

Fr. Perozich comments —

I meditate on this article by Fr. Peter Stravinskas because it feeds the soul and soothes it from all the other pain of instability, upheaval, confusion, injustice, chaos, ambiguity, and control in the church today.

Jesus makes Himself present to us now toward eternity, an incomprehensible gift to share in the Divine Life and the Beatific Vision.

Lent and the Sacraments: The Eucharist

This is how, said St. John Henry Newman, Jesus Christ “counteracts time and the world. It [the Blessed Sacrament] is not past, it is not away. It is this that makes devotion in lives. It is the life of our religion. We are brought into the unseen world.”

March 17, 2022 Peter M.J. Stravinskas

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The Doctrine

In incredibly complete fashion, the Catechism treats of the Eucharist, “the source and summit of the Christian life” [1324] in twenty pages! The various names are given for this “sacrament of sacraments” [Eucharist, Lord’s Supper, Breaking of the Bread, Eucharistic Assembly, Holy and Divine Liturgy, Communion, Holy Mass], along with the significance of each as each fills out some element of the total mystery, which would be difficult if not impossible to capture with only one title or image [1328-1332].

A thorough presentation is made on the signs of bread and wine, including their place in worship throughout salvation history – in both covenants. It is noted that “the first announcement of the Eucharist divided the disciples, just as the announcement of the Passion scandalized them” [1336]; this point is made because the text then goes on to a profound analysis of Catholic Eucharistic doctrine, which cannot but be a source of division where faith and grace are not present.

In speaking of Our Blessed Lord’s institution of the Eucharist in the context of the Jewish Passover, it is said that “Jesus gave the Jewish Passover its definitive meaning”; lest Jews see this as but another example of Christian “replacement” or “fulfillment” theology, it should not be missed that even the Eucharist is not presented as final. In reality, although the Eucharist “fulfills the Jewish Passover,” it “anticipates the final Passover of the Church in the glory of the Kingdom” [1340]; in other words, all ritual actions have a dimension to them which is but temporary, destined to be subsumed into the Eternal, in a time and place where signs and symbols will not be needed.

Perhaps responding to implicit attacks on liturgical reform, the following section is entitled, “The Mass of All Ages,” which outlines the basic structure of the Sacred Liturgy in every age: The Liturgy of the Word [composed of “the writings of the prophets” and “the memoirs of the apostles” (1345)] and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, forming together “one single act of worship” (1346)], just as the Risen Christ envisioned and accomplished it in His Emmaus journey with the disciples [1347].

In analyzing the various liturgical roles, the text stresses the active participation of all the faithful, but stresses the fact that Christ Himself is “the principal agent of the Eucharist” [1348] and that His presidency can be

represented “only [by] validly ordained priests” for only they can “consecrate the bread and wine so that they become the Body and Blood of the Lord” [1411].

The constituent parts of the Liturgy of the Eucharist are explained in summary but complete manner. As if to answer in a definitive manner some liturgists who argue for various “moments” when the transformation of the elements occurs, the Catechism teaches unequivocally: “The Eucharistic presence of Christ begins *at the moment of the consecration*” [emphasis added]; anticipating another disputed point of recent years, it goes on to say that this presence “endures as long as the Eucharistic species subsist” [1377].

The fifth major division of this treatise is concerned with “the sacramental sacrifice,” reflected upon as thanksgiving, memorial, presence. The Eucharist is, first and foremost, the Church’s sacrifice of praise offered to the Father “in the name of all creation. . . by Christ,” for “he unites the faithful to his person, to his praise, and to his intercession, so that the sacrifice of praise to the Father” [1361] is the most perfect form of worship possible. In considering the Eucharist as a memorial sacrifice, the Catechism stresses that “this is not merely the recollection of past events”; on the contrary, they “become in a certain manner present and real.” The explanation continues: “This is how Israel understands its liberation from Egypt: every time Passover is celebrated, the Exodus events are made present to the memory of believers so that they may conform their lives to them” [1363].

