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LESSON SIX
*THE REAL PRESENCE
CREATES COMMUNION*

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? (1 Cor 10:16)

The deliberate weave of the “cloud of unknowing” is about to dissipate.

Through the prayers of the baptized members of the assembly and the priest-celebrant (who in the First Epiclesis has prayed, “Make holy, therefore, these gifts, we pray, by sending down your spirit upon them...”), we are speeding toward the most intensely sacred moment of the Mass, the moment of transubstantiation, when Jesus Christ is made Present to us in his very Flesh and Blood under the appearance of bread and wine.

The Eucharistic moment is unlike any other moment in the worship of Almighty God. Mystics have told us that within the veil that separates heaven from earth, there are “thin places”—places made permeable and penetrable through God’s own desire to be with us. One of the thinnest places in the world is a Catholic Mass at the exact moment of Consecration, when the web is dissolved and Christ is there—the King among his people.

In that moment there comes a profound quietness, a brief instant of peace “beyond all understanding” so authentic, so true, that even children seem to recognize it. At the crackling sense of holiness that accompanies this supernatural event, the cooing babies always go silent, as though they too have become awestruck witnesses to the Reality of Christ.

For all we know, they have, because this moment is reality. Christ has come and there is a feast, and it is an eternal one. The Lord of Hosts is the host, and we are nurtured by his whole and healing food.

But let’s not get ahead of ourselves. It’s important to understand and appreciate what leads up to and effects this moment.



THE WORD MADE FLESH

Have you ever noticed that when some people return to their seats after receiving Holy Communion they will kneel and immediately cover their faces with their hands? As children, we might have heard our parents explain this action in the most expeditious way possible—something along the lines of: “They are speaking privately to God, and they don’t want you staring at them while they do it.”

It’s a reasonable, if brusque, answer, but we know that people cover their faces whenever they are encountering something that is too big, too mysterious, simply too overwhelming for their comprehension. Children cover their faces with their sheets when their imagination runs rampant at night. Baseball fans cover their faces, oh, almost every ninth inning. Face-covering is a response to a head-on encounter with a reality that goes beyond what we can fully take in.

The Reality of Christ within the Eucharist—the Son of God willingly enduring an unjust, terrible death to share his Body with his people that they might rise into eternity with him—*that’s* a lot to take in.

Indeed, for many of Jesus’ followers in the first century, the people who actually knew him and had seen his workings and heard his teachings, it was too much. Scripture tells us that when Jesus spelled out his plan and purpose, it drove many followers away. It’s worth re-reading here:

Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.

I am the bread of life.

Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died; this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die.

I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.”



The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us [his] flesh to eat?”

Jesus said to them, “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you.

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day.

For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.

Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me.

This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever.”

Then many of his disciples who were listening said, “This saying is hard; who can accept it?”

Jesus knew from the beginning the ones who would not believe and the one who would betray him.

And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by my Father.”

As a result of this, many [of] his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him.

Jesus then said to the Twelve, “Do you also want to leave?”

Simon Peter answered him, “Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God.” (John 6:47-58, 60, 64-69)

What we have here is Jesus’ own testimony to the certainty of his Eucharistic Presence. He gives us the doctrine straight up, not presenting it as a parable nor engaging in metaphor. It is the word without dressing or equivocation: “*My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.*”

The early followers of Jesus were not the only people to have a problem accepting this. Many Catholics have had the experience of being asked—by Christians who often profess that every



word in Scripture ought to be interpreted literally—how we can possibly believe that bread and wine can become *anything* else, much less God’s own Flesh and Blood.

In response, we’re tempted to ask how people who easily concede to Jesus’ self-articulated doctrine on the indissolubility of marriage—also delivered clearly and without embellishment—have so much trouble with his words on the Eucharist.

Perhaps it goes back to the notion of sacrifice and gifts—the measure in which we give them and God’s “good measure” of return—all of which is aligned with the notion of *consent*. When we say “yes” to God, we give consent to the very notion of faith and as we live the life of faith, we grow in it, thanks to the Lord, who gifts us with ever more faith, measure by measure.

