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# The Eucharist in the West

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In presenting an account of the 'Eucharist in the West', I have chosen to concentrate on one particular issue, the development of the doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharistic elements and the correlative development of devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. I am led to that choice by the fact that this aspect of our Western Eucharistic experience is what most clearly distinguishes us from our Eastern brethren. And I will also be suggesting that this distinction from the East is not without significance for us, that it helps to explain why this devotion developed so notably in the West and I will suggest points where we, in the West, can learn from the experience, or maybe better the lack of experience, of the East in this matter.

I will begin by offering a short account of what happened. The debate about transubstantiation began in the French abbey of Corbie, near Amiens, Picardy, in the north of France in AD 831. Paschase Radbert, a monk of the abbey, wrote the first treatise on the Eucharist, *De corpore et sanguine Domini*. In that work, he elaborated on a few remarks of St. Ambrose on the matter, and his treatment was an epitome of literalism. He showed a tendency to exaggerated realism, even physicalism, in his view of the presence of Christ in the Eucharistic elements. This must have made quite a stir, because it was in answer to a question from the King, Charles the Bald, that Ratramn, another monk of Corbie, argued in the opposite direction; he said that Christ is present in the elements 'in mystery' or 'in figure', not 'in truth'. And so the debate began, and has continued. Berengar of Tours in the eleventh century introduced Aristotle to the discussion, and the category of substance. In 1059 the Magisterium got involved at a Synod in Rome. In 1079 Berengar was required to sign a profession of faith, and it was on this occasion that the phrase 'substantially changed' was introduced into the final text, to ensure his orthodoxy. In the profession of faith prescribed to the Cathars and Albigensians at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), the term *transubstantiation* entered into the magisterial synthesis. During the fifteenth century, the Aristotelian philosopher John Wyclif strongly repudiated the doctrine and his efforts were condemned locally in England and at the Council of Constance. The doctrine had to be reaffirmed yet again, against the Reformed denial, at the Council of Trent, which declared the term *transubstantiation* to be 'most suitable' (*aptissime*) to describe the

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change in the bread and wine. There matters rested until the mid-20th century, when some theologians in Holland and Belgium, applying modern personalist philosophy, experimented with new terms, such as "Transignification" and "Transfinalization". Pope Paul VI, in *Mysterium fidei* (1965), repudiated these efforts and reaffirmed the validity of the term *transubstantiation*, which he made part of his *Credo of the People of God* (1967). Beginning in the early 70s, and even as we speak, yet another round of the discussion is under way with the critique of *transubstantiation* being pursued by PJ FitzPatrick.[1] He is an expert in Aristotelian philosophy, like his two great philosopher predecessors, Berengar and Wyclif, and argues that the doctrine of transubstantiation is philosophical nonsense. It seems that we are never going to allow this matter to rest.

Turning now to the development of the devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, we note that the development was common to both East and West during the whole of the first millennium. During this period the Eucharist was understood dynamically and, in common with all the other sacraments, the focus was on its effect in the sanctification of the people. The original and primary purpose of the reservation of the sacrament was for the administration of viaticum, and the more general giving of communion outside Mass, and these purposes were adhered to in both East and West. It was in the eleventh century, in the West, that the concentration on eucharistic realism and the problem of the real presence brought about a change in popular devotion. At the same time there was great falling off in lay participation in the Eucharist and the elevation of the host began to be highlighted and the adoration of the host became a substitute for communion. In 1264 the feast of Corpus Christi was instituted and there began eucharistic processions and Benediction, Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, leading on to the Forty Hours devotion and eventually to Perpetual Adoration. This devotion has entered deeply into our Western spirituality. We genuflect before the Blessed Sacrament when we enter and leave a church and until recently we blessed ourselves every time we passed one. This devotion to the Blessed Sacrament has been, and still is, a defining element of Roman Catholicism. Especially after the widespread denial of the Real Presence at the time of the Reformation, belief in it became the very badge of membership of the Catholic Church. And we note, finally, that during this whole process, the Magisterium was called on to intervene periodically to ensure that devotion to the Blessed Sacrament did not draw people away from the primacy of the eucharistic liturgy itself.