Similarly, as *Lumen Gentium* teaches, “as often as the sacrifice of the Cross by which ‘Christ our Pasch has been sacrificed’ is celebrated on the altar, the work of our redemption is carried out” [1364]. Hence, “the Eucharist is thus a sacrifice because it re-presents (makes present) the sacrifice of the cross, because it is its memorial and because it applies its fruit” [1366]. In the entire discussion on the Eucharist as sacrifice, the Catechism relies heavily on the Council of Trent [at least five citations in two pages], implicitly and clearly asserting the on-going validity of the Tridentine doctrine of the Mass.

In addition to being the sacrifice of Christ, “the Eucharist is also the sacrifice of the Church. The Church which is the Body of Christ participates

in the offering of her Head. With him, she herself is offered whole and entire. She unites herself to his intercession with the Father for all men. In the Eucharist the sacrifice of Christ becomes also the sacrifice of the members of his Body. The lives of the faithful, their praise, sufferings, prayer, and work, are united with those of Christ and with his total offering” [1368]. Beyond that, “the whole Church is united with the offering and intercession of Christ,” thus presenting the rationale for intercessory prayer within the Eucharistic Prayer itself [1369].

Referring specifically to the mention of the Pope at this time in the liturgy, the text observes that he “is associated with every celebration of the Eucharist, wherein he is named as the sign and servant of the unity of the universal Church.” Offering the Eucharist in union with the whole Christ [which is the whole Church] also demands turning attention to the saints, who participate now in the liturgy of Heaven. In a lovely line, we are reminded that “in the Eucharist the Church is as it were at the foot of the cross with Mary, united with the offering and intercession of Christ” [1370].¹

Turning to the matter of presence, the Catechism takes account of the various modes of Christ’s presence in the world and in the Church but goes on to make its own the line from *Sacrosanctum Concilium* which teaches: “But he is present . . . most especially in the Eucharistic species” In case the teaching is missed, it is repeated that this presence “is unique.” Once more, the text reiterates a teaching of Trent to explain this emphasis on the uniqueness of the Eucharistic mystery, for “in the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist ‘the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained’” [1373-4].

This marvelous presence comes about “by the conversion of the bread and wine into Christ’s Body and Blood” as a result of the “efficacy of the Word of Christ and of the action of the Holy Spirit to bring about this conversion” [1375]. How is this phenomenon to be understood and explained? Falling back on Trent again, the text reads: “By the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. This change the holy

Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called transubstantiation” [1376].

As all the surveys of the past forty years demonstrate that 70% of every-Sunday-communicants are confused about or reject the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist, how necessary is this re-statement. If this is truly the Body of Christ, then follow the necessity of worship and the external signs of reverence; particular mention is made of genuflection for the Western Church and the profound bow for the East, as well as other signs of devotion and adoration [1378]. Quoting Pope Paul VI’s *Mysterium Fidei*, the text singles out one devotion for special notice: “To visit the Blessed Sacrament is . . . a proof of gratitude, an expression of love, and a duty of adoration toward Christ our Lord” [1418].

As we are led to reflect on the Eucharist as the paschal Banquet, it is recalled for us that the altar is a kind of dual symbol: “the altar of the sacrifice and the table of the Lord,” in both instances representing Christ Himself, “both as the victim offered for our reconciliation and as food from heaven who is giving himself to us” [1383]. Because of the greatness of this mystery, proper preparation is required, including the Eucharistic fast [1387], but especially freedom from serious sin: “Anyone who desires to receive Christ in Eucharistic communion must be in the state of grace. Anyone aware of having sinned mortally must not receive communion without having received absolution in the sacrament of penance” [1415].

The Catechism, of course, underscores the importance of frequent and even daily Communion for those who are properly disposed [1389]. While acknowledging the divergence of liturgical traditions between East and West on the question of both species, the Catechism nevertheless stresses that reception under one species still enables one “to receive all the fruit of Eucharistic grace.” [1390], obviously dealing with some recent assertions that this is not the case.

