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In the face of the current crisis, there is obvious need for a serious, renewed eucharistic catechesis.

The crisis in eucharistic faith

By Germain Grisez and Russell Shaw

■ Her husband having died while on an Italian trip undertaken in hopes of restoring his health, the American woman stayed on for a while in Italy with business associates of her late spouse. Her hosts were devout Catholics whose devotion to the Eucharist impressed the widow, an Episcopalian.

Sometimes she attended Mass with her friends, and one day a non-Catholic tourist whispered a skeptical remark to her at the consecration. Shocked, she found herself pondering St. Paul's words in his First Epistle to the Corinthians: "For all who eat and drink without discerning the body eat and drink judgment against themselves" (1 Cor. 11:29).

It struck her that this admonition made little or no sense if the Blessed Sacrament, as her Episcopalian faith led her to believe, were only a symbol of Christ's presence. Paul would hardly have issued so dire a warning against taking a casual view of a symbol. But suppose the Eucharist

was *not* just a symbol? Suppose it was, as her Catholic friends believed, the Real Presence of Jesus Christ? Then Paul's words made altogether good sense.

A few months later, Mrs. Elizabeth Seton returned to New York, and the following year she was received into the Catholic Church.

This incident from the life of Saint Elizabeth Seton is worth recalling for the light it sheds not only upon the centrality in Catholic life of eucharistic faith but also upon a possible approach to restoring such faith among those American Catholics whose belief in the Real Presence has not simply grown dim but, seemingly, been extinguished. The point is that the New Testament and the whole Catholic tradition testify in unmistakable terms to the fact that the consecration of the bread and wine changes them into the body and blood of Christ. Not to believe this trivializes Scripture and the doctrine of the Church.

And today, it appears, many Ameri-

can Catholics do *not* believe it. In the general crisis of the Church in the United States, no individual crisis is more serious and urgent than this one. This is so not least because, as we shall see, this collapse of eucharistic faith is related, as both cause and effect, to the broader crisis.

The latest evidence that many Catholics do not believe in the Real Presence was supplied last spring in a *New York Times*/CBS poll. Among its findings was that roughly two adult Catholics out of three in the United States think that at Mass the bread and wine, rather than being changed into Christ's body and blood, serve as mere "symbolic reminders" of him. The figure was 70% for the two youngest age groups surveyed (those aged 18–29 and 30–44) and 58% for those in the 45–64 age group.

Even among Catholics 65 and older, 45% held the "symbolic reminder" view of the Eucharist, while only 51% considered the sacred species to be Christ's body and blood. Moreover, contrary to what many people would expect, even the majority (51%) of those who said they go to Mass weekly or almost weekly think of the Eucharist as a mere symbol.

Were these isolated, unrepresentative findings? Evidently not. Other polls have produced similar results. *Times* religion writer Peter Steinfels summed up the implications with mordant accuracy: "For centuries, and especially since the Reformation, the church has insisted upon the actual change of the bread and wine into the 'real presence' of Christ as a defining mark of the Mass. This emphasis on 'sacramentality,' on God's life-giving action through material signs and physical acts — water, wine, laying on of hands, all mediated by a structured church — has been the hallmark of the Catholic approach to worship." Steinfels quoted Archbishop Rem-

bert Weakland, O.S.B., of Milwaukee, who called the findings "certainly an alarm bell," particularly because belief in the Real Presence is the touchstone of belief in so much else the Church holds dear. ("Future of Faith Worries Catholic Leaders," *The New York Times*, June 1, 1994)

An alarm bell indeed. Is anybody listening? One is reminded of Flannery O'Connor's earthy but accurate remark about the Blessed Sacrament: "If it's only a symbol, then I say the hell with it." O'Connor of course possessed robust Catholic faith in the Real Presence, as apparently did most of her coreligionists as recently as thirty years ago. Now many do not, and, as Archbishop Weakland points out, the collapse of their faith in this central element of Catholic belief signals a still broader crisis of faith.

What happened? The answer is complex but it is by no means obscure.

One fundamental cause lies in the pervasive secularization of Western culture underway for the last several centuries and still continuing. Grounded in a rationalism and scientism that are themselves ideologically-based rather than truly rational, this secularization process has made belief in anything of a supernatural and transcendent nature more subjectively difficult for many persons than it was in earlier times. It is modernity's great challenge to religion. And even though the Catholic Church in the United States, without being fully conscious of what she was doing, successfully shielded many of her members from its effects until well into this century, her ability to do so has diminished sharply (and, it seems, at an accelerating rate) as the assimilation of Catholics into a rapidly secularizing cultural mainstream has proceeded apace since World War II.

