



Eucharist, God Among Us

by Fr. Sergius Wroblewski, OFM

Pope Benedict XVI and the Eucharist

The Eucharist holds a special place in the Holy Father's theology. Pope Benedict's ecclesiology especially is eucharistic and in his book on the Eucharist, *Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, God Is near Us; the Eucharist, the Heart of Life*, Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 2003, the Holy Father lays the ground work for the eucharistic presence in the very first chapter. This article is a paraphrase of his teaching in chapters one and five.

As human beings, we dread being alone because we were made for relationships, for being with others, with human beings and with the Triune God. Perhaps that is why cell phones are so popular; they help us keep in touch all day long. Moreover, what we desire, consciously or unconsciously, above all is fellowship with God.

Before the fall of Adam and Eve, these two were privileged to enjoy intimate fellowship and communion with God. We can infer that from Gen 3:8 that God daily walked in the garden in the cool of the day, and that Adam and Eve enjoyed this time with him. But when they chose to trust the devil instead of God and to disobey the command of God, they sinned. Sin's consequence was separation from God, the rupture of fellowship with him.

The rest of the Bible is the story of how God fulfilled his promise of salvation so that sinful human beings could once again draw near to a Holy God. That happened when God sent his Son to become as men are. "He emptied himself... coming in human

likeness" (Phil 2:7). Through the Incarnation, the Word was brought near to us. "By the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary and became man" (Creed). From that moment on, God is near us. Hence, he was given the name Emmanuel which means "God with us."

The biblical foundation for this teaching that the Incarnation is God's nearness is to be found in three scriptural texts:

1. Lk 1:28-36

The archangel Gabriel told Mary that the Child who was being born would be called Son of the Most High, Son of God. The Holy Spirit as the power of the Most High would bring about the conception in a mysterious way. Luke uses the word "overshadow" to describe it. That word is an allusion to the Holy Cloud that rested over the "Tent of Meeting" to show God's presence and nearness. Mary's "yes" (fiat) offered her womb as a dwelling place for God in the world.

2. Mt 1:18-25

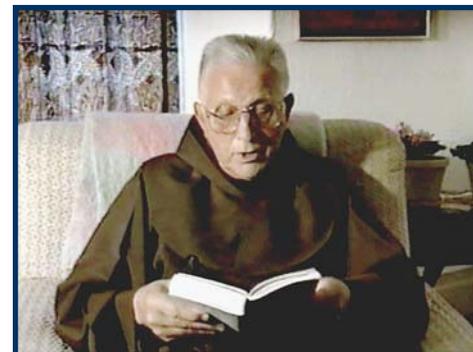
What stands out in Matthew's infancy narrative is the annunciation to Joseph. Matthew sets the figure of Joseph in the forefront in

his infancy narrative. Joseph comes at the conclusion of the Davidic genealogy, "Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary" (Mt 1:16). Joseph upheld the Davidic dynasty and transformed it into the Kingdom of God in the whole world. The figure of Mary appears alongside that of Joseph.

Matthew applied the prophecy about the Virgin Birth to Mary. "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son and shall call his name Emmanuel" (Mt 1:23) which means, "God with us." But this nearness of God through the Incarnation had nothing to do with Joseph whose prerogative was to protect the Mother and Child. Everything in this narrative is about Christ: Joseph is the child's father according to the Law; and Mary is his Mother and embodies the hope of humankind.

3. Jn 1:13ff

This text is "the Word became flesh." We have become so accustomed to this statement so that we're no longer amazed by this immense reality, the union of divinity and humanity which makes God near. John used the expression, "pitching a tent," which is an allusion to the Tent



Fr. Sergius Wroblewski, OFM: Snapshots taken from a Catholic series, produced in DVD, that had been presented on Catholic television in Johannesburg, South Africa, where Father Sergius was a missionary for many years.

of Meeting where Moses saw God “face to face.” The “yes” of Mary opened for the Word, the Second Person, the place where he could “pitch his Tent.”

All these things happened at Nazareth, Bethlehem and Jerusalem; hence, they are regarded as sacred places where one can see the footprints of the Redeemer and where the Incarnation touched us directly. They lay the foundation for God’s nearness, that closeness to us which will find its grandest expression in the Eucharist.

The Presence of the Lord in the Eucharist

In his fifth chapter, Pope Benedict gave his observations about the Real Presence in the Eucharist. His main teaching is that the Glorified Christ is present in the Eucharist; and that he has a Body that is different, described briefly in 1 Cor 15:42-44.

