

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S TEACHING ON THE EUCHARIST

The holy Catholic Church teaches that at the moment of the Consecration of the Mass, the bread and wine on the altar truly become the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus Christ. The bread and wine cease to exist, though the appearances and properties, or accidents, of bread and wine remain. This momentous change is known as transubstantiation - change of substance.

ADORATION OF THE EUCHARIST

The consecrated Host and the Precious Blood under the form of wine are given the adoration that is reserved for God alone, since they are, indeed, Almighty God Himself. This highest form of veneration is known as latria. The opinions that Christ is only in the Eucharistic elements as in a sign, or that Christ is received only spiritually, were condemned by the Council of Trent.

THE REAL PRESENCE

Both the bread and wine become the whole Jesus Christ - His Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity, so that the recipient receives Christ whole and entire under either form. Furthermore, the tiniest particle of a consecrated Host or the smallest drop of consecrated "wine" is Christ. Yet Christ is not divided, He remains one.

Our Lord is present as long as the appearances of bread and wine remain. When a consecrated Host is digested or dissolved in water, and no longer has the appearance of bread, it is no longer Jesus. Thus Our Lord is present in a communicant for about 15 minutes, and one should adore Him within oneself as long as He is sacramentally present.

While it is true that God is everywhere, as the Creator and Sustainer of all things, and that He is present by sanctifying grace in all souls in the state of grace, these are spiritual presences. The Eucharistic presence of Christ - Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity - is entirely unique, and it alone is referred to as the Divine Presence.

GUIDELINES FOR RECEIVING COMMUNION

To receive Holy Communion worthily, one must be in the state of grace, that is, free of having committed a mortal sin that has not been confessed and absolved in the Sacrament of Penance. To receive Holy Communion in the state of mortal sin is itself a mortal sin of sacrilege. A person who has committed a mortal sin must first cleanse his soul in the Sacrament of Penance before receiving Communion. St. Paul declares (1 Cor. 11:29) that anyone who would receive the Eucharist unworthily eats and drinks

judgment to himself. (The sin of sacrilegious Communion is of course forgivable in the Sacrament of Penance.)

The communicant must also, in addition to being in the state of grace, have a right intention and perform the required fast. The current requirement is to fast from all food and drink (except water and true medicine) for one hour before the actual time of receiving. Fasting for a longer time - for example, for three hours or from midnight - is an excellent preparation.

The serious Catholic will also strive to purify his **soul** from venial sin in order to provide a worthy dwelling place in his heart for Our Lord. The best immediate preparation for Holy Communion is praying the Mass devoutly.

EASTER DUTY

Catholics must receive Holy Communion at least once a year, during the Easter season (in the United States, from the first Sunday of Lent through Trinity Sunday, the 8th Sunday after Easter).

WHY ARE WE ENCOURAGED TO RECEIVE COMMUNION FREQUENTLY?

The special sacramental effects of the Eucharist are an intrinsic union of the recipient with Jesus Christ (and also with the other members of His Mystical Body); the spiritual nourishment of the grace (an effect comparable to the nourishment of our bodies by food); and a pledge of heavenly bliss and the resurrection of the body.

By receiving Holy Communion, a Catholic obeys Our Lord's command to eat His Body and drink His Blood. He performs an act most pleasing to God, who longs to come into his heart. And in turn, his desire to receive Him will increase. Each reception of Holy Communion brings an increase of sanctifying grace in the soul; this takes place to the degree that the recipient has opened himself to Our Lord by emptying his soul of sin and worldly desires, and in accord with the dispositions of his immediate preparation, reception and thanksgiving.

Sanctifying grace is the very life of Christ in the soul, a spiritual reality difficult to describe. Sanctifying grace renders the soul holy and pleasing to God, and gives it a supernatural beauty which far surpasses the greatest natural loveliness. A person must be in the state of sanctifying grace at the moment of death in order to be saved. Every visit of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist is a promise of eternal life for those who remain in His grace by obeying His commandments.

