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The Theological, Spiritual, and Practical Meaning of the Eucharist

by Benedictine Fr. Thomas Acklin

*Senior Fellow of the St. Paul Center for Biblical Theology
and Director of Counseling at St. Vincent Seminary
in Latrobe, Pennsylvania*

As soon as we start to like someone, we want to get to know him or her better in order to develop a relationship. A clearer understanding of the Eucharist opens us to a deeper, personal relationship with Jesus who gives himself to us in this sacrament. This relationship with Jesus is a covenant with all of us in his blood, and with each one of us in a personal and intimate way. In dying, Jesus conquers our death because of our union with him in our humanity. In rising, he restores our life. and in taking on our sins, his offering washes away the sins of all the living and dead. In the Spirit he breathes forth as he dies, the Son reconciles us to the Father. At the Last Supper, Jesus prepared his disciples for this gift by washing their feet, and he concluded by telling them, "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:24). We will consider the meaning of the relationship in the Eucharist theologically in terms of meal, sacrifice, memorial, and presence.

A Theology of the Eucharist Meal

A meal, especially one with family and friends, and particularly on an occasion of celebration, is an opportunity to deepen closeness, bonding, communion, and even union. It is an intimate occasion. Think by contrast of meals taken alone or with strangers or when there is tension and resentment, and how the meal then is somehow lacking in harmony. Jesus gave us the Eucharist at the Last Supper. But in this case, we not only eat with the host of the meal, we also eat and drink the consecrated host and wine and thereby eat the giver of the gift, becoming one with each other as we become one in Jesus Christ.

Lovers often express a "consuming" desire to be united to each other, to be inside each other. On the other end of the spectrum, we may recall times from our childhood when parents or other relatives affectionately pretended they would "eat us up" because they loved us so much, telling us that we were "good enough to eat." The common substances

of bread and wine become the very Body and Blood of Christ, and our consuming desire for him is satisfied in receiving the Eucharist.

The Last Supper of Jesus was a celebration of the Pasch, the Passover meal in which the Israelites were incorporated into God's chosen people as they ate the Paschal Lamb before their exodus from Egypt to the promised land. This sacrificial meal grounded a special relationship with the Lord, gave them an identity as his people, and strengthened their covenant with him. Jesus established a new covenant, a new relationship with us, through offering not a lamb but himself, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. When we do this in memory of him, we do it at a meal, the new Paschal Meal participating in the Paschal Mystery of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. We eat his Body and drink his Blood.

Jesus prepared his disciples to receive the Eucharist by washing their feet. In Jesus' time, this ritual was performed for all the guests before a festive meal, and Jesus enjoined his Apostles that if he who is our master has done this for us, so must we do for each other. The meaning is more than simply charity for, as Jesus tells Peter, "Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me" (Jn 13:8).

Sacrifice

We have already described the Eucharistic meal as a sacrificial meal. Most other sacrifices that have been offered to God or the gods, or even sacrifices we offer in daily life for the sake of others, have to be repeated. But

on the Cross, Jesus offered himself once and for all. The Eucharistic sacrifice, repeated each time Mass is celebrated, is not a *new* sacrifice, but a participation in the *one* sacrifice of Christ. As we will see, in this sense, it is a memorial.

"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn 15:13). In the Eucharist, the priest is also the victim. The one offering the sacrifice is also the one being sacrificed. The Good Shepherd is also one of the sheep, the Lamb of God, the lamb who has been slain. It is one thing to give something to someone in need, yet another to act to help someone in need, and yet the greatest sacrifice of all to give oneself for someone in need.

Christ, the great high priest (see Heb 8), offers himself once and for all, so that from that time forward, all sacrifices are offered in his sacrifice. This is really true. The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, offered by an ordained priest, is the unbloody sacrifice that participates in the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. In a real way, the moments of time in which we celebrate and receive the Eucharist are taken up into and participate in the time opening into eternity of the self-giving love of Jesus in the Paschal Mystery. For the baptized Christian, no sacrifice or offering is ever too small, because it is taken up into the one sacrifice and offering of Christ.

