

Today’s Gospel selection from the sixth chapter of St. John’s Gospel ends with Jesus’ dramatic proclamation: ***“I am the bread of life: whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst”*** (Jn. 6:35).

At the heart of our Roman Catholic understanding, teaching and practice of the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist is the belief that in its celebration physical bread and wine, while outwardly retaining their appearance and taste to our physical senses, become through the person and action of the Holy Spirit, invoked by the priest voicing the prayer of the church, to use the traditional language: the “very body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus”. In other words, Jesus the divine Son of God, assuming the fullness of our human life, our flesh and blood at his birth, became truly and really present as a human person who lived, worked, preached, suffered and died, in human history, now as the risen Lord becomes present in his same person—fully God and fully human—by way of sacramental sign/symbol, through bread and wine. It is the same Jesus, yet the mode/means of his presence are different.

Surveys over the past twenty years or so indicate that when it comes to this doctrine of our faith regarding the real presence of Jesus in the Holy Eucharist, there is considerable misunderstanding and confusion. Some see it as merely being a reminiscence of what Jesus said and did at the Last Supper. Others hold to an overly literal physical understanding that sees, for instance, that when the consecrated host is broken, Jesus’ bones are being physically being crushed. Both views are incorrect.

Like all the sacraments, the bread and wine in the Holy Eucharist are physical realities. Like the physical realities used in the other sacraments (water, oil, human touch, human words) they are symbols by and through which God and our lives encounter each other. A symbol is a physical object which enshrines within itself the reality that stands behind or, the within it. Think of the recent debate over the Confederate battle flag. Like

all flags, it enshrines particular people's beliefs, values, and emotions. It is able to engender strong reactions from those who interact with it. That's what symbols do.

At the Last Supper, Jesus took bread and wine, physical realities already filled with the symbolism of the history of God's care for his people as evidenced in the story of the manna in our first reading, and added a new level of meaning by identifying them with his own self-emptying sacrificial death. The bread he now proclaims to be "my body, given up for you", the cup of wine; "the cup of my blood, the blood of the new eternal covenant to be shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins." These already rich symbols of God's interaction with his people now take on eternal divine significance and presence. As words uttered by the divine Son of God, like the divine word of creation, these words effect what they proclaim. While the outward symbols of bread and wine remain, now their nature, purpose, and effect have been forever transformed. They now become the means by which Jesus offers the gift of himself to all those who, in faith, consume the means by which they, and Jesus, enter into a common life—a holy communion. This is what the doctrine of the "real presence" of Jesus in the bread and wine of the Holy Eucharist means.

Yet, belief in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Holy Eucharist is more than a static, solely intellectual doctrine. Belief in the Real Presence, participating in the Mass, and receiving Holy Communion, demands something from us. Eucharist nourishes us, but also transforms us into being more perfectly members of the Body of Christ, so that we might be the "Bread and Cup of Life" for others. St. Augustine in his famous Sermon 272 states: ***"You are the Body of Christ and members of it. ... It is that mystery which is placed on the Lord's table. You receive the mystery, which is to say the Body of Christ, your very self. You answer Amen to who you are and in the answer embrace yourself. ... Be a member of Christ's Body, that your Amen will be true."*** To say Amen to the Body and Blood we receive at Communion is to commit ourselves to relationship with Jesus; to live like Jesus as St. Paul says in today's second reading: "putting away the old self of our former way of life...and putting on the new self, created in God's way in righteousness and holiness of truth." (Eph. 4:20,24). May we become what we once again receive.