

MODERN MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE EUCHARIST

by Rev. Regis Scanlon, O.F.M. Cap.

Joseph Cardinal Bernardin stated that "according to a Gallup poll only thirty percent of our faithful believe what the Church teaches on the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist." [1] Once more, there is also a campaign to eliminate kneeling during the entire Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass. [2] The cause of these two related phenomena can be discovered by examining past and present Catholic theology of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Let's first look at Scripture.

Scripture and Tradition Are Clear On Transubstantiation

When Jesus told his disciples that "my flesh is real food and my blood real drink" (Jn. 6:55), his disciples took Him <literally> and said: "This sort of talk is hard to endure! How can anyone take it seriously?" (Jn. 6:60). Then St. John's Gospel reports: "Jesus was fully aware that his disciples were murmuring in protest at what he had said" (Jn. 6:61). John then states that "From this time on, many of his disciples broke away and would not remain in his company any longer. Jesus then said to the Twelve, 'Do you want to leave me too?'" (Jn. 6:66-67). The Twelve (except for Judas) stayed with Jesus because they trusted his words (Jn. 6:69-71).

Now, "Jesus was fully aware" that the departing disciples understood his teaching literally. Obviously, if Jesus had only meant that they would eat his Body and drink his Blood <figuratively> or <symbolically,> He would have said so before they walked away. Since He did not, He meant his words literally and, of course, <not sensibly or cannibalistically>, but miraculously!

Some people become confused by what Jesus said after the disciples complained that "This sort of talk is hard to endure! How can anyone take it seriously?" Jesus states: "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words I spoke to you are spirit and life" (Jn. 6:63). They mistakenly think that this is proof that Jesus is saying that He only means that the disciples will eat his flesh and drink his blood spiritually and not literally. But it is illogical that Jesus would say that <his flesh> is "useless" after saying 'the flesh of the Son of Man' gives "life" (Jn. 6:53). Rather, Jesus is not talking about his flesh, but about <their flesh.> Jesus is telling the disciples that they cannot grasp or come to his teaching on the Eucharist by their <senses> or their "flesh," which is "useless" for this purpose, but only through faith or "spirit".

Now, the fourth century Church Fathers understood that the Eucharist is really Jesus Christ Himself. St. Cyril of Alexandria states: "He said <This is my body> and <this is my blood> in a demonstrative fashion, so that you might <not> judge that what you see <is a mere figure>." [3] And St. Ambrose of Milan teaches about the Eucharist that "<nature itself is changed through the blessing">.[4] So, it is quite clear from the fourth century Church Fathers that the Eucharistic consecration "changes" the "nature" of the bread and wine into the "nature" of Jesus Christ and that the Eucharist is not just "a mere figure" of Jesus Christ but "truly" Jesus Christ Himself. This is precisely why St. Augustine states about the Eucharist: "no one eats of this flesh without having first adored it . . . and not only do we not sin in thus adoring it, but we would be sinning if we did not do so". [5]

This teaching on Christ's Eucharistic Real Presence was not seriously challenged until the eleventh century (after a thousand years!). Then, Berengarius of Tours held that Christ was present in the Eucharist only "as mere sign and symbol" and that after the consecration, "bread must remain". [6] Berengarius stated: "That which is consecrated (the bread) is not able to cease existing materially." [7] St. Thomas Aquinas (thirteenth century) calls "Berengarius . . . the first deviser of this heresy," that the consecrated Bread and Wine are only a "sign" of Christ's Body and Blood." [8]

St. Thomas also gave a very good reason why bread and wine cannot remain after the consecration: "Because it would be opposed to the veneration of this sacrament, if any substance were there, which could not be adored with adoration of "<latria>". [9] If bread and wine remained, Catholics would be committing the sin of idolatry by adoring it. So, physical bread and wine do not remain!

Thus, the Council of Trent (1545-1563), in harmony with St. Thomas infallibly taught:

"If anyone says that in the sacred and holy sacrament of the Eucharist there remains the substance of bread and wine together with the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and denies that wonderful and singular conversion of the <whole substance of the bread> into the Body, and of the <entire substance of the wine> into the Blood, the species (appearance) of the bread and wine only remaining, a change which the Catholic Church most fittingly calls <transubstantiation:> let him be anathema." [10]

Finally, in 1963, Pope Paul VI taught most clearly that, after the consecration at Mass, "nothing remains of the bread and wine except for the <species> (smell, taste, etc.)" and that Christ is (bodily) present whole and entire in his <physical> 'reality,' corporeally present, although not in the manner in which bodies are in a place." [11] So, the "<physical> thing" that remains after the consecration is Jesus Christ and not bread and wine.

New Theology or Old Heresy?

