

The Real Presence: A synopsis from talk given by Bishop Robert Barron

In the Eucharist Jesus is really, truly, and substantially present. It is very important that we get this truth. Jesus is not just symbolically present in the Eucharist. He is really, truly, and substantially present. From the very beginning many people found this doctrine hard to accept. Indeed many people have found it hard to accept down through the centuries. Christ is really present in the Eucharist; his presence is not a symbolic presence. It is a real Presence. Jesus becomes present in Person. We see this from the beginning in chapter 6 of St John's Gospel. After the miracle of the loaves and fishes Jesus crosses the lake to the other side, but large crowds of people follow him. Here Jesus says to them: Don't look for perishable food. I myself am the living bread come down from Heaven. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in him, for my flesh is real food, and my blood is real drink. The people balked, and we are not surprised. After all a Jew was not allowed to eat flesh, or drink the blood of animals, and here is a Jew telling them to eat his flesh and drink his blood.

In the Old Testament there are many prohibitions against the eating of flesh of animals, or the drinking of blood. His followers were not only shocked but scandalised. In fact some of them began to walk away. If they had not understood him properly one would have expected Jesus to explain his words, and explain his meaning. In fact he did the opposite. He turns up the heat and upsets them more. He means what he says. He says: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood you will not have life in you. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day. It is no wonder they say that this is in tolerable language. But still Jesus didn't compromise. Instead he turned to the disciples and said: Will you also go away. It was Peter who answered saying: Master, where shall we go for you have the words of eternal Life". Will the Eucharist be a divisive point for the church all through history. Yes it will. It was a controversial point from the beginning and it will continue to be right down through history. They all ran away, and left. It was Peter who saved the day.

The Eucharistic question was raised again in the 11th Century. It was raised this time by a monk called Ballengarry. He was interested in logic and grammar. He raised a logical objection against the real presence. He said: There is the Body of Christ in heaven. There is the Body of Christ on the Eucharistic Altar. Surely when Jesus said: This is my Body he must have been talking about the ordinary bread which becomes a symbol of the body of Christ in heaven, for the body of Christ in heaven doesn't change, move, or become different for altars all over the world. It is therefore a symbol of the body of Christ. Then during the reformation five hundred years later this notion of symbol was used again. Zwingli and Calvin said that the bread and wine were symbols of the Body and Blood of Christ. But the church balked at this notion of symbol for it wasn't the reality found in Chapter 6 of John's Gospel. As the Church said to Ballengarry; "You sound like the objectors in John Gospel", so now they say the same to the reformers.

It was only in the thirteenth century that that we found the adequate way to describe the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. It came from Thomas Aquinas. We are not surprised that it came from St Thomas for St Thomas loved the Eucharist. Thomas was a person who said Mass each morning, and assisted at another Mass. He was so overcome by the mystery of the Mass that he was often emotionally overcome during it. We are told that when he couldn't work out some problem, he brought it to the Blessed Sacrament looking for help. He analysed the meaning of the Real Presence under the word Transubstantiation. He is borrowing from Aristotle who had made a distinction between substance and accident, or in our language between reality and

appearance. In using this language St Thomas said that at the Consecration of the Mass the substance of Bread is changed into the substance of the Body of Christ, and the substance of the wine is changed into the substance of the Blood of Christ. In other words, the deepest reality of the bread changes into the body of Christ, and the deepest reality of the wine changes into the blood of Christ. As we know appearance and reality usually coincide, but sometimes they don't. Sometimes the reality is different from the appearance. If you are driving along in your car in the evening the moon seems to follow you. However the truth is that it remains in the one place. The appearance changes but the reality doesn't. We can see this happen when we meet someone whom we don't like. They appear to be gruff, unkind, and uncaring. But later we meet someone who knows this person to find out that they are kind, compassionate, and caring. The reality doesn't match the appearance. So we cannot judge the Eucharist by its appearance; we cannot judge it by its taste, colour or what we see. The substance changes, but the outward appearance doesn't change.

The Church claims that this is the perfect example of the distinction between reality and appearance. What changes the bread and wine?. The answer is the power of Christ. The power Jesus' word changes the bread and wine and it becomes the Body and Blood of Christ. It is important that we consider the power of words. If I go into a crowd and say to some one:"You're under arrest you would naturally take it as a joke. But if I am a police officer, and function with the right authority, and I say to somebody "You're under arrest" they are under arrest. They are under arrest because the words come from the proper authority. And these words by that authority changes reality.

What changes the bread and wine is God's Word--The power of God's Word. When God speaks he brings about what he speaks. He said: "let there be light and there was light". "Lazarus come forth, and Lazarus came out". "Little girl get up, and she did get up". "Your sins are forgiven, and they are forgiven". God's word is not just descriptive, it is creative. It accomplishes what it set out to do. "As the rain and the snow come down from Heaven, and water the plants and make them grow, my Word does not come back to me without carrying it what it was sent to achieve." At the last Supper Jesus goes up to Jerusalem to mount Zion with his apostles. And here he takes some bread and he gives thanks, and blesses it and gives it to his disciples saying—"This is my Body and then "This is my blood, and the bread and wine become his body and Blood" The change is effected by the Word of God. This is the basis for our Faith in the Real Presence.

The change is not affected by the word of the Priest but by the word of Jesus, for the Priest speaks them in the person of Christ. It is the priest who uses his vocal chords for Christ, but it is Christ who speaks. We notice the shift in the consecration when the priest's speaks in the name of Jesus—This is my Body-This is my Blood. Then we join with him in his banquet and eat his body and blood and Christ is now the power in which we abide. The mystical Body is fed by the power of Christ. The two disciples on the way to Emmaus speak to us about the meaning of the Eucharist. They represent us. They had left Jerusalem while everyone else was on their way to Jerusalem. They were going the wrong way. We all go the wrong way. Then Jesus joins them but they do not recognise him. They know all the details of the scripture but they fail to understand. Then Jesus tells his story, he goes in with them, and they recognise him at the braking of bread. They get up and though it is late and dangerous they set out for Jerusalem. They now go the right way. In the Mass we too recognise that we are walking the wrong way. We say Lord have mercy. We then come to his banquet, and we walk the right way.