



THE PASTOR'S DESK

February 28, 2010 - "Transubstantiation"

Dear Parishioners,

Continuing with John Paul II's encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, the Holy Father reasserts the teaching of the Church that the change in the bread and wine at Mass is a substantial change, the substance of bread and wine being changed into the substance of the Body and Blood of Christ. First, here is the passage from the encyclical and then I will elaborate on the meaning of this teaching:

The sacramental re-presentation of Christ's sacrifice, crowned by the resurrection, in the Mass involves a most special presence which – in the words of Paul VI – "is called 'real' not as a way of excluding all other types of presence as if they were 'not real', but because it is a presence in the fullest sense: a substantial presence whereby Christ, the God-Man, is wholly and entirely present". This sets forth once more the perennially valid teaching of the Council of Trent: "the consecration of the bread and wine effects the change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord, and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. And the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called this change transubstantiation". Truly the Eucharist is a mysterium fidei, a mystery which surpasses our understanding and can only be received in faith, as is often brought out in the catechesis of the Church Fathers regarding this divine sacrament: "Do not see – Saint Cyril of Jerusalem exhorts – in the bread and wine merely natural elements, because the Lord has expressly said that they are his body and his blood: faith assures you of this, though your senses suggest otherwise".

One of the most difficult teachings of the church to understand is "transubstantiation." This is because we are trying to use words and concepts for created things to speak about the presence of the incarnate Son of God in things that look like parts of our created universe. Our attempt to understand this teaching can begin with the simple declarative statement of someone pointing to something (say, a car) and saying "that thing is a car." The reason he can say this is that all the information that this object is giving to the senses of the observer points to the presence of a car: its size, shape, sound, smell (exhaust or that "new car" scent), etc. The thing itself, its substance, is a car. Its species (the aspects about it that engage our senses) are its size, shape, sound, smell, etc. The two go together. When something with all these kinds of sense information (species) comes into our presence, we can say "this thing is a car."

With the Eucharist, though, this is all changed. After the consecration of the bread and wine, the information that reaches our senses about these things still tells us that "this thing is bread" and "this thing is wine." But, now the substance, the "what it is" is now the Body and Blood of Christ. We know this by faith. But, those species (the aspects about it that engage our senses) still say that they are bread and wine. The host looks, smells, feels,

and tastes like bread. The Precious Blood still looks, smells, feels, moves (flows), and tastes like wine. It still even has the alcoholic effect, as one who has to consume a lot of the left-over Precious Blood can attest.

The species (the sense-effecting aspects) of the Eucharist remain but they become symbolic. No, this does not mean the Eucharist is only a symbolic presence of the Body and Blood of Christ. After consecration, the species continue to tell our senses that bread and wine are present. But, this is not the case. The Body and Blood of Christ are present. The continuing presence of the species (the sense-effecting aspects) no longer points to the presence of bread and wine. Despite what our senses tell, we can no longer point to the Eucharist and say "that thing is bread." We can no longer do this, since bread and wine are no longer present. For this reason, we say that the species, the aspects that cause our senses to tell us that bread and wine are present, can only be symbolic. To say that they are "only" symbolic should not diminish their significance. Our experience and understanding of the Eucharist are greatly enriched by this symbolism. In fact, Jesus' Body is eaten as bread; it comes from the earth as the human nature of Christ came from the earth; it is the manna, the bread from Heaven that nourishes us during our wanderings through the desert of this world; the wheat is crushed as our Lord's Body is crushed. We can each spend a lifetime meditating on "only" symbols.

The most important meaning of the symbols of bread and wine comes during the Mass itself. The separate consecration of the bread into the Body of Christ and wine into the Blood of Christ symbolizes the sacrificial death of Christ. The separation of blood from the body causes death. The consumption of each species by the Priest completes the sacrifice of the Mass, as the Body and Blood of Christ are consumed. Also, the reception of both species by the Priest symbolizes the resurrection of Christ, as the Priest, acting in the person of Christ, reunites the Body and Blood in his own body. The reunification of Body and Blood symbolizes Christ rising to life again in His human Body.

I know this is difficult to understand. It must be, because it is difficult to explain. Even though you may not understand the theology and philosophy behind this explanation, it is not necessary in order to receive the grace of the sacrament. All the faithful, by the gift of the Holy Spirit understand that the Eucharist is no longer bread and wine but the Body and Blood of Christ. This is enough understanding to engage the fullness of love for Christ and our need for His Grace. The experience and the grace that come from participating at Mass and receiving the Eucharist can be as profound and life-changing for an illiterate farmer in the third world as it can be for the wisest and most saintly theologian.

**Have a blessed Lent,
Fr. LaHood**