Opinion
Spirituality



by NCR Staff

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August 23, 2019
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Last week, NCR published letters to the editor in response to an article on a recent Pew Research study that shows that a majority of U.S. Catholics do not believe church teaching about the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. More letters flooded our inbox since, so we bring you part two of responses to the topic. NCR readers are encouraged to respond with letters to the editor, which are published every Friday. The letters are edited for length and clarity.

The question is already a mystery, just like life. Each of us has to find out what life means to us. Jesus came to save us, and he could see right away we needed, and would probably need always. Thus, we say Jesus the Christ, our Savior.

Now when he blessed the bread and wine, he did so knowing that his blessing saves. He urged us to save others by being one of his followers. He appointed some to specifically do that and we have tried to do that over 2,000 years. Of course, it needs leadership to help others become saviors in the name of Jesus Christ. So, we are not in a crisis as to whether Jesus Christ is present in the Eucharist, but rather we are, as we often are, in a crisis of leadership in this institution.



However, we have a leader now who wants to provide more people with the riches of our faith, and therefore we need to organize in a new way in these critical times for the people of God as well as for the people of the world.

It is a big job and what keeps us going and not giving up hope is the fact that when we need new leadership the Holy Spirit always comes through and sends us someone who has the love to help us. Remember St. Francis of Assisi.

ELIZABETH AVERILL

Madison, Wisconsin

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At 80 years old and having read more books on theology than most bishops and certainly most priests, I have concluded that the current conversation concerning

real presence is nonsense. The church continues to believe that when they say something all the uneducated peasants will take it as absolute truth because the church "knows the mind of God."

For many years, I would ask priests to explain what transubstantiation was and how it worked. They would immediately launch into a lengthy diatribe of theology. I would patiently wait until they finished and then I would answer with the simple comment, "prove it." This was usually met with doe-eyed stares and silence. Finally, they would say it is a mystery. Then why not simply teach it as a mystery? It would save a lot of print.

I wonder why Jesus would talk about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Did he have a greater notion in mind? Was he trying to create an understanding in simple terms that the uneducated people of his time could relate? Jesus' two basic rules of conduct were easy to understand, love the Father God and love one another. He showed us how to do this through the coming together around a meal, in which he loved to participate. When families and neighbors gathered at the end of a hard day it was a special way to bond and love one another.

Most people today, understand the hands that bless and pass the bread and wine is not as important as those that receive within the presence. The act binds us all together as one.

RICHARD WALTERS

Phoenix, Arizona

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"The presence of the Lord in his word is as real as his presence in the Eucharist" comes from that great church father, Irenaeus. To it we might add the line of Jerome, "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ." Before us at Mass are two tables from which we have the right to be equally fed.

What happened in the days of Pope Gelasius was that the focus shifted from the Eucharist as a Gospel event, the climax and high point of the life of Jesus, to the question of what happens on the altar, hence real presence. The Eucharist lost its contact as Gospel event.

The call to personal conversion of life comes through both Scripture and Eucharist if we are to become the Eucharist we celebrate. Then we will have "real presence."

(Br.) KIERAN FENN, FMS

Auckland, New Zealand

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Probably the reason most Catholics don't accept the concept of transubstantiation is because it's obvious the church doesn't seem to understand it. They give us a lot of mumbo-jumbo, some terribly horrid theological babble about something that's really very simple.

Of course, the church would have to actually explain that's going on, and they prefer to hide behind the words "It's a mystery!" There's no mystery to it.

GENE McMANUS

Pictou, Nova Scotia

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My wife (Anglican) and I (Catholic) have no difficulty believing in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. As a married couple, the one made so by God, together we give thanks in both our Anglican and Catholic churches each Sunday, and include within that the reception of the body and blood of Christ. We have done so for the 27 years of our marriage.

What we struggle with is the U.S. bishops' conference statement, seen by hundreds of thousands in Mass books across the country: "Eucharistic sharing in exceptional circumstances by other Christians requires permission according to the directives of the diocesan bishop and the provisions of canon law (canon 844 § 4)."

Given that these words are presented to Christians of other traditions as a fait accompli when they open the book at the particular Mass they are participating in, it's unlikely they will have any idea of the existence of any diocesan directives — or if such directives even exist. The statement says they are required to be followed, hence they should exist, and should be accessible. Does your diocese have such

directives? Could you explain them to your non-Catholic friends? What are the chances those friends might know of canon 844 § 4, and its parameters?

Unless and until the U.S. bishops' conference revisits this statement, what should be a doorway to dialogue and discernment remains an unscalable wall, making unwelcome and driving away all those who the Catholic Church allegedly wants to have "return to the fold."

