

The Real Presence

Its Place in Catholic Belief.

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THE REAL PRESENCE.

In this little work, I do not aim at a theological exposition of the subject, nor at indicating the intricate metaphysical problems which are presented to the mind by this doctrine, and which are discussed in schools of theology. Nor do I propose, to any great extent, even to be argumentative. My idea is rather to be expository, to look at this great doctrine from the viewpoint of those who fully accept it, and to indicate in a popular manner its place in Catholic belief and its bearing on Catholic life.

Sincere and honest non-Catholics may, like some of the first disciples, find the doctrine of the Real Presence “a hard saying,” but I hope they, will at least be deeply interested in a doctrine which is of the greatest historical importance, a doctrine which is the very warp and woof of Catholic spiritual life, and to which true Catholics cling as tenaciously as to life itself. “No one,” says Mr. Hilaire Belloc, “can understand the Middle Ages unless he understands the Mass”; no one can understand Catholics at all unless he understands the doctrine of the Real Presence.

The Doctrine Stated.

Briefly, and in popular language, the doctrine of the Real Presence is this: that in the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist Jesus Christ, in His entirety, is as really and truly present as He was twenty centuries ago in the stable of Bethlehem, or in His little home of Nazareth, or on the hill of Calvary. During the Mass, before the Consecration, there is bread and wine on the altar; but at the Consecration, when the sacred words are pronounced, “This is My Body, this is My Blood,” a profound and mysterious change takes place: there is no longer a particle of bread or a drop of wine; the accidents, or appearances, of bread and wine remain as before, but the entire reality underlying these appearances — that is, the substance of the bread and wine — has been replaced by the substance of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. Not that the Body and Blood are actually there in a state of separation, nor is there any mutilation of the Sacred Humanity; the living Sacred Humanity is present whole and entire, but in an altogether mysterious manner, both under the appearance of the bread and under the appearance of the wine. And the Sacred Presence remains as long as the appearances remain unchanged.

The Catholic, therefore, when he enters one of our churches or oratories where the glow of the red sanctuary lamp shows that the Blessed Sacrament is reserved in the tabernacle, bends the knee in adoration. He recognises Jesus Christ present on the altar as truly as He was present long ago in His little home at Nazareth.

Such, in a few words, and passing over the more technical statement of theology, is this tremendous doctrine. It is more wonderful than anything related in the fairy tales. Transubstantiation, or the replacement of the substance of the bread and wine by the Sacred Humanity of Jesus Christ, is a miracle beside which all other miracles shrivel away to shadows. It is a real test of faith. And though, like the Being of God Himself, it may be apprehended, it cannot be comprehended. It belongs to the fathomless mystery of the divine action. The feeble human mind may cast its plummet into the Infinite, but it can never sound those depths. But — and this is an important point — it can know that those depths exist.

God-Given Conviction with Groundwork in Reason.

Though, like other revealed mysteries, or like the unfathomable Being of God itself, the doctrine of the Real Presence cannot be measured by standards of the natural order, we Catholics have solid and unshaken grounds for our belief. An act of faith is not an act of simple credulity; it is a firm and reasonable conviction. It is a conviction which comes from God, and from which all prudent doubt is excluded. But, apart from the divinely-infused character of the gift of faith, there is a solid groundwork in reason, which may be examined, analysed, and criticised. As my aim, however, is less argumentative than expository, I will confine myself to a brief reference to this rational groundwork, and I will mention, without developing, three basic statements held by all Catholics.

(1) The first is that the doctrine of the Real Presence is contained in the clearest and most explicit terms in the Holy Scripture. I may add that all converts who pass over to the Catholic Church never have the slightest difficulty in finding in their Bibles the fullest warrant for the doctrine. (See Cardinal Wiseman's "Lectures on the Eucharist".)

(2) The second statement is that the doctrine of the Real Presence was taught in the Church from the beginning. The writings of the Fathers of the Church are full of it; the religious rites of the Church of the Catacombs centred round the doctrine of the Real Presence, as was also the case, and is still, in the schismatical Russian and Greek and other Oriental churches, which broke away from Catholic unity many centuries before the Reformation. And, moreover, the Catholic Church, now as always, teaches the doctrine, tremendous as it is, not with a hesitating and uncertain voice, but with the total intensity of Her teaching authority.

