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THE BODY OF JESUS Identifying the Eucharistic Presence

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Abstract

The article is prompted by two concerns. On the ecumenical front, the Roman Catholic doctrine concerning the presence of the Risen Lord in the Eucharist prevents us from accepting those who do not share our doctrine from participating fully in our Eucharist. In the pastoral field, many questionable practices result from the Roman doctrine. The article tries to go back to the New Testament and see whether the Roman Catholic doctrine is supported by the text common to all Christians. The author thinks that the New Testament texts do speak of a presence of Jesus with his community. This presence is interpreted in the breaking of bread: the Jesus who is present is the Jesus who broke himself for us and who invites us to break ourselves for others. Only in this way we can make him really present to ourselves and others.

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Some early Fathers have emphasized the relation between the Eucharist and the Church. The Eucharist makes the Church; and the

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Church makes the Eucharist. Both are the body of Christ. The Eucharist is the source of the unity of the Church. Yet, in our quest for Christian unity, many of us are not willing to allow other Christians to share in our celebration of the Eucharist. Our concern for Christian unity must prompt us to re-examine and evaluate our theological position. In this article I limit myself to just one question. How are we to understand the words of Jesus: "This is my body... This is my blood"? The present official position of the Roman Church — the doctrine of transubstantiation — was formulated first by the Fourth Council of Lateran, and then by the Council of Trent. Is what the Councils teach adequately grounded in the earlier sources?

For me as a person who has spent the best years of life training future Roman Catholic pastoral animators, the discussion on the nature of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist is of crucial importance in understanding our service of the Christian community. In my evaluation of Roman Catholic history, the most tragic consequence of the new Roman Catholic approach was that it

led to the further sacerdotalization of priesthood. According to the long-standing consensus, the priest was ordained for the *corpus Christi*, or "body of Christ" (Paul's term for the church)... Once the *corpus Christi* for which the priest was ordained was understood to be Eucharist, *his transition from the minister of the gospel to the cultic servant of the altar was complete.*¹

This was a pastoral disaster. We witnessed very solemn liturgies, but heard horribly poor homilies. The pastors are more and more confined to their little church, where the Eucharist was kept.

Thomas Aquinas says that formal change in beings is within human reach. We can convert milk into curds, grapes into wine. We cannot bring about a change in the order of being and affect the substance. "And this is done by Divine power in this sacrament; for the whole substance of the bread is changed into the whole substance of Christ's body, and the whole substance of the wine into the whole substance of Christ's blood."² Aquinas thinks that the bread becomes only the body of Christ, and the wine only his blood. This is clearly wrong. Trent states the subsequent Roman Catholic position more correctly: "Christ whole and entire is under the species of bread and

¹John Jay Hughes, "Christian Priesthood," in Mircea Eliade, ed.-in-chief, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 16 vols, New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1995, vol. 11, 536a-539b, here 538; emphasis added.

²*Summa Theologica*, III, q. 75, art. 4, resp; <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/4075.htm#article4>, accessed on 28-02-2015.

under any part whatsoever of that species; likewise the whole (Christ) is under the species of wine, and under the parts thereof.”³

1. Conciliar Teaching

The Councils before Vatican II were often in response to some ‘attack’; and were convoked to deal with some doctrinal dispute and/or disciplinary problem. Hence they tended to behave in a very defensive manner, and were guided by narrow concerns, more eager to prove the other wrong, than to find the full truth. In the process, they forbade further theological discussion on a question that needed much more serious study and reflection. We also need to remember that today a growing number of church historians and theologians are questioning the ecumenicity of the councils of the second millennium. These councils do not meet the criteria which would guarantee their ecumenical character.⁴

1.1. The Pre-conciliar Dispute

To understand the conciliar teaching about transubstantiation, we need to go back to Berengar of Tours (999–1088). From about 1047 his ideas about the Eucharist provoked violent reactions from some. He rejected the position of Radbert Paschasius (c. 790–c. 860), who taught that in the Eucharist we receive “the flesh born of Mary... and which is miraculously multiplied by the omnipotence of God at each consecration. At the same time [however] he insisted on the spiritual mode of this Presence, but without defining it.”⁵ Berengar maintains “the fact of the Real Presence, but denies that any material change in the elements is needed to explain it.”⁶ The followers of Berengar were referred to as Berengarians or New Berengarians. “In reaction to the spiritualizing Eucharistic doctrine of Berengar” there was starting “from the twelfth century on an unconscious but fateful reversal of the terms *corpus Christi (verum)* and *corpus Christi mysticum*.”⁷ Earlier

³“Decree Concerning the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist, Ch 3: “On the Excellency of the Most Holy Eucharist over the Rest of the Sacraments”; text as in J. Waterworth, ed. and trans., *The Council of Trent*, London: Dolman, 1848, history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/trpref.html; accessed on 01-12-2009.

