

Lesson 15: The Real Presence

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The real presence of Christ in the Eucharist is a doctrine — an official teaching of the Catholic Church — and a profound mystery. With the words of consecration, the whole of Christ is truly present — body, blood, soul and divinity — under the appearances of bread and wine.

As Catholics, we firmly believe that the real presence of Christ is in the Holy Eucharist. The Second Vatican Council referred to the **Holy Eucharist as the source and summit of the whole Christian life** (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, #11).

Our belief in the Holy Eucharist is rooted in Christ himself. Recall the beautiful words of our Lord in the Bread of Life Discourse in the Gospel of St. John: *“I myself am the living bread come down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread he shall live forever; the bread I will give is my flesh, for the life of the world. Let me solemnly assure you, if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. He who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has life eternal, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood real drink. The man who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the Father who has life sent me and I have life because of the Father, so the man who feeds on me will have life because of me”* (John 6:51, 53-57). Note that none of this language is symbolic— Jesus meant what he said. Moreover, even when there is grumbling and objections, and even after some disciples abandon our Lord because of this teaching, Jesus nowhere says, “Oh please, stop. I really meant this symbolically.” Our Lord stood by his teaching.

The meaning of Bread of Life Discourse becomes more clear at the Last Supper on the first Holy Thursday. There Jesus gathered his apostles around himself. According to the Gospel of St. Matthew, Jesus took unleavened bread and wine— two sources of basic nourishment. He took bread, blessed it, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to the apostles, saying, *“Take this and eat it; this is my body.”* He took the cup of wine, gave thanks, gave it to his apostles and said, *“All of you must drink from it for this is my blood, the blood of the covenant, to be poured out in behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins.”* If we extracted the words of consecration recorded in the Last Supper accounts of the gospels and distilled them, we would have our words of consecration used at Mass. (Confer Matthew 26:26-30; Mark 14:22-26; and Luke 22:14-20.)

Jesus was not just giving to the apostles blessed bread and wine. He was giving his whole life— **Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity**. He was giving his very self. The next day, Jesus’ body hung upon the altar of the cross. His blood was spilled to wash away our sins. As priest, he offered the perfect sacrifice for the remission of sin. However, this sacrifice was not death rendering but life giving, for three days later our Lord rose from the dead conquering both sin and death. Yes, the perfect, everlasting covenant of life and love with God was made by our Lord Jesus Christ.

This whole mystery is preserved in the Most Holy Eucharist and the Sacrifice of the Mass. We too take unleavened bread and wine, two sources of nourishment. By the will of the Father, the work of the Holy Spirit, and priesthood of Jesus entrusted to his ordained priests, and through the

words of consecration, that bread and wine is transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus. Yes, the bread and wine do not change in characteristics— they still look the same, taste the same, and hold the same shape. However, the reality, “the what it is,” the substance does change. We do not receive bread and wine; we receive the Body and Blood of Christ. We call this *transubstantiation*. Therefore, each time we celebrate Mass, we are plunged into the whole ever-present, everlasting mystery of Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter, and share intimately in life of our Lord through the Holy Eucharist.

The doctrine is based upon the words of Jesus himself when he instituted the Eucharist. Jesus took the bread and said, “This is my body” (Mt 26:26), and he took the cup filled with wine and said, “This is my blood” (Mt 26:28). When Jesus said, “This is my body,” he declared that the bread actually is his body, and that he is really present.