(3) And the third statement I would make is one, I submit, which does credit to the enormous commonsense and hard-headed rationalism of the Catholic Church. It is the claim to an infallible teaching authority within the area of the faith delivered by Jesus Christ. Once this claim is admitted, an indirect solution is found for every difficulty incidental to her official teaching. Now, her claim to this great prerogative of infallibility is not an unsubstantial shadow, but is firmly based as on the solid rock. It is not to be supposed for a moment that Jesus Christ handed over His wonderful teaching in a haphazard way to the ravages of time, to the changes of fashion, to the deadly processes of decay. He was very precise on this point. "Heaven and earth," He said, "shall pass away, but My word shall not pass away." His last commission was equally precise: "Go and teach all nations all things whatsoever I have commanded you." He did not send His followers to diffuse His teaching in a vague and uncertain way, presenting this doctrine to one nation and that to another, varying them with the ages and the changing character of thought; but in tones as clear as a trumpet blast His commission stands: "Teach them all things whatsoever I have commanded you." And as a guarantee that His Church need not fear failure in so great a task, He added, "And behold, I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world."

A short time previously He had given the same guarantee: "Upon this Rock I will build My Church, and the gates of hell (or the powers of evil) shall not prevail against it." The promise, therefore, of permanence of existence and permanence of doctrine was clearly given, and, indeed, was clearly necessary, while the miraculous history of the Catholic Church is the confirmation of that promise to the present hour. The Catholic Church is not harboured in some silent backwater of the world, but, standing ever on the great high-roads of history, confronts relentless hostility, and is ever subjected to the remorseless criticism of the keenest minds. This Church, then, in the midst of a world where empires rise and fall, where the tone and constitution of society are continually changing, where every institution except her own is in a state of continual dissolution — this Church, I say, standing up like a mountain of granite in the midst of a continually dissolving world, claiming — and alone in her claim — to speak as the official mouthpiece of Christ with infallibility within the area of the deposit of the faith, proclaims in the most precise and unambiguous terms, and with the full intensity of her teaching authority, the doctrine of the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass from the moment of the Consecration, and wheresoever else in our churches the Blessed Sacrament is reserved.

Such are these three important statements. If a person tending towards belief in the Catholic Church, or anxious to believe in it, has doubts and anxieties concerning the Real Presence, I would suggest to him, as one method of solution, "Settle the question of infallibility, and all your difficulties will automatically disappear."

The Intrinsic Difficulty.

So clear is the doctrine of the Real Presence in the Holy Scripture, and in the teaching of the Church from the beginning, that I am convinced no difficulty on these heads would be found by any candid enquirer were it not for the intrinsic difficulties of the mystery. So tremendous, indeed, is the mystery, so unexpected antecedently to its institution, apparently so extravagantly prodigal as a gift of God, that the mind may well pause before the mystery, as before the greatest test of faith. But once it is accepted, it is found to fit in with and round off, as nothing else can, the whole amazing liberality of God's dealing with man.

How Newman Met the Difficulty.

Various instances might be given of non-Catholics favourably disposed to the Catholic Faith, and who found their chief difficulty in the doctrine of the Real Presence. It would be interesting to show how many of these ultimately saw light through their difficulty, but it will be sufficient here to mention the case of Newman [now known to us as 'Blessed John Henry Newman']. In the "Apologia," Chapter 5, he writes:

"Many persons are very sensitive of the difficulties of religion; I am as sensitive of them as anyone; but I have never been able to see a connection between apprehending those difficulties . . . and, on the other hand, doubting the doctrines to which they are attached. Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt, as I understand the subject; difficulty and doubt are incommensurate. There, of course, may be difficulties in the evidence; but I am speaking of difficulties intrinsic to the doctrines themselves. A man may be annoyed that he cannot work out a mathematical problem, without doubting that it admits of an answer, or that a particular answer is the true one. Of all points of faith, the Being of God is, to my own apprehension, encompassed with most difficulties, and yet borne in upon our mind with most power."

“People say that the doctrine of Transubstantiation is difficult to believe; I did not believe the doctrine till I was a Catholic. I had no difficulty in believing it as soon as I believed that the Catholic Roman Church was the oracle of God, and that she had declared this doctrine to be part of the original revelation. It is difficult, impossible, to imagine, I grant; but how is it difficult to believe? ‘A faith which will stand that test,’ says Macaulay, ‘will stand any test.’ But for myself, I cannot indeed prove it. I cannot tell how it is; but I say, ‘Why should it not be? What’s to hinder it? What do I know of substance or matter? Just as much as the greatest philosophers, and that is nothing at all’; so much is this the case that there is a rising school of philosophy now which considers phenomena to constitute the whole of our knowledge in physics. The Catholic doctrine leaves phenomena alone. It does not say that the phenomena go; on the contrary, it says that they remain; nor does it say that the same phenomena are in several places at once. It deals with what no one on earth knows anything about, the material substances themselves.”