⁴See Subhash Anand, *May They All Be One: Towards an Ecumenical Theology of the Church*, Indore: Satprakashan Kendra, 2012, 29-90.

⁵“Paschasius Radbertus, St”, in F.L. Cross & E.A. Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd rev. ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 1235b-1236a, here 1235b.

⁶“Berengar of Tours,” in Cross & E.A. Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 192a.

⁷Hughes, “Christian Priesthood,” 538a.

the Church was referred to as *corpus Christi*, while the Eucharist as "*corpus Christi mysticum* (Latin *mysticum* from Greek *mysterion*, signifying the sacrament)."⁸ Though no major theologian supported Berengar, "we know, however, from ecclesiastical writers of his own and the following period that the influence of his principles was widespread and caused serious disturbance."⁹ Thus *not even in the Western Church as late as the thirteenth century was there unanimity as to how we are to understand the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.*

1.2. The Fourth Lateran Council

The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) was convoked by Innocent III. To understand its theological value, we need to keep in mind that the bishops present were "from throughout the western church... No Greeks were present... The bond with the Greek Church was indeed neglected, and matters became more serious through the actions of Latin bishops living in the east or through the decrees of the council."¹⁰ It is not much connected with the earlier councils. Its "first constitution is regarded as *a new profession of faith*."¹¹ In it we find the Council's teaching on the Eucharist: "His body and blood are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the forms of bread and wine, the bread and wine having been changed in substance, by God's power, into his body and blood."¹² In this council "the word 'transubstantiate' is used officially for the first time."¹³

1.3. The Council of Trent

The Council of Trent discussed the Eucharist in its thirteenth session. The second canon resulting from this session reads:

If anyone saith, that, in the sacred and holy sacrament of the Eucharist, the substance of the bread and wine remains conjointly with the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and denieth that wonderful and singular conversion of the whole substance of the bread into the Body, and of the whole substance of the wine into the Blood — the species Only of the

⁸Hughes, "Christian Priesthood," 538a.

⁹<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02487a.htm>.

¹⁰"The Fourth Lateran Council (1215)," in Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Georgetown University Press, 1990, www.papalencyclicals.net/Councils, accessed on 31-08-2013. The text quoted is from Tanner's introduction.

¹¹"The Fourth Lateran Council (1215)," in Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*; emphasis added.

¹²*Summa Theologica*, III, q. 75, art. 4, rep. to obj. 2.

¹³"Lateran Councils," in Cross & E. A. Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 958b-959a, here 959a.

bread and wine remaining — which conversion indeed the Catholic Church most aptly calls Transubstantiation; let him be anathema.¹⁴

The Council claims that its teaching on transubstantiation has “ever been a firm belief in the Church of God.”¹⁵

The Roman Catholic Church takes Trent very seriously. Hence we need to evaluate Trent; and for this we must keep the following in mind:

*The council was small to begin with, opening with only about 30 bishops... The decrees were signed in 1563 by 255 members, the highest attendance of the whole council, including four papal legates, two cardinals, three patriarchs, twenty-five archbishops, and 168 bishops, two-thirds of whom were Italians. The Italian and Spanish prelates were vastly preponderant in power and numbers. At the passage of the most important decrees, not more than sixty prelates were present.*¹⁶

Given this poor attendance, there are very serious reasons to question its teaching authority in matters doctrinal. “Perhaps the best way forward is... to see it as a general council of the Roman Catholic Church... rather than an ecumenical council binding on all Christians...”¹⁷ Hence it does not have the authority needed to define dogmas.

1.4. The Second Vatican Council

The Second Vatican Council was primarily a pastoral council. Hence it is all the more surprising that in none of its documents does it refer to what we call the static cult of the Eucharist: visits to the Blessed Sacrament, benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, holy hour, perpetual adoration, Eucharistic Processions, etc. All these expressions were so popular in the pre-conciliar period, and have received a further boost from the recent popes. Further, “it is to be remarked in this connection that in more than one hundred eucharistic references spread throughout its sixteen documents, Vatican II never uses the term ‘transubstantiation’ — not once.”¹⁸ In

¹⁴“Decree Concerning the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist, Ch 4, On Transubstantiation,” Waterworth, *The Council of Trent*.

