The Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist: Do This in Memory of Me

(Part 1 and 2)

**August 26, 2016**

The sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, the third of the Church’s “sacraments of initiation,” is the Body and Blood of Christ, whole and entire.  It is not a “sign” or a “symbol” or a “representation” of the Body and Blood of Christ — it IS the Body and Blood of Christ.  When we receive Holy Communion, the minister offers us the host and says, “The Body of Christ;” in parishes or places where the chalice is also offered, the minister says “The Blood of Christ.”  And we respond, “Amen,” a Hebrew word found throughout the Old and New Testaments that means, “yes, truly;” “so be it,” “I believe it.”  The Lord Jesus Christ is fully present in the host and wine consecrated by the priest at Mass.  The appearances of unleavened bread and true wine remain visible — the “sign” of the sacrament (remember the definition of a sacrament: “an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace”) and the taste remains the same — but they are totally, entirely and completely transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.  The theological term used for this transformation is “transubstantiation,” the mysterious process by which the Lord Jesus Christ becomes present.  When we receive the host consecrated by the priest at Mass, we receive Christ’s Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity.  When we drink from the chalice of wine consecrated by the priest at Mass, we received Christ’s Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity.

How can this be?  How can this happen?  I cannot give a scientifically verifiable answer to those questions.  But faith is not science.  As we read in the Letter to the Hebrews, “faith is confident assurance about things hoped for and conviction about things we cannot see (Hebrews 11: 1).”  Transubstantiation and the “Real Presence of Christ” are one of the core beliefs and acts of faith of the Catholic Church, one of the most important and one of the defining aspects of the Catholic faith.  Mystery?  Yes, it will always be.  Truth? Yes, it will also always be.  The fact that something is a “mystery” does not deny or negate the fact that it is at the same time true.  And truth is not true BECAUSE we believe it.  Truth is true whether we believe it or not.  Believing or not believing does not alter or change the object of our believing or its truth.

But where does this truth or belief come from?  It comes from God, from the Lord Jesus Christ.  It is found in the Holy Scriptures.  It is presented by the Catholic Church.

At the Last Supper of the Lord Jesus Christ, on the night before he died for us — Holy Thursday — Christ gathered with his apostles to celebrate the Jewish feast of Passover.  It was there, in the upper room as described in the Gospel of Mark (see also, Matthew 26: 25-29; and Luke 22: 13-20), that the Lord Jesus Christ instituted the Holy Eucharist:

*And as they were eating He took bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them and said, ‘Take, this is my body.’ And He took a cup and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them and they all drank of it and He said to them, ‘This is my blood of the New Covenant which is poured out for many (Mark 14: 22-24).*

Earlier in his public ministry, the Gospel of John, chapter 6, reveals the famous “miracle of the loaves and the fishes,” where Jesus fed the multitudes with a few pieces of bread and some fish on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, “as much as they wanted (John 6: 11).”  That night, after the miraculous feeding, John continues to describe, the apostles boarded a boat and headed across the lake toward Capernaum.  Jesus walked toward them across the water and got into the boat until it reached the shore on the other side, another miracle.  There, he explained the purpose of his miraculous feeding of the crowds, urging them to believe in him:

*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. … I am the bread of life.  Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died.  But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. …  Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.  For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.  Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them.  Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever (John 6: 35-51).*

I am quoting here selections and quotes from chapter 6 of the Gospel of John.  Catholics should read the entire chapter to get a clearer understanding of Jesus’ message and actions, foreshadowing and leading up to the institution of the Holy Eucharist at the Last Supper.

In the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians, St. Paul instructs the community of faith there about the Holy Eucharist:

*For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”  For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes (1 Corinthians 11: 23-26).*

The Holy Scriptures should always be read in text and in context to discern their full meaning.  They are the “Word of the Lord.”  Still, these few quotations affirm the scriptural basis of our belief in the Holy Eucharist and the constant teaching of the Catholic Church up to the present day.

Catholics continued to believe in, to celebrate and to “do this in memory of me (1 Corinthians 11: 24)” throughout the Catholic Church’s history.  The early Fathers of the Church, its Councils, and the writings of its theologians helped explain the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist and the Real Presence of Christ to the faithful of every era.  True, there have been theological discussions and debates — even disagreements — about the scriptural sources for and the meaning of this and other sacraments of the Catholic Church.  But belief in the Holy Eucharist as the Body and Blood of Christ has endured in the Catholic Church from the Last Supper on as a fundamental and constitutive element of the Catholic faith.  It is a non-negotiable belief for Catholics.

