

The Real Presence of Jesus in Holy Communion

I have found working with children, teens, and adults that any apathy or boredom associated with Church involvement and attendance can often be linked to a lack of understanding of the truths of the faith. The purpose of this series, "Misperceptions," is to clarify misunderstandings and misinformation that have plagued the Church for years, and in some ways, contributed to the decline in numbers of priests and practicing Catholics.

The Eucharist (Holy Communion) is one of the doctrines that are often misunderstood. What makes this so important to clarify is that the Eucharist is actually the source and summit of the Catholic Christian Faith. The Eucharist IS the Body and Blood of Christ that is made truly present in the species of bread and wine.

Many misperceptions or misunderstandings are made known through surveys and statistical analysis. Perhaps the most profound for the Catholic Church is the one statistic most troubling for devout Catholics and leaders of the Church. That statistic as recorded by Kenneth C. Jones in *Index of Leading Catholic Indicators: The Church Since Vatican II*, sadly reports the finding that Catholics who believe that the Eucharist is merely a "symbolic reminder" of Jesus is 66%. Let us make an attempt to clarify.

The Sacrament of the Eucharist is a sacrament of thanksgiving. It is that action we share each time we come to Catholic Mass that unites us fully to Jesus Christ and to each other as Christians. As Catholics we focus on Christ's institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. By Christ's words and actions at his last meal with his Apostles, we believe that Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist. The real presence is achieved by the action of the Holy Spirit, through the words spoken by the priest, as was laid out by the New Covenant that God the Father established with his people. For Catholics, the Eucharist is the "source and summit of the Christian life." All of the other sacraments and all works of the Church are oriented toward the Eucharist.

The process by which Jesus is made present in the Eucharist is that of the action of *transubstantiation*. This contends that a change actually occurs to the substance of the bread and wine, while retaining the appearance of bread and wine. By the words of Consecration spoken by the priest, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, the actual substance of bread and wine becomes the Body and Blood of Christ.

So where does this come from? The use of bread and wine in worship dates back to the early history of the people of God. In Old Testament times, bread and wine were seen as gifts from God. The ancient people would, in turn, offer praise and thanks to God for all of his many blessings. Bread and wine are key elements of the Jewish Passover meal, which is a

remembrance of the great Exodus of God's people from slavery and bondage in Egypt. At that time a covenant of fidelity was made between God and his people.

Thousands of years later and three years after Jesus began his public ministry, when the time came to celebrate the Passover, a new covenant would be established. The meal that Jesus shared with his disciples, referred to as the Last Supper, was actually the Jewish Passover meal. Jesus shared his last Passover meal with his disciples. Jesus chose the Passover feast as the time in which he would institute the Eucharist and undergo his dying and rising. Knowing that this would be his last meal, and knowing the suffering that he would soon undergo, Jesus offered himself as a perfect sacrifice to the Father, and hence, established a new covenant of salvation between God and his people. During this meal Jesus changed the ordinary bread and wine into his own Body and Blood as is recounted in the Gospel of Luke: "While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And he did the same with the cup after supper saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.'" (Luke 22:19-20). By the words, "Do this in remembrance of me," Jesus commanded the Apostles and their successors to repeat this "until he comes again." To this day, in fidelity to the command of Jesus Christ, this is what Catholics do each time we celebrate Mass. This is the great mystery of our faith.

Anne Tarallo is the Director of Faith Formation at Holy Cross Church in South Easton. She holds a Master's Degree in Pastoral Theology. She can be reached at atarallo@holycrosseaston.org.