We notice two points arising from this short account. Is the fact that, after more than a thousand years, we still have not reached a peaceful

[1] *In Breaking of Bread: The Eucharist and Ritual* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, 2006).

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possession of the doctrine of Christ's presence in the sacrament a sign of some underlying problem? And is the enduring tendency of this devotion to break loose from the liturgy of the Church a further sign of a difficulty? And we observe also, and hope to learn from, the fact that there has been no corresponding development in the East. There is no doubt that there is a danger of exaggeration in the devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. The Second Vatican Council, in *Sacrosanctum concilium*, § 7, made clear that the real presence of Christ in the sacrament must be understood always in the context of his presence elsewhere in the liturgy as well; in the gathered people, in the proclaimed word and in the presiding Bishop. However, there are two other aspects of Christ's presence which would seem to be even more fundamental, and I will suggest that the different experience in the West in these areas might help to explain this particular emphasis on Christ's presence in the Eucharist in the Western Church.

The most fundamental "real" presence of Christ is in his own actual risen body in heaven, and there is doubt about the depth of our Western awareness of this primary presence of Christ in his risen body in heaven, from which the eucharistic presence derives. It is not a novelty to suggest that our sense of the Resurrection is poor. In the 1950s FX Durrwell produced a book on the topic which caused a great stir. There was great enthusiasm for the renewal of the Holy Week liturgy in the early 1950s, but it never really caught on as we would wish. Christmas is still our big feast; we find it much easier to celebrate his birth than his Resurrection. It may be reading too much into a name, but it seems significant to me that we call the central feast of our faith after the German pagan goddess, Easter, rather than giving it its proper name as in Greek, Latin, Slavonic, and even Irish, "Passover". And we call our weekly feast of the Resurrection after the pagan sun-god, rather than giving it the name it has in the older languages, the "Lord's Day". I take these to be various signs that our sense of the Resurrection is weak, as compared with the East where there is no doubt that the feast of the Resurrection is the high-point of the liturgical year, even in popular devotion and not just in theory, as with us in the West.

Closely related here is our sense of the reality of the heavenly liturgy and the communion of saints, and what I say here is based to some degree, it has to be admitted, on personal experience. The idea of the heavenly liturgy was a discovery for me on reading *Sacrosanctum concilium* forty years ago. Since then I have *known* about it, but it only became a *real awareness* for me in very recent years.[2] I have no reason to believe that my experience is completely idiosyncratic

[2] I have presented the fruits of that discovery in *The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass: A Search for an Acceptable Notion of Sacrifice* (Leominster, Gracewing and Chicago, Hillenbrand Books, 2005) p. 90ff.

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and I see clear signs of weakness in our Western sense of the reality of the heavenly liturgy. In the East, on the contrary, the sense of the heavenly liturgy is central to their liturgical understanding. The Orthodox love to tell the story of Vladimir, Prince of Kiev, sending emissaries to examine the credentials of the major faiths. They were variously dissatisfied with what they found in the other major centres, including Rome, and it was only when they enter the great church of Santa Sophia in Constantinople that they found what they sought, and reported to the prince: 'We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth.'[3] Just this year I had the privilege of participating in a liturgy of St. John Chrysostom sung in Russian, and I knew exactly what those emissaries had experienced. The Orthodox liturgy is redolent of heaven from beginning to end, with the icons and the music and the incense.