The Second Vatican Council (1963-65) referred to our Catholic belief in the Holy Eucharist as “the source and summit of the Christian life (Lumen Gentium, no. 11).”  In our own day, quoting from Catholic documents relating to the Holy Eucharist, the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) explains:

***1322****The holy Eucharist completes Christian initiation. Those who have been raised to the dignity of the royal priesthood by Baptism and configured more deeply to Christ by Confirmation participate with the whole community in the Lord’s own sacrifice by means of the Eucharist.*
***1323****“At the Last Supper, on the night he was betrayed, our Savior instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice of his Body and Blood. This he did in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the cross throughout the ages until he should come again, and so to entrust to his beloved Spouse, the Church, a memorial of his death and resurrection: a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a Paschal banquet ‘in which Christ is consumed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us.’”*
***1324****The Eucharist is “the source and summit of the Christian life.”  “The other sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate, are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented toward it. For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Pasch.”*
***1325****“The Eucharist is the efficacious sign and sublime cause of that communion in the divine life and that unity of the People of God by which the Church is kept in being. It is the culmination both of God’s action sanctifying the world in Christ and of the worship men offer to Christ and through him to the Father in the Holy Spirit.”*

Hopefully, these ideas help us to understand better what the Holy Eucharist is and what the Catholic Church believes and teaches.  It is also important to understand and believe what the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist does.  In a recent catechesis, our Holy Father Pope Francis reflected:

First *, the Eucharist affects the way we see others. In his life, Christ manifested his love by being with people, and by sharing their desires and problems. So too the Eucharist brings us together with others – young and old, poor and affluent, neighbors and visitors. The Eucharist calls us to see all of them as our brothers and sisters, and to see in them the face of Christ.*

Second *, in the Eucharist we experience the forgiveness of God and the call to forgive. We celebrate the Eucharist not because we are worthy, but because we recognize our need for God’s mercy, incarnate in Jesus Christ. In the Eucharist, we renew the gift of the Body and Blood of Christ for the remission of sins, and our hearts are enlarged to receive and show mercy.*

Third *, in the Eucharistic celebration, we are nourished as the Christian community by Christ’s Word and Life. It is from the Eucharist that the Church receives continually her identity and mission. It is in our celebration that Christ fills us with his grace, so that our lives may be consonant with our worship of God in the Liturgy. Let us live the Eucharist in a spirit of faith and prayer, with the certainty that the Lord will bring to fulfillment all that he has promised (Pope Francis, General Audience, February 12, 2014).*

In the Holy Eucharist, we receive the Body and Blood of Christ.  In receiving him, we become the Body of Christ, a community of faith and love.  We receive him, yes, and we are also, at the same time, united with all who believe in him as brothers and sisters.  The Holy Eucharist intensifies his command and our obligation to “love one another (John 13: 34).”

*The Holy Eucharist draws its name from a Greek word meaning “thanksgiving.”*

**The CCC explains:**

**1328** The inexhaustible richness of this sacrament is expressed in the different names we give it. Each name evokes certain aspects of it. It is called: Eucharist, because it is an action of thanksgiving to God.  The Greek words “eucharistein” and “eulogein” recall the Jewish blessings that proclaim — especially during a meal — God’s works: creation, redemption, and sanctification.

We give thanks in the Holy Eucharist for the death by which the Lord Jesus Christ offered himself to and for us.  CCC continues to state, as noted above, that “by this sacrament we unite ourselves to Christ, who makes us sharers in his Body and Blood to form a single body (CCC, 1331).”

We have noted before that the Catholic Church is a community of faith and doctrine.  This catechesis highlights the rationale for our faith in the Holy Eucharist and our Church’s doctrine about it.  The Catholic Church is also a community of sacraments and prayer, likewise presented in these words.  We also understand the Catholic Church to be a community of laws and structures.  It should come as no surprise then that our belief and our worship regarding the Holy Eucharist also includes laws created by the Church to ensure that what we believe and how we celebrate the sacraments of our faith are preserved, safeguarded and strengthened for the good of the Catholic community. Church law (canon law) provides an abundance of regulations surrounding the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, many of them relevant only to bishops and priests. It is important for us, as Catholics, to know what those safeguards and structures regarding the Holy Eucharist are and mean as they relate to the faithful of the Church.  My comments here focus on the Holy Eucharist as celebrated in the western Roman Catholic Church.