What and how much we believe depends upon how much consent we give to what is placed before us: “Marriage is for life? Okay, that makes sense and we can see the fruitful rightness of that teaching in real time,” so we consent to giving that a measure of belief.

On the other hand, “Eat your Flesh and drink your Blood? That’s cannibalism, isn’t it? I cannot believe you mean that!” Consent to belief is withheld in full measure.

Consent—“Yes, Amen!”—is the essential catalyst for everything. God’s intention for creation was expressed with words of consent: “Let there be light!” Mary’s consent was the hinge upon which swung our salvation: “Let it be according to thy word!” Jesus’ consent was the mechanism to effect it: “Not my will, but yours be done.”

Consent is necessary for the gift of faith. It is, in fact, a sacrificial action. The little surrendering we make, over and over again, to believe rather than doubt enables the willful suspension of disbelief so that we may move forward in faith, even when it’s hard. From the simple Sign of the Cross to the most difficult novena, our prayers necessarily contain our consent for God’s action in our lives, and the measure of that consent within prayer impacts the measure by which God responds.

That’s why prayer has power, and why faith “the size of a mustard seed” can move mountains. We bless God by offering up a sacrifice of consent to God. God takes our sacrifice, makes it better, and returns our offering to us in “good measure.”

If we understand that, then we can more readily see how the Eucharistic Prayer—this great combination of words speaking praise, supplication, and consent—can help to effect an action of such unthinkable and mysterious power as to bring forth the Divine Word himself.

As Bishop Barron emphasizes, during the Eucharistic Prayer the priest’s narration of the Last Supper moves from a third person retelling to a First Person proclamation when the celebrant, acting *in persona Christi*, intones Christ’s own words.

You or I could stand in front of bread and wine and repeat Christ’s words ad nauseam but the bread would never become more than bread, and the wine would remain only wine. The specific action of the priest, working within the prayerful formulas of the liturgy and speaking in his capacity as an apostolically ordained “stand in” for Christ, brings the power of Christ himself into the words, and brings God’s own creative power of consent—the almighty “Let it *be*”—into the moment.

When it is Christ speaking the words through the priest called to represent him *in persona Christi capitis*, then the words become the Reality. “This is the foundation of the Church’s insistence on the Real Presence,” says Bishop Barron. “We’re not dealing with symbolism here. Rather, we’re dealing with the Incarnation of the Creator God whose Word *constitutes* reality.”

The Council of Trent affirmed that this transformation happens, this Presence occurs, by the power of the words spoken. The words of Jesus as God *become reality*. “Daughter, your faith has healed you...” and a woman is healed. “Lazarus, come forth,” and a dead man walks out of his tomb. “Little girl, arise,” and a child returns to her family. When the Second Person of the Trinity says, “You will be with me in Paradise,” there is cause for rejoicing because it is an assured reality. When he says, “Behold your Mother,” his mother becomes our own.

So, when his representative at the Mass speaks the words, “This is my Body...” we may trust in it. “God’s Word creates. God’s Word makes things happen,” Bishop Barron says, invoking the promise made through the prophet Isaiah:

Yet just as from the heavens
the rain and snow come down
And do not return there
till they have watered the earth,
making it fertile and fruitful,
Giving seed to the one who sows
and bread to the one who eats,
So shall my word be
that goes forth from my mouth;



It shall not return to me empty,
but shall do what pleases me,
achieving the end for which I sent it. (Isa 55:10-11)

This Consecration—the climactic moment of the Mass—enables us to offer Christ himself to the Father. Symbolically, we are indeed offering “all of creation and our own lives” as we saw in the last chapter. But now, Bishop Barron tells us, “those gifts are transfigured into the Body and Blood of Jesus, which means the sacrifice becomes unsurpassable. It becomes nothing symbolic but a real ‘representation’ of Christ’s sacrifice at Calvary. And we are there being offered with him, all as members of the Mystical Body. Having been knitted together during the Liturgy of the Word, we are joined in this supreme sacrifice, which the Father does not need, but which benefits us infinitely.”

