

## What is the Value of Receiving Holy Communion?

When we receive Communion, if we are honest with ourselves, often we *feel* no different. We welcome Jesus, pray to him and show due reverence, but after the Mass has ended has it made any real difference to us? To answer this question we must distinguish between what we feel and what actually happens.



When we eat food, we do so for a number of reasons: we eat for **personal** enjoyment, for **social** enjoyment and, crucially, for the **well-being** of our health. Now, if we are shipwrecked on our own on a desert island we know that if we want to survive we have to eat, even if the choice of food is not for our enjoyment, and clearly our eating there has no social aspect. But, what we eat has to be nutritious in order for us to maintain our health and continue living. To do this our body will absorb any vitamins and goodness in order for us to survive.

And so it is with the Eucharist. We are not sensually aware of the goodness that is entering our body in Holy Communion, although our intellect may be. We may not feel physically different but Jesus is within us nevertheless, and where Jesus is then so is the goodness we need to live good lives and we come away both with a sense of responsibility to behave better and a desire to become better people. And we do this because of the influence of Jesus within us, the indwelling of God brought about by this majestic mystery.

# Understanding The Bible and Our Faith

## 14

### Jesus and the Eucharist

*Examining the sense in which Jesus can truly be in the Eucharist*



### Questions for Reflection

1. What is meant by saying Jesus is in the Eucharist by transubstantiation?
2. Did Jesus really say 'This is my Body ... This is my Blood'?
3. What is the value of receiving Holy Communion?
4. Why doesn't St. John include the giving of the Eucharist in his account of the Last Supper?

## Catholic Eucharistic Belief

Our belief as Catholics is that, at Mass, the bread and wine is actually changed into Jesus' body and blood. This is in the context both of a Eucharistic thanksgiving meal:

**'Take and eat, this is my body'** (Matthew ch.26)

and a Eucharistic sacrifice:

**'This is my blood, the blood of the Covenant poured out for many'** (Mark ch.14),

**'This is my body which is given up for you'** (Luke ch.22).

However, although the early Church followed Jesus' command to:

**'do this in memory of me'** (Luke ch. 22)

as can be seen from Acts ch.2 and 1 Corinthians. ch.11, it is not clear whether Our Lord's words were understood literally or symbolically. Indeed, it would be hundreds of years before a clear affirmation of the doctrine would find its way into official Church documents.

## The Importance of the Last Supper Account

The Gospels of Matthew (ch.26), Mark (ch.14) and Luke (ch.22) all contain accounts of the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, albeit with slightly different variations.

St John's Gospel's description of the Last Supper does not include the institution of the Eucharist. However, it does contain a complementary and much more detailed description of the importance of 'eating and drinking the body and blood of Jesus', in Jesus' discourse with the Jews in the synagogue at Capernaum (ch.6):

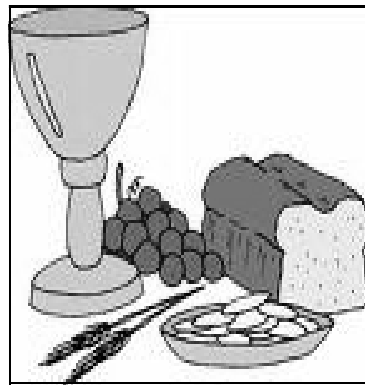
**'whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life .. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink me .. whoever eats me will also draw life from me ..'**

This a very important passage because it shows the natural repulsion the Jews felt for such a statement, an instruction that many could not accept and would not believe. The naturally repellent nature of Jesus' words point to their authenticity and significance.

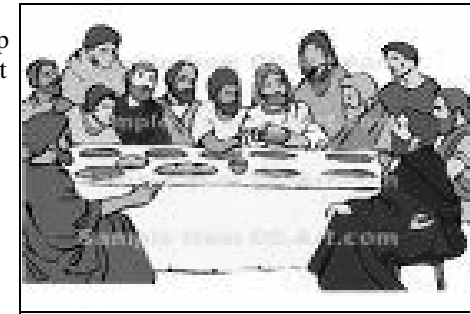
Jesus' words also describe a new Covenant, a new relationship with God. As such the Eucharist is inextricably linked to Jesus' death and the redemption that brings (see later talk).

## How Can the Bread and Wine Actually Become Jesus?

The wafer and wine at Holy Communion still tastes like a wafer and wine, so in what sense can they be anything different? One explanation put forward is called transubstantiation.



This word is used to describe an interpretation of a Greek philosophic idea that any substance is made up of an essential essence (the 'thing' that makes it what it is) together with associated properties (for example, the feel, the taste, the texture) that are identified by our senses. Transubstantiation states that one substance can change its essence to that of another substance whilst keeping the properties of the original substance. But, please note, it is not a doctrine of our faith that we have to accept this idea.



We must also remember how Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes, and changed the water into wine at Cana. These miracles prefigure the Eucharistic mystery and help us accept its truth.

## Do We Really Believe in the Eucharistic Presence?

This may seem a strange question, but is it?

Consider the following story:

*A kind Christian woman won £5 million on the lottery. She decided to share her good fortune with her fellow Mass-goers and worked out how many people normally go to Church on Sundays. She decided to give £2000 to every adult, £500 to every teenager, and £100 to every other child. She told a few friends about her plans and arranged with the Parish priest to distribute the money on a particular Sunday. Unknown to her, however, her plans became common knowledge in the area. What do you think happened on that Sunday? No prizes for guessing! The church was overwhelmed with people. Thousands of extra people came out of no-where, there was massive traffic congestion near the church, and many of the normal Mass-goers could not get into the church. The woman had no option but to postpone her plan.*



The story reflects human greed. But it has a much deeper meaning. If we really *felt* that the Eucharist was Jesus Christ what price would we put on that? Wouldn't there be similar massive crowds at every Mass every day, with everyone eager to receive Holy Communion? This is not meant to be unduly self-critical, but to draw attention to the difficulty most of us have in really accepting the fullness of the Eucharistic mystery. Why is that?

We are all influenced by our feelings and emotions. We all know how powerful these can be in directing us one way or another. We can think about issues and intellectualise how we should behave, but very often our rational conclusions are overwhelmed by our emotions. In the case of the Eucharist, our mind can accept *in faith* the presence of Jesus under the appearance of bread and wine but, in general, it is true to say that our feelings and emotions are not aroused by this belief and, therefore, they have no major role in exciting us to seek out and anticipate Holy Communion as we would, say, a concert, a family wedding or a football match.