The sacrament of the Holy Eucharist (Holy Communion) is celebrated (“confected” is the technical term) only through the words and actions of a validly ordained bishop or priest (canons 899 and 900) at the “consecration” of the Mass.  A deacon assists the bishop or priest at the altar but, although he is an ordained clergyman, a deacon is not considered a celebrant at Mass.  Along with the bishop and priest, the deacon may distribute Holy Communion as an “ordinary” minister (canon 910.1).”  Canon law allows other Catholic faithful, men and women, to serve as “extraordinary” ministers when “ordinary” ministers are not available and there is a need due to the numbers of communicants (canon 910.2; 230.3).  Along with the bishop, priest and deacon, an “extraordinary” minister may bring communion to the sick outside of Mass when officially deputed to do so.

The sacrament of the Holy Eucharist is celebrated only with wheaten, unleavened bread and natural grape wine (canon 924).  They are required for the validity of the sacrament because they alone constitute the elements for consecration.  It is never permissible to use any other substances such as rice cakes, leaven or commercial bread or beverages other than natural grape wine. This is the law of the Church and no bishop or priest may dispense from this requirement.   Faithful who are allergic to wheat or have the disease of celiac sprue may take the consecrated wine or Precious Blood instead of the wheaten, unleavened host since Christ is fully present in both the consecrated bread and wine or the priest may consecrate a low-gluten host and place it in a separate vessel.  Faithful who have such allergies or health issues should make them known to the pastor or priest so that appropriate arrangements might be made.  The Office of Worship of the Diocese of Trenton has information available where low-gluten hosts may be purchased for use at Mass and what their gluten contents are.

The Church does allow alcohol intolerant or alcoholic priests to consecrate minimally fermented (non-alcoholic) grape wine called “mustum” for their own consumption at Mass (or distribution to the faithful when necessary) with permission of the bishop and in individual cases only (2003 Letter of Cardinal Ratzinger to All Bishops, Prot. No. 89/78 – 17498).  These provisions trouble people who cannot receive Holy Communion under the ordinary circumstances.  Because they concern what is “valid” in the consecration and distribution of the Holy Eucharist, they cannot be changed.

The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass during which bread and wine are consecrated by the bishop or priest and become the Body and Blood of Christ must be celebrated as established by the Church and according to its approved rituals.  Allowing for wise, prudent (necessary) and good pastoral judgment that does not compromise the validity of the sacrament, we — neither priest nor faithful — don’t make the Mass up as we go along.  In fact, canon law states that the “Christian faithful have the right to worship God according to the prescription of their own rite approved by legitimate pastors of the Church (canon 214).”

Mass should “be performed in a sacred place (or, at least a ‘respectable place’) unless in a particular case necessity demands otherwise (canon 932.1).”  Mass should be celebrated on “a blessed altar” or a “suitable table (canon 932.2).”  There are occasions and legitimate reasons when Mass may be celebrated outside a sacred place.  They should be “occasional” and not regular, for example, celebrated on the beach every Sunday of the summer because it is “a nice thing to do” and “feels good.”  The Holy Eucharist is a sacrament and should be accorded the respect that celebrations of the Church’s sacraments deserve and the Church’s law attempts to preserve.

A word on approved “rites” and rituals.  The ordinary form of the Mass celebrated in the western Roman Catholic Church is the Mass approved by Pope Paul VI in 1969 after the Second Vatican Council (1963-65) commonly called the “novus ordo Missae (new order of Mass).”  Permitting the Mass to be celebrated in English and other languages throughout the world, it replaced all other versions of the Mass preceding it.  In 2007, Pope Benedict XVI wrote to all the bishops of the world that “the Missal published by Paul VI and then republished in two subsequent editions by John Paul II, obviously is and continues to be the normal form – the  ***forma ordinaria*** – of the Eucharistic Liturgy.”  Pope Benedict XVI, however, in his document  ***Summorum Pontificum*** to which that letter was attached, approved the continued use of the Mass contained in the 1962 Missal of Pope John XXIII as the “extraordinary form,” celebrated in Latin only and sometimes referred to as the Tridentine Mass.  Both forms of the Mass are equally valid.

In recent times, the question has been raised whether Catholics are “still” obliged to attend Mass on Sunday (or on Saturday at the evening vigil, after 4 pm)?  The answer is yes, it is an obligation for all baptized Catholics.  “On Sundays and other holy days of obligation the faithful are bound to participate in the Mass (canon 1247),” unless a “grave cause” exists to excuse them.  Besides fulfilling the Third Commandment and the first of “Seven Precepts of the church” — to keep holy the Lord’s Day — CCC states:

**2182**Participation in the communal celebration of the Sunday Eucharist is a testimony of belonging and of being faithful to Christ and to his Church. The faithful give witness by this to their communion in faith and charity. Together they testify to God’s holiness and their hope of salvation. They strengthen one another under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

