

The Real Presence of Jesus Christ



In the Sacrament of Holy Eucharist

Are the consecrated bread and wine “merely symbols”?

In everyday language, we call a "symbol" something that points beyond itself to something else, often to several other realities at once. The transformed bread and wine that are the Body and Blood of Christ are not merely symbols because they truly are the Body and Blood of Christ. As St. John Damascene wrote: "The bread and wine are not a foreshadowing of the body and blood of Christ—By no means!—but the actual deified body of the Lord, because the Lord Himself said: 'This is my body'; not 'a foreshadowing of my body' but 'my body,' and not 'a foreshadowing of my blood' but 'my blood'" (*The Orthodox Faith*, IV [PG 94, 1148-49]).

At the same time, however, it is important to recognize that the Body and Blood of Christ come to us in the Eucharist in a sacramental form. In other words, Christ is present under the appearances of bread and wine, not in his own proper form.

We cannot presume to know all the reasons behind God's actions. God uses, however, the symbolism inherent in the eating of bread and the drinking of wine at the natural level to illuminate the meaning of what is being accomplished in the Eucharist through Jesus Christ.

There are various ways in which the symbolism of eating bread and drinking wine discloses the meaning of the Eucharist. For example, just as natural food gives nourishment to the body, so the eucharistic food gives spiritual nourishment. Furthermore, the sharing of an ordinary meal establishes a certain communion among the people who share it; in the Eucharist, the People of God share a meal that brings them into communion not only with each other but with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Similarly, as St. Paul tells us, the single loaf that is shared among many during the eucharistic meal is an indication of the unity of those who have been called together by the Holy Spirit as one body, the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:17).

To take another example, the individual grains of wheat and individual grapes have to be harvested and to undergo a process of grinding or crushing before they are unified as bread and as wine. Because of this, bread and wine point to both the union of the many that takes place in the Body of Christ and the suffering undergone by Christ, a suffering that must also be embraced by his disciples.

Much more could be said about the many ways in which the eating of bread and drinking of wine symbolize what God does for us through Christ, since symbols carry multiple meanings and connotations.

NEXT WEEK: Do the consecrated bread and wine cease to be the Body and Blood of Christ when the Mass is over?

*This resource, *The Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Sacrament of the Eucharist: Basic Questions and Answers*, was produced by the Committee on Doctrine of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and was approved by the full body of bishops at their June 2001 General Meeting. The text is authorized for publication by the undersigned.*

*Monsignor William P. Fay
General Secretary, USCCB*

Copyright © 2001, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C. All rights reserved. Used with permission.