

## The Real Presence

By Bishop Victor Galeone

In October 1972, a charter flight crossing the Andes from Uruguay to Chile never reached its destination. It was presumed that all 40 passengers aboard had died. But 72 days later, 16 were found still alive to tell how they had survived on the snowcapped slope where the plane had crashed. The world was stunned to learn their story. For food, they had eaten the flesh of the passengers who had died in the crash.

In the sixth chapter of John's gospel, Jesus' listeners are likewise stunned to learn the incredible promise that he makes: One day he will give a special bread for them to eat, which in reality will be his own flesh. Is it any wonder that they object, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

Before examining the Lord's reply, let's place this passage in the context of the sixth chapter of John's gospel with its unique theme linking the three parts.

The chapter begins with Jesus feeding the crowd of 5,000 by multiplying five small loaves of bread. Normally, bread results from a long, tedious process—beginning with spring planting and ending in an oven. But Jesus' simple blessing dispenses with both time and effort. His action is a resounding declaration: "I can suspend the laws of nature for BREAD!"

Later that night, while the disciples are struggling to steer their boat on the storm-swept sea, Jesus approaches them by walking on the surface. How strange! To walk on water smacks of what occurs in pagan myths. What's the point? A very important one, actually. The law of gravity causes weighty objects to seek their rest at the lowest possible level. By preventing his body from sinking, Jesus was implying: "I can suspend the laws of nature for my BODY."

The next day, some of the crowd that had been fed came to Jesus on the other side of the lake in order to make him their "bread king." Jesus used the occasion to promise that one day he would give a special BREAD that in fact would be his own BODY (Jn. 6:51).

In short, when Jesus fed those hungry thousands with only five small loaves, he proved, "I can do what I want with *bread*." By walking on water, he confirmed, "I can do what I want with my body." That afternoon, he drew the logical conclusion: "Someday, I will give a special bread that in reality is my *body*."

When did the Lord fulfill that awesome promise? At the Last Supper, when he blessed the bread and wine: "Take, eat. This is my body...Take, drink. This is the cup of my blood."

For almost 2,000 years the Church has firmly taught that whenever the priest at Mass does what Jesus did at the Last Supper, the bread and wine are changed in *substance* to the Lord's true body and blood, even though the *accidentals* (appearance / properties) of the bread and wine remain. Does this seem incredible? Perhaps the following illustration might shed some light on this marvel.

You grasp an iron bar. How do you know it's iron? From its weight, color, and hardness. But in outer space, the bar becomes weightless; and in a blast furnace it becomes a red-hot liquid. Is it still iron? Of course, since its *substance* remains the same. Only the *accidentals* (weight, color, hardness) have changed.

In the blast furnace of God's love at Mass, the reverse of this analogy takes place. The accidentals of the bread and wine continue on, while the substance\* changes into the Lord's own body and blood. The Church calls this marvelous change transubstantiation.

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\* Here, “substance” does not refer to the chemical substance of iron or bread. Rather, it refers to the basic reality of the thing, i.e., what it is in itself. You might not recognize me if I don a disguise, but I still remain the person I was—my substance remains unchanged.

Ever since that afternoon of the promise at Capernaum, many have refused to take Jesus at his word. Some have reasoned that the Eucharist only *represents* him, just as the Stars and Stripes represent our country. However, someone who burns our country’s flag is charged with desecrating the *flag*, not our country. But in 1st Corinthians, St. Paul states emphatically: “Whoever eats this bread or drinks of the cup of the Lord unworthily will be *guilty* of the *body* and *blood* of the Lord” (11:27, emphasis added).

Besides, if Jesus had meant a mere symbolic eating of his flesh, why did he allow his listeners to take him so literally? Elsewhere in John’s Gospel, whenever his listeners had misunderstood him, the mistake was corrected at once.

For example, in John 2, Jesus told the chief priests - standing in the Temple courtyard - “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” Since the chief priests thought he was referring to the temple of *stone*, the Evangelist added the clarification that Jesus meant the temple of his risen *body*.

In the next chapter, when Nicodemus concluded that Jesus had in mind a *physical* rebirth (“Surely, a grown man cannot enter his mother’s womb a second time to be born again”), Jesus pointed out that he meant a *spiritual* rebirth.

And in the eleventh chapter, when the disciples thought that Jesus wanted to awaken Lazarus from natural slumber, he had to specify that he meant the sleep of *death*.

But when his listeners at Capernaum objected, “How can this man give us his *flesh* to eat?” far from correcting a misunderstanding, Jesus went on to say that they had to drink his blood as well—something utterly abhorrent to a devout Jew!

When they refused to accept this “intolerable teaching,” Jesus allowed them to walk off and leave him. He did not call them back to restate his message in order to make it more palatable: “Wait, you misunderstand me! I’m only referring to a *symbolic* eating of my *flesh*.” No, he turned to the Twelve and asked, “Do you want to leave me, too?” Why was Jesus prepared to risk so much—even the loss of his chosen Twelve? The only possible answer is that the presence he spoke of was not *symbolic* but real.

I fear that this reflection has been more an affair of the head than of the heart. Recent surveys indicate that many Catholics are entertaining serious doubts about the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. So I wanted to use this occasion to reinforce what the Church has taught from the beginning. A serious examination of the sixth chapter of John leaves no room for doubt that Jesus is really, truly, and substantially present in the Eucharist—the Sacrament of His Love.

Love craves union. The greater the love, the more intimate is the union desired. The lover longs to be joined to the beloved—in thought, through letters, phone conversations, physical presence, and ultimately—through the love embrace between husband and wife. So much does Jesus love us that he conceals himself under what looks like bread in order to ravish us in the love embrace of Holy Communion!

In the 11th century, the monk Berengarius was the first to teach that Jesus’ presence in the Eucharist was not real but only symbolic. In his opinion, the bread and wine remained unchanged—mere symbols

of the Lord's death. Ultimately, Berengarius recanted his error in the presence of Pope Gregory VII with the following profession of faith:

"I, Berengarius, believe in my heart and profess with my lips that the bread and wine on the altar, through the mystery of the holy prayer and the words of Our Redeemer, are substantially transformed into the true, life-giving Flesh and Blood of Jesus Christ.

"After the Consecration, they are the true BODY of Christ, which was born of the Virgin, nailed to the cross for the salvation of the world, and is now seated at the right hand of the Father; and the true BLOOD of Christ, which flowed from his side.

"They are present, not merely symbolically or by reason of their effects, but in their true and proper nature and substance...This is my faith, and thus shall I ever teach hereafter..."