

## “THE SOURCE AND SUMMIT”: EUCHARISTIC CHALLENGES TO BELIEF

When my beloved Twins are in a slump, I typically deal with it by avoiding reading the newspaper. Just let it go until things turn around. After seeing the headline about the latest Pew Research Study on Catholics’ belief in the Real Presence, I chose not to click on the article for several days. Who wants to read about bad news? By the same token, especially as a pastor in the Church, shielding oneself from reality is never wise. Knowing that the research firm is reputable, I delved a bit deeper into the results. Catholic teaching from Vatican II stipulates that the Holy Eucharist is “the source and summit of the Christian life.” (*Lumen Gentium*, paragraph #11). It is neither an add-on, nor an ancillary aspect of our faith. Martyrs have died while protecting the integrity of the Holy Eucharist, while others have entered burning churches at great personal danger (e.g. Notre Dame de Paris in April) in order to retrieve hosts from the tabernacle. The other sacraments are oriented towards the Eucharist.

*Ergo noli quaerere intelligere ut credas, sed crede ut intelligas.* “Therefore, do not seek to understand in order to believe, but believe that you may understand.” (Augustine, tractate XXIX on John 7:14-18, §6) Augustine precedes that sentence noting that understanding is the reward (fruit) of faith. That is, **faith brings about** a greater understanding. Bl. John Henry Newman (soon to be St. Newman!) wrote about the challenges of belief in his monumental autobiography detailing his conversion. He wrote: “People say that the doctrine of Transubstantiation is difficult to believe; I did not believe the doctrine till I was a Catholic. I had no difficulty in believing it, as soon as I believed that the Catholic Roman Church was the oracle of God, and that she had declared this doctrine to be part of the original revelation. It is difficult, impossible, to imagine, I grant; but how is it difficult to believe?” (*Apologia pro Vita Sua*, chapter 5.)

Last week, I gave an impromptu tour to three Italian couples from Modena. I encountered them on the sidewalk and related that we had closed an hour ago. They were leaving town the next day—their faces said it all. I replied, “Va bene—cinque minuti”—“Okay—five-minute tour!” Immediately upon entering the Nave, one lady marveled at how the baldacchino reminded her of St. Peter’s in Rome. **Esatto!** Precisely. Why would a Church install a beautiful baldacchino over the tabernacle? They did so in order to highlight the most important elements of the sanctuary—the altar of sacrifice upon which the tabernacle rests that preserves the consecrated hosts after the Eucharist is celebrated. A *baldacchino* originated as a ceremonial cloth canopy placed over a throne to highlight an important personage. It was made of fine material (tapestry). Coming from *Baldacco* ‘Baghdad’, signifying the place of origin of the brocade in Baghdad.

The survey was conducted in February from a carefully crafted sample size of nearly 2000 people. It makes a distinction between **self-identified Catholics** and those Catholics who report attending Mass weekly. We know that there is a difference. Still, the numbers reveal a staggering lack of understanding about the basic truths surrounding the Eucharist. Nearly seven out of ten Catholics (69%) answered that they personally believe the bread and wine used during the Mass “are symbols of the body and blood of Jesus Christ.” The key word of course is *symbol*. To maintain that belief is to deny an infallible teaching, to deny the dogma of transubstantiation. Them is fightin’ words! Of that 69%, **43% think** that the **Church teaches** that the Eucharist is merely symbolic. That is different than knowing the teaching and denying it—the classic distinction between being **in error** (perhaps invincible ignorance, through no fault of their own) and knowingly denying a doctrine. That 43% represents the Church’s **greatest failure** of the past generation.

Yes, 22% know the teaching and deny it anyway—they simply do not believe what we teach. Now you might say, “But these are the folks who claim to be Catholic, but probably rarely if ever attend Mass.” The study takes this into account. Among those who attend Mass weekly, the number of those who believe in transubstantiation jumps to 63%. But that still means that fewer than 2/3 of weekly Sunday Mass goers believe in the Church’s teaching. That may be the **most staggering** statistic of all. Yes, I would quibble with the wording of the question. Respondents were asked if they believe that “during Catholic Mass, the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Jesus.” I would have added, “...under the appearance of bread and wine.” It is possible that some Catholics interpreted the phrase too literally.

The concept of transubstantiation as an explanation for Eucharistic doctrine is helpful, clarifying that the substance (the “whatness”) of the bread changes into the Body of Christ, while the *appearance* does not. The language of substance, while increasingly arcane to many today, makes key distinctions. The Gospel of St. John (6:55-56) is clear, “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.” It was quickly followed by: “Then many of his disciples who were listening said, ‘This saying is hard; who can accept it?’” Yes, some left, and Jesus did not run after them. We have our work cut out for us on this key teaching. Is this the wake-up call we need?

- The rector of the **Basilica in Ars, France**, the village where Saint John Vianney ministered for 41 years, paid a visit to the Cathedral. While we were touring, the layman in charge of accompanying the relic of the incorrupt heart of St. John Vianney arrived from the Knights of Columbus convention in Minneapolis with the relic. He knew that I had been called out of town on May 31 (to anoint my uncle), thereby missing the relic’s visit here by just a few hours. I was so grateful for this thoughtful gesture!
- It is always a pleasure to welcome the **Little Sisters of the Poor**, who provide such beautiful care for the elderly. Our **second collection** today supports their mission. Thanks for your support.
- Empty nesters no more. My brother and his wife just welcomed a beautiful new **Labrador puppy**. I was reminded of my ill-fated attempt in that arena. For a total of 24 hours, I was the proud owner of a Black Lab, until I realized I was thoroughly unprepared. I had no game plan for caring for a pup while trying to teach high school religion all day long. “What on earth was I thinking?” Thankfully, my sister adopted her, and she had a beautiful life with a loving and much more attentive family. I think I’m a better uncle than father!
- It is time to **register for Religious Education** classes this fall. I invite parents to go online to our parish website for more information. Just click the link. Wednesday classes begin the first full week after Labor Day, September 11, 2019.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel  
Rector