Opinion
Spirituality



by NCR Staff

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Do Catholics 'actually' believe in the Real Presence? A recent Pew Research study shows that a majority of U.S. Catholics do not believe church teaching about the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. NCR readers are encouraged to respond with letters to the editor, which are published every Friday. The letters are edited for length and clarity.

I have read the report about the non-believing Catholics in the real presence of our blessed Lord in the Eucharist with deep concern.

There is a way to help improve and eventually turn around this situation: Renew the love of God in the hearts of all Catholics. Teach the truth! Keep teaching that Jesus is present in the Eucharist, his body, blood, soul, and divinity. The Mass must be celebrated with great care and devotion.

If Christ is really present, act accordingly. People need spiritual food, it is hard to believe that the Son of God comes down to the altar every time the words of transubstantiation are pronounced if the celebrant does it like he is performing a daily duty and if he does not talk about this miracle with zeal and conviction. The church is a house of prayer and worship, not only a place to meet friends.



My heart breaks when I see what is happening. There is confusion, division, doubts, discontent. The sense of community is fading.

My suggestion is to bring back the Latin Mass. Bring it back and make it as reverent, sacred, and uplifting as possible. Let us give our blessed Lord the very best we have, without counting the cost or sacrifice.

MARÍA AZNAR

Basking Ridge, New Jersey

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Symbol is the language of religion. This is what scholars of religion hold. Those who deny the symbolic nature of religious language demonstrate a misunderstanding of the term. Transubstantiation is scholastic terminology and must be understood in that context. It is not an expression of our modern culture, nor the human psyche.

Yes, the bishop should be upset with himself for misrepresenting symbol and insisting on transubstantiation. The question remains; namely, the meaning of the presence of Jesus the Christ in the Eucharist. I refer all to the documents on both the church and the liturgy of Vatican II.

DONALD CONROY

Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Transubstantiation or consubstantiation or whatever, I don't care that much. I attend Mass regularly, including on weekdays when my schedule permits.

Back in the 1980s, I attended Mass Saturday evening and Lutheran worship Sunday morning with my wife (she now watches Mass and Lutheran worship on TV Sunday mornings). The big difference was that the Lutherans were more open and inviting when it came to communion. Big words seem irrelevant.

Communing with fellow believers is relevant, is following Jesus' example, a help on further following Jesus' example in our everyday lives.

JIM LEIN

Minot, North Dakota

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I think the headline "Pew survey shows majority of Catholics don't believe in 'real presence' " is a bit different from the original Pew Research blog post about the Eucharist.

The original blog says U.S. Catholics and not Catholics in general. This which does not includes Catholics outside of U.S. It is a bit presumptuous to say majority of Catholics as there are Catholics outside U.S. not included in the survey.

(Fr.) ETIDO JEROME, SSJ

New Orleans, Louisiana

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It seemed to me the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist did little for the attitude of those who spewed vitriol and anger and disrespect for their neighbors and of those who wanted more artificial constructs to somehow foster a belief in God. And those who say they attended Catholic schools for years and never heard of the real presence must have been absent those days.

I left the church almost eight years ago. I miss the Eucharist. My faith, not my religion, enables me to know Jesus' real presence in the Eucharist. My faith in the presence of Jesus does not need Latin, altar rails, or even priests for me to receive Jesus. It doesn't matter who gives the Eucharist out. Lay people are as equal in God's service as any priest, pope or saint.

Yes, the church needs correction, purgation, mercy, forgiveness and compassion more than ever. Was the presence of Christ diminished because a priest who committed sins of sexual abuse consecrated the hosts; was there less Jesus in that host? Would an altar rail improve it, increase it? Would the hands of a humble, diligent lay person harm the body of Christ? I grew sad as I read those tweets. They may have consumed the real presence, but they haven't digested it.

DAVE MURRAY

Cedarville, Michigan

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I was not surprised that a majority of Catholics do not believe in the real presence. I read a similar report 25 years ago. Transubstantiation does not begin to convey the meaning of the real presence. That word has lost its influence among Catholics, including me, because it is based on an outdated and irrelevant theology called scholasticism. a literal understanding of real presence loses the point.

At Mass, we are called to be so engaged in Jesus' paschal mystery that his presence is real and makes me want to be more like Jesus. Why would I want to be like a

cardboard cutout of Jesus when I could be the real presence of Jesus for others in our world? That's the meaning of real presence.

NORBERT BUFKA

Midland, Michigan

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This is shocking! I am 73 years old, and converted to Catholicism when I was 19. I was previously raised in a Methodist church.

In the Methodist church, I was aware that the communion bread and grape juice were symbols. When I converted, it was made very clear that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. It was a major factor in my conversion. My children were raised knowing this.

Who dropped the ball? Didn't these Catholics go to catechism? Or Mass? I can't say what a shocking surprise this is!

LYNNE MILLER

Oakland, California

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If God is in all things as expressed by Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr in his recent book *The Universal Christ*, then the issue of transubstantiation is irrelevant. Rohr makes this very clear in an online daily meditation titled "You Are The Body of Christ." In part, that meditation reads as follows:

> Christ is the eternal amalgam of matter and spirit as one. They hold and reveal one another. Wherever the human and the divine coexist, we have the Christ. Wherever the material and the spiritual coincide, we have the Christ. That includes the material world, the natural world, the animal world (including humans), and moves all the way to the elemental world, symbolized by bread and wine. The Eucharist just offers Christians the message in very condensed form so we can struggle with it in a specific and concrete way. We cannot think about such a universal truth logically;

we can only slowly digest it! It is the spiritual version of healthy eating and nutrition.

