

THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST IN THE EUCHARIST AND THE CHURCH

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The impetus for what I want to say today comes from the Apostolic Letter *Mane nobiscum Domine*, n.18: “There is a particular need to cultivate a lively awareness of Christ’s real presence, both in the celebration of the Mass and in the worship of the Eucharist outside Mass”. It is my contention that the awareness and devotion that Pope John Paul II spoke of will only come about through a proper understanding of the theology that underpins the doctrine of the presence of Christ. Like any doctrine, this one is best understood in its relation to other doctrines. I would also suggest that “cultivating a lively awareness of Christ’s real presence” presents us with particular pastoral challenges today, even if these are probably no greater than in other generations. However, understanding how other generations dealt with them can help us to better understand and find ways to address our own pastoral challenges. So today I will begin with a broad canvas about the presence of Christ, and then move on to speak of the real presence in the Eucharistic elements. This, I hope will open up a brief pastoral reflection on our current situation.

The many presences of the one Christ

When speaking of the presence of Christ we must first of all take account of a small section from the Dogmatic Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium* (n.7), where it says:

Christ is always present to his church, especially during the liturgy, so that this great task can be accomplished. He is present through the sacrifice which is the Mass, at once in the person of the minister ... and also, most fully, under the Eucharistic elements. He is present through his power in the sacraments... He is present through his word, in that he himself is speaking when scripture is read in church. Finally, he is present when the church is praying or singing hymns, he himself who promised, ‘where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them’.

Here we see the famous reference to the multiple presences of Christ in the liturgy. The presence in the Eucharistic elements is placed alongside the presence in the Word of the Scriptures, in the assembly of the church that gathers in worship, and in the person of the minister who presides. This, I believe, tells us something very important for our task of reflecting on the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, namely that this latter presence is only properly understood when it is situated within the context of these other presences. We can’t speak in any detail of all of these presences today, but I will say something about the relationship between the presence in word and sacrament, and show how this is always ecclesial.

The presence of the risen Lord in the Emmaus story

The link is best illustrated by a reflection on the presence of the risen Lord in the Emmaus story. There are several points we can draw from this. The first is that it is very clear that after the resurrection Jesus was present to his disciples in a way that was different to how he was with them before his death. Indeed, this is a constant theme in the appearance narratives. The initial experience is non-recognition. In this story, as in so many others, there is a moment of recognition after a period of non-recognition. At Emmaus it comes in the breaking of bread. Immediately this happens Luke tells us that he had vanished from their

sight. This is an important piece of information because it tells us that even when there is recognition he is encountered differently to the encounters before his death.

We can also think of the scene in John's gospel, of Mary Magdalene in the garden when she encounters a man she thinks to be the gardener. Once again there is non-recognition, and the moment of recognition comes when he calls her by her name. The recognition is not visual but auditory: she hears her name. What follows is interesting because the risen Lord tells her not to cling to him. It is as though he is saying that despite all Mary's efforts to hold on to him and to keep him present to her in the way that he always was, this is no longer how he will be present.

In both these gospel scenes we are faced with the dynamic of the absence and the presence of the risen Lord. There is a sense in which the original experience of the disciples is of his absence. When they do recognise and encounter him it is mediated through some other means: by the breaking of the bread, or the calling of her name. Of course, what we are dealing with here is what the church calls sacrament: we encounter the reality through signs. These are signs whose meaning is mediated through the Church. There will only be recognition and encounter with the reality when there is faith. St Augustine was to stress this in his mystagogical catecheses, when he said that you see one thing with your eyes, but with the eyes of faith you know a spiritual reality.¹ The contemporary French theologian, Louis-Marie Chauvet expresses this same point in his summary of the Emmaus incident when he writes:

The issue which dominates the whole of our story becomes clear: you cannot arrive at the recognition of the risen Jesus unless you renounce seeing/touching/finding him by undeniable proofs. Faith begins precisely with such a renunciation of the immediacy of the see/know and the assent to the mediation of the church.²

There is another important point to be made about the Emmaus scene. Part of the process of recognition involved hearing the Scriptures and having them interpreted. Later on the disciples will recall that their hearts were burning within them as he broke open the scriptures. In other words, the encounter with the risen Lord began with the hearing of the Word of God. No doubt they had heard the Word of God many times before, but this time it was interpreted in the light of the death of Jesus. Note that their companion on the journey says, "Was it not ordained that the Christ should suffer these things and so enter into his glory?" What we see here is a pattern that the Church continues to rely on: the word of God is proclaimed and interpreted and the breaking of the bread follows. It is important to stress this connection between word and sacrament. The church never has the sacrament without the word of God. Conversely, the word of God interpreted in the church leads naturally to the eventual recognition of the risen Lord in the sacrament.