“Why do people stay away from this?” asks the Bishop in real wonder. We might think back to John Chapter 6: *“This saying is hard...”*

But Catholicism is a religion of faith and reason, and the Eucharistic doctrine has been well-reasoned by Doctors of the Church through the ages. Bishop Barron relates Thomas Aquinas’ teaching that in the other sacraments, the power of Christ is present, but in the Eucharist, Christ himself is present. When Aquinas makes this fundamental distinction, it is easier to “get it” and feel a sense of awe. It is hard, however, to understand and consent to believe in a doctrine if it has not been well-taught and absorbed.



THE MYSTERY OF FAITH

The Divine Word becoming unsurpassingly Present to us in this moment is a supreme mystery. After the celebrant elevates both Body and Blood so that we may see and adore, he will genuflect in adoration before them both, and solemnly declare, “The mystery of faith.”

This is not a cue or a rubrical instruction, writes Abbot Jeremy Driscoll, but “an exclamation of awe and wonder, and this is the supreme moment in the Liturgy for using this word, *mystery*. Something is hidden under the appearance of bread and wine. Faith perceives it.”¹

In one voice, the assembly, using one of several options, testifies to what is perceived: “We proclaim your Death, O Lord, and profess your Resurrection until you come again”; or, “Save us, Savior of the world, for by your Cross and Resurrection, you have set us free”: or, “When we eat this Bread and drink this Cup, we proclaim your Death, O Lord, until you come again.”



SECOND EPICLESIS

Recall that in the First Epiclesis the priest called down the Holy Spirit, and asked that our gifts be sanctified, made holy before the Lord. Now we arrive at the Second Epiclesis. Once again, the priest is calling down the Holy Spirit “not to consecrate the gifts this time,” says Bishop Barron, “but rather to conform us to the Consecrated Elements.” One Eucharistic Prayer makes that pleading this way:

Grant that we, who are nourished by the Body and Blood of your Son and filled with his Holy Spirit, may become one body, one spirit in Christ.

This epiclesis, says Bishop Barron, “breaks upon the rocks of the Divine self-sufficiency and comes back to us, that we may be incorporated in this great sacrifice. This is us, now, being joined to the Eucharist.”

Depending upon which Eucharistic prayer is being used, this second epiclesis continues in the form of emboldened intercessory prayer made in union with the Real Presence. It is at this point (in all but one of the Eucharistic prayers) that we are praying specifically for our pope and our diocesan bishop, for people around the world, for the souls in purgatory, and even—in one case—for “all the dead, whose faith you alone have known.”

Within these intercessions, specific names are mentioned as we ask to be “made worthy” to share in the eternal joy of heaven with all who have gone before us. One variation of the prayer begs:

May he make of us an eternal offering to you, so that we may obtain an inheritance with your elect, especially with the most blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, with blessed Joseph, her Spouse, with your blessed Apostles and glorious Martyrs (with Saint N.: the Saint of the day or Patron Saint) and with all the Saints, on whose constant intercession in your presence we rely for unflinching help.

“The Eucharist is the tie that binds us to everybody else,” says Bishop Barron, both on earth and in heaven—saints, angels, and martyrs included.



DOXOLOGY AND GREAT AMEN

A doxology acknowledges and gives glory to the wonder and eternal unity of the Triune God, both within and outside of time. We pray a doxology every time we conclude our prayers or a psalm with the “Glory Be”:

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

The Eucharistic Prayer now concludes with the Great Doxology in which the celebrant prays or sings, “*Through him, and with him, and in him, O God, almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, for ever and ever.*”

While pronouncing these words, the priest has once more raised the Eucharistic elements, Body and Blood, as one last gesture of offering to heaven.

Through Jesus, with Jesus, in Jesus and with the Holy Spirit, all glory belongs to the Father forever! Many Catholics will tell you they love this moment and this prayer of glorification, not only because we have arisen from our knees, which feels good, but because this moment seems to solemnly tie together the entire “mystery of faith,” summarizing it in a phrase of pure and simple praise that we might imagine singing in heaven.

We also know, as we rise, that we are quickly approaching the moment of intimate, real Communion with the Bridegroom. So we eagerly and with vast thanksgiving respond with a heartfelt, often sung and repeated, “Amen”—the great liturgical word of consent—because no other response could ever do.