This being the case, it would seem no one really has to be concerned about transubstantiation. Yes, Christ is in the bread and wine. The host and chalice are reminders that indeed Christ is with us and in us. Put another way, reception of Christ in the Eucharist symbolizes the reality of our mutual communion — We with and in Christ and Christ in and with us.

This teaching is not the way most of us learned about the Eucharist. Clearly, it is a most beautiful teaching and will require a significant change in the nature of religious education.

WILLIAM R. EIDLE

Poughkeepsie, New York

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I can only speak of my own personal growth of the Eucharist which is way beyond that of what I learned as a child and lived for many years.

I see this Christ not only in the bread and wine that priests are said to have been given to change into Christ but Christ is present in every living substance, creature and person created by God.

Bishop Robert Barron should be upset that the church has not taken people beyond the rituals of Mass that only his kind can perform and to a realization that we all give and present Christ in the world. The great people who he mentioned found this out and went beyond mere doctrine of one idea to living out Christ in the world.

JOAN M. GRIESER

Federal Way, Washington

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I wonder if a third of Catholics really don't believe in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist or if, when asked if they believe the Eucharist is the "actual" body and blood of Christ, they reject the literal physical sense that that term implies. Good! Because that's not what the church believes either.

We say the body of Christ, not the body of Jesus, because the physical body with which Jesus walked the earth no longer exists. It has been transformed and glorified through the resurrection, and it is the risen, glorified body of Christ we receive in the Eucharist. The catechism makes this abundantly clear.

And while we're on the subject, why don't we ask Catholics if they believe in the real presence of Christ in the word, in the poor, and in the sick, as the catechism also teaches?

STEVE CRON

Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Villanova University professor Timothy Brunk opines that better Catholic catechesis need not focus on transubstantiation but how "charged with charity, compassion and justice" the faithful are — even if they have no clue about what their faith believes.

U.S. Catholics have had 50 years of faulty catechesis-by-coloring that makes vacuous statements about "love" while treating real content as Catholic lite. That, coupled with our loosened reverence toward the Eucharist (processions of extraordinary ministers at Masses where their absence would "unduly prolong" the celebration by maybe five minutes; infrequent confession but frequent Communion, etc.) explains why Catholics can't explain what the Eucharist is.

On the other hand, with all due acknowledgement of differences between Eastern and Western Eucharistic theology and the development of the doctrine of real presence, I would love to pose the same question to my fellow theological chattering class among whom — given transignification and "symbolic change" and "critical metaphysics" — I have real doubts whether there is a Catholic understanding of the Eucharist there.

JOHN M. GRONDELSKI

Falls Church, Virginia

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In my 50-year career as a cultural and medical anthropologist, scholar, author, and avid fieldworker, I have asked my intimate subjects questions that might seem inappropriate. One of those questions was my asking priests and their parishioners in a rural village in County Kerry, Ireland (in the mid-1970s) and priests and parishioners in Brazil (in the 1980s) about their belief in the real presence. As an insider/outsider, a Catholic with reservations, here are a few of their memorable replies:

Donncha Ó Laocha (Fr. Denis Leahy), the late and much beloved curate in the village of An Clochan, Ireland, told me: "I don't know how to answer your question about the difference between transubstantiation and transignification. I am a simple country priest and all that matters to me as that I am at the head of a long table and my work is to feed my flock. Jesus is present in the host [the wafer] but how he is there is a mystery."

Padre Orlando, the former parish priest of Our Lady of Sorrows in Timbauba, Northeast Brazil, told me: "I give Holy Communion to anyone who comes to the altar. I know that some of the people from the shantytowns practice Xangô (Afro-Brazilian spirit possession) and then after a night of many spirit possessions they come to the altar to receive communion. I never turn them away."

When I asked him about the real presence of Jesus, he had this to say: "The real presence of the flesh of Jesus is those who feed the hungry people in our city. The real presence of his blood is in those who struggle to bring clean water to our thirsty people. At that time when there was no clean public water, the graffiti scribbled on the walls of the marketplace was "'Esto com Sede!" — I thirst."

NANCY SCHEPER-HUGHES

Berkeley, California

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I spent almost 50 years in catechetical publishing producing materials for kindergarten children all the way through adult programs. Never did any of my staff, artists, or writers, proclaim anything but the real presence.

When I saw the results of the Pew study on the matter, I knew they had it wrong because of the way the question was worded. I am grateful for Heidi Schlumpf's response because it serves to clarify just why the question is severely misleading and the answers dismaying.

Catholics revere the Eucharist. Anybody, moreover, who has participated in a Corpus Christi procession or a 40 hours devotion can tell just how deeply they do revere the sacrament and understand its reality. It isn't communion, the hand, or lay Eucharistic ministers that cause a problem. Nor would I lay blame at the feet of the catechists or in the pages of catechetical texts.

If you ask any Catholic the direct question, "Is Jesus Christ really present in the Eucharist?" The answer will be a resounding "yes" for most. To try to put too fine a point on it or to try to give elaborate explanations in a catechetical or homiletic situation (or in a multiple choice question) can sometimes serve to cloud the issue.

CULLEN SCHIPPE

Mendham, New Jersey

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The lack of belief started after Vatican II, when people were encouraged to receive in their hands. Then it was more disrespected when lay people were "Eucharistic ministers!"

I was a convert in the early 1960s and learned that only the priests' hands were to touch the Eucharist. Now the communion process almost looks like my Baptist church where they passed around cubes of bread. Thank God the Latin Mass is returning where we can practice the "real" Mass with more respect for tradition and

the Eucharist.

CHARLOTTE CAMPBELL

Fuquay Varina, North Carolina

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