Scratching the surface of an ‘inexhaustible mystery’

Under the direction of Bishop Roger Foys, the Office of Catechesis and Evangelization has teamed up with the Messenger to produce this and four subsequent special sections on the Eucharist. Long-term readers of the Messenger will recognize these articles since they were published previously. However, they have been re-structured by themes and re-designed as “pull-outs” in the hope that you will consider collecting them and keeping them for future reference. This series on the Eucharist covers a variety topics, but, of course, with limited space and the fact that this is an exploration at the very center of theology, we are only scratching the surface here. I hope that reading these short articles inspires you to explore more and to take every opportunity you are given to meet our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament.

Our faith is born from and expressed in theology (speech about God). Theology, in turn, remains, as St. Anselm once defined it, as a matter of “faith seeking understanding.” What we believe, we try to understand further; when we understand further, we believe more deeply. To grow in the faith means to engage in this cyclical process of seeking God. The reason we want to grow in faith is so that we can love God all the more.

Not long ago a Pew Research study reported that “Just one-third of U.S. Catholics agree with their Church that the Eucharist is the body, blood of Christ.” This particular study noted that “… nearly seven-in-ten Catholics (69 percent) say they personally believe that during Catholic Mass, the bread and wine used in Communion ‘are symbols of the body and blood of Jesus Christ.’ Just one-third of U.S. Catholics (31 percent) say they believe that ‘during Catholic Mass, the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Jesus.’”

This, understandably, caused shock waves to resound throughout the Church for anyone who was paying attention. However, there is reason to believe that we shouldn’t panic — yet. In this case, hopefully at least, things don’t seem to be as bad as they first appear. One factor to consider is sample size. The Disciple Maker Index, administered by the Catholic Leadership Institute, has currently surveyed 131,845 Catholics around the country about multiple themes connected with parish life. (By contrast, the PEW survey was based on 1,835 Catholics in a total sample population of 10,971.)

When asked about doctrines of the faith, 72 percent of the DMI respondents strongly agreed with the statement “I personally believe the Eucharist really is the body and blood of Jesus Christ.” Another 19 percent agreed with that statement. That’s almost 120,000 Catholics claiming they do agree with what the Church teaches, compared to the 569 respondents highlighted in the PEW results.

Also, when considering the PEW survey, it has been pointed out that phraseology may have been an issue. The word “actually,” used in the Pew study, may have been interpreted as referring to a physical change, which would explain why few Catholics chose that response. If so, they were correct, in that the Church does not teach that there is a physical change in appearance.

Long before the word “coronavirus” was part of our daily speech, our Catholic churches weren’t exactly over flowing with people on a weekly basis. With the exception of Christmas and, maybe, Easter, most people weren’t worried about arriving early to Mass so that they could find a seat. There are many factors and explanations for this that could be explored. But I think it’s fair to say that the general long-term trend in the Eastern and Northern parts of our country has been a steady decline in numbers.

Now, in the post-pandemic-of-2020 world, there is, understandably, anxiety among those who care for souls what Mass attendance numbers will look like when all of this is over, and what the long-term effects will be on the sacramental life of the Church. Being forced away from the sacraments, even if it was only for a short time, could easily cause confusion for the faithful, or even, God forbid, a notion that the sacraments are not needed for salvation. For believers, the Catechism of the Catholic Church does not mince words about this and affirms that “the sacraments of the New Covenant are necessary for salvation.” (n. 1129)

There’s a story about an evangelical Protestant preacher who once said, “If I truly believed what you Catholics say you believe, you would have to pull me away from the tabernacle. If I believed that my Lord was physically present in the church building I would never leave.” Now, of course, we can’t just stay in front of the tabernacle any more than Peter, James and John could stay up on the mountain with Jesus after he was transfigured (Mt. 17:1-10), but the message remains the same and the point is well taken. For us believers there is kind of a paradox: People don’t go to Mass because they don’t believe in the Real Presence, and they don’t believe in the Real Presence because if it were true, then wouldn’t the churches be full?