¹⁵“Decree Concerning the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist, Ch 4, On Transubstantiation,” Waterworth, *The Council of Trent*.

¹⁶http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Council_of_Trent#Occasion.2C_sessions.2C_and_attendance, accessed on 10-03-2015; emphasis added.

¹⁷Norman Tanner, “Trent, Council of,” in Adrian Hastings, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 714b-715b, here 715b.

¹⁸Luis M. Bermejo, *Body Broken and Blood Shed*, Anand (Gujarat): Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1986, 225.

this the Council reveals its ecumenical sensitivity, because that term is “consistently rejected by absolutely all other Christians.”¹⁹

2. Biblical Foundation

In our ecumenical journey we begin with the sources that all Christians accept. We need to see what the New Testament itself says about the Last Supper. If every church insists that its point of view is correct, then we will make no ecumenical progress.

2.1. Reconstructing the Parable

Historico-critically speaking we are not sure that at the Last Supper Jesus really said all the words we attribute to him. In fact, there are good reasons to maintain that he did not. This is very clear when we compare the relevant lines from the four reports of the Last Supper we find in the New Testament (1 Cor 11:23-26; Mk 14:22-25; Mt 26:26-29; Lk 22:19-20):²⁰ they are also so significantly different. The writers are reporting not the Last Supper but the way the Eucharist was celebrated in their community. All this seems “to make access to the real event virtually impossible.”²¹ I shall focus only on those aspects that pertain to our question: the nature of the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. We can say with some certainty that the words Jesus used were: “This is my body. This is my blood of the covenant.”

Only in Matthew’s story does Jesus explicitly invite his disciples — they were all Jews — to eat the bread that is his body and drink the wine that is his blood. This Gospel has a very “conservative Jewish background.”²² Matthew is aware of how the pious Jew thinks and feels. He is aware that the Jews were strictly forbidden to consume blood (Lev 3:17; Deut 12:17). Would Matthew, then, present a Jesus who offers his own blood to be consumed by his disciples? I hesitate to say ‘yes’. Suppose the disciples unmistakably heard Jesus offering them his own real blood to be consumed, how would they react? I am inclined to believe that they would be horrified. We do not see this happening. Some Old Testament texts show Israelites eating human flesh as they had nothing else. This was a punishment for their infidelity (Deut 28:53-57; Lev 26:29; Jer 19:9; Ezek 5:10; Lam 4:10).

¹⁹Luis M. Bermejo, *Body Broken and Blood Shed*, 225.

²⁰Biblical texts given are from RSV; the Greek original also was consulted.

²¹Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *Jesus of Nazareth, Part Two: Holy Week*, London\San Francisco: Catholic Truth Society\Ignatius Press, 2011, 103.

²²W.F. Albright & C.S. Mann, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Anchor Bible: 26, New York: Doubleday, 1971, liv.

Hence were Jesus literally offering his flesh to be eaten by his disciples they would be disgusted. If Matthew is the only one to present Jesus as inviting the disciples to eat his body and drink his blood, he does it to show that Jesus is speaking in a symbolic manner. His body and his blood can be symbolically consumed by the disciples. In other words, Matthew's narration rules out transubstantiation.

In the Markan version Jesus says, "This is my blood of the covenant" after the disciples have already drunk from the cup. After the wine has been consumed by them, it ceases to be wine. Hence in the Markan version Jesus did not transubstantiate the wine. If so, then he did not transubstantiate the bread either. He could only tell his disciples of the symbolism of that wine and likewise of that bread. We do this in our own life; e.g., after a fire destroys a souvenir we received on attaining maturity, we say: "My father gifted me that scooter when I completed eighteen."

Paul and Luke have "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." They speak of the covenant in the blood of Jesus. They do not say that the wine itself was the blood. They are not saying that the cup contains the blood of Jesus, but that cup is the new covenant (*to "potērion hē kainē diathēke estin"*). Already in the Old Testament, the Psalmist was familiar with the symbolic character of the cup. He sees the Lord as the cup of the righteous (16:5). His cup overflows with joy (23:5). In gratitude he lifts up the cup of salvation and praises the Lord (116:13). A cup could also be a source of suffering and even death, as when it contains poison. A scorching wind shall be the portion of the cup of the wicked (11:6). The Lord will give a cup full of his wrath to the wicked (75:8). Jesus too had used the symbolism of cup to indicate suffering (Mk 10:38; 14:36). When the Pauline-Lucan Jesus speaks about the cup of the new covenant, he too is employing a symbolic language. It is symbolic of the new covenant sealed in the blood of Jesus.