THE LORD’S PRAYER : OUR DAILY BREAD

Now after that supreme (and supremely moving) moment in the liturgy, the celebrant invites us to pray together in the words that Jesus himself taught us as he intones “Our Father” and we join in.



It seems curiously commonplace after a Eucharistic Prayer of such grandeur, doesn't it? It's the prayer most of us use every day, learned in childhood and understood to be a kind of "all-purpose, always appropriate" prayer—one for which we are especially grateful when our own words fail us.

And yet, as Bishop Barron tells us, this is a perfect moment to pray—together in one voice—in the words our Savior gave us. We pray it while Jesus is truly, substantially Present and in our midst, "to claim as our Father, His Father. It's at that moment, in the Presence of the transubstantiated elements, that we most appropriately call upon God as 'Father.' We pray 'Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done...' because the order of heaven has become the order of earth. What we are praying for, ultimately, is the Eucharist itself, which is the reconciliation between heaven and earth."

It is also within the recitation of this familiar prayer that we get to ask for "our daily bread" and, as Abbot Jeremy writes, "We remember the Lord's teaching that we 'cannot live by bread alone... but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God' (Deut 8:3, Matt 4:4). So the Word of God received as real food, the Body and Blood of Christ accepted as spiritual nourishment— this is the ultimate 'bread' we ask the Father to give to us."²

Our request for bread echoes the pleas of the children of Israel who, wandering the desert without food, received manna from heaven every day, which they would have to collect every day.

Most of us already know all of this, but what many do not realize is that "give us this day our daily bread" is also asking for something peculiarly meaningful within the context of the Eucharist. The Greek behind that phrase "our daily bread" is *ton arton hēmōn ton epiouision*. "*Epiouision*" is the only adjective in the prayer; it is masculine in form and appears to exist nowhere else in ancient Greek except in the prayer that Jesus gave us.

"What it means," says Bishop Barron, "is 'super-substantial.' What is he asking people to pray for? Not ordinary bread, but this 'super-substantial' bread—this bread now elevated, transfigured, transformed...*transubstantiated*."



THE RITE OF PEACE

After we have asked for this super-substantial bread, the priest, recalling Christ's words, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you," brings to mind the great "Shalom" with which the



Resurrected Christ greeted the apostles. “Shalom, peace,” marvels Bishop Barron. “It means what God wants for us; it means ‘every good thing.’ It means well-being at every level of one’s life.”

Jesus, murdered, returns to us and offers the word “Shalom.” Bishop Barron suggests this means that Saint Paul was quite right when he said nothing could separate us from the love of God.

What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? As it is written:

“For your sake we are being slain all the day; we are looked upon as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:35-39)

How can St. Paul know this? Because, the God we killed returned to us “in forgiving love.”

This is another instance in which we are hearing more than the priest who utters these words; we are hearing Christ—crucified and risen, made truly pre-sent among us—saying “Peace.” With the peace of Christ bestowed upon us, we turn to our families and neighbors in a gesture of commonality and sharing. As earth has been reconciled to heaven, so are we reconciled to each other.



AGNUS DEI: THE SUPPER OF THE LAMB

Then the assembly prays, or sings, “The Lamb of God”—in Latin, the *Agnus Dei*:

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.
Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.
Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, dona nobis pacem.

In English:

Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.
Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.
Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, grant us peace.



THE BREAKING OF THE BREAD

We kneel and the priest breaks the bread before him and elevating it proclaims, “Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb.”

In response, we make one final request of Christ Jesus: “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.”

All of this talk of the Lamb of God recalls for us the sacrificial dimension of the liturgy that has been rather de-emphasized since the Second Vatican Council in favor of the meal-taking aspect of the Mass.

It is certainly a shared meal. As we said earlier, it is a feast and the Lord of Hosts is the host whose True Body and True Blood appear as bread and wine. “This theme of eating and drinking with the Lord runs right through the Bible,” Bishop Barron says. He is calling to mind God’s instructions to Adam and Eve that they eat; his order that the Hebrews enslaved in Egypt eat a Passover meal; Isaiah’s vision of the heavenly banquet; Jesus sharing meals with priests, Pharisees, and tax collectors; the Last Supper; and the first Masses as they are described in the Acts of the Apostles and in the Epistles.