I believe that Luke is making a point in the Emmaus scene: from now on access to the risen Lord comes through the church – mediated through word and sacrament, and expressed as an act of faith. The temptation will always be to want to see and touch. But the mode of Christ's presence from now on will be different to what it was before his death. He is now ascended to the Father.

So, there is our broad canvas. It shows us that as soon as we start to speak about the presence of Christ we find ourselves in sacramental mode. This places us squarely in the context of the mediation of the church and the faith of the church. This is the context for the

¹ *Sermo 272*. English translation in Daniel J. Sheerin, *The Eucharist, Message of the Fathers of the Church* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1986), 94.

² Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001), 25.

recognition of Christ in the Eucharistic elements. Already we can say that if this is divorced from the presence of Christ in the word of Scripture or the presence of Christ in the life and witness of the Church then we run the risk of being unfaithful to the post-resurrection witness of the early church. So, when we speak about the unique presence of Christ in the Eucharistic elements, as we saw in *Sacrosanctum concilium* we cannot forget that it is linked to those other presences.

Questions about the uniqueness of Christ's presence in the Eucharistic elements

While there is a constant tradition of understanding the uniqueness of Christ's presence in the Eucharistic elements, we know that there were times in the tradition when questions were raised about the mode of that presence. I believe that these periods of searching, enquiry and questioning were occasions that helped the church refine its understanding of the meaning of sacrament and sacramentality. It was also a time when it was searching for the most appropriate language to express the mystery of the Eucharist.³

One of the most intense periods of questioning was in the ninth century. A quick look at the writings from this era indicates that people were trying to juggle a number of aspects of the mystery of the Eucharist. There was, on the one hand, the relationship between Jesus who had been born of Mary, had preached and worked miracles, and who in his earthly body had suffered and died on the cross; and on the other hand, the Christ who was now risen and whose body was glorified and was called by Paul a "spiritual body". This, of course, is the very problem that confronted the disciples at Emmaus. There was also the affirmation that the risen Christ was now present in heaven and seated at the right hand of the Father, which had to be reconciled with their conviction that this same Christ was now present on the altar. In the literature of this period there were some who wanted to affirm the identity of the various elements – the earthly Jesus, the risen Christ, the glorified Christ at the right hand of the Father, and the Christ present on the altar. There were others who wanted to safeguard the distinction between these various presences of Christ. Of course, it is appropriate and even necessary to do both.

We can see both the question being explored in the treatises of two monks from the abbey of Corbie. Paschasius Radbertus insisted on the strict identity between the historical body of Christ born of Mary and the sacramental body of Christ in the Eucharist. Ratramnus, on the other hand, stressed that the body of the risen Christ was now glorified and was somehow different to the historical body of Jesus who had suffered and died. For him, Christ is present in the Eucharist in a different way to either how he was present on earth or how he is now in heaven. Of course, both these monks held theological opinions that can be regarded as consonant with the faith of the church. I am not aware of any condemnation of either of them. Over time, however, there was a strand from each of these approaches that developed in such a way that it deviated from the faith of the church.

The approach taken by Radbertus can be called realist. Positively, it affirms the truth of the presence of Christ in the bread and the wine. But if it is pushed to the extreme it will degenerate into a crude understanding of change in material and physical terms. I guess an innocent example of this would be the catechesis that advises children not to chew the host because they will inflict pain on Jesus. A less innocent example would be the claim that hosts are bleeding. The approach taken by Ratramnus can be called figurative or symbolic. Positively, it affirms that in the Eucharist we have both sign and reality. But when it is pushed to the extreme we see a separation of the symbolic from the real. The result is that the

³ I have developed the historical analysis in more detail in "The Eucharistic Doctrine of Transubstantiation", in Margaret Press, ed., *The Eucharist: Faith and Worship* (Strathfield: St Pauls, 2001), 56-74. See also David Power, *The Eucharistic Mystery: Revitalising the Tradition* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 208-212.

Eucharist is seen in mere symbolic terms, and there is no real change in the bread and the wine. We see an example of this in some traditions of the Reformation, particularly those that spring from Calvin or Zwingli.

If we have a pastoral concern to cultivate a lively awareness of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist then I believe we need to be alert to these two approaches and their potential for deviation. Both types of deviation can exist even today. I am aware that the National Catholic Church Life Survey has some questions that will pick up the deviation that heads in the direction of mere symbolism.⁴ It is less clear that the Survey asks questions that will detect the ultra physicalist distortion. Nevertheless, we are all aware that such exists among the People of God. Cardinal Walter Kasper, in a meditation on John 6, comments on these two deviations:

Naturally, what we have in the Eucharist is not the earthly flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, open to perception by the senses. That was the misunderstanding of the people in Capernaum, and this crudely sensuous interpretation is, in fact, known as the "Capernaist" misunderstanding. On the other hand, we may not react to this position by taking a purely symbolic view.⁵

I believe it is important that we be alert to both these distortions because I suspect that one breeds the other as a way of reacting, as it were, to an excessive swing of a pendulum.