The disciples of Emmaus recognize when he breaks bread for them (Lk 24:30-31). Luke wants us to understand that "the Christians of his day were able to have the living Lord made known to them in their 'breaking of bread' in a manner that was at least analogous to the experience of the Emmaus disciples."²³ Hence he composed the text in such a way that an alert reader would definitely look back to the Last Supper (22:19). He also wanted the reader to see the experience of the Emmaus disciples as a Eucharistic experience (the breaking of

²³John Nolland, *Luke 18.35-24.53*, WBC, 35C, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993, 1208.

bread, 24:35). Here we are not told that Jesus said "This is my body..." This suggests that in the Lucan community the Eucharist was celebrated, at least by some, without the words of consecration. This community did not see them as having a transubstantiating effect. Hence they were not needed.

If Jesus intended transubstantiation it would have been enough to transubstantiate the bread because his body would not exist without his blood. The use of bread and wine, makes sense if Jesus' action is a symbolic drama. Parallelism and repetition are used to emphasize an idea.²⁴ We have quite a few examples in Matthew's Gospel. Here is an example involving symbolic discourse: "Then two men will be in the field... Two women will be grinding at the mill..." (24:40-41). Sometimes the repetition may involve the duplicating of an event: two feedings of a hungry crowd (14:15-21; 15:32-38); two healings of two blind men who cried to Jesus in identical words (9:27; 20:30). At times a powerful thought is enforced through parallelism: "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away... And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away..." (5:29-30).²⁵ In giving the bread and wine as his body and blood, Jesus is making a symbolic statement, enforced through parallelism.

We also need to go back to see how the disciples understood Jesus when he invited them to eat his body and drink his blood. On the one hand, they were ordinary people. There are many instances when they do not understand what their master says or does (Mk 4:13; 6:51-52; 8:21; 9:9-10). On the other hand, nowhere in the Synoptics do we find Jesus preparing his disciples to eat his body and drink his blood. In John when Jesus tells the crowd that he is the bread of life, the people have their reservations (6:35, 41), and they express their disbelief (vv. 52, 60). Eventually some of them abandoned him (v. 66). Jesus' invitation at the Last Supper to eat his body and drink his blood would make sense to the disciples only if they understood him as speaking in a symbolic manner. They do not show any surprise or express any doubt.

Luke shows the disciples involved in a dispute as to "which of them was to be regarded as the greatest" (22:24). Hence it is difficult

²⁴See <http://www.bible-researcher.com/hebraisms.html>, accessed on 10-03-2015. See also <http://www.opundo.com/figures.php?catstr=Repetition>, accessed on 10-03-2015.

²⁵So too in 13:41-42, Jesus speaks about "all causes of sin and all evildoers" who will be thrown into a bottomless pit of fire where they "will weep and gnash their teeth."

to think that when they heard Jesus asking them to eat and drink his body and blood a few lines earlier (vv. 19-20), they understood him as giving them his real body and his real blood. Second, after rebuking them he gives them an assurance: "You are those who have continued with me in my trials; and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (vv. 28-30). Here Jesus is not speaking about real eating and drinking by the disciples while they are seated on real thrones around a real table.

That in the Last Supper, Jesus was following the Semitic style involving parallelism becomes clear from John's Gospel. When the people find him, Jesus tells them that they are looking for him because they had received from him enough food to eat, and he adds: "Do not labour for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life" (6:27). Then Jesus makes a solemn claim: "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst" (v. 35). He speaks of hunger and thirst, but does not mention eating and drinking. That is taken care of by coming to Jesus and entering into intimacy with him. This one bread can take care not only of our hunger but also of our thirst, because in their symbolic function they both connote a longing for something or someone.

That transubstantiation is not required for Jesus to dwell in us becomes abundantly clear in John's Gospel. John's Jesus does not give his disciples bread and wine as his flesh and blood during the Last Supper. Yet he says to them: "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him..." (15:5). He invites us to abide in his love (v. 9), and allow his word to abide in us (v. 7). He assures us the indwelling of his Spirit (14:17). This is not yet the full truth. Hence Jesus continues: "If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (14:23).