RAY TEMMERMAN

Winnipeg, Manitoba

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The words, which Jesus used in the narrative institution of the real presence, are found in the gospels as well as in the writings of St. Paul. "This (bread) is my body," "this (wine) is my blood." Jesus does not say that the bread and the wine are symbols of his body and blood. Transfiguration was St. Thomas Aquinas' attempt to explain the real presence, and while this concept may no longer be helpful to the majority of Catholics today, we still have Jesus' own words.

I believe that those who hold that the real presence of Jesus is in the poor, the hungry, and the homeless, miss the point that Jesus made. By these words he identifies himself with the hungry. He is not the hungry person, but if the Eucharist has any meaning in our lives, like Jesus, we too will identify with those in need and respond to them with generosity and unconditional love.

PATRICK T. DARCY

Columbia, Missouri

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I am shocked to read the poll results. I am 71 and grateful for Vatican II and the resulting changes in lay involvement.

I consider the true presence of Jesus in the Eucharist as bedrock Catholic teaching. What has happened that young people today don't see the mystery and truth of this teaching? It saddens me beyond measure.

JULIE PASTEUR

Racine, Wisconsin

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Responding obediently and happily to Jesus' invitation and command to participate in the commemoration of the Last Supper paschal feast has always been a given in my spiritual life. As a cradle Catholic, I was expected to accept without question the reality of his presence in the host that was placed on my tongue as a child in the late 1940s, but I never totally bought into the fleshiness or the bloodiness of that concept, even though mythical tales abounded then as now to support that idea.

As I matured in the faith, like many, I followed all the protocols of preparation for, reception of and thanksgiving after Eucharist, but, to this day, my original feelings remain the same. We often use the expression, "food for thought," which probably describes best my own personal feelings as I approach the altar for communion.

If I can simply center on the joy of the welcoming invitation to his supper, process forward without embarrassment and avoid being distracted by the seemingly, excessive piety of others, I feel that the Jesus I know will not judge me too harshly for not feeling as some zealots think I should about the experience.

NANCY McGUNAGLE

Kalispell, Montana

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My understanding of Christ's presence in the Eucharist derives both from my faith and reason. As Christ rose from the dead, his body was transformed into a state of being that allowed him, among other powers, to be present or not at will during his remaining time on earth. He had undergone, then, an ontological change.

It is in that changed, higher state of being that I believe Jesus becomes present in the Eucharist before, at or after the words of consecration. We, too, undergo a similar ontological change after death. When or by what process that takes place, I will not speculate. I just believe that it happens.

Finally, I should add that I do not believe holy orders includes an ontological change on the ordained. We Christians/Catholics are all priests, ordained or not.

SAM J. THOMAS

East Lansing, Michigan

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The phrase "the real presence" was coined initially by Protestants. It's not a good phrase because it implies the other presences (in the assembly and in the word) are not real which is false.

The church teaches that Christ is present in the consecrated bread and wine but does not teach how he is present.

We can use the idea of transubstantiation as long as we know what that means and it's not easy for the modern mind because the word "substance" has changed meaning since the time of Thomas Aquinas.

It is valid to use the idea of symbolism.

Ultimately, it is a mystery of faith which we will never fully understand intellectually.

I prefer to say Christ is sacramentally present.

(Fr.) FRANK O'DEA, SSS

Melbourne, Australia

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When I read the results of this study, I was shocked because I was taught (and have always believed) this is a core belief of our Catholic faith. My experience, by observation, has convinced me that many people act as if the reception of Holy Communion means little to them. There is no reverence in reception; no prayerful attitude in return to pew, especially among children, and no acknowledgement upon leaving Mass that anything is different about Jesus being with them.

I prepared children for this sacrament for quite a number of years and I considered it my duty to be sure that they understood transubstantiation. Of course, I used language that children could understand and had them do a "taste test" to be ready to expect the taste to be the same but the reality to be very different. They were reverent, faith-filled Catholics who had at least a year of instruction about many aspects of our faith prior to reception of the sacraments.

I also worked with parish volunteers who took on the task of preparing children for the Eucharist. Often, they struggled with trying to teach this crucial part of our faith. I think this is where the downfall has occurred: Religious educators are not prepared, do not have enough background themselves or may not believe in real presence themselves.

The fact that this is so grieves me terribly. Nothing is more wonderful in my life than having Jesus visit so intimately.

MARY JO HALL

Guthrie, Kentucky

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In my education as a registered nurse with a master's degree in medical-surgical nursing, I have taken multiple college courses dealing with the anatomy, physiology and hematology of the human body.

I do not believe that the host and cup is the real body and blood of Jesus transformed from water and wine through transubstantiation. I believe that false beliefs continue to be spread when the host and cup is referred to as the "real body and blood of Christ."

