

Reflections on the Eucharist

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The Eucharist as Expression of God's Self-Giving Love

"I am the bread of life," says Jesus in beginning of the Bread of Life Discourse in Chapter 6 of St. John's Gospel. Jesus calls himself the true bread of life sent down from heaven by God "which gives life to the world."

Henri Nouwen, in his beautiful book, *With Burning Hearts: A Meditation on the Eucharistic Life*, offers wonderful fruit for reflection as one prays with the Bread of Life Discourse. Nouwen writes:

In the Eucharist, Jesus gives all. The bread is not simply a sign of his desire to become our food; the cup is not just a sign of his willingness to be our drink. Bread and wine *become* his body and blood in the giving. The bread, indeed, is his body given for us; the wine his blood poured out for us. As God becomes fully present for us in Jesus, so Jesus becomes fully present for us in the bread and the wine of the Eucharist...God does not hold back; God gives all. This is the mystery of the Incarnation. That is that mystery of the Eucharist. Incarnation and Eucharist are the two expressions of the immense, self-giving love of God. And so the sacrifice on the cross and the sacrifice on the table are one sacrifice, one complete, divine self-giving that reaches out to all humanity in time and space.

Listen to Jesus tell you that He is the bread of life and then reflect on Nouwen's words.

What does it mean to you that "Jesus becomes fully present for us in the bread and wine of the Eucharist?"

What does it mean that "God gives all"?

What is your response to God's total self-gift?

The Transformation of the Universe Into The Presence of God

Michael Himes has a wonderful book titled, *The Mystery of Faith: An Introduction to Catholicism* (which I highly recommend). In his chapter on the Eucharist, he offers a beautiful way to think of what it means for Jesus, as the bread of life, to give life to the world. Himes writes:

Not only does the Eucharist make us who we are, it tells us where we are going...[If bread and wine] can be transformed into the fullness of the presence of Christ, and therefore the fullness of the presence of God in human terms, then why not the whole material universe? And that is, of course, precisely the point...The whole universe is destined to be transformed into the presence of Christ, the fullness of God in the flesh. The whole universe is destined to be transformed into the presence of God in Christ...That is the destiny that the Eucharist reveals to us now: the transformation of the universe into the presence of God, so that the presence of God may be everything in everything. The Eucharist makes us who we are and reveals to us where we are going. That is why we are a Eucharistic people; because we are made into a people by the sealing of the covenant in the Eucharist, a people who know what the destiny of the world is.

By the Eucharist we are transformed. By the Eucharist we become part of the transformation of the entire universe into the presence of God.

Reflect on Himes' words.

Do I believe that the Eucharist transforms me?

Do I believe that, not just bread and wine, but the "whole universe is destined to be transformed into the presence of Christ, the fullness of God in the flesh"?

If I am hesitant to believe, what is the hesitation?

In what way does the "Eucharist make[] us who we are and reveal[] to us where we are going"?

The Communion of Love I Live With My Father

Father Peter John Cameron, O.P., in a book of reflections on the Eucharist, says that for Jesus, the Eucharist means,

“I love you so much that I want to get as close to you as I possibly can. No sacrifice is too great in my desire to express and communicate that love. As I approach my death, it is the communion of love I live with my Father that I want to impart to you.”

Cameron’s articulation suggests that the Eucharist is not only the Body of Christ, in the sense of nourishing us to be as Jesus was in the world, to do as Jesus did in the world. Rather, when we receive the Eucharist we really receive the entire Trinity. We receive not only Jesus, but also the communion of love Jesus lives with the Father, which also implies the Holy Spirit.

The idea that receiving the Eucharist nourishes us with the love and communion of the entire Trinity suggests an even fuller, richer experience and reality of what we receive in the Eucharist. We are all a part of the communion of love Jesus shares with the Father and the Spirit.

Spend some time reflecting on Cameron’s expression of Jesus’ thought and see where it takes you.