If the early Christians really thought that Jesus had transubstantiated the bread and wine into his body and blood, they would have given this tremendous action of Jesus more space in their writings. Yet apart from the Synoptics and Paul's words to the Corinthians (1 Cor 11:23-26), we do not find any reference to it anywhere else in the New Testament. Even Paul gives us the account almost tangentially: to explain to the Corinthians that what they are doing is not the Lord's

Supper (v. 20). The community was divided; the rich clubbed together and had plenty, while the poor sat apart and managed with the little they had. Paul is furious with the deeply anti-Christian attitude of the rich: they are making a mockery of the Lord's Supper, and therefore there is no Lord's Supper. If Paul had understood the gesture of Jesus as involving transubstantiation, the ritual of the Corinthians would be effective *ex opere operato*. The disposition of the community, important though it is (*ex opere operantis*), would not be essential for the effectiveness of the sacramental action — at least Roman Catholic theologians thought so. If Paul had understood the gesture of Jesus as involving transubstantiation, he would have told the Corinthians "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's presence." He does not say this but "as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26). He wants to emphasize not the presence of Jesus, but his being broken for others!

Some readers may insist that Paul had transubstantiation in mind when he wrote: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:16-17). If Paul believed that the bread literally became the body of Christ, he would have said "Because there is one body, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one body." That would sound more coherent literally and logically: because we eat one body, we become one body. It would also cohere better with the previous line where he speaks of "a participation in the body of Christ."

We need to read the question "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?" in the light of the line that follows: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (v. 17). Paul does not say "for we all partake of the one bread and the one cup." He need not, because, as I explained, the action of Jesus taking bread and wine is an instance of Semitic parallelism. We, who share in the one Eucharist of Jesus, become his one body, the Church. Hence when the rich Corinthians ignore their poorer brethren while celebrating the Lord's Supper, they are desecrating the body of Christ, his Church. This explains the strong reprimand Paul gives to the Corinthians: "When you meet together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry

and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?" (11:20-22).

The Corinthians are not worthy to celebrate the Lord's Supper. Hence what they do is not what Jesus did. Paul emphasizes the need of an appropriate disposition to participate in the Eucharist: "Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself" (1 Cor 11:28-29). Here Paul need not say "without discerning the body and the blood" precisely because he is speaking of the Church, the body of Jesus, the assembly gathered for Lord's Supper. "People who do not recognize the community as the body of the Lord but dare to eat the bread and drink the cup bring judgement upon themselves."²⁶

In the discourse on the bread of life, Jesus says: "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst" (Jn 6:35). Here after claiming to be the bread, Jesus speaks not of eating and drinking and thereby satisfying our hunger and quenching our thirst, but of coming to and believing in him. Those who come to Jesus have life (5:40). Later on Jesus says: "I am the living bread" (v. 51). The living bread is not just his body, but his whole person. The Jews think that Jesus is talking realistically: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (v. 52). Jesus talks in their terms, but with a deeper meaning: "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 (vv. 53-56). In real life, the food that I eat disappears, and becomes part of me. It, so to say, abides in me. Here Jesus is speaking of reciprocal presence: he abides in us and we in him. But he makes it clear: this reciprocal presence is not equal. Our abiding in him is much more important. The branch can abide in the vine (15:4-7), but not the other way round. Hence he is not speaking of literal eating and drinking, but of entering into intimacy with him. "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" (6:60).

Already earlier some of the Jews had started questioning in their hearts the claim of Jesus. They "murmured at him, because he said, "I am the bread which came down from heaven" (v. 41). Some, then, abandon Jesus not because he offered them his real body to eat and his real blood to drink, but because he identified himself with divine

²⁶Raymond F. Collins, *First Corinthians*, Sacra Pagina Series: 7, Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1999, 439.

Wisdom. They were right. She calls us: "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed" (Pro 9:5).²⁷ "Those who eat me will hunger for more, and those who drink me will thirst for more" (Sir 24:21). Jesus is both: the divine Wisdom and the bread come down from heaven. Jesus also announces the eschatological banquet (Is 25:6-8). Jesus is our nourishment precisely because he is our wisdom (Mt 4:4). In fact "the sapiential theme is primary in the discourse proper (vs. 35-50)."²⁸ This again confirms the interpretation that Jesus is not inviting us to eat his body and drink his blood literally but metaphorically: commune with him and receive wisdom from him.

2.2. Reiterating the Parable

John has five chapters dealing with all that transpired during the Last Supper (13-17). Yet he does not give us an account of what is known as the institution of the Eucharist. Many different reasons have been offered to explain this lacuna. I suggest three possible explanations. First, the Synoptics give the impression that the Last Supper was a Passover celebration (*pascha*, Mt 26:17-18; Mk 14:12-14, 16; Lk 22:8, 13, 15). John describes the Passover as a feast of the Jews (2:13; 6:4; 11:55). He may not want to present Jesus the Teacher bidding farewell to his disciples with the celebration of the Jewish Passover. He even wants to make sure that the Last Supper was not at the time the Jews celebrated their Passover. He begins his account with these words: "Now before the feast of the Passover..." (13:1).