In Holy Communion, Our Lord brings graces to enable us to keep His commandments. Frequent Holy Communion has long been urged by the Church as a means to overcome sin, including habitual sins and in particular, habitual sins of impurity. The

frequent reorienting of oneself toward Jesus Christ which is entailed in frequent devout Holy Communion is a most fruitful spiritual exercise, weakening the sensual and worldly impulses in the soul and awakening an appreciation for the things of God, thus disposing the soul to derive much spiritual profit from Holy Communion. St. John Bosco, the “Friend of Youth” and reclamer of wayward boys, often spoke of three “springs” to the spiritual life: Confession, Holy Communion, and devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

THE EUCHARIST IN SCRIPTURE

From earliest times the Church has venerated the Eucharistic “bread” and “wine” as the actual Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, since this was the teaching of Christ Himself. Our Lord knew the depth of faith which would be required for acceptance of this doctrine, so He first prepared His followers by the miraculous multiplication of loaves and fishes. (Matt. 14:15-21). Then He foretold that He would give His very flesh and blood “as food and drink.” This was the turning point for many of His followers: “Many of his disciples, hearing it, said: This saying is hard, and who can hear it? ... After this many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with Him.” (John 6:61,67). These had not misunderstood Him; they simply would not accept what He was saying. But Our Lord did not offer an explanation to soften His words or to give them a symbolic meaning. Rather, “Then Jesus said to the twelve: “Will you also go away?” (John 6:68).

The actual institution of the Holy Eucharist came at the Last Supper. It is described thus by St. Matthew: “And whilst they were at supper, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke: and gave to his disciples, and said: Take ye, and eat. This is my body. And taking the chalice, He gave thanks, and gave to them, saying: Drink ye all of this. For this is my blood of the new testament, which shall be shed for many unto remission of sins.” (Matt. 26:26-28). This momentous event is also recounted by St. Mark (Mk. 14:22-24), St. Luke (Lk. 22:17-20), and St. Paul (1 Cor. 11:23-26). These words of Our Lord have always been, and are now, accepted in their true and literal sense by the whole of Catholic Christendom.

THE EARLY CHURCH AND THE EUCHARIST

St. Ignatius of Antioch (d.170), who was a disciple of the Apostle John, wrote the following concerning the heretics of those early times: “They have abstained from the Eucharist and prayer, because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ.” St. Ephrem (d. 373) said: “But if anyone despise it or reject it or treat it with ignominy, it may be taken as a certainty that he treats with ignominy the Son, who called it and actually made it to be His Body.” And St. Justin (d. 165) declared: “We call this food “Eucharist” of which no one should partake who does not believe in the truth of our doctrine, who has not been cleansed by the regeneration and remission of his sins and whose life is not in conformity with the precepts of Jesus Christ, because we do not partake of this as ordinary food and drink, and since in virtue of the word of

God, Jesus Christ incarnate takes flesh and blood for our redemption. We know also that this food which in the natural order would become our flesh and blood, being consecrated in prayer which contains His own divine words, is the flesh and blood of the same Jesus made man.”

MORE RECENT SAINTS AND THEIR TEACHINGS ABOUT THE EUCHARIST

The saints of later ages, too, have consistently and eloquently professed faith in the real presence of Jesus within the humble consecrated Host. St. Francis of Assisi (c. 1181-1226), in one of his few extant letters, wrote that “everything in man should halt in awe. Let all the world quake and let Heaven exult when Christ the Son of the Living God is there on the altar in the hands of the priest.” The saint deemed no dignity greater than that of the priesthood “because of its sublime privilege of consecrating the Body and Blood of Christ.” St. Anthony of Padua (1195-1231) affirmed: “We must firmly believe and declare openly that the same body that was born of the Virgin, which was hung on the cross, lay in the tomb, rose on the third day and ascended to the right hand of the Father, was given in food to the Apostles, and now the Church truly consecrates and distributes it to the faithful.”

