J.M.J.

The Theology of the Sacrament of the Eucharist
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**Christology (Incarnation)**

One of the fundamental teachings within the theology of the sacrament of the Eucharist is that of the Real Presence. The Eucharist is truly “the body, blood, soul and divinity of Christ.”

The early Church father St. Cyril of Jerusalem focused on this point: “the seeming bread is not bread, though sensible to taste, but the Body of Christ; and that the seeming wine is not wine, though the taste will have it so, but the Blood of Christ.”

The physical body of Christ is central to the sacraments. Of all the sacraments, the Eucharist connects us with the body of Christ in a heightened and special way. The Incarnation is an important aspect of the Eucharist. Following the Bread of Life Discourse (John 6:35–58), Jesus stated that “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless” (John 6:63), thus indicating that one of the underlying principles of the Eucharist is the Incarnation. Just as God came to man by taking on a human nature, God continues to come to man through His glorified human body in the Eucharist under the appearance of bread and wine. The Son of God came to mankind in human flesh, and He left Himself, His physical human body, with the Church in the

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3 Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lecture 22*, §3, cf. §§1, 6, 9; likewise, another early Church father, St. Ignatius of Antioch, criticized heretics for not holding to the teaching on the Real Presence (Bramwell, *The world of the sacraments*, 243).
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form of the Eucharist.\(^9\) Moreover, the Eucharist unites and joins us to God,\(^10\) echoing how in the Incarnation the Son of God joined to His Person a human nature.

**The Sign**

The Sacrament of the Eucharist is a sign that achieves what it signifies. The Eucharist signifies Jesus Christ, and as explained above Jesus Christ is truly present in the Eucharist. The bread directly signifies and becomes the body of Christ.\(^11\) Since Christ’s Divine nature and human nature are united in his Person\(^12\) (the hypostatic union),\(^13\) and because the body, blood, soul, and divinity of the glorified Christ cannot be separated, the bread also becomes the blood, soul, and divinity of Christ.\(^14\) Correspondingly, the wine directly signifies and becomes the blood of Christ, and it likewise also becomes the body, soul, and divinity of Christ.\(^15\)

The Eucharist signifies and “re-presents (makes present) the sacrifice of the cross”\(^16\). In the Last Supper, Christ offered Himself as the paschal lamb,\(^17\) and both the Last Supper and His sacrifice on the cross are perpetuated and re-presented in the Eucharist.\(^18\) The Holy Mass, rather

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\(^13\) Bramwell, *The world of the sacraments*, 265.


than being just a symbol, is the sacrifice and external worship of both Christ and His Church.\textsuperscript{19} Moreover, the Eucharist both signifies and achieves the unification of the faithful with God and each other.\textsuperscript{20} The Eucharist is the outward sign of the unity of the faithful and their orientation towards God.\textsuperscript{21} The reception of the Eucharist, since it is the one body of Christ, draws the faithful into Christ and into His one mystical body.\textsuperscript{22} Just as bread and wine provide physical nourishment, the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist provides the recipient spiritual nourishment\textsuperscript{23} that is life-giving.\textsuperscript{24} In addition, the Eucharist is a sign that achieves in a unique way that which it signifies, since unlike the other sacraments where the completion of the sacrament requires “the application of the matter” to the recipient (e.g., water being applied in baptism), “the sacrament of the Eucharist is completed in the very consecration of the matter.”\textsuperscript{25}

**Personal, Ecclesial, and Missionary**

There are also the personal, missionary, and ecclesial aspects of the Sacrament of the Eucharist. The Eucharist is “Personal” with regard to Christ because it was Christ Himself who instituted the Eucharist and offered Himself as the sacrifice at the Last Supper and on the cross.\textsuperscript{26} Furthermore, the Eucharist remains the sacrifice of Christ (while at the same time being the

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\textsuperscript{22} O’Neill, *Meeting Christ*, 168.
\textsuperscript{23} Bramwell, *The world of the sacraments*, 244, 254, 256.
\textsuperscript{26} Bramwell, *The world of the sacraments*, 269.
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Moreover, the Eucharist unites the faithful to the Person of Jesus Christ, that is, to His fellowship body. In addition, the Church carries through time the mission of Christ, in particular through her re-presentation of the sacrifice of the cross in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Just as Christ transformed ordinary bread into His body, the mission of the Church is to transform ordinary human activity into Christ-centered human activity.

In a sense, the Eucharist is the font from which springs the Church, and the Eucharist continues to form the Church. “The Church was born of the paschal mystery.” The sacrifice of the cross was “the condition for” and “a causal influence of” the Church coming into being (and the sacrifice of the cross is re-presented in the Eucharist). The Eucharist forms the Church, and in particular forms her as “Mother of all the faithful” in the model of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Eucharist builds up the Church and draws together the Church on earth

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28 Bramwell, The world of the sacraments, 235–236.
30 Bramwell, The world of the sacraments, 166.
32 O’Neill, Meeting Christ, 195.
33 John Paul II, Ecclesia de Eucharistia, §21.
34 O’Neill, Meeting Christ, 195; John Paul II, Ecclesia de Eucharistia, §21.
35 Catechism of the Catholic Church, §1366.
36 Bramwell, The world of the sacraments, 249.
37 Bramwell, The world of the sacraments, 236.
38 Bramwell, The world of the sacraments, 270.
and the Church in heaven.\textsuperscript{39} Moreover, the Eucharist is the “source and summit of the Christian life”\textsuperscript{40} and the Church itself is a specifically Eucharistic community\textsuperscript{41} in that it is a community characterized by coming together to celebrate the Eucharist\textsuperscript{42}.


\textsuperscript{40} Catechism of the Catholic Church, §1324.

\textsuperscript{41} Bramwell, \textit{The world of the sacraments}, 242.

\textsuperscript{42} Bramwell, \textit{The world of the sacraments}, 268–269; \textit{cf.} In contrast to the heretics (at least, one group of heretics), who did not come together to celebrate the Eucharist (Bramwell, \textit{The world of the sacraments}, 243).
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References