And what are the fruits of a worthy reception of this most august Sacrament? “The principal fruit [is] an intimate union with Christ Jesus,” which union “preserves, increases and renews the life of grace received at Baptism” [1391-2]. Eucharistic communion also deepens one’s life of charity, removes venial sins, and “preserves us from future mortal sins” [1393-5]. Turning our gaze from Heaven [always the first priority] to earth

[which naturally and necessarily follows], the Catechism then considers some horizontal results of Holy Communion: strengthening of ecclesial bonds, action on behalf of the poor, movement toward unity among separated Christians [1396-8]. On this last matter, however, the Catechism repeats the important cautions on Eucharistic sharing developed at Vatican II and in subsequent legislation, lest a unity which does not truly exist be precipitously presumed, to the detriment of real union in God's own time.

Finally, we are told that the Eucharist should provide us with a perspective and focus which makes us long for Heaven and ultimately leads us there. And so, we make our own the prayer of the ancient *Didache*: "May your grace come and this world pass" [1403]. In and through the Eucharist does the grace of Christ come in the most significant way, preparing us for the day when this world does pass away and we are taken up into glory of the heavenly Banquet, which knows no end.

Doctrine becoming experience

As we know, all too well, this clearly explicated doctrine of the Holy Eucharist has fallen on hard times at the lived, practical level of Catholic experience, so much so that the bishops of our nation felt compelled to issue a teaching document on the topic at their Fall 2021 meeting ("The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church"), leading to what they hope will be a "Eucharistic revival." As regular readers of CWR know, I have written extensively on what I consider to be major obstacles to a full realization of our immemorial teaching on the Blessed Sacrament, so that I shall not repeat myself here.

At this moment, however, I would like to offer the perspectives of three Catholic thinkers from three different time periods, who might be able to assist us in the all-important process of doctrine becoming experience.

St. John Henry Cardinal Newman

It is a truism of good psychology and good sociology that our external behavior reveals our interior dispositions, indeed, our most deeply held beliefs. The great English convert and churchman of the nineteenth

century, St. John Henry Cardinal Newman, was exercised about the lack of due devotion of his Anglican congregations, causing him to observe:

Who then is there to deny, that if we saw God, we should fear? . . . But if so, does it not follow at once, that, if men do not fear, it is because they do not act as they would act if they saw Him, that is,—they do not feel that He is present?²

Please note that the holy future Cardinal was not talking about a servile fear, that is, the fear of a slave cowering before a cruel, demanding master; no, he was calling for a filial fear, that is, the fear or love or devotion that a child has toward one's loving father. The fear we ought to have in the presence of the divine, the holy is one of awe, wonder, reverence. In all too many instances, Jesus as "Buddy" has replaced Jesus as Lord.

Preaching for the feast of Corpus Christi in 1856, little more than a decade after his conversion, Cardinal Newman made this bold statement to his Catholic congregation:

There is no feast, no season in the whole year which is so intimately connected with our religious life, or shows more wonderfully what Christianity is, as that which we are now celebrating. There is a point of view in which this doctrine [of the Body and Blood of Christ] is nearer to our religious life than any other.

We are brought into the unseen world.

How almighty love and wisdom has met this. He has met this by living among us with a continual presence. He is not past, He is present now. And though He is not seen, He is here. The same God who walked the water, who did miracles, etc., is in the Tabernacle. We come before Him, we speak to Him just as He was spoken to 1800 years ago, etc.

This [is] how He counteracts time and the world. It [the Blessed Sacrament] is not past, it is not away. It is this that makes devotion in lives. It is the life of our religion. We are brought into the unseen world.³ What an exhilarating thought: "We are brought into the unseen world."

Thomas Merton

The famous American convert to the Catholic Faith, Thomas Merton, at once an accomplished author and Trappist monk, describes in his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, his First Holy Communion, interestingly enough, at Corpus Christi Church but a few blocks from Columbia University. As you read his reflection, think back on your own first encounter with the Jesus who deigns and desires to come to us under the forms of bread and wine. Merton puts it thus:

I saw the raised Host – the silence and simplicity with which Christ once again triumphed, raised up, drawing all things to Himself – drawing me to Himself. . . . I was the only one at the altar rail. Heaven was entirely mine – that Heaven in which sharing makes no division or diminution. But this solitariness was a kind of reminder of the singleness with which this Christ, hidden in the small Host, was giving Himself for me, and to me, and, with Himself, the entire Godhead and Trinity – a great new increase of the power and grasp of their indwelling that had begun [in me] only a few minutes before at the [baptismal] font In the Temple of God that I had just become, the One Eternal and Pure Sacrifice was offered up to the God dwelling in me: The sacrifice of God to God, and me sacrificed together with God, incorporated in His incarnation. Christ born in me, a new Bethlehem, and sacrificed in me, His new Calvary, and risen in me: Offering me to the Father, in Himself, asking the Father, my Father and His, to receive me into His infinite and special love. . . .