The great 13th century philosopher and theologian, St. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274), has been called “the Eucharistic Doctor,” not only for his inspiring theological writing on the Eucharist in this Summa Theologica, but also for his Eucharistic hymns and his composition of the Proper of the Mass for the feast of Corpus Christi. St. Thomas, considered by many to equal Plato and Aristotle as one of the greatest philosophers of all time, declared on his deathbed regarding the Eucharist: “If in this world there be any knowledge of this Mystery keener than that of faith, I wish now to affirm that I believe in the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in this Sacrament, truly God and truly man, the Son of God, the Son of the Virgin Mary. This I believe and hold for true and certain.”

The first American-born canonized saint, Elizabeth Ann Seton (1774-1821), while still an Episcopalian, attended Mass while on a visit to Italy. When her Catholic companion whispered at the elevation of the Host, “This is the Body of Christ,” the future saint became deeply moved and later wrote to her sister-in-law: “How happy we would be if we believed what these dear souls believe, that they possess God in the Sacrament and that He remains in their churches and is carried to them when they are sick! Oh, my! When they carry the Blessed Sacrament under my window, while I feel the loneliness and sadness of my case, I cannot stop my tears at the thought “My God, how happy I would be, even so far away from all so dear, if I could find You in the church as they do ... The other day, in a moment of excessive distress, I fell on my knees without thinking when the Blessed Sacrament passed by, and cried in an agony to God to bless me if He was there, that my whole soul desired only Him.” After the blossoming of Elizabeth’s faith and her eventual conversion, it seems she could hardly contain herself when she exclaimed, “God is everywhere, in the air I breathe -- yes, everywhere, but in His Sacrament of the altar, He is as present actually and really as my soul within my body; in His Sacrifice daily offered as really as once offered on the cross.”

THE EUCHARIST IN OUR LIVES TODAY

This holy Sacrament, given to us by a loving God as a perpetual presence among His children, while keenly adored by the saints and by the faithful members of the Church throughout the ages, has on the other hand been doubted by many, neglected and ignored by others, received unworthily by some, and even desecrated by a few. For these reasons, and others known only to God, the Lord has seen fit at times to manifest His presence by extraordinary Eucharistic miracles. These miracles affirm our faith and remind us of how privileged we are to share one of the most basic truths and most exalted mysteries of the Catholic religion: “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us” - not only in Bethlehem, but in every Catholic tabernacle and in every faithful Catholic heart.

FORTY HOURS DEVOTION

“THE FORTY HOURS” is a devotion aimed at increasing our appreciation, our love, and our knowledge of the Blessed Sacrament. The devotion itself covers a period of approximately forty hours.

WHY FORTY HOURS?

Generally, it is believed that the devotion was combined with the ceremonies of Holy Week to commemorate the forty hours our Divine Lord was in the tomb. The important thing is that throughout the devotion we are encouraged to take personal inventory of our relationship with Christ in the Holy Eucharist – to reevaluate the importance of the Holy Eucharist in our daily lives. This is what counts most.

WHEN DID FORTY HOURS BEGIN?

In some parts of Europe, “THE FORTY HOURS” was held as early as the 12th century to ask God for peace, to make reparation to the Blessed Sacrament, and as a means of public penance. Around the year 1590, Pope Clement VIII encouraged “THE FORTY HOURS” devotion in Rome. Saint John Neumann, the Bishop of Philadelphia, was instrumental in introducing the devotion to the United States around the middle of the 19th century. By 1866, “THE FORTY HOURS” was being celebrated in almost all the dioceses of the country.

DURING EUCHARISTIC ADORATION

Talk things over with Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. His love for you exceeds your ability to understand it. He realized how difficult it is for you to love the Blessed

Sacrament as much as you would like, He knows how distracted you are with the problems of your daily life. He knows, too, how spiritual things have a way of getting lost in the shuffle. He understands! All He asks is that you keep trying, trying to develop into a better Christian, trying to improve your relations with Him. It's hard work, but no work is more rewarding. The key word is "try". During the Adoration try harder than ever before to get even closer to Christ. Talk with Him in the Blessed Sacrament. He knows your goals ... your hopes ... your shortcomings. Talk them over with Him. And you'll know what we mean when we say that Adoration is truly "A TIME OF SPIRITUAL OPPORTUNITY."