This difference in our sense of the heavenly liturgy shows itself in what is the most visible difference between East and West, the issue of the icons. Just enter any Eastern church and the difference is immediately obvious. There are icons everywhere. The space is dominated by the large Pantocrator presiding over all, and there are icons of Our Lady and many of the saints all around. Enter any modern Catholic Church, on the other hand, and the situation is quite different. A large Crucifix dominates the space, there will be a set of Stations of the Cross, and in many churches the only image is a statue of the Madonna and Child, so that there is no clear reference whatever to the reality of the life of heaven. There will always be a tabernacle. It used to have pride of place at the front of the Church, but it will be the first thing the devout will seek out on entering the church in order to make the gesture of adoration. The suggestion being made here is that this lack of a sense of the heavenly liturgy is a contributing cause of the Western focus on the presence of Christ in the sacrament, and that our devotion to the Blessed Sacrament does nothing to overcome the lack. One might expect that devotion to the Blessed Sacrament would make our union with the heavenly liturgy very real, but it seems to have the opposite effect entirely, where heaven has dropped out of our imaginations almost completely. Our whole devotion is to the earthly Jesus, not the heavenly Christ. We have the crib at Christmas and we venerate the Cross on Good Friday, but we are at something of a loss during paschaltide. Devotion to Christ present in the tabernacle raises the mind and heart to God, but not to heaven, where Christ is, seated at the Father's right hand, and the strong iconophobia evidenced in our modern churches is the proof. And this parsimony verging on iconoclasm is official among us. *Sacrosanctum concilium* § 125 says: 'The practice of placing sacred

[3] Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Penguin Books, 1963) p. 269.

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images in churches so that they be venerated by the faithful is to be maintained. *Nevertheless their number should be moderate…*.'

The second point where the difference between East and West can be instructive is in the matter of our sense of the presence of Christ in the Church. We might begin our reflections here by recalling the change noted by de Lubac in the meaning of the phrase the 'Body of Christ'. Until 1050 the Body of Christ referred to the Church and the Eucharist was spoken of as the mystical body. Since that time, in the West, the meanings have been interchanged. The Eucharist is now the Body of Christ without qualification, and the Church is always spoken of as the Mystical Body. De Lubac opines that this change can be considered 'good because it was normal'[4], but it seems to me that the change in terminology betokens a most profound change in mentality, and it is from this shift that I take my cue as to what is going on here. I suggest that the change results from the loss, among Western Christians, of the sense of the mystery of Christ's presence in the Church. It is a commonplace of ecclesiology that the sense of the mystery of the Church has been weak among us in the West. An important movement to restore it was initiated by Drey and Möhler in Tübingen in the middle of the 19th century and was canonized by Pius XII's encyclical *Mystici corporis* and chapter one of *Lumen Gentium* at Vatican II. There is no doubt that the sense of the mystery of the Church was fundamental for all the Fathers of the Church, and, according to Congar and Lossky,[5] Eastern theology never forgets the role of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the Church, whereas we in the West, on the other hand, have been forgetting it all the time. So, what happened to us?

Our difficulty has its origins, even in the patristic era. It may seem odd to implicate St Augustine in this, for he, like all the Fathers, had a marvellous sense of the mystery, and he has some of the most beautiful doctrine about Christ and the Church in his Sermons and his Psalm commentaries, but it is another point of his teaching which has been more influential among us in the West, his ideas on the holiness of the Church, on which point he wavered. Against the Donatists St. Augustine claimed that the Catholic Church is 'the bride without spot or stain' mentioned in Eph. 5.27, and that the holiness of the Church on earth is real, it is focussed upon a small group of holy ones within the Church. Subsequently, against the Pelagians he had to change that tune. They claimed that they had the group of sinless ones, and so now St. Augustine made the counter claim that there is no such inner group, that we are all sinners, and that 'the bride without spot or

[4] H. de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum* (Paris, Aubier, 1949) p. 291.

[5] Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, New York, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002) p. 175; Yves Congar *Divided Christendom* (London, 1939) p. 12.

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stain' will only be revealed in heaven, and that the sinfulness of the earthly Church is an obvious fact of common observation. That became his final position and the one which has stuck with us in the West.[6] Another point is taken from a disciple of St Augustine, Faustus of Riez (400-490/95). He was arguing with the Macedonians about the divinity of the Holy Spirit. They used the last clauses of the Apostles' Creed against the doctrine: I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church etc. They argued that the Church is placed on the same level as the Holy Spirit and so the Holy Spirit cannot be divine, since the Church is only human. Faustus accepted their major premise, that the Church is only human, and denied the minor, the grammatical point, saying that we don't believe *in* the Church, because the Church is only human, not divine. And that too has remained standard doctrine in the West, repeated most recently in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, § 750.[7]