The sentiments expressed by Merton would have been commonplace in his time (even if few could enunciate them so poetically). Would those sentiments be commonplace today? I don't think so.

St. John Paul II

Pondering the wondrous nature of the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar, we need one further consideration – the 2004 apostolic letter, *Mane Nobiscum, Domine* (Stay with Us, Lord), of Pope John Paul II, who took his inspiration for the text from St. Luke's moving and theologically rich Emmaus pericope (chapter 24); it was with this document that he inaugurated the "Year of the Eucharist" for the Church Universal. Therein, he reminds us that in his encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, he

underscored the need for “all the faithful to celebrate the Eucharistic sacrifice with due reverence, offering to Jesus present in the Eucharist, both within and outside Mass, the worship demanded by so great a Mystery” (n. 10).

He went on:

As I emphasized in my Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, it is important that no dimension of this sacrament should be neglected. We are constantly tempted to reduce the Eucharist to our own dimensions, while in reality it is we who must open ourselves up to the dimensions of the Mystery. “The Eucharist is too great a gift to tolerate ambiguity and depreciation.” (n. 14)

Yet again, he teaches:

Faith demands that we approach the Eucharist fully aware that we are approaching Christ himself. It is precisely his presence which gives the other aspects of the Eucharist — as meal, as memorial of the Paschal Mystery, as eschatological anticipation — a significance which goes far beyond mere symbolism. The Eucharist is a mystery of presence, the perfect fulfilment of Jesus’ promise to remain with us until the end of the world. (n. 16)

In a striking image, the sainted Pontiff wants us to regard “the presence of Jesus in the tabernacle [as] a kind of magnetic pole attracting an ever greater number of souls enamoured of him, ready to wait patiently to hear his voice and, as it were, to sense the beating of his heart” (n. 18). He then urges a practical application:

This year let us also celebrate with particular devotion the Solemnity of Corpus Christi, with its traditional procession. Our faith in the God who took flesh in order to become our companion along the way needs to be everywhere proclaimed, especially in our streets and homes, as an expression of our grateful love and as an inexhaustible source of blessings. (n. 18)

And his final request – we could say the last will and testament of the Pope:

O Sacrum Convivium, in quo Christus sumitur! The Year of the Eucharist has its source in the amazement with which the Church contemplates this great Mystery. It is an amazement which I myself

constantly experience. It prompted my Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. As I look forward to the twenty-seventh year of my Petrine ministry, I consider it a great grace to be able to call the whole Church to contemplate, praise, and adore in a special way this ineffable Sacrament. May the Year of the Eucharist be for everyone a precious opportunity to grow in awareness of the incomparable treasure which Christ has entrusted to his Church. May it encourage a more lively and fervent celebration of the Eucharist, leading to a Christian life transformed by love. (n. 29)

“Stay with us, Lord.” (Lk 24:29)

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” (Rev 3:20)

“Come, Lord Jesus.” (Rev 22:20)

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Endnotes:

1St. John Henry Cardinal Newman penned this beautiful prayer for priests to offer in preparation for offering Holy Mass:

O Holy Mother, stand by me now at Mass time, when Christ comes to me,
as thou didst minister to Thy infant Lord –
as Thou didst hang upon His words when He grew up,
as Thou wast found under His cross.
Stand by me, Holy Mother,
that I may gain somewhat of thy purity, thy innocence, thy faith,
and He may be the one object of my love and my adoration,
as He was of thine.

2PPS, 5.2, “Reverence, a Belief in God’s Presence”, 4 November 1838.

3SN 127 (25 May 1856).

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