Second, John's Gospel is the last text to give us a report of the Last Supper. He might have been aware of how by the time he wrote his Gospel some corruption had already crept in and vitiated the celebration of the Lord's Supper, as was the case at Corinth. There are good reasons to think that John had read the Gospel of Luke and the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians, or at least one of them.²⁹ In these two texts the ritual of the Lord's Supper appears as the memorial of Jesus. John was not comfortable with this. He wanted to remind his readers of the real meaning of the Lord's Supper. Third, there are some "Johannine scholars who see no reference to the sacraments in John. For some of these the original Gospel was anti-

²⁷See also Sir 15:3; Is 55:1-3.

²⁸Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, Anchor Bible 29A, New York: Doubleday, 1970, 273.

²⁹In his very letter Paul says: "I adjure you by the Lord that this letter be read to all the brethren" (1 Thes 5:27). The author of the Second Letter of Peter too was familiar with the letters of Paul (3:16). See also 2 Cor 10:10; Col 4:16.

sacramental.”³⁰ John omits the baptism of Jesus by John, even though it is one of the most certain facts of the life of Jesus. John differentiates between the baptism with water given by him, and the baptism with the Spirit to be given by Jesus (1:33). The person of Jesus will replace the temple in Jerusalem (2:19-22). His person is Bethel, the new house of God (1:51).³¹ He tells the Samaritan that neither the Jewish nor the Samaritan temple has any meaning any longer because “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (4:24). John first reports that Jesus and his disciples were baptizing (3:22). But he almost immediately qualifies his report: “although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples” (4:2). Hence I am inclined to believe that John did not want Jesus to be seen as someone who instituted another ritual. In that sense there is a certain anti-sacramental or anti-ritual current in the Johannine narrative. He is concerned more about the symbolic content of what Jesus does.

John did not see Jesus’ last meal as involving an unheard of miracle: transubstantiation. Had he believed that, he would surely report it. Some scholars consider the washing of the feet (13:1-17) as the Johannine version of the institution narrative found in the Synoptics.³² John gives us a hint as to why he did that. He begins the story with those beautiful words: “Having loved his own who were in the world, he [Jesus] loved them to the end” (v. 1). Jesus sacramentalizes his love unto the end for his disciples by washing their feet. When Peter tries to prevent his teacher from washing his feet, Jesus tells him: “If I do not wash you, you have no part in me” (v. 8). By washing our feet he gives us a share in his life; he calls us to belong to him in love. For that to happen we need to come to Jesus, see him and abide with (1:39). When we do that then we go out and call others to come and see (v. 46), to share in our life-giving experience.

2.3. Reinterpreting the Parable

In interpreting what Jesus said and did we need to “focus on the impact of Jesus on his nearest followers. We can best appreciate Jesus by studying the memory he left among his followers.”³³ If Jesus really

³⁰Brown, *The Gospel according to St. John*, cxi.

³¹Here the Evangelist is echoing Jacob’s dream (Gen 28:12). When Jacob wakes up he anoints the stone he had used as a pillow, and names the place Bethel (v. 19).

³²See Brown, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 559.

³³José Antonio Pagola, *Jesus: An Historical Approximation*, tr. Margaret Wilde, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2013, 21. Pagola is basing himself on James D.G. Dunn, *A New Perspective on Jesus*, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic 2005.

transubstantiated the bread and wine into his body and blood, then he worked a miracle, revealing his divine power. Like the multiplication of bread, this too would be an instance of 'nature miracles', nay the greatest among them. But today not only for critical thinkers, "but even for some more conservative scholars the nature miracles are not genuine historical tradition about Jesus but reflect later theological interpretation by the early community and the evangelists."³⁴

Nowhere else in the Gospels we see Jesus working a miracle that is not a response to human plea or at least to human suffering. When he does work a miracle, the people around him express their awe and admiration, and they begin to wonder as to who he could be (Mk 1:27; 2:12; 4:41; 5:52; etc.). In the Last Supper the words of Jesus, "This is my body. This is my blood" evoke no reaction at all from his disciples. Peter was not impressed: he denied Jesus. Judas was not moved: he betrayed him. The others were untouched. They were discussing who was the greatest among them (Lk 22:19-24). Either Jesus did not do what we claim, or he has failed miserably to communicate his intention. If so, how do we get to know what he intended?