Like everything else in our lives, “it’s complicated.” But, here is one thing we can be sure of: Catholic theologians and teachers, as well as parents and Godparents, will always have work to do in communicating belief in the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, since the notion and reality of transubstantiation remains “an inexhaustible mystery.” You have to start somewhere and these editors of the Messenger are the perfect place.

— David Cooley, Co-director and Office Manager, Office of Catechesis and Evangelization

The Eucharist: The Source and Summit

8 The Truth is ‘Out There’
Deacon Timothy Britt

9 The Eucharist ‘in the Beginning’
Alma Burnette

10 Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist
Father Jeffrey Vonlehmen

Study Questions
Real Presence in the Eucharist

Father Jeffrey VonLehmen
In the Gospels Jesus says, “This is my body” and “This is my blood.” What does that mean to each of us?

How is Jesus present in the Eucharist?

Most of us, at one time or another, find ourselves either asking that question or trying to explain the mystery of relationship with us. We need a body-and-blood presence with Christ in order to understand the body and blood of Jesus when we understand true love in relationships involving friends, family, and marriage.

Sacrifice and Life

Think in terms of word associations. When I say “green” someone might think of grass. When I say “blue,” one might think of the sky. In our culture, when someone says “blood,” we probably think of something terrible, of violence or loss of life. When we hear about body and blood as sacrifice, as in the sacrifice of the Mass, we think something has been killed. But in the ancient Hebrew mentality, if an animal was sacrificed to God, the people did not think the animal was killed to appease an angry God. Instead, they thought of blood as the presence of life. Sacrifice was not so much giving up their best lamb or the first and best part of their crop. Sacrifice meant communion of life.

This brings to mind the wonderful image of an infant in the mother’s womb. The infant is being nourished through the umbilical cord by the body and blood of the mother. The baby is receiving life! The mother’s body is making all kinds of changes and sacrifices for the infant in her womb, and the mother is very conscious of the communion she has with her infant. The bond between mother and baby is truly a body-and-blood relationship.

The bond between God, our loving parent, and us is just as strong and concrete. God wants a body-and-blood relationship with us, and this concrete relationship is made possible in Christ. God so loved the world that he sent his Son, Christ’s sacrifice in becoming one like us in the incarnation and in his passion on the cross establishes a communion of life, a real presence in which we are assured that God desires us as much as we desire him.

The bread and wine are not simply like the body and blood of Christ. Scripture always says it so well: “Amen, Father, for you have made him holy by the sacrifice of your Son, who is true food, and my body is true drink.” (John 6:53-56)

The Different Modes of Christ’s Presence

In order that they should achieve a deeper understanding of the mystery of the Eucharist, we proclaim the mystery of faith. And it is a mystery! But the mystery of the kingdom of God and the Eucharist is meant to be obvious although it cannot be reduced to human logic. Sometimes, what is most obvious is most overlooked.

I invite you to look at the obvious — our ordinary human experiences — to help make sense of the Eucharist and Real Presence. Why does it make sense for Catholics to believe in what traditionally has been called transubstantiation (the changing of the whole substance of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ)? Why is it important to say that the Eucharist is a concrete encounter in which we are fed concretely through the umbilical cord of the Holy Spirit.

Demonstrating the importance of this sacrament, a Catholic visionary once said, “If I had a choice between a vision and the Eucharist, I would choose the Eucharist.”

Truly the Eucharist is a real, interpersonal encounter between God and the worshiping community exactly as Christ created it and exactly as Christ intended it from the beginning because Christ is body-and-blood present. Our human experiences of love and relationships tell us that any love seeks concrete union with the beloved.