Memorial

In celebrating and receiving the Eucharist, we partake in the new Paschal meal (in which we share in the sacrifice of the Cross) and participate in Jesus' dying and rising. As we have seen,

through the invocation of the Holy Spirit, the moments of our time participate in the moments of the time of the Last Supper, Jesus' Death and Resurrection, and the offering of the Son to the Father. This is the deeper meaning of the Eucharist and of the directive Jesus gave his Apostles and their successors to enact what he did in order to participate in his offering.

"Do this in memory of me." We know what it is like at a meal when we are remembering our loved ones who have died or the great deeds of our ancestors. We use our memories to know them as they once were (and somehow still are) to us. But the memorial of the Eucharist, the remembering of Jesus, is also his real presence, as we will see. The word "anamnesis" in Greek has this fuller meaning of remembering. For example, in Luke 23:39-43, as Jesus hangs with two thieves dying on the cross, one thief says to him, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus responds to the plea of the dying thief and goes far beyond reassuring him that he will never forget him and the crucifixion they have undergone together. Rather, he says, "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise!"

This answer of Jesus shows the fullness of his remembrance of us and how he is present to us in the Eucharist. The thief is promised by Jesus that he will remember him in the sense of anamnesis, and thus we can understand the injunction of Jesus at the Last Supper, "Do this in remembrance of me," to mean, "On that day when you do these things (the Eucharist), I will be with you" Now, that is real presence.

Presence

When we remember someone at a celebratory meal, make a sacrifice to fund a scholarship in a person's memory, or contribute to a charitable work to which someone was dedicated throughout his life, in a certain way the one we remember seems to be present. Sometimes a plate is set at table for a loved one who has died, or a picture or some memorabilia of that person is set out to help us remember. The remembrance of Christ in the Eucharist is much more than that, however. Jesus Christ is truly present.

The presence of Jesus is substantial, and the bread and wine are transubstantiated. Substance is the very being or reality of someone or something, and the very reality of Jesus—Body, Blood, soul, and divinity (Council of Trent, DS 1640; 1651)—is present in the Eucharist. Most of us are familiar with the word "transubstantiation," which describes the changing over (trans) of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. This is a change of substance, meaning that the reality of bread and wine are changed over into the reality of the Body and Blood of Christ. Though still under the appearances of bread and wine, the reality is the person of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God who has shared our human nature.

This is truly the real Jesus as he walked on earth, God and man, but more.: It is Jesus on the Cross, who has died, risen, and entered into glory, truly present to us in the Eucharist. The Eucharist is not only a sign of Jesus, pointing beyond itself to him. It is not merely a metaphor, conjuring up Jesus by virtue of some similarity or correspondence to him. If we call the

Eucharist a symbol of Jesus, a representation of him, we must remember that this symbolic representation re-presents him, makes present again the reality of Jesus, the eternal Son of God, divine and human, truly present in the Eucharist. Let us reflect on the spiritual and practical meaning for us of this theological understanding of the Eucharist.

Spirituality and Practice of the Eucharist

Offering the Eucharist in Thanksgiving and Praise

When we gather to celebrate and receive the Eucharist, we must remember that this is more than a meal, more than a sacrifice, more than a memorial in the usual sense. In the Eucharist, we encounter Jesus in person. The mystery of the Eucharist is the mystery of the Church. We are united as members of his body, ever more deeply each time we celebrate and receive. “We are the body of Christ” must be complemented by “We are the Body of Christ!” This is no ordinary meal, and the transcendent nature of what we are doing should never be lost in the familiarity we also seek to have with the community of the faithful, our brothers and sisters. The secular must here open out to the sacred, Jesus himself, come sacramentally among us. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* recognizes distinct and complementary ways in which Jesus is present: in the faithful gathered in his name, in the proclamation of his Word, and most especially in his sacramental presence in the Eucharist (Second Vatican Council, *Constitution on the Sacred*

Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium), no. 7, in *Vatican Council II: Volume 1: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery [Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996]).