Factors outside the Church have been reinforced by factors within. Back in the

1960s several theologians advanced theories of Christ's presence in the Eucharist according to which the reality of bread and wine is changed precisely because of the change in their meaning (transignification) and use (transfinalization) in the liturgy. In the encyclical *Mysterium Fidei* (September 3, 1965) Pope Paul VI rejected these views. He wrote:

As a result of transubstantiation, the species of bread and wine undoubtedly take on a new signification and a new finality, for they are no longer ordinary bread and wine but instead a sign of something sacred and a sign of spiritual food; but they take on this new signification, this new finality, precisely because they contain a new reality, which we can rightly call *ontological* [i.e., pertaining to what objectively is, independent of human thought and desire]. For what now lies beneath the aforementioned species is not what was there before, but something completely different; and not just in the estimation of Church belief but in reality, since once the substance or nature of the bread and wine has been changed into the body and blood of Christ, nothing remains of the bread and the wine except for the species—beneath which Christ is present whole and entire in his physical reality, corporeally present, although not in the manner in which bodies are in a place.

The intrinsic difficulties with theories of transignification and transfinalization as applied to the Eucharist are at least two. First, there are limits to what human meaning-giving can do. Human beings cannot, for example, constitute anything a person nor can they make a person a non-person; and the body of Christ is his living self, not part of subhuman creation over which human beings have dominion. Second, what happens in the Eucharist primarily is a matter of divine, not human, meaning-giving, which we must accept. Although the priest utters Jesus' words for him, essentially the consecration is Jesus' act, not the priest's—and not the congregation's either—and the change of bread and wine



into Christ's body and blood is accomplished in the only way it can be, namely, by divine power.

Mysterium Fidei should have settled the matter, but it did not. Theories of transignification and transfinalization have continued to be spread by many liturgists and catechists, converging in recent years with the encroaching congregationalism of much Catholic worship which tends to view the liturgy as essentially an action of the worshiping community and no more than that. Often of course the versions of these theories presented are subtle ones that stress the "reality" of the change brought about by the shift in meaning, without expressly denying the Church's teaching. But even though sophisticated theologians can perhaps believe bad theories without drawing their obvious conclusions, ordinary Catholics, using common sense, do conclude: If what is happening in the Mass is primarily the action of priest and people using bread and wine in a communal, memorial meal, then the bread and wine are not really changed into Christ's body and blood but are only symbolic reminders of him.

Many other things have helped along this process. In fact anything, authorized or not, that lessens the sense of the sacredness of the Eucharist tends to weaken faith. This is the case, for example, with changing the eucharistic prayer into English, multiplying the forms of the prayer, emphasizing the celebrating community (e.g., the kiss of peace just before Communion), Communion in the hand, extraordinary ministers of Communion, and drastically reducing the Communion fast. No doubt there is a case to be made for all of these changes; but it is no help to discussion of the falling-off in eucharistic faith to deny or overlook the fact that these and other authorized changes have had the bad side-effect of contributing to it.

Sexual immorality subverts

If this is so of certain authorized changes, it is doubly so of unauthorized ones: no first confession before first Communion, no fast at all before Communion, indiscriminately inviting everyone (sometimes including even nonbelievers) to receive, altering the words and gestures of the liturgy (even the consecration itself), using questionably valid matter, an overly casual approach to the consecrated elements (e.g., consecrating too much wine and pouring the excess down the sacrarium).

Various omissions and other things also have important negative implications. These include the virtual elimination of benediction and other eucharistic devotions outside Mass, removal of the tabernacle to an obscure place in some churches (even placing it at the usual side altar makes an undesirable non-verbal statement about the Blessed Sacrament), little or no pause for thanksgiving after Communion, and, in all too many cases, weak and ambiguous homilies on Holy Thursday and Corpus Christi.

Another important, though less obvious, cause for the decline in faith in Jesus' bodily presence in the Eucharist is the decline in sexual morality among Catholics. Underlying what has happened in this area is an implicit body-soul dualism: the essential reality of the human person is regarded, not as the body that is abused, but as something non-material—spirit or mind or soul—and “mere bodily behavior” is thought not to impinge significantly upon the moral goodness and holiness of this non-material self. Beyond the devastating impact this way of thinking has on morality, it also subverts the incarnationalism and sacramentalism at the heart of Catholic faith. Specifically, it subverts faith in the Real Presence.

The problem is reinforced and made worse by pastoral practice that condones sexual sins and makes little of the sacrament of penance. To encourage people who live in bad marriages and other sinful relationships or who otherwise engage in unrepented sexual sins to receive Communion strongly suggests that nothing particularly sacred is involved in Communion—that people who find themselves in these circumstances do not really “eat and drink judgment against themselves.”