The love expressed in the Eucharist is as old as Christmas. It is like the love between a mother and her infant in the womb. It is the love of God in Christ for his people not yet fully born into the reign of God: “... the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world; whoever eats this flesh is like me; whoever drinks the blood is like me” (John 6:53-56)

The Body of Christ

There is no doubt that a body-and-blood relationship exists between a mother and her child. But don’t they think of each other as the motherly bond? They think of the human relationship between them, whether or not it is a mutually loving relationship. It’s the same way in the Eucharistic celebration. We have a body-and-blood relationship with God in Christ. In this encounter, we no longer get stuck on the elements of bread and wine. We can increase our understanding of God’s presence concretely through the Body and Blood of Christ — the person of Christ — if we knock down those for whom he died out of love. For this reason, people are the body of Christ. Scripture always says it so well: “Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.” (Matt 25:45) If anyone says, I love God, but hates his brother, he is a liar.” (1 John 4:20) In speaking of the condemnation of the unjust steward, Matthew’s Gospel says, “So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart.” (Matt 18:35)

It is simple: we must have reverence for one another. We cannot but want a community of compassion, mercy, peace and justice. We recognize that we all come form the same womb of God, the love of God poured out into our hearts through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit signed and sealed in the body and blood relationship we have in Christ.

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Eucharistic Ministry, no.9)
In the beginning… The Eucharist prefigured in the Old Testament

Dr. Alma Burnett

“In the beginning, when God created...” (Genesis 1:1).

The bread of this verse, in Hebrew, is an untranslatable word, which is two Hebrew letters—the “aleph” and the “tav”—the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet. In Greek, the letters are the Alpha and the Omega. It serves the grammatical purpose of being the direct object pointer. These two letters form a concept rather than an actual word. They represent all the words of God by which all things were spoken into existence, including the Eucharist. These two letters are prominent in the creation story of the Old Testament, suggesting their meaning. The rabbi teaches:

When the Messiah comes he will explain the meaning of the aleph and the tav. And he did in Revelation: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” (Rev 22:12) The same concept is in John 1:1.

If the first man made him out of the earth’s pre-created dust and breathed life into the lifeless form, bringing man into being by his previously spoken words, “Let us make man in our image,”

Then as the lifeless form of the first Adam, became a living soul when the breath of God was breathed into him, so the second Adam would work to obtain bread, and since, it did not require work before, it had to be a product of a tree—the “bread” of the tree.

With this understanding, the text in John 6:55 and Romans 5:18 becomes more clear:

“...Christ is risen from the dead...” (Romans 5:18). God allowed Christ to die, to die for his people, his side, and his face, was opened (pierced) for the Church to come forth. St. Paul writes, “Because we are members of his body we are of his blood and flesh...” (Romans 5:13). The word “fruit” means more than apples, oranges or carrots. The fruit of the trees was manna. The tree of life had bread and wine. The fruit of the earth’s pre-created dust and breathed life into the lifeless form, bringing man into being by his previously spoken words, “Let us make man in our image.”

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During the Mass, the priest says, “Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread to offer; which earth has given and human hands—bread to offer, which earth has given and human hands—bread to offer—previous bread given by God, earth and human hands. The Levitical men, while serving as priests, though they were God’s appointed deliverers. Both were God’s appointed deliverers. Both provided food and drink. The list could go on and on.

There are many Eucharistic connections between the first Exodus in the Old Testament and the second Exodus brought on by Jesus.

Moses’ first public miracle was changing water to wine. Jesus’ first public miracle was changing water to wine, a forerunner of the greater miracle of changing wine to his own blood. Moses was the first priest to represent all the people. In this new position, he proclaims the word “fruit” means more than apples, oranges or carrots. The fruit of the trees was manna. The tree of life had bread and wine. The fruit of the earth’s pre-created dust and breathed life into the lifeless form, bringing man into being by his previously spoken words, “Let us make man in our image.”

Glorious words contain the word “fruit.” This word is the origin of both “fruit” and “food.” It means “the product of,” like “fruit of the womb.”

“...The fruit of the trees was manna. The tree of life had bread and wine.”

As Jesus said, “Bread and wine.”

God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread to offer; which earth has given and human hands—bread to offer—previous bread given by God, earth and human hands. The Levitical men, while serving as priests, though they were God’s appointed deliverers. Both were God’s appointed deliverers. Both provided food and drink. The list could go on and on.

