Real Presence Imaged in Friendship

James Voeller FBP

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta

Part of the Catholic Studies Commons, Christianity Commons, and the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)
ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

Recommended Citation


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Obsculta by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.
Real Presence Imaged in Friendship

by Brother James Voeller, FBP

Friendship properly understood is necessarily complimentary to Eucharistic presence. The presence of God in the Genesis story (Gn 1:27) was imaged precisely by creating man and woman. With our symbolically-existing nature and transformation in Christ we truly image Real Presence. This full personhood requires consciousness of human and divine love.

We affirm Real Presence in Catholic doctrine and practice, but the understanding of my faith evolves in as much as I am open to transformation, new perspectives, and mystery. The Rites that make up Liturgy and the inclusion of Institution Narratives in Eucharistic prayers are Spirit-led developments of the tradition. But my faith is not determined by fixed definitions or diminished by reflection on their origin and its significance. Consider for example the Last Supper Institution Narrative which is believed to have been added in the Eucharistic prayers, possibly in the 4th century.1 It is crucial to the theology since these are the words of Institution from the Synoptics. The understanding of presence was also part of the beliefs from the beginning though not universally accepted. Some early Church fathers affirmed actual presence while others used metaphorical language. Western scholars argue that Augustine used a more symbolic approach to Eucharistic theology while Ambrose had a realist emphasis.2 Joseph Wawrykow describes Augustine’s approach as using a sign quality. If the bread and wine point to something else, the res signified is the Church or the Body of Christ and the Eucharist is the Sacrament of unity and charity. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, verses 11:28-29, demonstrate how worthy reception of the Eucharist is true membership in the body of Christ.3

How is Transubstantiation related to the lived community experience? The grace of the Eucharist is receiving it as real food and worship of God who, "precisely by this self-giving transforms, heals and nurtures our human existence"4 which we refer to as uncreated grace. Worship of the sacrament outside Mass is upheld by Trent and is an article of faith by Vatican II, “it is the same God whom the apostles adored in Galilee”.5 Thus, processions which are normally held within the Church are appropriately brought out into the streets celebrating the great gift of the Eucharist. It allows the faithful to express themselves in the sacramental life of the Church. The original beauty of honoring this great Sacrament often included hosting a shrine at their homes and decorating streets according to culture. Connecting Real Presence with the whole of Christian life also means celebrating the liturgical year and the greatest mysteries of faith. Christians should join the two aspects of mission connecting the liturgical with justice, service and outreach into a common aspect of worship inspiring one another.

The Eucharist as the greatest gift Christ left his Church should be seen in its fullest context since it is medicine, healing and comfort for the believer. Inspired by example, one’s devotion to the Eucharist could be seen as a

---

2 Ibid., 133.
3 Ibid., 135.
continuation of the thanksgiving for graces received. God is the divine
physician and we are formed as members through Liturgy and those chosen
instruments who effect our lives.

Although there may be literalist and physicalist tendencies in the present, this
unfortunate circumstance allows us to retrieve the theology of the past and
better understand true presence with all its implications and not only in the
terms of accidents, substance and transubstantiation. The Council of Trent
states “immediately after the consecration the true Body and Blood of our
Lord, together with His soul and divinity exist under the form of bread and
wine” (Ch 3).6 The teaching of Aquinas allowed for a doctrinal development of
Real Presence to settle the debate in the 9th century when Paschasius had a
physicalist approach against Ratramnus’ more spiritual one.

Friendship is a gift that, like other sacred realities is beyond any formal
definition but is seen as precious. Real Presence in the Eucharist offers an
opportunity to consider aspects of this profound truth. In fact, it urges us to
explore it so that we can comprehend more deeply the sacramental aspect
of being human. Bernard J. Cooke proposes a way to see the relationship
between Real Presence and friendship. “Perhaps the most basic sacrament of
God’s saving presence to human life is the sacrament of love and friendship”.7
The gift of the Sacraments is essential to friendship, it is christianized by the
created grace they confer. We are made friends by reception of the Gospel, as
seen in statements from Jesus like, “I no longer call you servants…I have called
you friends” (Jn 15:15).8 But relationality actually has its origins in the creation
story. We were created in God’s image and likeness, male and female. The
knowing of God in relationship to us can be understood through relationships
to each other though applying human concepts to the divine always fall
short. None the less, they can be used to gain some glimpse of Jesus as the
primordial sacrament of God, as we are reminded how “all things came to be
through him, and without him nothing came to be” (Jn 1:3).9

