

In the breaking of the bread

Roger Karban | Apr. 22, 2012 Spiritual Reflections

I can't overemphasize the importance of the first verse of today's Gospel pericope: "The two disciples recounted what had taken place on the way and how Jesus was made known to them in the breaking of the bread."



Some church leaders recently expressed their concern about young Catholics not

believing Jesus is really present in the eucharistic bread and wine. Though most believe "he's in there somehow," their beliefs don't dovetail with our accepted doctrine of "transubstantiation."

Luke 24:35-48

[Full text of the readings](#)

If it's any consolation, we Christians have had problems with Jesus' eucharistic presence for almost 20 centuries.

Having problems isn't necessarily a bad thing when it comes to scripture. Without them, we'd have almost no scripture. They're the force that normally impels our sacred authors to write. That's why scripture scholars often start their investigation of a specific text by searching for the problem behind the passage.

Since our sacred authors never got around to explaining just how the risen Jesus "got into" the elements of bread and wine, we presume the biblical church didn't have a problem with it. When they recalled his statements "This is my body" and "This is my blood," they seem to have taken for granted he was somehow present in those elements, without worrying about the process that got him there. They simply presumed he was in the bread.

But listen carefully to what the two Emmaus disciples tell "the Eleven and those with them": "They recounted what had taken place on the way, and how Jesus was made known to them in the breaking of the bread." As a child, I was basically taught to know Jesus in the bread, not in the breaking of the bread.

Martin Luther formulated one of his most biting criticisms of the 16th-century Mass in just one short sentence. "You've turned an action into a thing." By that time theologians had figured out exactly at what point Jesus came into the bread and wine. Archbishop Maurice de Sully of Paris had answered the question four centuries before when he instructed his priests to genuflect both after the words over the bread and again after the words

over the cup. We narrowed his presence down to the exact syllable. ?Things? like that can be precisely determined.

Actions are something else. Can you isolate the precise point during a birthday party in which someone?s birthday is actually celebrated? Is it the moment we finish singing ?Happy Birthday,? the candles are blown out, the gifts opened, or the cake eaten? When do we ?genuflect??

On the other hand, an ?action? obviously implies some sort of interaction with something or someone. In this situation, Luke?s Easter Sunday disciples on the road to Emmaus came to recognize the risen Jesus during the interaction of the meal they shared with a stranger they?d encountered on the Emmaus road. It was precisely while they were breaking bread that their eyes were opened and they discovered someone sharing their meal whom they hadn?t noticed before.

No wonder, as in today?s Lucan passage, the risen Jesus often shares a meal with his followers. It was during the interaction among his followers during the frequent meals in which he was remembered that he also was recognized. Especially today, it?s important for us to explore the type of interaction that surfaces the risen Jesus.

Fr. Carroll Stuhlmueller once noted that everyone is taught that ?the Mass is a reenactment of Calvary. Though separated by 2,000 years, we?re daily privileged to be standing near the cross, joining with Jesus as he once again dies.? But then he asked, ?How exactly do we die with him?? He quickly answered his own question: ?By becoming completely one with everyone celebrating that particular Eucharist.?

At any given Eucharist I mingle with people who don?t agree with my politics, buy into my theology, share my sexual orientation or my understanding of the Bible. The only way I can become one with such a motley group is to completely die to myself, and then I begin to experience the presence of the risen Jesus in each and all of them.

I can?t imagine what our church would look like today if we hadn?t turned the Eucharist into a thing.

[Roger Vermalen Karban is a priest of the Belleville, Ill., diocese and pastor of Our Lady of Good Counsel Parish in Renault, Ill.]

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