Still “we’ve underplayed the sacrificial dimension of the Mass, which is so beautiful because remember, God doesn’t need the sacrifice. Therefore, it comes back to us. Now, we are going to eat and drink the Body and Blood of Christ, which we have offered to the Father.”



COMMUNION

With the reception of Holy Communion, with that intimate and prayerful reception of Christ into our own bodies, we have reached the fullest expression of our worship. “We become what we eat,” says Barron. “We become assimilated in the food; we become “Christified as we now partake of the Body and Blood of Jesus.”

Our reception of Communion is followed by a brief silence—time to simply sit and be present with the Presence within us. Then, there is a final prayer acknowledging all that has been done for us and expressing gratitude for the liturgy and the action of God within.

The Mass is ended. Everything has been said; a sacrifice has been made; a meal has been eaten. *It is finished* (John 19:30).



ITE , MISSA EST

“After the words of Consecration, the most sacred words of the Mass are ‘Go, the Mass is ended.’” Bishop Barron shares this thought of Henri de Lubac’s as a way to remind us that having been called “out of the world” and into the Mass, into the company of saints and angels, and having feasted on the Sacred Body and Blood of Christ, it is time to leave that Holy Mountain upon which we have been changed and transfigured, and return to the world.

We must go.

Once Noah’s Ark came upon land, Noah opened the doors and shooed out the animals. He “let the life out” as Bishop Barron puts it. It was necessary to do so in order to renew the face of the earth.

Nourished into new life through Christ Jesus, we too now must go to let the life of Christ within us out in order to renew the face of the earth, one



encounter at a time. “Mission country is right outside these doors,” says Bishop Barron, “and so we bring the fruits of the Mass out—for the transfiguration of the world.”

“*Ite, missa est*,” was how the dismissal was phrased in Latin: *The Mass is ended. Go.*

Ite, missa est. These words help us to grasp the relationship between the Mass just celebrated and the mission of Christians in the world. In antiquity, *missa* simply meant “dismissal.” However, in Christian usage it gradually took on a deeper meaning. The word “dismissal” has come to imply a “mission.” These few words succinctly express the missionary nature of the Church.³

– Pope Benedict XVI

QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Whose words does the priest say during the Consecration and when were they first spoken? Why do those words effect a change in the bread and wine? (Luke 22:19-20; Matt 26:26-28; Isa 55:10-11; CCC 1375, 1412)
2. How is Christ present in the Mass? Where is he most fully and substantially present? (Matt 18:20; CCC 104, 1088, 1374)
3. Explain the importance of *consent* in faith. How is *consent* a sacrifice? Give some examples of *consent* in Scripture. (Sir 15:14-17; CCC 1381, 1730-32)
4. What is the significance of placing prayers for the “Church spread throughout the world,” the Lord’s Prayer, and the handshake of peace *after* the Consecration? (Col 3:12-17; CCC 790, 957, 960, 1368)
5. How does our offering of the Body and Blood of Christ on the altar very quickly come back to us? How is it enlarged and expanded as it returns to us? (John 6:56-58; CCC 1391-1396, 1416)
6. Bishop Barron quotes Henri de Lubac and says that after the words of Consecration, the most sacred words of the Mass are “Go, the Mass is ended.” In a spiritual sense, where do we go at the end of Mass and what are we supposed to do? (John 15:16; Rom 10:14-15; Eph 4:16; CCC 1331-1332)

QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION

1. Do you have any doubts or questions on transubstantiation? If so, write them down and bring them to a priest or your small group for discussion.
2. When you spend an hour at Mass on the “mountain of the Lord,” what particular graces do you enjoy and receive personally? How do these graces arm you for life off the mountain in the “valley of tears”?
3. What is your own unique “mission” in the Body of Christ right now? How does it come to mind at the end of each Mass you attend when you are “sent” to do God’s will?