There are two sentences in Mark that are grammatically identical: "Whoever does the will of God [he] is ('*estin*') my brother, and sister, and mother" (3:35); and "This is ('*estin*') my body (14:22). In the first sentence Jesus is not transubstantiating his faithful disciples into his real mother, brothers and sisters, but affirming an intimate spiritual relation between him and his disciples. He is talking in a symbolic manner. So too in 14:22 Jesus is engaging in symbolic discourse. There is neither need nor reason to bring in the idea of transubstantiation. How then are we to understand what Jesus said and did at the Last Supper?

Jesus invites us to eat his body. The body is the real symbol of the person.³⁵ Religious discourse is metaphorical and symbolic. A symbol points to and makes us aware of some reality other than what we perceive. Something is a mere symbol when it does only this. For instance, a young man offering a rose flower to his beloved and saying: "I give you my heart." His heart remains where it is. He is assuring the

³⁴Donald Senior, "The Miracles of Jesus," in Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer & Roland E. Murphy, ed., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2005, 1369-1373, here 1370b.

³⁵See Subhash Anand, "Human Sexuality: Some Theological Reflections," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 47 (1983) 77-85.

young lady his love. In religious communities, some symbols are considered sacraments or effective symbols. They not only evoke in our minds some spiritual experience, but in some way actualize that experience, make it real. Baptism with water not only evokes the idea of purification, but actually brings about spiritual purification. Third, we have a real symbol: it not only evokes the awareness of an otherwise unseen reality, but is also in some way that reality itself. The person is not just the body; she is much more, but her body is herself. Hence when Jesus invites us to eat his body, he is inviting us to enter into communion with his person, so that he can abide in us and we in him (Jn 6:56). The Israelites were told not to consume blood in any way as it symbolizes life (Lev 3:17; Deut 12:16, 23; 15:23). By inviting us to drink his blood, Jesus is asking us to share his life.

3. Theological Discernment

Christian life and practice is guided by Scripture and the tradition of the community. This does not dispense us from the difficult task of theological reflection. This becomes all the more urgent both within the ecumenical frame.

3.1. Evoking the Divine Presence

Prophetic persons are concerned about the quality of human life. They are aware of the decadence that has set in even in the religious life of their people.³⁶ They try to generate in their audience attitudes that will lead to right action, action that will promote the wellbeing of all humans. They are aware that “deeply held symbols, of which we are not necessarily [fully] aware, structure our thoughts, feelings, attitudes and actions.”³⁷ Hence they use symbols and symbolic narratives to convey their concern.

Mark (1:15) and Matthew (4:17) show Jesus beginning his ministry with the announcement of the imminence of God’s kingdom. The Lucan Jesus wants us to celebrate a jubilee (4:18-19). The Johannine Jesus begins by calling people to be his disciples (1:39), who begin to believe in him by seeing him supply an abundant quantity of excellent wine for the guests invited to a wedding (2:11).

³⁶See Subhash Anand, “If Salt Has Lost Its Taste: Organized Religion as a Source of Corruption” Part 1, *Third Millennium* 15, 3 (July-September 2012) 33-50; Part 2: 15, 4 (October-December 2012) 5-29.

³⁷D. Glouberman, *Life Choices, Life Changes: The Art of Developing Personal Vision through Imagework*, San Francisco, Cal.: Thorsons–Harper Collins, 1995, 2.

The kingdom of God, jubilee, wedding feast — these are all symbols, pointing to a mystery that cannot be fully articulated because that mystery involves the presence of God in our lives. We dimly understand that mystery by actualizing it in our lives. Jesus constantly uses images to explain the change he wants to happen in us, and through us around us. In telling us that we are the salt and the leaven (Mt 5:13-14; 13:33), he is not transubstantiating us. He wants us to affect our community and society the way salt and leaven influence their environment. I do not know of any instance when Jesus changed the metaphysical character of something by his word. Some of my readers may draw my attention to the wedding feast at Cana (Jn 2:1-11). They will be shocked to know that some commentators see it “as a purely theological creation.”³⁸

3.2. Recognizing the Divine Presence

The presence of Jesus through the Eucharist is the presence of the Risen Lord. Only this presence can be an abiding presence. Only this presence can be our life, our joy and our peace. The disciples from Emmaus are discouraged and they want to get back to their village and continue their life. It was late in the evening, and they discourage Jesus from continuing his journey. When they recognize the Risen Lord, they are filled with joy and courage. Dark as it is, they return to Jerusalem to share the Good News with the others. The other disciples are all huddled together in a room, with all the doors and windows closed for fear of the Jews. The Risen Lord walks in and gives them his peace. Eventually he gathers them together and sends them on a mission, assuring them of his presence wherever they go (Mt 28:20). Before his resurrection the presence of Jesus was limited by time and space. The Risen Lord is not bound by space and time. The sealed tomb could not hold him back (Mt 27:65). The closed doors could not keep him out (Jn 20:19). Strictly speaking, the Risen Lord does not come in and go out. He is there where his disciples are.