What if a baptized Catholic does not attend?  Sadly, in the Diocese of Trenton, roughly only 20% of Catholics registered in parishes report attending Sunday Mass.  Since only a “grave cause” excuses a Catholic from this obligation, the Church has always taught that it would be a serious sin (more on “sin” later in my catechesis on the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation) to willfully skip Mass on Sunday or a Holy Day of Obligation. To do so requires confession before receiving the Holy Eucharist.  What are “grave causes?”  Emergency weather situations, personal sickness or the care of the sick, work required to support one’s family and/or travel connected with it, child care when the child cannot accompany the parent, transportation emergency, and other occasional disruptions.   The ancient legal principle is at work here: “no one is bound to the impossible.”  In all cases of doubt, the faithful should speak to their pastor or priest.

Before receiving the Holy Eucharist or Holy Communion, Catholics are obliged to “abstain from any food or drink, with the exception of water and medicine, for at least the period of one hour before Holy Communion (canon 919.1).” This is not optional; it is a requirement of Church law. Those of us born and raised before the Second Vatican Council might remember when this was a requirement from midnight on before Sunday Mass.  “Those who are advanced in age or who suffer from any infirmity, as well as those who take care of them, can receive the Most Holy Eucharist even if they have taken something during the previous hour (canon 919.3).”  If a Catholic should inadvertently forget to abstain before Mass, he/she may receive Holy Communion.   Again, “no one is bound to the impossible.”

**So, who may or should receive the Holy Eucharist?:**

**1.** Any baptized Catholic who is not prohibited by law (canon 912) or the penalty of actual excommunication (canon 915) may receive Holy Communion.  A baptized Catholic who is divorced is not excommunicated and may receive Holy Communion.  If that same divorced person has remarried without receiving an annulment, he/she should refrain from the sacrament.

**2.** Baptized Catholics, and children in particular, should have reached the “age of reason (canon 914)” and have sufficient knowledge (know what the Holy Eucharist is) and careful preparation (understand the mystery according to their capacity and be capable of distinguishing Holy Communion from ordinary food) before receiving Holy Communion (canon 913).  Parents and pastors should make sure that children are “correctly prepared” and that they receive the Sacrament of Penance / Reconciliation beforehand (canon 914).  Children who are “handicapped in body or mind” may receive Holy Communion with some catechetical formation “as their condition permits (canon 777.4).”  The sacrament should be received reverently and respectfully by all baptized Catholics who approach Holy Communion.  It is, after all, the Body and Blood of Christ.  People should not be chewing gum, laughing and talking as they approach Holy Communion.  That is neither reverence nor respect.

**3.** Baptized Catholics should receive Holy Communion only “once” during the same Mass but may receive it a second time at another Mass in which they participate on the same day (canon 917).

**4.** Holy Communion should ordinarily be received during Mass but may be received outside of Mass “for a just cause (918).”  People who are sick or confined to a facility may also receive Holy Communion outside of Mass as the circumstances require and with a special approved ritual observed.

**5.** Baptized Catholics who are “conscious of grave sin” or who “obstinately persist in manifest (public) grave sin (canon 915)” should not present themselves for Holy Communion without prior sacramental confession (canon 916).  This provision of canon law is based upon the Holy Scriptures which state:

*Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.  For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself (1 Corinthians 11: 27-29).*

If sacramental confession is not possible, the person should make a deeply sincere act of contrition with the intention of going to sacramental confession as soon as possible before receiving the sacrament.  The fulfillment of that intention is required before receiving the sacrament again.

**6.** Baptized Catholics should receive the Holy Eucharist at least once a year (canon 920.1).  That is one of the “Seven Precepts of the Church” as is the requirement to go to sacramental confession at least once year.  Minimally, this should be done — sacramental confession and the reception of Holy Communion — during the Easter Season (from Easter Sunday through the first Sunday after Pentecost or “Trinity Sunday”).

A neuralgic question exists about the reception of the Holy Eucharist or Holy Communion by those who are not Catholic or even not Christian.  This question most frequently arises at weddings and funerals or at other times when extended family and friends who are not Catholic or even not Christian (in addition to those baptized Catholics who are not properly disposed to receive Holy Communion, as referenced above) gather at Mass for a special occasion.  A good working principle is this: “if you do not believe it, you should not receive it.”  In the Holy Scriptures, the Lord Jesus asks for faith and belief in him as “the Bread of life.”