Explaining the Real Presence has always been difficult. Nowadays, they raise three questions about the Eucharist: **1. Does the Bible say anything about it; perhaps it was misunderstood? 2. Is it truly possible for a body to share itself out into all places and at all times? 3. Hasn’t modern science, with its view on “substance” and material being, rendered obsolete the Church’s doctrine about the Eucharist?**

The Bible does speak of the Real Presence in John’s Gospel 6:33,35. Jesus said: “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and

drink his blood you have no life in you... My flesh is food indeed.” The Jewish listeners dismissed his claim as absurd. And Jesus did not explain himself by saying, “Do not be disturbed; this is metaphorical language.” Instead, refusing to tone it down, he said with emphasis, “My flesh is food indeed.” This heavenly Bread had to be literally, physically eaten.

The second question is about the possibility for a body to share itself

out: that is, to be always there in many hosts. First of all, we have to understand that this happens in the sphere of the Resurrection, a sphere in which we do not live nor have any experience of.

The Resurrection appearances show Jesus to have a body with entirely different qualities (Cf Lk 24:36-42). Moreover, in the language of the Bible, the word “body”—“This is my Body”—does not mean just body “in contradistinction to the spirit.” Body in the language of the Bible denotes “the whole person in whom body and spirit are indivisibly one.”

“This is my Body” therefore, means “This is my whole person existing in bodily form.” Its nature is described in the words “which is given up for you;” it is a self-giving Person and he can be shared out. Our body is a body that separates us from others. But the Risen Body is not limiting; its capacity for communion remains.

In Holy Communion we do not receive “a piece of the body, a thing, but him, the risen One himself. We receive a Person, the

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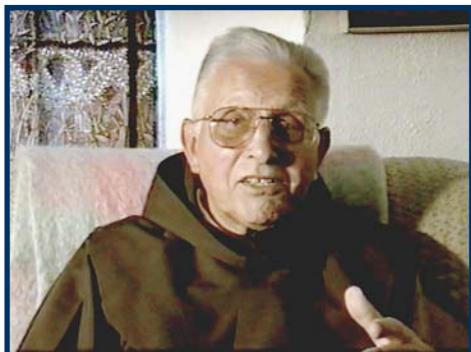
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Lord Jesus Christ, both God and Man. And that calls for adoration. We are not on the same footing; he is the wholly Other. Saint Augustine said to First Communicants, “No one can receive Communion without first adoring.” When the monks of Cluny (c. 1000 AD) went to receive Communion, they took their shoes off; they knew the burning bush was there.

The third question raises the issue of the Real Presence of Christ and asks if this doctrine has not been rendered obsolete since “transubstantiation” comes from primitive science. In the 12th century the mystery of the Eucharist was being torn apart by two groups.

There were those who claimed Jesus was there bodily and that in the Eucharist we chew on the flesh of the Lord like cannibals. And there were those who argued that since Christ cannot be there in an earthly body, the Eucharist is simply symbolic. The Holy Father pointed out that Christ is not in the realm of what can be mea-



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sured and quantified. "Christ is there with his true Being (the Second Person in a glorified Body) and that is the "substance."

He made two observations about this "substance." First, the Body of Christ is not added to the bread, as if they could exist as two substances in the same place side by side. The Risen Lord takes possession of the bread and wine; he lifts them up out of the setting of their normal existence into a new order.

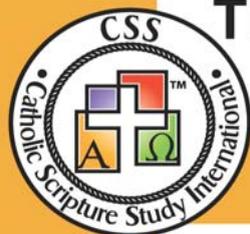
The other observation has to do with "transignification." It is said that the bread does not change, but its use. The Church rejects this

transignification; she insists on "the change of substance." It is not the different use of the bread and wine that changes but through the faithful prayer of the Church, the Lord himself does a new thing; and his presence remains and we adore the Lord in the Bread and the Wine.

This teaching about the Eucharist justifies Eucharistic Adoration. Some object that the Eucharist is not to be gazed at but to be eaten. In other words, it is to be eaten, not adored. But when we receive Christ, that is not like eating a slice of bread. The Bread

is consumed in seconds, but then we adore because the Risen One remains in us as long as the species endure.

In that way the reception of Holy Communion stretches out beyond the time of celebration of the Mass. That is why the practice in the Church for roughly a thousand years has been to install a tabernacle to house the consecrated Bread with the Risen one and to place near it a vigil light to indicate that the Lord is always there to be adored. For as Pope Benedict XVI states, "Without adoration, there is no transformation of the world." †



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