



Christianity: The Basics — Eucharist

The Eucharist is the Christian story acted out in miniature. The offering of the sinless Son of God for the sinful children of men is not a past event, if by past we mean something over and gone. The incarnate humanity of Christ, offered, sacrificed, risen and ascended, is always part of the Godhead. It is real humanity drawn up into God and eternally representing humanity to God. This is not representation in our ordinary sense of the word – depicting, or being an image for. It is re-presenting, offering something again. The perfect human life lived out in Christ is offered in its perfection so that all human imperfections are overlooked.



Nicholas Poussin. *The Eucharist*.

In the Eucharist, bread and wine—simple, physical gifts—are brought and offered to God: the simple stuff of life offered to its author. God receives those gifts, takes them, transforms them and then offers them back to the Church which whose offering he transforms. That is the miracle of the Eucharist—by grace people offer, and God transforms so as to unite human offering with the perfect offering of the Son to the Father. Those who receive communion seem only to receive what was first offered—the signs of bread and wine—but in reality they receive the gift of God himself. God gives himself in this sacrament so that human beings are drawn up into the worship of heaven. In this worship it is the humanity of Christ which plays our part, ensuring that when God looks towards his human children what he sees is Christ. Rather than our selfishness, he sees the self-giving love of the perfect Son. The Victorian theologian and hymn writer William Bright put it beautifully; “Look, father, look on his anointed face, And only look on us as found in him”.

We are found in Christ because his offering is made present among us. This is the heart of a catholic understanding of the Eucharist. In the consecrated bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ are really and objectively present, they are not just symbols of a present reality, they are that reality.

There are different ways in which theologians talk about this presence, but at root they are saying something relatively simple. The presence of Christ is not something ordinary, the way your presence or the presence of the chair on which you sit, is ordinary. If, as Christians have asserted from the earliest times, the body and blood of Christ is to come to be where it was not before, there are only two possibilities. One of these is that Christ moves locally—i.e., from place to place—as other bodies move. He leaps down from heaven and arrives in this place. And this is daft—the body of Christ is not an earthly thing like an ordinary body. The other possibility is the claim sometimes called *transubstantiation*: something that is already there in the sacrament is changed, converted into the reality of Christ; the earthly bread and wine become the heavenly body and blood.

Notice how little is being said here, in terms of detail or explanation. Instead of a normal act of motion from one place to another, we are claiming that a miracle occurs. When people report these ideas teaching—that the substance of the bread and wine have been miraculously transformed into the substance of the body and blood of Christ—they often leave it at that, but the Church says more about what this presence is *not*, than what it is. The theology which affirms the presence of Christ’s body and blood also denies that the body and blood are present as in a place, that is,

they are not locally present, they do not move when the host is moved, one is no nearer to them at the altar than to the North Pole, etc. etc. In other words, the standard physical characteristics of presence do not apply in this context, because the body and blood of Christ are not earthly materials, any more than heaven is an identifiable place with physical boundaries.

All this is a reminder of the limitations of our language. The presence of Christ which we celebrate is not something static, something limited to an object or a place. It is the presence among us of the eternal offering of the Son to the Father. In the Eucharist we celebrate being drawn up into the worship of heaven, being enabled to share in the very life of God, a life of perfect self-giving in love, the life which we call Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The miracle of the Eucharist is the miracle of God's creative act, an act made new for us every time we celebrate and share in this sacrament.

Peter Groves

The St Mary Magdalen School of Theology

<https://www.theschooloftheology.org/posts/essay/christianity-the-basics-eucharist>



Suggested Discussion Questions

1. “Eucharist”, “mass”, “Holy Communion, and “Lord’s Supper” are all common ways to talk about “the sacrament of Christ’s body and blood”. What aspects do these different terms emphasize?
2. The eucharist is a *sacrificial meal*. What does this language of sacrifice and (fellowship) meal signify about what’s going on at the eucharist?
3. The Bishop of Zanzibar once preached a famous sermon called *Our Present Duty*, in which he said that “You cannot claim to worship Jesus in the Tabernacle if you do not pity Jesus in the slum.” What does this tell us about the effects the eucharist should have on our lives?