It may be added that any difficulty, which may be felt regarding the presence of the Sacred Humanity in so many different places, applies with full force to the omnipresence of the Divine Nature. But since we already know — and reason itself forces the knowledge on our minds — that the Divine Nature is present, whole and entire, everywhere, we may brush aside any difficulty which may arise regarding the presence of the Sacred Humanity in all places where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved.

The Great Test of Faith.

Nevertheless, the Real Presence is a great test of faith, and Christ Himself made it a test case — in fact, the Great Test. It was after the great miracle of the loaves and fishes that He first propounded the doctrine, yet many of those who had witnessed the miracle, or, at all events, had authentic information about it, said: “This is a hard saying, and who can hear it?” “And after that many of His disciples walked with Him no more.” Then Our Lord turned to the Twelve and said: “Will you also go away?” Peter stepped to the side of Christ and used those memorable words, which are the universal language of faith: “Lord, to whom shall we go but to You? You have the words of eternal life. And we have believed and have known that You are Christ, the Son of God.” (See John chapter 6.)

On these words Dr. Albert Von Ruville, Professor of Modern History in the University of Halle-Wittenberg, Germany, a distinguished writer and convert, says:

“Now the decision was given. Now the Apostles could, with full faith, become acquainted with the new Sacrament at the Last Supper, and receive it; now they could accept the power to perform this miracle, when, through Jesus’ Passion, Death, and Resurrection, a deeper understanding of it had come to them. . . . The fame which Saint Peter won by stepping to the side of Jesus in advance of the other disciples and of all humanity will not fade in all eternity.

“It would be presumption and self-deception if one wished to examine scientifically the miracle of the Holy Eucharist, to wish to prove or disprove it. It forms the foundation of a new conception of the world, the basis of a new science. We cannot, and must not, put ourselves on a worldly standpoint; we must not apply worldly principles, natural laws.

“No, first cross the line, and submit to the will of Jesus and acknowledge His holy Mystery; then make honest research and effort with all the resources of science. Only then, the full truth can be obtained, not merely in the spiritual but also in the material sphere. I, at least, was not able to hesitate a moment to embrace the mystery with my whole heart when its whole meaning became

known to me. But he who, though well-informed, cannot bring himself to cross the line (of this great test), has evidently not acquired real faith, however high may be his theological rank. The Holy Eucharist is the unerring touchstone of faith.”

A Mystery for the Mind.

The Blessed Sacrament is a mystery both for the mind and for the heart. As a mystery for the mind, it is like all the other great truths, which concern the Divine Nature. It is beyond our comprehension as infinity is beyond the finite. If we ask ourselves how the substance of the bread and wine can be changed into the Body and Blood of Christ, we may reply with Saint Augustine:

“By that same power which said. Let there be light, and light was made.”

In the natural order, we have, under our eyes, mysteries which, if they do not furnish a complete analogy of the supernatural mysteries, at least prepare the mind for them. In the grain of wheat, for example, we may contemplate a miracle and a mystery which all may see but none may understand. Take in your hand that tiny seed. It is apparently lifeless. There is little in it to attract the outer senses; no, striking beauty of form, as in the palm or the fern; no miracle of colour, as in the rose or the pansy; no alluring subtlety of texture, as in the petals of the geranium. It presents little more to the outer eye than does a chip of wood or a fragment of dust. But the inner vision, penetrating the commonplace walls of the tiny seed, enters into a palace of wonders. It sees things which surpass the dreams of fairyland. It finds itself looking down one of the tremendous, interminable corridors in the “sounding labour house vast of being.” The whole atmosphere of the place palpitates with miracle and mystery — the miracle and mystery of the life which animates that seed. The mind can discern in the potency of that seed countless millions of square miles of waving fields of grain, growing and ripening from generation to generation, and capable of covering not only the entire cultivable earth, but also of covering tens of thousands of planets as vast as the earth itself. And all these marvels in the one little grain! If that single grain of wheat were the only specimen of plant life in the world, it would, still be sufficient to assure the harvests of countless generations. And the life of all the stalks in those boundless harvests lies hidden in this single grain of wheat, from which, through successive reproduction, they derive their being.