In the accounts of the post-Easter apparitions there are two features that strike me. When Mary of Magdala goes to the tomb of Jesus, she recognizes him only when he calls her by her name (Jn 20:15-16). The disciples who are fishing spot Jesus on the shore, but do not recognize him. The beloved disciple does so only after witnessing the miraculous catch of fish (Jn 21:4-7). The disciples from Emmaus hear Jesus explaining the scriptures to them with such great unction that they feel their hearts burning. Yet they do not recognize Jesus. The

³⁸Brown, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 101.

Risen Lord is with us. His presence is his grace. It is not like the presence of the sun that keeps on shining even when it is night in our part of the world. It is somewhat like the even-watchful presence of an anxious mother by the bedside of her sick child. As and when the child opens her eyes, she finds her mother gazing at her with love. The presence of the Risen Lord is much more: it is a gift of love and grace. The assurance of his presence to his Church could only be given by the Risen Lord. It cannot go back to the pre-Easter Jesus. Hence, *the Eucharist as we understand it today could not have been instituted at the Last Supper.*

The second feature is that some of these apparitions are directly or indirectly connected with a meal, or with some eating (Mk 16:14; Lk 24:31, 41-43; Jn 21:12). The accounts of the Last Supper were composed after the disciples experienced the Risen Lord. After his tragic death some of them would talk about him. They would do this particularly while they were together for a meal, recollecting his last meal with them. Then something happened. They felt that the crucified Jesus was alive and he was with them. Then the Last Supper acquired a deeper meaning. The invitation of Jesus to eat his body and drink his blood was not merely an invitation to carry his memory with them after his death and allow that memory to inspire them. That invitation now is seen as the assurance of his life-giving presence with them. Given their roots in the Old Testament, the first disciples believed that the presence of the Risen Lord with them was essential for their mission (Mk 3:14).

3.3. Sacramentalizing the Divine Presence

When God calls Moses to bring his people out of their bondage, he wants to know what to tell them if they question him about his name. God orders Moses to tell the Israelites: "I AM has sent me to you" (Ex 3:13-14). God is assuring Moses of his "active being or Presence."³⁹ He will accompany Moses and his people all through their life. Moses will remind him of this after the Israelites have worshipped the golden calf. He knows that he is dealing with a very difficult people and seeks divine assurance. God tells him: "My presence will go with you..." Moses makes his stand clear: "If thy presence will not go with me, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favour in thy sight, I and thy people? Is it not in thy going with us, so that we are distinct, I and thy people, from all other

³⁹John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Bible Commentary: 3, Nelson Reference & Electronic, 3, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987, 39.

people that are upon the face of the earth?" (33:14-16). Israel has a unique identity: God is with them.

The assurance given by God finds its most perfect expression in the event of the Incarnation of God's Word. In the Old Testament the Ark of the Covenant and the Temple in Jerusalem symbolized God's presence with his people. Now God's presence need not be mediated by things. Now persons become the primary and the most effective sacraments of God's real presence. Matthew wants to assure his Jewish Christians that in Jesus, God's presence with us attains its greatest possible intensity. He begins his story by telling us that Jesus is "God with us" (*emmanouēl*, 1:23). This presence is real in two ways. First it is not merely a representation or reminder of an otherwise absent reality: it invites us to love as God loves, and thereby become authentic persons. Second, it is a powerful presence: it empowers us to grow as persons. The very last line of Matthew's Gospel is the assurance that Jesus will be with us as long as we are on his mission (28:20).

We need to experience that presence of the Risen Lord today. In the Gospels we never find Jesus speaking about his presence in relation with some material symbol. His presence is mediated through persons. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt 18:20). This is the mystery of the Church. It is this coming together in the name of Jesus that is the constitutive element of the Eucharistic assembly, the *ekklēsia*. It was this coming together in the name of Jesus that was missing at Corinth. The people there simply could not come together in his name because they refused to come together with the poor. The world will continue to experience the presence of the Risen Lord as long as people come together in his name, whatever be their name. For this we need to be decent humans, journeying in *love beyond all boundaries*. This will unite all Christians, because we all profess to God's pilgrim people. Crossing boundaries in order to reach others is the most profound way of being human. This and this alone, is *the one thing that is really necessary* (Lk 10:42).