

Corpus Christi “Radbertus, Ratramnus and Mom”

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After attending Priest Days this past week and having the privilege to attend the ordination of new priests for our Archdiocese at our Cathedral this weekend, celebrating the mystery of the Eucharist on Corpus Christi comes at a good time for me. The mystery of God feeding his people bread in their time of hunger has a long history as we can see in our first reading from Genesis. The priest/king Melchizedek brought Abraham’s tribe bread and wine in their time of need. In the book of Exodus, God fed Moses’ people bread as they traveled through the desert to the Promised Land. When Elijah was at his wits end in the Book of Kings, God sent an angel to give him bread to strengthen him for the journey ahead. Our Gospel reading this weekend recounts the multiplication of the loaves. Again, we find the people unable to feed themselves and so Jesus continues the tradition of God feeding his people, only this time with a radical new understanding. This passage from the Gospel of John begins the Bread of Life discourse where Jesus controversially reveals that he is the bread that has come down from heaven. As the story continues in this chapter, Jesus even says that if we are to have life within us, we are to eat his flesh and drink his blood.

You see, my friends, our faith that Jesus Christ is really and truly present in the Eucharist body, blood, soul and divinity should come to no surprise because of the number of instances in the New Testament that Jesus simply says that this is so. The Last Supper as remembered by Mathew, Mark, Luke and our second reading from First Corinthians today all quote Jesus himself at the Last Supper referring to the bread and wine that he gives to his disciples as his actual body and blood. We also have Early Church writings in the years soon after the texts of the New Testament were written, such as the Didiche and the Apologies of St. Justin Martyr that speak to the Early Church’s belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. In fact, there are even records of tabernacles being established in the Early Church to reverently house the Eucharist after Mass for the purpose of worship and bringing the sacrament to the infirm.

Students of history can see clearly that the belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist was simply an accepted tenant of faith for a number of centuries...until a controversy erupted in the 9th century that shifted the conversation in a new way. What happened in the 9th century? Holy Roman Emperor Charles the Bald (What a great name!) had an inquisitive mind and was curious as to whether or not the Eucharist we consume at Mass was also the historical body of the Lord born of the Virgin. There were two monks who rose to the challenge and articulated two different views of the Eucharist for the King to consider, and this caused quite a stir. The monks names were (get ready for it) Radbertus and Ratramnus (Honestly, you just can’t make this stuff up). The first monk Radbertus argued that indeed what we consumed at Mass was miraculously the same historical body of Jesus as was born of the Virgin. The real presence remains an objective fact for him regardless of the faith of the recipient. His opponent the monk Ratramnus said this was nonsense as what we taste and see after the consecration is clearly still bread and wine. Ratramnus taught that Christ was truly present spiritually because in his sacramental theology a symbol points to something and makes it real for us who receive in faith.

Like all great controversies in the Catholic Church, this theological knot took a couple centuries to untie because both positions had their benefits and their problems. Radbertus defended the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, which is a good thing, however his position as articulated can lead to a belief if you took the consecrated host and placed this under a microscope you should be able to find the historic cells of Jesus' body in there somewhere, a rather unpleasant idea for those who have an aversion to cannibalism. Ratramnus' position escapes this problem by focusing on the spiritual presence of the historical Jesus utilizing the idea of sacrament being a sign that makes real that which it points to, however, his position as articulated can lead to a belief in Christ's real presence in the Eucharist as simply a metaphor, a position clearly not supported by the Bread of Life discourse of John chapter 6 where Jesus quite literally commands us to eat his flesh and drink his blood. What to do?

It was only until Aristotle was rediscovered and utilized in an interesting way by scholastic theologians of the 11th century that the Church could confidently articulate the "how" of the real presence of Jesus in the Holy Eucharist. You see, with Aristotle everyday things we encounter, like bread, have (dramatic pause) substance and accidents. Let's define these terms here. Aristotle didn't mean the term accidents to refer to spilling a glass of wine or a car crash. For Aristotle, the accidents of a thing are what we can determine with our human senses, the color, shape, touch, taste, etc. Substance is what makes a thing what it is. For example, I could place before you a table made of stone, a table made of gold, and a table made of wood. All three tables would have different accidents, they are made of different materials, they might have different shapes, sizes, heights, colors, etc. Even though they look completely different in their accidents, what we perceive with our senses, we nevertheless understand them all as having the same "whatness", namely, they are all tables. This "whatness" is what Aristotle means by the substance of a thing. Same thing goes with bread. You can walk up and down the bread aisle at Safeway and discover all kinds of items that we identify as bread, (the substance of the thing), however everything there that we identify as having the substance of bread nevertheless look very different from each other, with all kinds of different shapes, sizes, colors, ingredients, etc., (those are the accidents).

Now Scholastic theologians were delighted to discover that they could take Aristotle's insight and apply it to the Eucharist in such a way as to avoid the problems of Radbertus and Ratramnus. Before the consecration, on the altar are gifts of bread and wine in their substance and accidents. After the prayer of consecration of an ordained priest who is commissioned by Christ to "do this in remembrance of me", something happens that is miraculous. The substance of the bread and wine disappear without destroying the accidents. What emerges are truly the substance of the body and blood of Christ while retaining the accidents of bread and wine.

The Scholastics called this miracle (drum roll please) transubstantiation. Get it? The doctrine of transubstantiation is able to maintain a logical understanding of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist without resorting to cannibalism on one extreme or resorting to mere symbolism on the other. The second person of the Holy Trinity, Jesus Christ, is perfectly capable of really and truly being present to us in the appearance of bread and wine. If God can become truly present to us in the form of a baby on the lap of the Virgin Mary, God can most certainly do this for us. This will happen again for us today here at Mass.

You know, what amazes me, is that it took the Church eight centuries before she became concerned with the question of “how” the real presence of Jesus comes about in the Eucharist. Don’t get me wrong. The question of “how” is important, but the question of “how” is far less important than the question of “why”. The question of “why” was more important to the Early Christians and I think it should be more important to us today. This is why I sometimes like to think of a particular person in my life as a profoundly more influential theologian than Radbertus, Ratramnus and all the scholastics combined. This person is my mother. My mother sometimes would remind me growing up to be careful what I eat because, you are what you eat. How many of you had mothers who said this to you? Perhaps we are related.

Ask yourself: Why does Jesus give us himself to us, all of himself to us, body, blood soul and divinity? Jesus gives himself to us in the Eucharist because, mom is right, we are what we eat. This means when we come forward for communion, we are not to think we are receiving a dried out piece of bread and sip of mass produced wine that is somehow a mere symbol of Jesus. When we come forward for communion, we are not receiving a thing into our body but rather a Person. The Eucharist is a Person.

When we receive communion we are receiving Jesus himself into our souls as food for the journey. My friends, there comes a time in life when we realize that we just can’t feed ourselves. We need God to feed us. We really do. And when Jesus feeds us his very self in the Holy Eucharist, we are invited to prove mom correct and become what we eat. Become Jesus to your family members, become Jesus to your co-workers, become Jesus to your neighbors, and become Jesus to the person you see in the mirror each morning. Yeah, that person too. Become the Body of Christ! Get it? Christians, when it comes to the Church’s understanding of the Holy Eucharist, the “how” has an importance place in our tradition. On the feast of Corpus Christi, however, we must not lose sight as to the question “why”. When Jesus unites his divinity to our humanity, our humanity becomes united to his divinity, and with this comes our hope for eternal salvation.