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OBSTACLES TO REAL PRESENCE

Every few years, the Pew Research Center releases an updated study on American Catholics' belief related to Eucharistic presence. The study is often used as a bellwether in determining the commitment of Catholics to religious practice in the United States. In 2019, the report found that seven out of ten Catholics believe that the bread and wine at Mass are symbols of Christ's Body and Blood. Only 31 percent of Catholics in the same study professed faith that the bread and the wine become "the actual Body and Blood of Christ."¹

Within US Catholicism, the reactions to the study are similar each time Pew releases its most recent findings. Some Catholics call for a renewed catechesis of the Eucharist, scandalized that so many do not understand the doctrine of real presence and transubstantiation. In 2019, Bishop Robert Barron expressed anger that the Church has consistently failed in expressing the basics of this doctrine to the faithful.² For Bishop Barron and many Catholic leaders who share his concern, the survey functioned as a wake-up call for clergy and catechists to intensify efforts related to Eucharistic catechesis.

Others are critical of the study. Dr. Mark Gray, a Catholic sociologist, has drawn attention to the imprecise theological language in the survey. Catholics do not profess faith that the bread and wine become “the actual Body and Blood of Christ.” We declare faith in the real or substantial presence of Christ, Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity. This presence is offered to us through the species or accidents of bread and wine. The language of the poll, not taken from Catholic teaching, may have led to confusion on the part of pollsters. The actual Body of Christ could have been understood as the localized body of Christ, ascended to the right hand of the Father. The pollsters, in this case, demonstrate that confusion around Eucharistic doctrine is a problem not only for Catholics but those who work for Pew.

Lastly, others celebrate the results of the poll. According to the Jesuit journalist Fr. Thomas Reese, S.J., the survey reveals that there is an outdated approach to Eucharistic theology still being handed down in parishes. As he writes in the *National Catholic Reporter*,

I personally find the theology of transubstantiation unintelligible, not because I don't believe that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ, but because I do not believe in prime matter, substantial forms, substance and accidents. I don't think we have a clue what Jesus meant when he said, “This is my body.” I think we should humbly accept it as a mystery and not pretend we understand it.³

For Fr. Reese (and he is not alone), the doctrine of transubstantiation depends on an antiquated view of the physical world drawn from Aristotle. Those surveyed by Pew do not believe in

transubstantiation because the doctrine is incomprehensible to the modern person. Even more, the real focus of the Eucharist, according to Fr. Reese, should not be adoring or praying to Jesus in the Eucharistic host. Instead, the Eucharist is oriented toward making the assembly more Christlike through participation in the communal meal of the Mass for greater service to the world.

Exempting the position of Dr. Gray, whose critique should be read by pastoral leaders tempted to give too much attention to the Pew study, it is clear to me that many Catholics do not possess a precise understanding of the doctrines of both real presence and transubstantiation. They also do not engage in reverent practices that enable the Christian to taste and see the goodness of the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. This book wants to bring these two concerns together—a meaningful retrieval of the doctrines of real presence and transubstantiation, together with the spiritual formation required to assent to the doctrine with our full heart.

In this opening chapter, I seek to clear the way for this retrieval. I do so by focusing on three prominent confusions around the doctrines of real presence and transubstantiation. These confusions are the obstacles that make it difficult to both understand and teach these doctrines. These three points of confusion include

- an overly physical and thus technical interpretation of real presence and transubstantiation,
- a lack of Eucharistic reverence, and
- a false dichotomy presumed between Eucharistic reverence and recognizing the presence of Christ in the hungry and the thirsty.

MISUNDERSTANDING REAL PRESENCE

I suspect that most Catholics, even if they do believe in real presence, could not explain it to an inquisitive neighbor who wanted to know why Catholics think they eat the Body and Blood of Christ. Since 2010, I have taught theology at the University of Notre Dame. In many of my classes, students do not know what a sacrament is and why the Eucharist is one of these sacraments. They are “kind of” aware that transubstantiation is important. But if asked to define the doctrine, most of my students (of which around 83 percent are baptized Catholic) would not be able to articulate why the Church believes in the real presence, what transubstantiation is, and why it matters for Christian life. One could imagine these students might check a box on a survey such as the Pew study confessing that Christ is symbolically present at Mass. Since you cannot perceive Jesus present on the altar, symbolic presence makes the most sense to those unformed by the Church’s Tradition—especially when the Pew study itself does not use the proper language in describing the Church’s teaching around real presence.