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The Todah sacrifice is considered the greatest of the animal sacrifices because it added suffering of one’s own life (see Psalm 69:30). The Todah is a subcategory of the animal sacrifices because it added suffering of one’s own life (see Psalm 69:30). The Todah is a subcategory of the animal sacrifices because it added suffering of one’s own life (see Psalm 69:30). The Todah is a subcategory of the animal sacrifices because it added suffering of one’s own life (see Psalm 69:30). The Todah is a subcategory of the animal sacrifices because it added suffering of one’s own life (see Psalm 69:30). The Todah is a subcategory of the animal sacrifices because it added suffering of one’s own life (see Psalm 69:30). The Todah is a subcategory of the animal sacrifices because it added suffering of one’s own life (see Psalm 69:30). The Todah is a subcategory of the animal sacrifices because it added suffering of one’s own life (see Psalm 69:30). The Todah is a subcategory of the animal sacrifices because it added suffering of one’s own life (see Psalm 69:30). The Todah is a subcategory of the animal sacrifices because it added suffering of one’s own life (see Psalm 69:30). The Todah is a subcategory of the animal sacrifices because it added suffering of one’s own life (see Psalm 69:30). The Todah is a subcategory of the animal sacrifices because it added suffering of one’s own life (see Psalm 69:30). The Todah is a subcategory of the animal sacrifices because it added suffering of one’s own life (see Psalm 69:30). The Todah is a subcategory of the animal sacrifices because it added suffering of one’s own life (see Psalm 69:30). The Todah is a subcategory of the animal sacrifices because it added suffering of one’s own life (see Psalm 69:30). The Todah is a subcategory of the animal sacrifices because it added suffering of one’s own life (see Psalm 69:30). The Todah is a subcategory of the animal sacrifices because it added suffering of one’s own life (see Psalm 69:30). The Todah is a subcategory of the animal sacrifices because it added suffering of one’s own life (see Psalm 69:30). The Todah is a subcategory of the animal sacrifices because it added suffering of one’s own life (see Psalm 69:30). The Todah is a subcategory of the animal sacrifices because it added suffering of one’s own life (see Psalm 69:30). The Todah is a subcategory of the animal sacrifices because it added suffering of one’s own life (see Psalm 69:30). The Todah is a subcategory of the animal sacrifices because it added suffering of one’s own life (see Psalm 69:30).

(Continued on page 10)
The Truth is ‘Out There’

Deacon Timothy Britt

There is a show on T.V. called “The X Files.” It’s about two F.B.I. agents who investigate strange and unexplained events, like ghosts and UFOs. The show’s tagline is “the truth is out there.”

I always thought of that tagline as saying that there was a rational explanation for all the mysteries that the agents were investigating. The answers the agents were searching for basically the truth, would eventually be found because it was “out there” — somewhere.

Of course, there is another way of looking at that expression “out there.” It’s something that people say sometimes, when they’re talking about something or someone who is unconventional, unorthodox or eccentric.

It’s what people mean when they say that the truth is stranger than fiction or when they ask, “is this guy for real?”

As Catholics we cannot deny that the truth that we present to the world is “out there.” Jesus himself did not deny the truth. He was investigated. The answers the agents were searching for was right before our eyes. The plate of what used to be used to be bread and the cup of what used to be wine for some continue to appear to be nothing more than bread and wine.

Like Pontius Pilate, we ask, “What is truth?” while truth himself stands before us.

Following Jesus’ introduction of himself as bread for the life of the world, as he watched so many followers walk away, Jesus asked the Twelve, “Do you want to leave too?” To which Simon Peter replied, “Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the holy one of God.”

It wasn’t that what he was telling them was any easier to accept. Following what we call “the bread of life discourse” in John’s Gospel, many of his disciples said, “This saying is hard.” (John 6:60) “Who can accept it?” and many of them returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him.