The language of "substance"

The church took several centuries to find language and an intellectual framework that would express the faith in the Eucharistic mystery in the face of these potential distortions. The breakthrough came with the introduction of the notion of substance. It allowed people to avoid an understanding of the change in crude material and physical terms, to adopt an orthodox realist emphasis, and to respect the connection between sign and reality.

The first official use of this new language and thought form was at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. There we find the following teaching:

Christ's body and blood are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the forms of bread and wine, the bread and wine having been changed in substance (*transubstantiatis*), by God's power, into his body and blood, so that in order to achieve this mystery of unity we receive from God what he received from us.⁶

A few hundred years later, and faced with a different set of problems, the Council of Trent would teach that the change that occurs in the bread and wine "the Catholic Church most aptly calls transubstantiation".⁷

This is a word that over the last fifty or so years has been the subject of a lot of scrutiny among theologians. Alternative words have been suggested, but none seem to have taken hold. It is probably true to say that people look for appropriate language to deal with their own pastoral problems. I'd like to argue today that the pastoral challenges we face demand that we appreciate the significance of the language of substance. When it was first used it gave people a way of avoiding the two extremes of either a crudely sensuous interpretation or a purely symbolic view. I admit that in a world like ours there are dangers

⁴ Robert Dixon, "Acceptance of Key Catholic Beliefs and Moral Teachings by Generation X Mass Attenders", *Australasian Catholic Record* 81(2004): 131-143.

⁵ Walter Cardinal Kasper, *Sacrament of Unity: The Eucharist and the Church*, trans. Brian McNeil (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 51.

⁶ English translation from *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, edited by Norman P. Tanner (London: Washington: Sheed & Ward/Georgetown University Press, 1990), I: 230.

⁷ Canon 2, Decree on the Sacrament of the Eucharist. *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, II: 697

with the word substance because it is often understood in scientific terms as referring to matter. If this meaning were to inform people's understanding of the Eucharist they would easily find themselves deviating from the faith of the church. A pastoral challenge is to help people distinguish these two different uses of the word substance.

Thomas Aquinas on the presence of Christ in the Eucharist

For a proper understanding of the notion of substance in relation to the Eucharistic mystery I propose to examine briefly the work of Thomas Aquinas. He was one of the many thinkers of his day to incorporate the use of the language of substance into his work. He did so with great care and subtlety. The starting point for his theology, of course, was the conviction that the Eucharist is a work of God and therefore belongs to the realm of faith. Outside the context of faith it makes no sense to speak about the presence of Christ or the change in the bread and wine.

When speaking of the change in the bread and wine his language is precise. He says: "in this sacrament (of the Eucharist) we have the *reality* of Christ's body... it begins to be there because the *substance* of the bread and wine is *turned into* it (*per conversionem substantiae panis in ipsum*)" (STh, III, 75, 4).⁸ He continues: "this conversion, however, is not like any natural change, but it is entirely beyond the powers of nature and is brought about purely by God's power". Finally, he says: "The complete substance of the bread is converted into the complete substance of Christ's body and the complete substance of the wine into the complete substance of Christ's blood. Hence this change is not a formal change, but a substantial one. It does not belong to the natural kinds of change, and it can be called by a name proper to itself — 'transubstantiation'." In other words, the kind of change we are speaking about is outside anything that we are familiar with; it does not take place according to the laws of nature. Here, I believe, he explains the long sacramental tradition in the church, namely that in the sacraments we are faced with signs that point beyond themselves to a new and different reality.

He develops this idea when he writes: "Whenever this sacrament is celebrated Christ is present in an invisible way under sacramental appearances" (STh, III, 75, 1, ad 2). And elsewhere, to make sure we have understood, he comments on the "Capernaist" misunderstanding: "It is obvious to our senses that, after the consecration, all the accidents of the bread and wine remain. Divine providence very wisely arranged for this. Men and women have not the custom of eating human flesh and drinking human blood; indeed, the thought revolts them. And so the flesh and blood of Christ are given to us to be taken under the appearances of things in common human use, namely bread and wine" (STh, III, 75, 5). The bread and wine are clearly important for the sacrament. However, if our senses tell us that there is something different to bread and wine on the altar then we are no longer within the sacramental tradition of the church. Rather, it is faith that tells us that there is a different reality now present. Thomas says that our faith "is concerned with something to which our sense do not reach" (STh, III, 75, 5, ad 3). Of course, we are familiar with this from his hymns:

Seeing, touching, tasting are in thee deceived;
How says trusty hearing? That shall be believed:
What God's Son has told me, take for truth I do;
Truth himself speaks truly or there's nothing true.⁹

⁸ The translation of the texts from the *Summa Theologiae* are from *St Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologiae volume 58 The Eucharistic Presence (3a. 73–78)*, Latin text, English translation, Introduction, Notes, Appendices & Glossary by William Barden O.P. (London: Blackfriars, 1965). Emphasis added.

