



Real Presence

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

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Eucharist

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All my life as a Catholic, I have held the orthodox belief that the “Real Presence” of Christ is communicated in the bread and wine of the sacred meal (rather shockingly taught by Jesus in John 6:35-58). This is not a magical idea, but simply the mystery of incarnation taken to its logical conclusion—from creation itself, uniquely to Jesus’ body, to the human Body of Christ that we all are, and then to the very elements from the earth and human hands like bread and wine to serve as food for the journey. Why believe the universal Presence is “Real” if it is not also real in one concrete ordinary spot? (We are meant to struggle with this realization, as we see in John 6:60-66.)

The very notion of presence is inherently and necessarily relational and also somehow embodied. Note that Jesus did not say “Think about this,” “Prove this,” “Look at this,” “Carry this around,” and, surely not, “Argue about this.” He just said, “Eat this . . . and drink all of you” (Matthew 26:26-27). As Augustine (354-430) would preach later, the message is that you are what you eat and drink! [1]

We spent much of our history arguing about the “how” and the “if” and who could do what Catholics called the “transubstantiation” of the bread and wine instead of simply learning how to be present. We made the Eucharist into a magic act to be believed instead of a personal transformation to be experienced. We changed bread more than people, it seems to me. We emphasized the priest as the “transformer” instead of the people as the transformed. We made “Real Presence” into a doctrine (which has its very good meaning!), but we seldom taught people how to be really present (which is contemplation). When you are really present, you will experience the Real Presence for yourself.

The Eucharist is an encounter of the heart, knowing Presence through our available presence. In the Eucharist, we move beyond mere words or rational thought and go to that place where we don’t talk about the Mystery; we begin to chew on it.

We must move our knowing to the bodily, cellular, participative, and unitive level. Then we keep eating and drinking the Mystery until one day it dawns on us, in an undefended moment, “My God, I really am what I eat!” Henceforth we can trust and allow what has been true since the first moment of our existence: We are the very Body of Christ. We have dignity and power flowing through us in our naked existence—and everybody else does too, even though most of us do not know it. This is enough to guide and empower our entire faith journey. If Christians did not already have Eucharist as our central ritual, we would have to create something very similar.

References:

[1] Augustine's message to the newly baptized, *Estote quod videtis, et accipite quod estis*, is often translated as "Be what you see, and receive what you are." See Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 272, available at http://www.earlychurchtexts.com/public/augustine_sermon_272_eucharist.htm.

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *A Spring Within Us: A Book of Daily Meditations* (CAC Publications: 2016), 298-299.

Image credit: Sharing a meal in the Philippines (detail), photograph by Avel Chuklanov, 2017. Magalang Road, Mabalacat, Philippines.

Inspiration for this week's banner image: Jesus' most consistent social action was eating in new ways and with new people, encountering those who were oppressed or excluded from the system. He didn't please anybody, it seems, always breaking the rules and making a bigger table. —Richard Rohr