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Upcoming Eucharistic Congress underscores need to rekindle understanding of divine presence in the Eucharist

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JOURNEY TOWARD HOLINESS



By Sister Mary Garascia

Even as preparations for the Synod are occurring, the U.S. bishops have announced another major coming-together of American Catholics – a national Eucharistic Congress in July 2024. Preparations are to begin on June 16 this year, the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ. It's a big deal.

Why is this happening? Our bishops are concerned that U.S. Catholics are losing their spiritual attachment to Eucharist, the feature that most distinguishes Catholic religion from other kinds of religion and that nourishes the inner spiritual life of Catholics.

The bishops' concern arises from two things documented through surveys of U.S. Catholics: first, only a third of Catholics say they believe in the "true presence" of Jesus Christ in Eucharist; and second, only a third of Catholics attend Mass regularly. If we look at the cohort of youngest adults, this number only about 10 percent.

Let's begin by talking about lack of belief in "true presence." A 2019 PEW survey asked U.S. Catholics: does the bread and wine at Mass actually become the body and blood of Jesus Christ, or are the bread and wine symbols of the body and blood of Jesus Christ? Only 31 percent chose "actually become" and 69 percent chose "symbols."

"Actually become" is a shorthand reference to the term "transubstantiation." This term emerged in the Middle Ages around 1130 AD as an explanation of how the appearances of bread and wine remain but the substance changes ("trans" means change) from bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ at the consecration during Mass.

This explanation using Aristotelian philosophical reasoning was adopted by the Council of Trent (1545-63 AD). It counteracted Protestant teaching that the bread and wine were mere signs of Christ's body and blood. After Trent the term transubstantiation made its way into our doctrinal teaching and Catechisms.

From the beginning, transubstantiation was a problematic term. As scientific understanding grew about the laws of chemistry and physics that govern how things become and change, it became more problematic. Transubstantiation seems to require belief in a material change of bread and wine that contradicts what we know from science. Some theologians, like Bishop Robert Barron, are trying to reinvigorate the idea of "substantial change" by presenting a less material explanation of it.

Other theologians are trying to explain Christ's presence in Eucharist using different categories of thought.

A good discussion of the history of past and modern thinking about Eucharist is in the *New Dictionary of Theology* published by Liturgical Press. You might also like to read the recent article on the Eucharist by Father Tom Rausch, SJ, of Loyola Marymount, available in the online *America Magazine*, Nov. 12, 2021.

If I could advise the U.S. bishops, I would drop "true presence" from our vocabulary. Current discussion about "transubstantiation" is unfinished, nor can reasoning about it be rendered in language we can easily relate to, grasp and be inspired by. What we need is conceptual language that supports our faith in the presence of Christ at Eucharist and attracts us to the Eucharistic assembly. Instead of "true presence," my simple suggestion is to speak of the sacramental presence of Christ at Eucharist.

"Presence" itself is something we all experience. We live in a world rich in ways that permit us to be present to one another. We are aware of our neighbors on a global scale, in constant communication with people we've never met, and able to celebrate global consciousness of our common humanity through sports, music, film and in a myriad of other ways. We are also self-aware or present to ourselves through many paths including psychology, spirituality, history/genealogy and self-help movements and practices. Sacramental presence, a unique kind of multi-faceted presence, is both communal and intensely intimate and individual.

Sacramental presence begins as people enter the Church. They

bring the risen Christ living in them into it, and so the presence of Christ fills the Church before Mass begins. The worshipers also are present themselves, in their free inner openness to receiving the graces from "being there." Vatican II and subsequent Church documents have described other facets of presence of Christ during Eucharistic Liturgy: the presence of God in the Word as the scriptures are read and preached; the presence of Christ in the person of the priest, authorized to pray "in the person of Christ" with us; the presence of Christ in the communion of saints and others gone before us, now gathered into the risen Christ and through Him present to us.

To understand the special presence of Christ in the consecrated bread and wine of Eucharist, belief in the risen Christ is the key. Rausch reminds us of another thing Trent said, that the whole of Christ becomes present, body and blood, soul and divinity, "the risen Jesus himself in his glorified humanity ... When we receive the Eucharist, the risen Christ ... no longer bound by space and time, comes to dwell in us, uniting us with himself and with one another in his body, the church."

There is a "materiality" to the risen Christ. His body is/was raised. Neither Jesus of Nazareth nor any of us can do anything, think anything, communicate anything without our material bodies. Even after resurrection, Gospel accounts show the risen Jesus eating, talking, walking with his disciples. Partly because we think of God as pure spirit, we have a hard time finding language to say how matter is joined with divinity in the resurrection of Jesus or after our own deaths. But the "memory" of Him that we celebrate at Eucharist is all connected with his body. And if we are present at Mass as whole persons, of course that includes our bodies.

Bread and wine are material things, not imaginary food but material food that encompasses the presence of the ever incarnate Lord and becomes part of our own bodies. Ronald Rolheiser speaks of us being touched, literally, by Christ as we receive the consecrated host. That matter is made holy in the bread and wine at Mass is the ultimate affirmation of our own material, embodied lives.

When we eat His food, a special kind of union happens between the risen Christ and us, a union touching our whole selves including our bodies. Perhaps someday we will have better theological language for this mystery, but after all, that is what mystery really means – something we understand but are always growing to understand better.

A final consideration: Jesus the Christ when risen does not change his "character" from the human person he was as Jesus of Nazareth. The risen Christ continues the actions of Jesus. He continues the covenant he made with his disciples, to "be with" them whenever they "do this" in memory of him. The risen Christ intentionally offers himself totally to us at each Mass just as the Jesus of Nazareth did on the cross.

It is not our understanding or interpretation of the signs of bread and wine that makes Christ presence at Mass. It is His own intention to be present. He intends to be present within his body of the Church, to be present in the word of scripture, in the person of the Priest, in the communion of saints, and to be present Body and Soul, humanity and divinity, within the blessed bread and wine.

All this richness of sacramental presence is not something that can be had apart from the body of Christ assembled for Eucharist. That's what our Catholics are missing when they come so seldom to the table. What a loss. The bishops are right to be concerned.

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