Franciscan Sr. Katarina Schuth in her article, "A Change in Formation," published in 2012 in America, states that Pope John Paul II's *Pastores Dabo Vobis* introduced for the first time a section on human formation, "insisting that the whole work of priestly formation would be deprived of its necessary foundation if it lacked a suitable human formation." She goes on to recommend "those to be ordained must be thoroughly informed not only about the spiritual aspects of celibacy and sexuality, but also in straightforward, clear language about biological and psychological, social and pastoral dimensions."

Today, the U.S. bishops' conference continues to use the 2005 edition of "The Program of Priestly Formation." I see no development of the content of anatomy, physiology and hematology within this document — neither for current priests, priestly candidates nor does it include content about women for whom priests act as advisers and counselors.

If theologians and clergy put as much thought, time, and energy into helping Catholics develop and use their gifts, as identified and demonstrated by their interests and abilities, the Catholic Church would be a much different church.

Where are members of the medical and nursing professions and educators of anatomy, physiology and hematology in this discussion?

MARY JO CANAR

Hales Corners, Wisconsin

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The Pew survey indicates that 60% to 70% of Catholics in the U.S. do not believe in the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. This confirms that:

- Bishops and priests ignore what most Catholics believe or do not believe. This shows why their work is not more productive.
- Most Catholics are ignorant on religious matters, have little interest in the life of Our Lord and in what he said.
- The Eucharist is a mystery of the love of God to Christians and to all mankind. It is an extension of Redemption. We can experience His real presence in the Eucharist if we are humble.
- The Eucharist should be given only to those who participate in holy hours after Mass and not 5 minutes before the end of the Mass.
- An Orthodox priest of Greece who studied religious practices in the Americas said that Catholics did not understand the Eucharist and were really indifferent.
- Catholicism cannot survive without frequent holy hours of adoration and prayer to the Eucharist.
- Catholics should read every speech of Pope Francis, a holy man with exceptional intelligence.
- Cardinals, bishops, the Vatican Curia, religious orders and priests should make vows of humility and poverty and share their work with religious orders of

women and with lay women and men.

JOSE H. GUZMAN

Quito, Ecuador

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I greatly appreciate the article "The Eucharist is about more than Christ becoming present" by Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese. However, I think Reese misses an important point. To me, the Eucharist celebrates the real presence of Christ. This means not so much that I become Christ's presence in the world, but that I seek and meet Christ's presence in the people and places where I live. We are all one in Christ. God's love knows no bounds.

Eucharist is the sacrament celebrating this real union. It is both mysterious — how can Christ be present in a country whose government locks children fleeing hardship in cages? — and practical — how can I join with others to be a sign of love and unity in our divided country? It challenges me to remain faithful to gospel values, even when it is hard to do.

The celebration of the Eucharist humbles me and empowers me to live the reality that all is one in God's great love. In the Eucharist, my failings and strengths and those of others are wrapped in this love which is beyond our understanding and are incorporated into the body and blood of Christ. This may not be theologically or dogmatically correct, but it is what I celebrate in the Eucharist.

ANNE McNICHOL

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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From my long experience of presiding at the Eucharist I know that most Catholics do not understand what they are doing. I hesitate to say "celebrate." This is through no fault of their own. It's still the presider doing something for them while they remain passive.

Catechesis begins with Exodus 12 because this is the context of the paschal mystery. Without an understanding of the Passover it is impossible to appreciate

what we do on Sunday. We gather to celebrate, not only Christ's Passover, his death and resurrection, but ours as well. All celebrate. The priest presides.

Language matters. The title "Mass" is the one that least explains what we do. Paschal mystery by far describes best what we do. I say "do" because we do the liturgy — liturgy is work. Priests and people need to refrain from language like "saying" Mass, "going to" Mass, "attending" Mass. Use language like I show up to worship, to celebrate, to give thanks; to be nourished by word and sacrament.

(Fr.) SEAN SMITH

Claddaghduff, Ireland

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One point I like to make when the presence of Christ in the Eucharist comes up in my preaching is that as church, and people in general, we are not good at presence — being present to others, and in the present moment.

From a pastoral perspective, being present to others is a crucial aspect to being aware of God's presence in the world. Seeing in others, regardless of their status, situation, condition, the presence of the image, likeness, and reality of the Christ is of upmost importance.

It is not surprising, if I'm not practicing being present to others, that the presence of Christ in the Eucharist is harder to apprehend.

Some time ago, while at church between Sunday Masses, I was approached by a man who had recently lost his spouse of many years. While in conversation, the pastor approached and shushed us because we were in the church proper and should be silent before Christ in the recently relocated tabernacle.

Thinking that the pastor was unaware of the tenderness of our conversation, I tried to explain to him about the recent death of the man's spouse. I was only further corrected in front of this hurting man.

I wonder how we expect to avail ourselves of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist when we will not allow ourselves the presence of the Christ in another.

(Deacon) PAUL HURSH

Phoenix, Arizona

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