

Chapter Title: The Eucharist and the Person of Christ

Abstract: One cannot deny that the person of Christ is present in the Eucharist, on a Catholic interpretation, but the term 'person' is rarely, if ever, used in formulas or theology describing the Eucharist. Moreover, the understanding conveyed by Scriptural imagery of the Eucharist, such as the Passover Lamb or our spiritual food, is rather sub-personal. In this chapter, I argue instead that the role of the person of Christ is most clearly perceived in the sacrificial action within which the Eucharist is embedded in every Mass. I argue that the Mass is related to Calvary in a specifically second-personal sense, in which we are equipped to love with God what God loves, and sacrifice with God what God sacrifices. On this account, the focus of the Eucharist is not on communicating the incommunicable person of Christ but being formed as an adopted divine person. Also on this account, salvation is not about becoming slightly better human beings but being formed as children of God.

Keywords: Aquinas, second-person relatedness, the person of Christ, the Eucharist as sacrifice.

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The Eucharist and the Person of Christ

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Introduction

What is the connection between the Eucharist and the person of Christ? Assuming the framework of Catholic theology, especially as expressed in the theology of St Thomas Aquinas, in what sense can it be said that Jesus Christ is personally present in or with or under the Eucharistic species?

There is a relatively straightforward way to address this question. Catholic theology, as expressed formally, for example, in the thirteenth session of the Council of Trent, declares that “our Lord Jesus Christ, true God and true man, is truly, really and substantially contained in the august sacrament of the Holy Eucharist under the appearance of those sensible things.”¹ Aquinas further declares not only that the body and blood of Christ are truly present (*Summa theologiae* [ST] III.75.1) but the “whole Christ” (ST III.76.1-3). Aquinas argues that the sacrament links us specifically with the body and blood of the risen Christ, observing that if the sacrament had been celebrated during the time Christ was in the tomb, his soul would not have been present (ST III.76.1 ad 1). Now, however, Christ’s body will never again be separated from his soul. Hence, given that the body and blood are present by means of the sacrament, Christ’s soul is also present. If Christ’s soul is present, by concomitance, then so is his divinity (ibid.). And to say that Christ’s divinity is present is to say that Christ’s person is present, the second person of the Trinity. Christ is therefore personally present in the Eucharist.

Nevertheless, it is striking that the term ‘person’ does not appear in the traditional formularies of the Eucharist, such as “body, blood, soul, and divinity,” even though these words may be interpreted as pertaining implicitly to the person of Christ. The term does not appear at all in the Eucharistic discourse of the Council of Trent. Furthermore, a review of instances of the term ‘person’ in Aquinas’s detailed articles on the Eucharist (ST III.73-83) also highlights some interesting patterns. Aquinas refers to the person who receives the Eucharist, the person of the priest, and to the priest speaking or otherwise acting “in the person of Christ”. On one occasion, he refers to the person of the entire Church (III.82.7) and on one occasion to the three divine persons in the Eucharistic prayers (III.83.4). The close association between the Eucharist and the person of Christ is also highlighted in III.78.2, in which Aquinas argues that the use of the pronoun “my” sufficiently indicates Christ’s person in the words of consecration, “This is my body.” Even in this instance, however, Aquinas is referring to the person of Christ principally as the consecrator of the Eucharist rather than associating Christ’s person directly with the Eucharist. One can conclude therefore that the term ‘person’ in association with the Eucharist is not denied but it is also not generally used of the Eucharist in some of the most important texts that we have.

Another point of consideration may be the various metaphors associated with the Eucharist, in which, by the term ‘metaphor’, I mean the various imaginable embodied experiences that are traditionally associated with the Eucharist, and which are the origins of much of the understanding of the Eucharist.² In Philippians 2, there is what looks like an embedded hymn, part of which is as follows,

¹ Reverend H. J. Schroeder, O.P., trans., *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (Rockford, Ill: TAN Books, 1978), 73.

² For the role of metaphors in understanding, see, for example, Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, 2nd edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 71, 116–17.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.³

These words highlight the extraordinary humility of Christ, not only becoming man but a man obedient to death, even on a cross. Yet the humility associated with the Eucharist goes even further. Even a crucified man is still a man, yet John the Baptist refers to Jesus as the “Lamb of God” (John 1:36), an association with the paschal lambs sacrificed in the temple at the time of the Passover. In other words, in the sacrifice associated with the Eucharist, Jesus chooses to be associated with the metaphor of an impersonal animal.

Jesus himself goes even further. In John 6, he declares himself to be the true bread from heaven, the bread of life (John 6:35), and then tells his listeners:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.⁴

To repeat, Jesus is stating in this passage that those to be saved will need to eat his body and drink his blood. In other words, beyond becoming a man, or even a crucified man, or even a sacrificial animal, Jesus promises to become food and drink for his disciples. Unsurprisingly, the Gospel also records that many of his disciples, when they heard these words, said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” adding that, “Many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him” (John 6:60, 66).