But even those who can articulate the doctrine of real presence also misunderstand what the Church teaches about the Eucharist. Several years ago, I wrote a book on why boredom in the Mass functioned as an invitation to a deeper level of participation in the Eucharistic mystery.⁴ A novice Catholic writer looking to sell the book to someone besides his grandmother, I participated in Catholic radio programs to speak about the themes of the book. My interviewers were fervent, the kind of folks who would join the short-story writer Flannery O’Connor

in her retort to a fellow Catholic writer who at a party confessed faith in the Eucharist as a mere symbol, “Well, if it’s a symbol, to hell with it.”⁵ These radio hosts, while rejecting a symbolic approach to the Eucharist, often fell into a physical interpretation of transubstantiation that was also not congruent with the Church’s teaching. Many Catholics have been taught through blogs, preaching, and other popular media that these Eucharistic miracles are signs of what has physically happened at the consecration. And yet transubstantiation is not a physical change. The Eucharistic doctor par excellence St. Thomas Aquinas argues that Eucharistic miracles (bleeding hosts, the appearance of a child during the consecration) are secondary miracles meant to lead the doubting Christian to express faith in the Eucharist presence of Christ.⁶ A bleeding host is not related to transubstantiation because Christ’s presence in the Blessed Sacrament is perceived, for Thomas Aquinas, not through the senses but exclusively through an act of the intellect. Here, the intellect does not mean the faculty that only intellectuals in universities employ in writing books. Instead, intellect is our attention, memory, imagination, understanding, reflection, and our way of judging. We are all intellectuals because we use our intellects each day to move from the seen to that which is unseen. I see a dark cloud, and I come to the hypothesis that it might rain. This hypothesis is an act of the intellect.⁷ In a similar way, I confess that Christ is present in the Eucharist not because I perceive this presence through the senses but because the intellect has been transformed by faith to recognize the presence of Love.

But maybe all this talk about Eucharistic doctrine is just an overreaction. Perhaps, like Fr. Reese, we should give up the antiquated doctrine of transubstantiation to find a new way to

speaking about the Eucharist. Do we really need to explain away the mystery of this presence using terms such as *substance* and *accidents*? Is it not sufficient for the Christian to bend the knee before Christ's presence? Does the Church require her faithful to receive a doctoral degree in ancient philosophy to savor the gift of the Eucharist?

Bending the knee before the Blessed Sacrament, offering flowers before an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and crying out "My Lord and my God" during the consecration are essential to fostering Eucharistic devotion. Still, Catholics are called to more than servile assent to doctrine. We have been given the capacity to think, to understand, to grasp what it means to profess faith in Jesus Christ. Prayer and intellect can go together. After all, it is Thomas Aquinas who writes a treatise on the Eucharist in his *Summa Theologiae* alongside composing Eucharistic hymns and prayers for the Feast of Corpus Christi.

Doctrinal precision is ordered ultimately to deeper appreciation of the mystery of divine love. The doctrines of real presence and transubstantiation are ways of forming our habits of speech to communicate properly about this mystery of love. Transubstantiation is not a technical explanation for what happens in the Eucharist. In fact, it is a doctrine intended to form women and men to approach the sacrament as the personal and life-giving presence of the crucified and risen Lord given to us to eat. There is precision necessary in Eucharistic doctrine, but such precision is designed to facilitate a deeper encounter rather than explain away the mystery.

And the precise language used in transubstantiation is important. Sure, it requires a bit of background to teach this doctrine. When the modern Catholic hears the term *substance*,

they do not think of Aristotle but of material things. They imagine that the substance of bread is that which can be seen, touched, and tasted.

But the precise language of the doctrine was designed to avoid an overly physical account of Christ's presence, as well as a merely symbolic one. To do this, the Eucharist employed language from the philosopher Aristotle. But it is not quite right to say that this language requires one to embrace the physical worldview of Aristotle to understand the doctrine of transubstantiation. As Joseph Ratzinger writes,

The eucharist transformation relates *per definitionem*, not to that which appears, but to that which never *can* appear. It takes place outside of the physical realm. But that means, to put it quite clearly: viewed from the perspective of physics and chemistry, absolutely nothing takes place in the gifts—not even something in a microscopic realm; considered physically and chemically, after the transformation, they are exactly the same as they were before it.⁸

Transubstantiation is not an extension of Aristotle's physics into theology. Instead, it employs the language of the philosopher Aristotle to describe an essential transformation that takes place in the Eucharistic elements. The species of bread and the wine remain, and yet their reality is now entirely different—the Eucharist is the personal presence of Jesus Christ. To understand this claim, it is helpful to see that Thomas Aquinas uses Aristotle, but one does not need to become a natural scientist in the mode of the Philosopher (what St. Thomas calls Aristotle).