⁹ *Adoro te devote*, in *The Australian Hymn Book with Catholic Supplement* (Sydney: Collins, 1977), n.590.

Thomas was surely aware of the struggles of the preceding centuries, when people endeavoured to affirm the unity of the Eucharist with the body of the risen Christ while at the same time acknowledging the uniqueness of his presence in the Eucharist. He explained: “it is clear that the body of Christ does not begin to exist in this sacrament by being brought in locally. First, because it would thereby cease to be in heaven...” (STh, III, 75, 2).

Let me return to Kasper and his comments on how the church’s doctrine responds to the two misunderstandings of the Eucharist:

The church’s doctrine responds to both these misunderstandings by maintaining firmly a sacramental understanding. All that one can touch, see, and taste externally by means of the senses is bread and wine; but through faith in Jesus’ word we know that, thanks to the working of the Holy Spirit, the true reality which is not accessible to the senses (that which the Middle Ages called “substance”) is no longer bread and wine, but the body and blood of Christ – and this means, in keeping with the language of the Bible, Jesus Christ himself in the gift that he makes to us of himself. Thus the forms of bread and wine which the senses can perceive become signs and real symbols of a new reality, that of the risen and exalted Lord; they are filled with this reality and make it present.¹⁰

By way of conclusion

We are now in a position to make a few brief comments about Eucharistic devotion and piety. From all that I have said it is obvious that the primary form of Eucharistic devotion is the celebration of the liturgy. It is there that the church assembles, the word is proclaimed, the Spirit is called forth in prayer, and the sacrament is celebrated. It is there that we proclaim the Mystery of Faith at that central moment in the Eucharistic Prayer. It is there that we are drawn into the Eucharistic action and give praise to God in Holy Communion. Eucharistic devotion is an active devotion; it is participation in the mystery. Of course, I am speaking about more than participation through song and ministry; I am speaking about participation in the very action of Christ. If Eucharistic devotion is giving glory to God we glorify God by being transformed into the people that God has called us to be. We glorify God as we demonstrate to the world the unity of the body of Christ.

Against the background of this most basic of all forms of Eucharistic devotion we can speak about the worship of the Eucharist outside Mass. In the liturgical books the Church reminds us that this both springs from and leads to the celebration of the Eucharistic action in the Liturgy.¹¹ Eucharistic devotion outside Mass would normally have ways of linking us to the Mass. Even what would seem to be the most private devotion is first and foremost the devotion of the church. Thus there is an aspect of this devotion that is properly communal and ecclesial. This may happen through such things as songs, readings, or common prayer. These occasions of Eucharistic devotion also give us an opportunity for longer periods of silence. Silence, of course, is an important element of the Eucharistic Liturgy and there are moments when it is most appropriate during the celebration. Outside Mass it is possible to have longer moments of silence for contemplation and meditation. This is a silence that allows us to recognise the Lord present in the Eucharist as we contemplate his word in Scripture, and seek reconciliation and unity. Through such contemplation and prayer people can also focus their intercession for the fruits of the Eucharist, especially unity and peace.

¹⁰ Kasper, *Sacrament of Unity*, 51-52.

¹¹ See *Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharist outside Mass*, English translation approved for use in Australia by the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship (Sydney: E.J. Dwyer, 1975).

The rite of Worship of the Eucharist outside Mass (n.80) sums up these sentiments, and I would like to quote it as a way of drawing together the various elements I have spoken of today:

The same piety which moves the faithful to Eucharistic adoration attracts them to a deeper participation in the paschal mystery. It makes them respond gratefully to the gifts of Christ who by his humanity continues to pour divine life upon the members of his body. Living with Christ the Lord, they achieve a close familiarity with him and in his presence pour out their hearts for themselves and for those dear to them; they pray for peace and for the salvation of the world. Offering their entire lives with Christ to the Father in the Holy Spirit, they draw from this wondrous exchange an increase in faith, hope and love. Thus they nourish the proper disposition to celebrate the memorial of the Lord as devoutly as possible and to receive frequently the bread given to us by the Father.

Focus Question:

In the coming months what can I do to cultivate a lively awareness of Christ's real presence: 1) in my life, and 2) the life of the parish community?

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