In 1966 the late Fr. Karl Rahner stated that "one can no longer maintain today that bread is a substance, as St. Thomas and the Fathers of the Council (of Trent) obviously thought it was". [12] For Rahner, the "substance" of a thing did not include its <material and physical> reality, but the "meaning and purpose" of the thing. [13] So, according to Karl Rahner, transubstantiation meant that, after the consecration of the Mass, the physical bread remained physical bread but it now had a new "meaning" of spiritual food because it was now a "symbol" of Jesus Christ. [14]

Fr. Edward Schillebeeckx agreed with Fr. Karl Rahner that the physical bread and wine were only a "sign" of Christ. [15] In fact, for Schillebeeckx, the "real presence" of Christ in the Eucharist was not the consecrated bread and wine, but the presence of Christ in the <"assembled community">. [16] This is why Schillebeeckx says that "<I kneel, not before a Christ who is, as it were, condensed in the host, but before the Lord himself> who is offering his reality, his body, to me through the host." [17]

This same theory of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist was accepted by some theologians in the United States. Thus, Tad W. Guzie, S. J. of Marquette University, says that the change in the bread and wine taking place through the consecration of the Mass is "not one that has to do with the <physical> order". [18] And, Georgetown University professor, Monika K. Hellwig, suggests that Jesus' words at the Eucharist were not meant to identify the "bread" with his body, but that the "community" was the "embodiment . . . of Jesus". [19] Finally, Anthony Wilhelm, author of <Christ Among Us> (a catechism with "two million copies sold"), stated:

"When we say that the bread and wine 'become Christ' <we are not saying that bread and wine are Christ . . . What we mean is that the bread and wine are a sign of Christ present>, here and now, in a special way - <not in a mere physical way>, as if condensed into a wafer . . ." [20]

It is most unfortunate that the errors of Berengarius are still with us today. They are to be found at the center of a maze of subtle, obfuscating theological language. It should come as no surprise then, that so many of today's Catholics are ignorant of the Church's teaching on the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. However, we have great hope that the light of Truth will dispell the Berengarian mists through the laity's loyal act of kneeling in Eucharistic Adoration at the Liturgy and the constant teaching of the Magisterium, exemplified by Pope John Paul's excellent <Catechism of the Catholic Church>.

ENDNOTES

1. Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, in Gianni Cardinale, "Clinton and Us," <30 Days>, no. 12, 1992, p. 32.
2. FDLC (Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions), "Posture During Eucharistic Prayer," Position Statement 1990 C 2.853, <FDLC Newsletter> (October 1990), 35.
3. St. Cyril, Bishop of Alexandria, found in Paul VI, <Mysterium Fidei>, no. 50, <The Pope Speaks>, vol. 10, no. 1 (Summer-Autumn 1965), D. 322. Partially my emphasis.
4. St. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, found in Paul VI, no. 51, p. 322. My emphasis.
5. St. Augustine of Hippo, found in Paul VI, no. 55, p. 323.
6. C. E. Sheedy, "Berengarius of Tours," <New Catholic Encyclopedia>, vol. 2, p. 321; James T. O'Connor. <The Hidden Manna> (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), p. 97.
7. Berengarius, <De Sacra Coena Adversus Lanfrancum>, A. F. Vischer and F. T. Vischer, eds. (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1975), p. 91. English translation taken from James T. O'Connor, p. 102. My parenthesis and emphasis.
8. St. Thomas Aquinas, <Summa Theologica>, IIIa, q. 75, art. 1. My emphasis.
9. St. Thomas Aquinas, <Summa Theologica> IIIa, q. 75, art. 2. Partially my emphasis
10. <Denz.> no. 884, 30th edition. My emphasis and parenthesis. For translation of "species" with "appearance" see <Denz.>, no. 874, and

English translation from Paul VI, no. 45, p. 321.

11. Paul VI, no. 46, p. 321. My emphasis and parenthesis.

12. Karl Rahner, S. J., <Theological Investigations>, vol. IV, trans. by Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), p. 307. My parenthesis.

13. Karl Rahner, S.J., p. 307; Engelbert Gutwenger, "Transubstantiation," <Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi> edited by Karl Rahner, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 1754; St. Thomas Aquinas, On Being and Essence, chap. 2, no. 1, pp. 34-35. My emphasis.

14. Engelbert Gutwenger, pp. 1754-1755. My emphasis.

15. Edward Schillebeeckx, O. P. <The Eucharist>, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), p. 120.

16. Edward Schillebeeckx, O. P.. p. 120. My emphasis.

17. Edward Schillebeeckx, O. P., p. 120. My emphasis.

18. Tad W. Guzie, S. J., <Jesus and the Eucharist> (New York: Paulist Press, 1974), pp. 67-68. My parenthesis and my emphasis.

19. Monika K. Hellwig, <Understanding Catholicism> (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 139.

20. Anthony Wilhelm, <Christ Among Us>, 5th revised edition (San Francisco: Harper Collins Pub., 1990), the cover and p. 216.

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