For baptized Catholics, such faith and belief is centered in the Holy Eucharist.  ”This is my Body.  This is my Blood.”  If a person does not believe that as the Church teaches it, then it is not authentic and honest for that person to present himself/herself for Holy Communion.  At the Last Supper, the Lord Jesus prayed “that they may be one (John 17: 21).”  But the unfortunate fact of the matter is that all Christians are “not one.”  Different Christian religions have different beliefs about what happened at the Last Supper and what the Holy Eucharist or Holy Communion means.  Obviously, those who are not Christian have no belief in the Body and Blood of Christ as Catholics do.  We respect those differences and other religions should respect them too.  Reservation of the Body and Blood of Christ — as the Church believes and teaches — to baptized Catholics only is not simply an attempt to restrict or exclude those who do not share our faith.  No, rather, it is an attempt to affirm and celebrate what we believe as Catholics, beliefs that they do not share.  At these special Masses, the priest can make that clear in a gentle but pastoral way before Holy Communion is distributed, if Catholic families involved have not already done so.  If, after all of this, a non Catholic or a non Christian presents himself/herself for Holy Communion, we should not make an embarrassing spectacle about it during the Mass.  Leave the judgment to God and pray with the Lord Jesus that one day, “all may be one.”

In 1996, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued the following pastoral “Guidelines for the Reception of Holy Communion:

**"FOR  CATHOLICS.** As Catholics, we fully participate in the celebration of the Eucharist when we receive Holy Communion. We are encouraged to receive Communion devoutly and frequently. In order to be properly disposed to receive Communion, participants should not be conscious of grave sin and normally should have fasted for one hour. A person who is conscious of grave sin is not to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord without prior sacramental confession except for a grave reason where there is no opportunity for confession. In this case, the person is to be mindful of the obligation to make an act of perfect contrition, including the intention of confessing as soon as possible (canon 916). A frequent reception of the Sacrament of Penance is encouraged for all.

**FOR OUR FELLOW CHRISTIANS.** We welcome our fellow Christians to this celebration of the Eucharist as our brothers and sisters. We pray that our common baptism and the action of the Holy Spirit in this Eucharist will draw us closer to one another and begin to dispel the sad divisions which separate us. We pray that these will lessen and finally disappear, in keeping with Christ’s prayer for us “that they may all be one” (Jn 17:21).

Because Catholics believe that the celebration of the Eucharist is a sign of the reality of the oneness of faith, life, and worship, members of those churches with whom we are not yet fully united are ordinarily not admitted to Holy Communion. Eucharistic sharing in exceptional circumstances by other Christians requires permission according to the directives of the diocesan bishop and the provisions of canon law (canon 844 §4). Members of the Orthodox Churches, the Assyrian Church of the East, and the Polish National Catholic Church are urged to respect the discipline of their own Churches. According to Roman Catholic discipline, the Code of Canon Law does not object to the reception of Communion by Christians of these Churches (canon 844 §3):

**FOR THOSE NOT RECEIVING HOLY COMMUNION.** All who are not receiving Holy Communion are encouraged to express in their hearts a prayerful desire for unity with the Lord Jesus and with one another.

**FOR NON CHRISTIANS.** We also welcome to this celebration those who do not share our faith in Jesus Christ. While we cannot admit them to Holy Communion, we ask them to offer their prayers for the peace and the unity of the human family.

Finally, a word about what happens to the Holy Eucharist after Mass and between Masses.  The bread and wine consecrated by the priest at Mass should be adequate enough to supply Holy Communion to all the baptized Catholic faithful seeking to receive it.  When not all the consecrated hosts are consumed, they are reserved in a special vessel called a “ciborium” in the tabernacle.  In fact, the Body and Blood of Christ “must be reserved” in diocesan cathedrals, parishes churches and other special chapels (canon 934.1)” so that Holy Communion can be available and brought to the sick and those in special need.  The pastor of the parish is responsible to care for the preservation of the Holy Eucharist in his parish church.  A special lamp burns at all times near the tabernacle (canon 940) and we genuflect or bow to the tabernacle when we enter and leave a Catholic Church because the “Real Presence” of the Lord Jesus is there as the “Blessed Sacrament.”

Because of our belief in the Body and Blood of Christ — the Blessed Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist — we are encouraged “to visit” our Catholic churches to pray in Christ’s presence.  Again, that is a difference between Catholic churches and those of other Christian denominations.  The Catholic Church provides special rituals and ceremonies for the adoration of and benediction (blessing) with the Holy Eucharist and parishes schedule these occasions between Masses throughout the year.  The Church is a community of worship and these occasions are an example of that fact.  The Lord Jesus Christ is really and fully present at Mass, in the tabernacle and when we bring the consecrated hosts to those who are sick, dying or in otherwise spiritual need.  How fortunate we as Catholics are!  “This is my Body.  This is my Blood,” the Lord Jesus said.  Believe!  And “do this in memory of me."

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