This emphasis on the sinfulness and humanity of the Church seems to me to be already a sign of a waning of the sense of the mystery. However, another important factor at work is the different experience of Church/State relations in East and West. In the East, the Empire remained solid until 1439 and then the national churches emerged. This meant that the Bishops, who for centuries have always been monks, were free to concentrate their attention on spiritual affairs. In the West, on the other hand, it has been very different indeed. When the Germanic tribes overran the Western Empire, the Bishops were forced to take over the administration of civil affairs, and for many centuries they were secular men, chosen for secular reasons, and heavily involved in secular affairs. And further, a profound change took place in the eleventh century which exacerbated this development. During that century the German Emperor sent four good German Bishops to Rome to reform the papacy and to use the papacy to reform the Church. They initiated the reformation/revolution which led to long-lasting struggle between the papacy and the Empire, which had us fighting over the institution of the Church for a thousand years, and this concentration on the institution forced the sense of the mystery to atrophy and die. A further difficulty was caused by the new, pro-active, manner of exercising papal authority over the Church at large. This exercise of authority was resisted from the very beginning and the various dissidents all used the mystery of the Church as a weapon in their struggle with the papacy. Ockham began it, and was followed by Wyclif, Hus and the sixteenth century reformers. They affirmed

[6] On this see Denis Faul, 'Sinners in the Holy Church: A Problem in the Ecclesiology of St Augustine' in *Studia Patristica*, Vol IX, Part 3 Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1966) pp. 404–415.

[7] On all this see de Lubac, *The Splendour of the Church* (New York, Sheed & Ward, 1956) pp. 13–28.

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the mystery of the Church, indeed, but located it in a "hidden" Church separated from the earthly institution. In reaction to this, we Catholics kept such a tight grip on the institution that there was no room left for the mystery. This led to a fear of the mystery of the Church, seen as a mark of dissidence, which was very much present among the Bishops at the First Vatican Council and was still in evidence even at the Second Vatican Council.

The suggestion I am making is that this loss of the sense of the mystery of Christ's presence in the Church encouraged our concentration on his presence in the Blessed Sacrament. The Church, for us, has been a focus of disunity, and failing to find our consolation in the presence of Christ through his Holy Spirit in the Church we sought our peace in the Blessed Sacrament, and this has led to an imbalance in our spirituality. St Paul simply said 'You are the body of Christ' (1 Cor 12.27), and the concentration on the Eucharistic body must not be allowed to distract us from that primary mystery, to which the phrase, the Body of Christ, should spontaneously refer. *Sacrosanctum concilium* § 7 teaches that Christ is present in different parts of the liturgy, but *especially* in the Eucharistic species. Pope Paul VI, in *Mysterium fidei* § 38, teaches that the presence of Christ in the Eucharistic species is a presence 'surpassing all others'. It seems to me that the considerations presented here call for a review of these affirmations. On the simple principle that the whole is greater than the part, one must affirm that the presence of Christ in the Eucharistic liturgy as a whole surpasses the presence in the Eucharistic species alone. The mystery of transubstantiation and the miraculous presence of Christ's body is more accessible to our imaginations than the mystery of his presence in the people, in the presiding Bishop and in the proclaimed word. However, those other presences surpass the presence in the elements in their personal quality, their dynamic force and their effect on our spirits, and are not to be undervalued. And surely we must affirm that the presence of Christ through the action of his Holy Spirit in the Church, which includes all the rest, is the most important, the most fundamental, presence of Christ on earth. There is need, it is being suggested, for a contextualisation of the Eucharistic presence in the larger whole, and the proper recognition of the absolute priority of the presence of Christ in the Church.

The way forward for us now is in the renewed liturgy. This dramatic and far-reaching reformation of our liturgy is an implicit public confession of the inadequacy of our liturgical practice for centuries past. And the correct principles which must guide us are all clearly laid down in the documents. The effort required now is to develop the true spirit of the liturgy to go with the practical reformation, and I have been suggesting two points where we can get help from the example of the unbroken tradition of the East. Our union with the Risen Christ and the heavenly liturgy is foundational, and his

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presence on earth should be primarily focussed in his presence through the Holy Spirit in the Church. Part of our effort now must be to develop our sense of these aspects of the presence of Christ, to match our well-developed sense of his presence in the Blessed Sacrament.

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