And so, though the analogy is imperfect, the same infinite power that multiplies the seed multiplies also the Sacred Presence wherever the words of Consecration are pronounced over the bread and wine.

The multiplication of the wheat is a miracle of the natural order; Transubstantiation is a miracle of the supernatural order. We are familiar with the one from experience; we know the other through the Word of God. But the mind, though it recognises both as facts, can understand neither the one nor the other.

Christ Prepares the Mind for the Mystery.

By stilling the storm with a word, Christ showed Himself the Master of the inanimate world; by raising Lazarus and others from the dead, He proved Himself the Lord of life and death; and by the miracle of the loaves and fishes, He prepared the minds of His followers for the mystery of Transubstantiation.

Thousands had followed Him into the wilderness. They had remained with Him three days on one occasion, and the time had now come to dismiss them. But, their provisions being already

exhausted, they were hungry. Christ, therefore, adopted a course, which fulfilled a twofold purpose. It appeased their hunger, and at the same time prepared them for the doctrine of the Real Presence.

“And Jesus called together His disciples, and said: ‘I have compassion on the multitudes, because they continue with Me now three days, and have not what to eat.’ ‘And I will not send them away fasting, lest they faint in the way.’

And the disciples say unto Him: Whence then should we have so many loaves in the desert to feed so great a multitude? And Jesus said to them: How many loaves have you? And they said: Five, and a few little fishes. And He commanded the multitude to sit down upon the ground.

And taking the five loaves and the fishes, and giving thanks, He broke and gave to His disciples, and the disciples gave to the people. And they all did eat, and had their fill. And they took up twelve baskets full of what remained of the fragments. And they that did eat were five thousand men, besides women and children.” (This miracle is recorded in John chapter 6, in Mark chapter 6, in Luke chapter 9 and in Matthew chapter 14. Jesus worked a very similar miracle at a latter stage of his ministry to re-emphasise the importance of the doctrine he was shortly to proclaim on this occasion. In the second instance, Jesus used seven loaves to feed a crowd of four thousand men, “besides women and children”, and there were seven baskets of leftovers in this incident. This miracle is recorded in Mark chapter 8 and in Matthew chapter 15, just before the famous chapter 16 of Matthew, where we see such a contrast between the lack of faith of the Pharisees, and the great faith, again, of Saint Peter.)

The divine power, through a handful of wheat, multiplied through successive harvests, feeds - whole nations with bread; the same power, through five loaves, (and later seven loaves) multiplied in a different but not more wonderful way, fed thousands of hungry men, women and children. And, again, the same power — “to which no word shall be impossible” — acting in a still more marvellous way, feeds the souls of hungry millions with the Bread of Life, multiplied as much as may be required in the constantly repeated miracle of Transubstantiation.

A Mystery for the Heart.

The Blessed Eucharist is also a mystery for the heart. Our heart pines for kindness, for remembrance, for love. Even the fidelity of a faithful dog we repay with gratitude. The love of parent, brother, sister, child and friend is the very native air of the heart. We need it. We can hardly live without it. But when all other love fails us, we still have God. Him, too, we need; ‘and we need Him most of all’. Those who have ‘lost God are restless and unhappy’. And their unhappiness is like the inarticulate cry of the infant for its mother. “Where is the One Whom my soul seeks?” In a hundred ways, we pine for Him. We need His love and His sustaining arms.

But when we turn to the Holy Eucharist for consolation, our narrow, human hearts are confronted with a profound mystery — truly a mystery for the heart. Can such love be? Can the great God of the universe pour out His affections upon us with such extravagant prodigality? Can it be that such a One woos our wretched hearts with such tender artifices? Well may we hesitate for a moment in perplexity, for we are only ‘men’, with our narrow thoughts of human love and human goodness. But ‘the mystery clears when we reflect that we are dealing with the Heart of God.’

We turn to the life of Christ, and the light on this amazing mystery of love grows brighter and brighter. We see the poor stable on the hillside, with the little Babe in the manger, and we think deep thoughts; we note the humble home of Nazareth, where dwell Mary and Joseph and Mary’s

marvellous Son; we see the poverty, the privation, the obscurity; and as we reflect on the meaning of it all, knowledge grows. A love, which will do all this, will do anything. Yes, there is no limit to this love. He is wooing our hearts, as only a divine lover could, with the most delicate artifices. He speaks to us, God though He be, not in the language of power and majesty, but in 'the language we know best' — the language of want and heart-hunger. Yes, He wants us.