Forgetfulness of heaven and hell

Still another dimension of the decline in eucharistic faith is general forgetfulness of heaven and hell. Partly this has to do with the optimistic view, now widespread although at odds with the New Testament and tradition, that everyone will be saved; partly, too, with the condoning of sexual and other sins and the downplaying of penance—for people with more or less troubled consciences do not generally care to think much about an afterlife. But partly it has to do simply with the emphasis in many liturgies upon the here-

and-now: upon *us*, upon *this* group of people gathered in *this* place for gratifying interaction and mutual encouragement, rather than upon our links with the *whole* communion of saints including Mary and the blessed in heaven. Many people who participate in Mass today, including many priests who preside, do not appear to have a lively sense that they are being drawn into Jesus' resurrection life and are sharing even now in heaven.

Jesus emphasizes the necessity of the Eucharist precisely as the food that gives heavenly life. It is not an option but a *requirement* for those who would have eternal life (cf. John 6:26-59). But the requirement—that is to say, the Eucharist—loses its own force and meaning to the extent that the reality of eternal life is tacitly set aside in the 'we-here-now' liturgical celebrations so common today.

The Church's teaching on the Real Pres-

ence is clear. Consider the Council of Trent's definitive canons "on the most holy sacrament of the Eucharist," especially the first and second:

1. If anyone denies that the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained in the sacrament of the most holy Eucharist, but says that Christ is present in the sacrament only as in a sign or figure, or by his power: let him be anathema. (DS 1651/883)

2. If anyone says that the substance of bread and wine remains in the holy sacrament of the Eucharist together with the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and denies that wonderful and extraordinary change of the whole substance of the bread into Christ's body and the whole substance of the wine into his blood while only the appearances of bread and wine remain, a change which the Catholic Church has most fittingly called transubstantiation: let him be anathema. (DS 1652/884)



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Trent cites the words of the synoptic gospels (Matt. 26:26–28; Mark 14:22–24; Luke 22:19–20) to support the proposition that when Jesus instituted the sacrament of the Eucharist at the Last Supper “he bore witness in express and unambiguous words that, after the blessing of the bread and wine, he was offering them as his own body and his own blood.” Trent also points out that these words of institution were repeated by St. Paul (1 Cor. 11: 24–25).

In some ways, though, the eucharistic passages in John’s gospel and in First Corinthians are more powerful evidence of Jesus’ bodily presence in the Eucharist than even the words of institution. The sixth chapter of John not only makes it clear that Jesus taught that his disciples must eat his flesh and drink his blood but also explains the point of doing so: bodily communion with him is the basis for the full personal communion essential to having “life” — that is, grace and salvation. Since the Word became flesh, Jesus’ living body is divine, and union with it is union with God.

The more than symbolic force of Jesus’ teaching is underlined at the conclusion of the chapter (John 6:60–71). Many of his disciples found his saying too hard and went away. This would have made no sense if they had understood him as speaking in merely symbolic terms. But instead of modifying his teaching, Jesus challenged the Twelve, too: “Will you also go away?” To that challenge Peter replied: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” This has been the response of believers from Peter’s time to Elizabeth Seton’s — and now also to ours.

In the face of the current crisis of eucharistic faith, there is obvious need for a serious, renewed eucharistic catechesis stressing, as we have suggested, the scriptural and dogmatic foundations of belief

in the Real Presence. Initiating and conducting such a renewed catechesis are in the first instance responsibilities of the Church’s pastoral leaders.

Similarly, there is need — for its own sake and also for its bearing upon eucharistic faith — for a clear and forceful reaffirmation of the Church’s teaching on sexual morality, presented in homilies and catechesis just as Pope John Paul II long has done. Bishops should make it clear, as John Paul does in the encyclical on moral principles *Veritatis Splendor*, that those who dissent from the received teaching on sexual morality are denying revealed truth. Bishops and priests should eliminate the abuse of general absolution where it exists, and begin urging people who have committed moral sins to repent and confess them. Pastors at all levels need to teach and preach about heaven, and to call attention to the frightening truth that those who die in unrepented mortal sin will not go there.

Ordinary Catholics who themselves believe in the Real Presence also have a contribution to make. As our analysis of the problem suggests, they should show reverence toward the Blessed Sacrament in every way possible, urge catechists and priests to teach and preach sound doctrine, and explain the Eucharist correctly when speaking with confused people and instructing children. They also should communicate respectfully but firmly with their bishops, urging them to provide better instruction, promote eucharistic adoration (Forty Hours, exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, Benediction). They should work against irreverence, especially by doing what they can to eliminate liturgical abuses.

In this crisis of eucharistic faith the stakes are very high. How high, Jesus himself makes clear: “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (John 6:53). ■