Transubstantiation

My encouragement to you for today's prayer is to begin by going to a video on youtube in which Danielle Rose, a young Catholic singer, talks about what it means that Jesus is "really there...that it is really Him" in the Eucharist and about how we receive Jesus and each other when we receive the Eucharist. (The video is nine minutes long, but is worth listening to in its entirety. The depth of understanding and honesty in one so young is extraordinary.)

If you can't watch the video, the thrust of what Rose says is quite simple: If we believe that the Eucharist is really Jesus, if we really truly believe that it is really Jesus in the Eucharist, it changes everything. It has to. In another of her songs, *Reason to Believe*, Rose expresses how it changes everything:

I become His hands,
I walk with His feet.
Transubstantiation must occur
with each person that I meet.
Thy kingdom come and live today in me.

I never heard anyone speak of the transubstantiation in this manner. I had not, but it seems to me an awfully good way to talk about it.

Watch the video if you can. Then spend some time thinking about how the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist changes everything for you.

Become What You Receive

A couple of years ago, Archbishop Harry Flynn, retired archbishop of the St. Paul and Minneapolis Diocese, gave a talk at St. Hubert. He spoke on the Eucharist and on the centrality of social justice in the lives of Christians. Let me share one of the things he said that evening that I seems to me to be central.

The Archbishop observed that when he ate a piece of the lemon square that was served for dessert at the dinner preceding his talk, he changed the food into himself. In contrast, when we receive Eucharist, we don't change the Body of Christ into ourselves. Rather we are changed into the Body of Christ. We become what we receive. The Body of Christ doesn't become Harry Flynn; rather, Harry Flynn becomes the Body of Christ.

The Eucharist doesn't just nourish us; it transforms us. We *become* Christ. So there is nothing figurative about saying we *are* the hands and feet of Christ in the world.

Similarly, as I become Christ in the receipt of the Eucharist, so too does everyone else in the assembly. And we don't all become different Christs. Rather, we all become part of the *same* Christ. Thus, he observed, when we say that we are many parts but one body, we are not speaking figuratively, but quite literally.

How do Archbishop Flynn's words help give a fuller picture of the meaning of Christ's words at the Last Supper – do this in memory of me? If we take this understanding of the Eucharist seriously, what do these words invite us to? (What is the "this" we are invited to do in memory of Christ?)

After reflecting on these questions, ask yourself

Do I always receive the Eucharist with a consciousness of what it means, of what it does for us and to us?

Our Daily Bread

This week we have been, in different ways, reflecting on the centrality and meaning of the Eucharist in our lives.

In John's Gospel, Jesus tells the people that "it was not Moses who gave the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." Their response was, "Sir, give us this bread always."

Those words are reminiscent of the request of the Samaritan woman at the well. When Jesus tells her that "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again; but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life", she say to him: "give me this water."

In both cases, it is clear that Jesus' listeners knew something extraordinary was before them. They recognized something in Jesus that would change their lives.

I remember reacting very negatively when a former pastor of mine in New York, having decided to eliminate Saturday morning Mass because of a shortage of available priests, said that it was good to be deprived of the Eucharist occasionally because it would make us appreciate it more. His comment suggests the possibility that our easy, reliable access to the Eucharist can result in our taking it for granted. We go to Mass...we receive communion. Ho hum.

I still react negatively to the suggestion that it is "good" to not have the opportunity to receive the Eucharist. But we need to make sure that our easy access doesn't serve to blind us to the extraordinary nature of what we receive each time we partake of the Eucharist.

Spend some time reflecting today on whether you have lost something of the sense of exactly what we are receiving when we receive the Eucharist. If so, how can you recover it?

Review of the Week

Spend some time reflecting back on your prayer for the previous week. Return especially to those moments where you were most moved.

Where was I most moved this week?

Where did I find myself struggling?

What new understandings did I come to about the meaning of the Eucharist and its role in my life?

What difference will these insights make in my life?

After spending some time reflecting on these questions, share with God what it means that he gives Himself to us in the Eucharist.