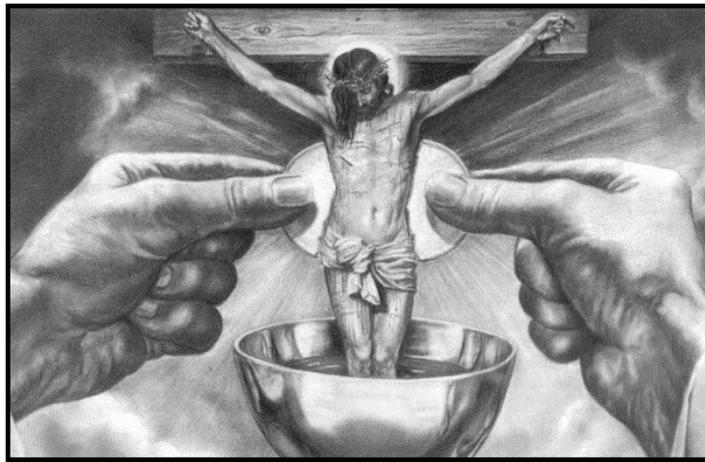


UNDERSTANDING THE MASS, PART IV - B: HIS PRESENCE IN THE SACRAMENT

Part IV (B) Continued from Part IV (A)

As we have seen, the Lord Jesus is really and truly present in the Eucharist in at least four distinct ways. In our last article, we discussed His presence in the Word. The final and most special way that the Lord is present in the Eucharist is in His Body and Blood, present to us under the signs of bread and wine.



Jesus is God, and so He is omnipresent. But Jesus is man as well as God; His humanity can't be present everywhere in the same way as His divinity. Jesus' glorified humanity is at the right hand of the Father. In the Eucharist and only in the Eucharist, though, He makes His Body and Blood present to us in a totally real way. This is why the sacramental presence of Christ's Body and Blood is so extraordinary. In all of the other sacraments Jesus gives us His grace, says St. Thomas Aquinas, while in the Eucharist, the "sacrament of sacraments," He gives us His whole self, His divinity and His humanity.

How is this possible? How can Jesus be present bodily under the forms of bread and wine? Many people have the impression that it's all hocus-pocus. But the Eucharist is emphatically not magic. Rather, the transformation of bread and wine into Christ's Body and Blood happens the same way Mary's virginal conception did: through the power of the Word and the power of the Spirit. The incarnation may seem impossible, yet all Christians believe it. It happens the same way creation did: God spoke and the world was made out of nothing through the power of the Word and the Spirit. Likewise, in the Eucharist, the One who said "let there be light" says "this is My Body" and "this is My Blood." Through the power of the Spirit invoked upon the gifts, an awesome change takes place.

About the year 1200 or so, as some Catholics were struggling to find a way to explain this change, they came up with the word “transubstantiation.” Many people struggle with this word today! One reason why we find it hard to understand is that the word “substance” has different meanings. For us, substance is something you can touch. Substance abuse, for example, has to do with tangibles like drugs and alcohol. In theology, though, substance means something that underlies what you can see and touch; it’s the unchanging essence of the thing that resides under its appearances. Surface characteristics — “accidents,” as theologians call them — have to do with everything that could be otherwise, be changed or altered — say, how long your hair is or how fat or thin you are.

Transubstantiation, therefore, means that while everything looks the same on the surface, the underlying essence of a thing is changed. This is just the opposite of what happens in the world we see. Usually, appearances change while the essence of a thing stays the same. In the Eucharist, though, the underlying, invisible substance is transformed from bread and wine to Christ’s Body and Blood. Everything looks the same as before. Even with a microscope, you wouldn’t be able to tell the difference, for the level at which this change happens is far too deep for human probing. But in the Eucharist, Christ is as truly present in His Body, Blood, soul, and divinity as when He walked the roads of Galilee, healing and preaching.

This article is Part IV of a Five Part Series adapted from Marcellino D’Ambrosio’s book, “Exploring the Catholic Church” (Servant, 2001)