We follow His steps to the terrible tragedy of the scourging, and the crowning of thorns, and the last awful scene on the Hill. There love utters its last strong cry. And is that companionship now to cease? Is it to be for us of later times only a reminiscence shining sweetly, but somewhat dimly, through the long vista of the receding centuries? No, most happily no. Infinite resourcefulness and infinite love discover the way. The 'gift' of the Sacred Humanity was too great, too overwhelming, to be lavished on one generation. It is to be perpetuated. And so, before the consummation of His Sacrifice, He has left us a twofold legacy — His Mother and Himself. He could have given us no greater gifts than these. In the midst of His agony, He gave us His Mother; a few hours before, in the supper-room, He instituted the Blessed Sacrament, and gave us Himself as a perpetual gift.

Yes, indeed, the Blessed Eucharist is a mystery for the heart; but it is in line with the whole amazing story of this Lover's quest for our souls, from the stable of Bethlehem even to the Hill of Sorrow.

Effects on Catholic Life.

The Real Presence, then, is a wide and profound joy to the believer. It invests our churches and oratories with a beautiful and fascinating character, making them havens of peace and consolation, and elevating the spiritual sense of the worshipper.

The Blessed Sacrament is the very centre of our devotional life. It is the hearthstone round which the Catholic family gathers. With this left out, the whole tone of our devotional life would be radically different. The Sacred Humanity would still be an adorable reminiscence; the life of Christ might still 'be our consolation and our hope'; but in the dark hours of existence how far off God would seem! If through some catastrophe, all those little ruby lamps of the sanctuary were extinguished forever and the tabernacles left empty, what a darkness would fall on the world! What a happiness and ease of heart would vanish into the gloom! Every true Catholic understands this.

If we go into a non-Catholic church to examine, let us say, the beauty of the architecture, or just to take a look round, what do we notice? The place is cold. It seems empty. Our footfalls echo hollow and desolate in the empty spaces. To us the place, despite, perhaps, its irreproachable architecture, is four dead walls, and nothing more. There is something wanting. The saints are not encouraged — or, if they are, they do not feel at home there: we feel the angels are absent; the sweet Virgin Mary is not welcomed — perhaps not even wanted; there is no sanctuary lamp; no fire in the hearth; the atmosphere is chilly; the place is not homely; it is like a home where there is no mother, from which the father is absent, and the children, too, are all away. We miss many things; but, above all, we miss that which gives its meaning to all else — the inhabited tabernacle, the loving companionship of the Sacred Humanity, the soft music of the whisper which we fain would catch: "O ye who labour and are heavily laden, behold I am here!"

How great is the contrast when we visit one of our own churches, no matter how humble it may be! It is a different world; a haven of peace and hope and companionship. Here we have something more than an empty house, something more than four dead walls. The place lives. It is beautiful — always beautiful. It has a soul. It is tenanted. And the soul of this living, beautiful temple is the

everlasting Lover of our souls — the Sacred One Who brightens our pilgrimage with His unfailing love and His heart-easing companionship.

The Secret.

And what is the secret of this intense spiritual life so widely spread among the faithful, of this frequent elevation of the humblest and most poverty-stricken Catholic men or women to a sublime realisation of the most beautiful things in existence? The secret is Bethlehem, Nazareth, Calvary. But not Bethlehem, Nazareth, Calvary apprehended as sweet and gracious visions appearing somewhat dimly through the growing haze of two thousand years, or as pertaining-to regions separated by thousands of miles of land amid water. No, Bethlehem is over the road in the little wayside chapel; Calvary is over there where the Mass bell tinkles at the tremendous words of the Consecration; Nazareth is there where the little ruby lamp of the sanctuary burns day and night before our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, really present in the tabernacle and consoling our pilgrimage with His amazing companionship.

A distinguished writer says that to the humble man the rose is redder than to the ordinary man. I say with all humility, but with complete confidence, that to the devout believer in the Real Presence, the rose is redder than to other men, the sky is of a deeper blue, the meaning of life is more profound, the light on the path more intense, and the joy, which is in the heart of things, more easily apprehended. For God is not only in His heaven, not only present everywhere in the inscrutable immensity of His divine nature, but He is present in our midst in a way that grips our heart-strings, looking into our souls with His human eyes, assuaging our bruises with His human hands, loving us with His human heart, and whispering to us from the tabernacle where the little lamp glows before the Sacred Presence, “Come to Me and I will give you rest.”