The association of Christ’s sacrifice with that of the Passover lamb and of the Eucharist with his body and blood means that the formal teaching that Christ is personally present is combined with descriptions of embodied experiences that do not emphasize the personal but the sub-personal, namely a sacrificial animal and of food and drink. Of course, this observation does not imply that Jesus is not also personally present to those who consume his body and blood. After all, in John 6:56, he states, “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.” Why, then is the person of Christ rarely, if ever, referred to in personal terms in respect of the Eucharist? In the context of revelation, is this tension a way of drawing attention to overlooked aspects of the Eucharist?

The goal of Communion

Whatever else may be said, the fact that the Eucharist is communicated with the appearance of bread and wine underline its effects. Aquinas writes,

Thirdly, the effect of this sacrament is considered from the way in which this sacrament is given; for it is given by way of food and drink. And therefore this sacrament does for the spiritual life all that material food does for the bodily life, namely, by sustaining, giving increase, restoring, and giving delight. Accordingly, Ambrose says (*De Sacram.*

³ Philippians 2:5-8, Revised Standard Version (RSV) translation.

⁴ John 6:53-56 RSV.

v): "This is the bread of everlasting life, which supports the substance of our soul." And Chrysostom says (*Hom.* xlvi in Joan.): "When we desire it, He lets us feel Him, and eat Him, and embrace Him." And hence our Lord says (John 6:56): "My flesh is meat indeed, and My blood is drink indeed."⁵

Aquinas draws attention here to a parallel, namely that, as material food and drink sustains bodily life, this sacrament, given by way of food and drink, sustains the spiritual life. As he elaborates in the same and subsequent article, this sustenance assists the recipient to persevere through suffering and to attain the fruition of this spiritual life in the glory of heaven.

But what is this spiritual life? The complete answer that Aquinas offers is an extremely detailed anthropology, comprising 1,004 articles in the *ST* I-II and II-II. As I have argued extensively elsewhere, this life is nothing like that of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, not least because Aquinas interweaves virtues with gifts of the Holy Spirit, beatitudes, and fruits of the Spirit.⁶ Instead, the key principle of this anthropology is that of alignment with God, in a relationship oriented towards friendship with God. One learns to love with God what God loves, which changes the forms of all the virtues from their Aristotelian counterparts.

On this account, there is an extremely central role for personhood in the reception of the Eucharist, but the emphasis is not so much on the person of Jesus Christ. Instead, there is a strong focus on the recipient of the Eucharist being formed as a person, an adopted child of God, in second-person relation to the person of God. Do these notions match with anything in the theology of the Eucharist?

The Eucharist and second-person relatedness

One important consideration about the Eucharist in Catholic theology is its connection with a true and proper sacrifice.⁷ This notion of the Eucharistic sacrifice is arguably the true and most important distinction of Catholic and non-Catholic approaches to the Eucharist, including Anglicanism, and is one of the aspects of the Eucharist that has made its theology so complex and controversial.

Theology has struggled with the language to be used in describing the Eucharistic sacrifice. Pius XII, in his encyclical *Mediator Dei*, wrote as follows:

For by the "transubstantiation" of bread into the body of Christ and of wine into His blood, His body and blood are both really present: now the eucharistic species under which He is present symbolize the actual separation of His body and blood. Thus the commemorative representation of His death, which actually took place on Calvary, is repeated in every sacrifice of the altar, seeing that Jesus Christ is symbolically shown by separate symbols to be in a state of victimhood.⁸

⁵ *ST* III.79.1. For this and subsequent citations from the *Summa theologiae*, I use the translation of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Schroeder, O.P., *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, 73. This translation has become standard and there are not many places where I could improve on it significantly.

⁶ Andrew Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective in Aquinas's Ethics: Virtues and Gifts* (New York; Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2012).

⁷ Libreria Editrice Vaticana, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd edition (Vatican City; Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 2000), paras 1356–1381.

⁸ 'Mediator Dei (November 20, 1947) | PIUS XII', para. 70, accessed 2 April 2022, https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_20111947_mediator-dei.html.

In other words, not only is Jesus Christ really present, but his death is represented by the twofold consecration of the body and the blood, representing the physical separation on the Cross.

How should this term ‘representation’ be understood, however? St Thomas uses this term in explaining why we talk of Christ as being “immolated” in the Mass. In the *ST* III.83.1, he writes:

As Augustine says, “pictures are generally called by the names of the things of which they are pictures: for example, we look at a painting or a fresco and say, that is Cicero, that is Sallust.” And the celebration of his sacrament is a kind of picture (*imago est quaedam*) that represents the passion of Christ, which is a true immolation.

Considered by itself, this description might lead one to think that the Eucharist is a sacrifice insofar as it is something like a picture or sculpture of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, thereby continuing or renewing or making present the sacrifice of the cross.