Our fellowship with each other in the eucharistic meal is also a sacrifice. Many Christians find this essential element of the Eucharist a stumbling block, because it recalls what seems to be a pre-Christian notion of God who demands the annihilation of what is most precious to us. Yet whatever we offer in the Eucharist, we should offer not only our intentions and needs but also everything we have and are, and none of it is taken from us except to be restored to us in Christ. We place ourselves on the altar with the gifts, and as we are incorporated into the one Body of Christ, we are taken up into his once-and-for-all offering of himself to the Father. The proper disposition is to offer ourselves in the self-offering of Jesus.

Communion with Christ in Receiving the Eucharist

On the day we do these things, he is with us! Whatever we bring with us as a community—our identity, our shared life of worship—we bring to him present now with us. Yet as individuals, we not only receive him in unity with all the other members of his Body, in communion with them, we also encounter him in a personal way. The silent time given to us during the celebration of the Eucharist allows the intimacy of this personal encounter to become communion. Our receiving him is our letting him “come under our roof.” We can share with him whatever we bring of our memories, hopes and fears,

needs and desires. We can also share with him what we might find impossible to share with anyone else.

We are humbled that he would come to us because of our sense of our communal unworthiness, but also especially because we are aware of our personal unworthiness. Yet this should stir us to contrition rather than mere guilt. Who am I that the Son of God would come to me, would let me receive him under my roof? This type of self-knowledge is too much for us, and we unconsciously seek to avoid it. So often in contemporary celebrations of the eucharistic liturgy, there is so much singing, reading, talking, explaining, and expressing, that the time for silence and intimacy with the Lord can be lost. Indeed, it seems to me, we often begin even to avoid this intimacy.

It can become hard for us to sit still, to be silent, to truly meet the Lord in the Eucharist. It seems easier to establish a more ready fellowship with the other people who are present. If we do not find the homily interesting or the music moving, we do not quite know what to do with ourselves.

In times gone by, many Catholics followed the practice of going to church a half hour or more before Mass to pray and prepare themselves to receive the Body and Blood of Christ. Likewise, following Mass, they spent private time in thanksgiving and prayerful communion with the Lord. In a society where we are all in such a rush, where we blow into church rushed and excited and leave amid quick hellos and good-byes, much of the intimacy with Christ in the Eucharist has been lost. We fail to deepen an interior awareness and personal relationship with Christ, just as our rush to and from church makes

fellowship with other believers increasingly elusive.

Adoration and Eucharistic Prayer

The last fifty years have seen a general decline in the various devotions to the Eucharist that can be practiced outside of Mass. Yet, over the last several decades, there has been an upsurge in devotion to Jesus Christ sacramentally present in the reserved Eucharist. Some of the above problems have left people craving the quiet of a more personal relationship with the Lord. Some people look for a relationship sustained over a time outside the eucharistic celebration when they have the opportunity for a more extended period of quiet prayer and adoration. This devotion supplements and extends the celebration and reception of the Eucharist at Mass and must be seen as flowing from it. The Church has always taught that Jesus Christ remains truly present in the Eucharist even after the celebration of Mass, and hence in the Eucharist reserved in the tabernacle. Jesus himself shows this need for a more contemplative, prolonged loving union in prayer to his beloved Father, and Scripture often shows him continuing his prayer through the whole night. In recent times, the Church has intensified its traditional encouragement of such prayer for all Catholics.

This practice provides a stumbling block for some believers, as if staring at the consecrated host or praying before the tabernacle were some kind of idolatry. It is important to remember that the Eucharist is not an object to be stared at, not an idol, but a person, a

relationship. As we receive the Eucharist or adore in silent prayer, we can relate to the Eucharist as Jesus present, actively offering himself to us. This relationship, like all relationships, requires faith, but a faith that bears fruit. The adoration of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament allows the fruits of our reception of him to ripen and deepen into communion and into a fullness of love flowing forth into our daily lives.

The Eucharist is the heart and summit of the life of every Christian and of the whole People of God (Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 11)

in that all the other sacraments are bound up with it and orientated toward it (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. [Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana—United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000], no. 1324). Eucharist means thanksgiving, and it is the consummation of all that Christ promised when he said, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; . . . Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and . . . remains in me and I in him” (Jn 6:51, 54, 56).

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