although this

is something of a simplification, the Eucharist was seen more and more as an end in itself, and Jesus' command to 'take and eat' increasingly came to mean in practice 'come and gaze'. Fewer and fewer people were receiving communion. With less and less active participation in the Eucharist, the 'real presence' was increasingly seen as an 'object' produced within the Eucharist. Eucharistic theology and devotion was more and more centred on the real presence itself and how it came about, rather than on its meaning and purpose in the life of the community of Christ's body.

The Middle Ages

The unresolved tension between those who stressed the realism of Christ's presence brought about by a change in the bread and wine, and those who stressed the sacramental, symbolic character of that presence, found a focal point in the mid-eleventh century in the controversy surrounding *Berengarius of Tours*, who died reconciled to the Church in 1088. Berengarius reacted far too strongly against the dominant extreme realism of his day, stressing instead the symbolic character of the Eucharist in such a way as to deny any real change in the bread and wine. In 1059 he was required to take an oath which stated that the body and blood of Christ 'are physically taken up and broken in the hands of the priest, and crushed by the teeth of the faithful'. Later theologians

like *St Thomas Aquinas* found such words extreme and embarrassing, and tried to find a way of expressing the total presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the change of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ while avoiding the blatantly carnal language of some of Berengarius's opponents. Berengarius clearly failed to do justice to the faith of the Church, but the controversy provoked theologians into developing and clarifying our understanding of the manner of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist.

The introduction of the Aristotelian notion of *substance* was vital in this process. In 1079 a more moderate oath was accepted by Berengarius, stating that the bread and wine are substantially changed into the body and blood of Christ. *Lanfranc*, later Archbishop of Canterbury, who had himself been rather prone to extreme realist language, developed the use of this concept, stressing the mysterious nature of the change and that nothing physical is done to Christ's body in the Eucharist:

Therefore we do believe that the earthly substances which, through the priestly ministry, are divinely consecrated on the table of the Lord are, in a way that defies all telling and understanding, wondrously transformed by a power that operates from above into the essence of the Lord's body. The Lord's

body itself, which exists in heaven at the right hand of the Father, remains immortal, inviolate, whole, untouched, unharmed. (*On the Body and Blood of the Lord*, 19)

The language of 'substance' enabled theologians to insist on the real presence of Jesus by a change in the inner reality of bread and wine while avoiding any crude identification of that presence with what we handle with our senses. This is the importance of the idea of 'sacrament', which involves a distinction between the visible sign (what we see, touch and taste) and the invisible reality we receive (the whole Christ). This avoids falling into the pitfall of thinking that whatever is done to what we handle (chewing, digesting, dropping, breaking, spilling) is actually being done to the risen Lord himself.

St Thomas Aquinas

The supreme statement of this 'substance' approach to the Eucharistic presence was that of St Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae* (Part III, qq. 73-83). He showed how it could make sense to believe in a real conversion of the bread and wine even though they looked exactly the same as before the consecration.

St Thomas used the distinct concepts of *substance* and *accidents* (or *species*). The *substance* is the inner reality of a thing, which 'stands under' (sub-stans) its *accidents*.

The *accidents* of a thing are its qualities and appearances, such as colour, size, shape, weight, taste and smell. In other words, the accidents are all the characteristics of a thing that can be grasped by our five senses, whereas the substance of it is beyond the direct reach of the senses. The distinction is based on the common sense realisation that there is more to a thing than its appearances and attributes; there is more to a tree for example than the colour of its leaves, the length of its branches and the taste of its fruit.

By the words of consecration at Mass, it is the whole substance, the inner reality, of the bread and wine, which becomes instead the whole substance, the inner reality, of the crucified, risen and glorified Jesus Christ. All that remains of the bread and wine are their accidents, their appearances and attributes, but now the substance that we encounter ‘under’ them is not bread and wine, but Jesus himself.

From the point of view of our senses, there is no change, and the most exhaustive chemical analysis of a host would produce exactly the same results before and after it has been consecrated. We touch and break and taste the accidents of bread; some thinkers today identify these accidents with the empirical chemical aspect of reality, the atoms and molecules. These remaining appearances of bread and wine are the ‘blessed sacrament’ of the real, substantial presence of the Lord, a

presence which cannot be touched and broken and tasted because it is a presence 'beyond the senses' and 'beyond the physical' (metaphysical), a presence 'in the manner of a substance'.

Extreme realists were shocked by this interpretation, and it was indeed St Thomas' purpose to avoid any crude sensualistic understanding of the unique presence of Christ. He reminds us in the *Summa* that the breaking and grinding with the teeth mentioned in the first Berengarian oath are to be referred to the accidents, the sacred species under which is the body of Christ (77.7). This teaching is summed up succinctly in his hymn for Corpus Christi, *Lauda Sion*. The communicant receives the whole Christ, uncut, unbroken, undivided; there is no division or breaking up of the reality (Christ's body) but only of the sign (the accidents of bread and wine) [*A sumente non concisus, non confractus, non divisus, integer accipitur... Nulla rei fit scissura, signi tantum fit fractura*].

A clear distinction between the sense-perceptible accidents of the bread and wine and the 'beyond the senses' substance of Christ's body and blood makes intelligible the Catholic belief that the whole Christ - body, blood, soul and divinity - is present under the smallest fragment of consecrated bread or the smallest drop of consecrated wine. By adopting the concepts of 'substance' and 'accidents', theologians did not think they had finally explained away all the difficulties in the

End of booklet sample. Find more and order online:

<http://www.ignatius-cts.com/>