Catholic theology, however, describes the Eucharist as a “true and proper sacrifice”, implying all the elements of a sacrifice. These elements are matters of debate, but can be held, for example, to include the sacrificial gift, the sacrificing minister, the sacrificial action, and the sacrificial end or object.⁹ Whatever the precise elements, their presence implies much more than a representation in the sense of a picture, in which what makes the Eucharist in any sense a sacrifice is external to itself. Thomas Crean, for example, has used stronger language as follows.¹⁰ On this account, the Mass itself is a proper sacrifice insofar as that which happens to Christ in the Mass is that he is put into the state of representing his passion. On this account, the sacrifice of the Mass is a true and proper sacrifice that makes present the passion of Christ.

How can this account best be understood? A Jewish woman, Rosalind Moss, who became a Protestant Christian and afterwards a Catholic, wrestled with the theology of the Eucharist for years prior to her reception into the Church. The problem, for her, was that the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary ought to be sufficient for all Christ’s redemptive work, especially given scriptural verses that underline that this sacrifice is once, for all (Hebrews 9:23-10:18). There are hints that sufferings by followers of Christ can contribute to the work of salvation, notably the following text from Colossians 1:24:

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, ...

Such texts, however, do not in themselves solve the mystery of why this or any additional sacrifice can apparently be part of Christian revelation.

The image that came to her eventually to answer this question was actually very simple. Imagine a mother baking a cake and the mother has a young daughter who offers to help. The mother might say, “I am sufficient for the cake, so no thank you” but it would not be surprising if the mother did something else, namely to prepare a small bowl and ingredients so that the daughter can work beside her. Strictly speaking, the mother does not need the help, but working co-operatively is the sort of thing that someone

⁹ ‘Catholic Encyclopedia: Sacrifice of the Mass’, accessed 2 April 2022, <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10006a.htm>.

¹⁰ Thomas Crean, ‘[Personal Email] How Is the Mass a Sacrifice?’, 29 March 2022.

might do out of love, to build the relationship between the mother and the daughter.¹¹ In the case of Jesus, there are many such cases in his ministry in which he allows himself to be helped out of love.

One can, perhaps, apply a similar lesson to the Eucharist. The primary sacrifice is that of Christ on the cross, but each and every Mass is also a true sacrifice in which Christ is put into a state of representing his passion. On this account, the priest indeed offers sacrifice that is intimately related to and dependent on Christ's passion but is also a distinct sacrifice. Hence in the Mass, we love with God what God loves and sacrifice with God what God sacrifices. On this account, the Mass is an indispensable part of the salvific action of Christ, enabling us not only to receive the supernatural food of the Eucharist but also to be formed as second persons, as adopted children of God in the life of grace.

What are the implications of thinking of the Eucharist in these terms? First, the action of attending or doing with another what another attends to or does is what is called 'joint attention' in psychology.¹² This joint attention is immensely important in all human interactions, but especially in the development of children. Examples include pointing, which is an invitation to joint attention, turn-taking, reciprocal smiling, and many kinds of games and interactions, such as having stories read. It is also plausible that such interactions, which are second-personal interactions, play an important role in forming children as persons in all kinds of ways, including language and ethics. On this account, just as ordinary joint attention plays an important role in typical human development, it is perhaps unsurprising to find a parallel, a supernatural joint attention, plays a role in the formation of Christians.

Second, the notion of the sacrifice of the Mass understood in second-personal terms also gives a way of understanding the role of the person of Christ in the Eucharist. As argued previously, the person of Christ can indeed be understood as present in the Eucharist, but it is also hard to understand how and in what sense the personal identity of Christ can or should be transferred to the recipient of communion. But the second-personal action of the sacrifice of the Mass offers a different approach. Instead of the incommunicable identity of Christ being transferred, one can consider the sacrifice a way of enabling a second and created person, a disciple of Christ, to be formed as an adopted child of God.

Conclusion

Although the person of Christ is associated with the Eucharist, the role of the person of Christ in the salvific action of the Eucharist is, I have argued, principally in a second-personal interpretation of the sacrifice of the Mass. In this sacrifice, we are equipped to love with God what God loves and sacrifice with God what God sacrifices. Salvation is not simply about becoming slightly better human beings but being formed as mature adopted children of God for the glory of heaven. On this account, it is credible that the Eucharist communicates all that pertains to the person of Christ, and, in the context of the offering of the Eucharist in the Mass, Christians are formed as divinized human persons in the life of grace.

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¹¹ *Holy Smoke* (Orange, CA: St. Joseph Radio, 1998).

¹² For an introduction, see, for example, Naomi Eilan, 'Joint Attention, Communication, and Mind', in *Joint Attention: Communication and Other Minds: Issues in Philosophy and Psychology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 1–33.

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