Even today, many find our teaching on the Eucharist too out there. It is a stumbling block too confusing to get around or over. Two people can look at the same thing and see two entirely different things. Like an optical illusion, some of us might squint and strain and still not see what is said to be right before our eyes. The plate of what used to be bread and the cup of what used to be wine for some continue to appear to be nothing more than bread and wine. Like Pontius Pilate, we ask, “What is truth?” while truth himself stands before us.

In the Beginning

(Continued from page 9)

First, let’s consider the two great harvests of Israel — the spring harvest of grain and the fall harvest of mostly grapes and olives — bread, wine and oil. In Leviticus 23:13 13 God unites bread and wine, priests who anoint with oil and the sacrifice of the lamb.

Next, David is a type of Jesus starting with his birth in Bethlehem (House of Bread), and his being chosen by God for the dual role of king and priest — a priest-king in the order of Melchizedek, the one who brought bread and wine to Abraham (Gen 18:1-8). There are also many Eucharistic images written by David in the psalms, such as Psalm 110, which contains the Eucharistic prophecy: “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies. It is interesting to note that this psalm follows Psalm 22 — the passion psalm.

Now comes Elijah in the wilderness. (1 Kings 19:9) While in the wilderness, Elijah was awakened by an angel and found prepared for him bread in the shape of a cake and a jar of water. The bread in the shape of a cake is like the host of the holy Eucharist. The jar of water foreshadows the water turned to wine at Cana.

After the prophet Elijah comes Elisha, who miraculously feeds a hundred men with a small amount of food, a type of loaves and fishes miracle, which prefigured Jesus multiplying himself in the Eucharist.

All this is followed by Isaiah’s prophecies and his vision in chapter 7, the chapter where a coal of fire is taken from the fiery altar of God and is touched to Isaiah’s lips. The fiery coal is a prefiguration of the Host. This allusion is referred to in Church liturgies, especially in the Orthodox Liturgy of St. James where Communion is described as “receiving the fiery coal,” due to its cleansing of Isaiah to prepare him for his mission.

Another pre-Eucharistic episode is found in the vision of Ezekiel eating the scroll with the written Word of God on it — a scroll made edible (Ezek 2). This vision is experienced in the two parts of the Mass. In the first part, the Liturgy of the Word, we hear the written Word through the proclamations, we see the written Word before our eyes, and then we prepare to partake of the Word through the homily. In the second part, the Liturgy of the Eucharist, we eat the Word of God — the Word made flesh, the Word made edible.

Dr. Alma Burnette is a parishioner at St. Paul Parish, Crescent Springs. “I enjoy watching the children’s faces light up when we discuss the sacraments. They know deep in their hearts that this is a special time in their lives. When we discuss the parts of the Mass and especially the Consecration, they are listening like little sponges because they know it is an honor and privilege to receive Holy Communion. The children have a deep, inner yearning to learn more about the Eucharist.

When COVID-19 forced us to go to remote learning, we did not know when we would be able to celebrate First Holy Communion. One student who is dedicated to her faith said, “I will be most ready to receive Holy Communion” and that day came.

On the day of First Holy Communion, it was obvious that the Holy Spirit was hard at work! The First Communicants walked into church with a deep sense of maturity and confidence. The first communicants walked into church with a deep sense of maturity and confidence. When I received Holy Communion, I cried — I literally cried out of pure joy! Finally, I was reunited with my dear friend and savior Jesus. After Mass, I just sat there and cried and thanked God that we were able to have Mass. When I received Holy Communion, I cried — I literally cried out of pure joy! Finally, I was reunited with my dear friend and savior Jesus. After Mass, I just sat there and cried and thanked God that we were able to have Mass — and receive Holy Communion. COVID-19 made me realize, more than ever, that I truly love receiving Holy Communion and attending Mass. I will never take that for granted again.

Study Questions

How is Jesus present in the Eucharist and why is this so important?

What are some prefigurations of the Eucharist in the Old Testament?

What does it mean to say that Moses and David are a “type” of Christ?