In fact, transubstantiation may be understood in short order by almost anyone who attends to the meaning of the doctrine.

According to Aristotle, everything possesses a substance. A substance is that which makes the thing what it is. Such substances are not visible. My three-year-old daughter goes for a walk down the street. She sees a golden retriever, a poodle, and a greyhound. Each dog looks different. And yet she will wondrously proclaim every time, “Look, doggies!” The properties or appearances of each dog may be dissimilar. One is small, the other is large. One may be brown, the other black. One may have short hair, another long hair. But they share a substance—that which makes them *this very dog*.

Transubstantiation is the explanation of the doctrine of real presence employing the word *substance*. The bread and wine have changed their substance—what they fundamentally are. They look, taste, smell, feel like, and even sound like bread and wine. But through the words of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, and through the instrument of the ordained minister’s words, the substance of *this* bread and *this* wine are transformed. At the level of substance, there is no more bread. There is no more wine. Rather, the Eucharist is the total and real presence of Jesus Christ, given to the Church in what looks and tastes like bread and wine. The species or appearance—that is, the accidents of the bread and the wine—remain available to our senses, sustained only by a miracle.

So the doctrine of transubstantiation is not a technical or physical explanation of what happens at Mass. Instead, it is a doctrine that describes how Jesus Christ feeds us with his very presence through the signs of bread and wine. As we will see in the Fathers of the Church, in Thomas Aquinas, and in Eucharistic adorers both medieval and modern, those signs of bread and wine

really do matter. It is through these signs that we human beings learn to delight in the presence of God here and now.

A LACK OF EUCHARISTIC REVERENCE

And yet understanding the doctrine is not sufficient. Eucharistic formation also requires reverence, bending the knee before the presence of our Lord. It is possible that we misunderstand the Eucharist because we do not adore the Lord. In his *A Grammar of Assent*, St. John Henry Newman introduces a distinction between notional and real assent. Notional assent is abstract and thus concerned with propositions and definitions. This kind of assent or apprehension discerns how competing claims interact with one another and relate to the whole. Real assent, on the other hand, is an act of imagination. As an assent, it implicates the one making this assent at a personal level. Before I was a dad, I could make a notional assent to the following proposition: raising children requires patience. This is a reasonable claim. Children can ask a lot from parents. If I were a sociologist, I might perform a longitudinal study of couples assessing how they developed patience from the birth of their children through when their children leave home.

A real assent to parental patience is different. What if instead of doing a study about parental patience, I become a dad? I begin to experience sleepless nights. I would take frequent and very slow walks with toddlers around church sanctuaries. I would wait as an adolescent son or daughter occupies the bathroom for two hours. The virtue of parental patience is no longer notional for me. It has become real.

Real assent must be concrete, dealing no longer with ideas but the reality itself. And religious assent to dogmas must be both notional and real for the Christian. Newman writes,

A dogma is a proposition: it stands for a notion or for a thing; and to believe it is to give the assent of the mind to it, as it stands for the one or for the other. To give a real assent to it is an act of religion; to give a notional is a theological act. It is discerned, rested in, and appropriated as a reality by the religious imagination; it is held as a truth, by the theological intellect.⁹

A propositional approach to the doctrines of real presence and transubstantiation cannot ensure a real assent. We need to appropriate the doctrine, hold it in our religious imaginations, and bow down before the Blessed Sacrament before we make a real assent to real presence.

Because a real assent requires reverence, the Eucharist is often misunderstood not only because people do not know the doctrine but also the Church implicitly professes in her prayer a lack of belief in the presence of Christ. If the faithful approach the Eucharist as “merely” symbolic, it may have more to do with the poverty of the Eucharistic cult (the spirit of reverence through which we approached the worship of God at Mass) than the quality of doctrinal instruction. In many places, the Mass is celebrated in such a way that Christ’s presence is not the focus of worship. There are no postures of adoration or silence in the Mass. The hymns that the Church sings during the Eucharist may themselves speak about the Eucharistic elements as merely bread and wine. A parish that notionally acknowledges the doctrine of real