

"The Real Presence of Jesus in the Bread and Wine"

4 Minute Special - June 2, 2002

by Father Brian Joyce

This weekend, we'll have four minutes about the real presence of Jesus in the consecrated bread and wine of Communion. Next weekend's four minutes will be about the real presence of Jesus in the entire Mass. Having those two separate topics may in itself be surprising news to a lot of Catholics because the signature of Roman Catholic belief has been so identified with Christ being really present in Communion that the rest of Catholic belief about the other ways Christ is present often gets overlooked, forgotten and ignored.

The Catholic belief and conviction about the real presence of Jesus in Communion finds its foundation in the faith that the Risen Lord is no longer bound by the particular restraints of time and place. However, that belief stands midway between two extremes which the Church has always rejected.

The first extreme which the Church rejects is the understanding that Christ's presence is "merely symbolic" and no more than that, that Communion serves simply as a reminder of the life, death and love of Jesus, that the bread of Communion keeps us from forgetting Him. So, the presence of Jesus, if anything, is all in our heads or in our remembering. A second and quite different extreme which the Church also rejects is the view that Jesus is physically present, that is, present materially so that somehow His atoms and molecules hide just beneath the surface of the bread and wine. Sometimes our own vocabulary, with words like "real presence," "substantial presence" and even "physical presence," betrays us into this extreme. Both extremes, "symbolic" and "material," misrepresent scripture, tradition and orthodox Catholic belief.

The authentic Catholic understanding about Christ's presence in Communion can be described in two statements. 1) The presence of Jesus is personal and it is real. It is not the presence of an object or thing, but the personal presence of the Lord. The old Baltimore Catechism and its answer that Christ is present, "Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity" was trying to get at that whole personal presence. 2) Secondly, it is the presence of the Risen and Spirit-filled Christ, not a matter of molecular flesh and body fluids. Christ's Aramaic words at the Last Supper, "This is My body; This is My blood," are more helpfully and accurately put into English as "This is Myself, and this is My life given for you." The traditional Catholic teaching about "transubstantiation" has been a way of protecting belief in the substantial personal presence of Christ and, at the same time, excluding belief in a material physical or molecular change in bread and wine. That's the "what" of Communion. How about the "why?"

Through the centuries from New Testament days, the Church has recognized that

the "why," the fundamental purpose of Christ's presence, is not for Him to be adored and not for our isolated private devotion and piety. The goal and purpose of Christ's presence is to lead us as a body in a sacrifice of praise to God, our Creator, Father and Author. Its further purpose is to nourish our lives and to transform us into the community of His body and to empower that body, a Eucharistic people, to continue His mission. Communion is important and vital to who we are and to what we must become. But so is the presence of Christ in many other ways, and we will discuss them next weekend.