Sacramental theology has always held that Sacraments cause grace by
signifying (significabo causant)10 Although cause and effects has been
a traditional emphasis in sacramental theology, the role of symbol is
revolutionary for realizing and actualizing the Church’s identity as the
Sacrament of Christ. Christ gave us his presence sacramentally as the Bread of
Life, the gift of the Lord’s Supper. The objective and subjective realities have
been explored, discussed and documented by the Anglican-Roman Catholic
International Commission 11 that “the Lord’s gift of himself to his Church—
becomes no longer just a presence for believers, but also a presence with him”.
This calls to mind the Gospel passage, “whoever remains in me and I in him
will bear much fruit” (Jn 15:5).12

The highest good of the Eucharistic presents a theological divide, is Real
Presence most fully realized as the Sacramentum et res – sign and reality
or res tantum reality signified. Augustine’s theology emphasizes the
ecclesiastical aspect of Eucharist. Ambrose on the other hand, had a realist
emphasis through the language of figura, understood in the ancient world
as “participating” in the reality itself in some way. There are differences of
understanding Real Presence as seen in the theologies of Augustine and
Ambrose13. This gives rise to different ways of expressing devotion. Devotion
to Eucharist outside Mass began in the Middle Ages was affirmed at Trent
and is strongly encouraged by Vatican II. Friendship is the means by which
grace is communicated between persons symbolically through many means
such as language, art and gestures. Transformation which takes place by grace
and the self-giving nature of God is the link for understanding created and
uncreated grace.

---

6 Council of Trent (1545-1563 : Trento, Italy). Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent. Translated by
Henry Joseph Schroeder. (St. Louis, Mo: B. Herder Book, 1941), Ch 3.
1994), 80.
8 The Catholic Study Bible : The New American Bible, Revised Edition. Edited by Donald Senior, John J
9 The Catholic Study Bible : The New American Bible, Revised Edition. Edited by Donald Senior, John J
11 Ibid, 340.
Eucharist is about everything: creation, redemption, love, service, repentance, forgive, be Church, kingdom of God and the eschatological Great Banquet. This is the meaning of highlighting friendship as an aspect for understanding Real Presence. To begin with, Eucharist is about transformation of our Humanity. The Sacraments in themselves are transformative, created grace is for the betterment of our human nature. But this also entails that the faithful not be strangers to devotion. The kind of devotion that I am referring to here is not the usual sense of the term. What matters is a proper attitude toward them so that they are not a burden or a little understood notion but efficacious signs of what is actually happening. Cooke makes this clear: “the bitter polemic regarding the character of Eucharist points to the lack of explicit connection in people’s thinking between the external symbolism and God’s saving presence, and between that presence and the causing of “grace””14. Devotions are good in as much as they are extensions and continuations of the grace the Sacraments are meant to confer.

Another way that we express devotion to the Eucharist is also friendship. Inspired by example, one’s devotion for Real Presence is a continuation of the thanksgiving for graces received. And since all that we can do is what is humanly possible, the rest depends upon created grace, openness to grace must entail transformation of our humanity. Christian faith believes Jesus introduced a new element into what it means to be truly human15. This is not meant in a humanistic, therapeutic psychological sense. But humans need a greater awareness of humanness, to wake up and know what is going on. Through belief in Transubstantiation not just as a doctrine, I can see myself as a presence of friendship which transforms me. God is pure relationship. Presence is not abstract truths we know nothing about. Being transformed means being in relationship with everyone, grace constitutes friendship. The value of my participation in Liturgy and celebration of the sacred mysteries are understood and brought to fulfillment in the context of relationships which lead me to Christ. As humans, our knowing is continually growing, our exploration of the universe is continually increasing. Discovery of friendship and its growing influence on us and on others is limitless, “finite personhood gives us a hint of infinite personhood”16.

In order to appreciate the relationship of friendship with Real Presence we should understand the power of symbol and particularly humans as symbol-making beings17. Words are evocative making the past present and allowing us to share in others experiences or bringing ours to their consciousness. My experience of another person’s life is limited but through the symbolic-making power of words they become real without the limitations of time and space. A biography portrays the happenings and essence of someone’s life powerfully to all who receive it. The protagonist of the story may not be able to bring their own history to life the way a second party could. The Gospel writers did not all share the experiences of the Twelve. People can become symbols of great good such as Mother Theresa’s love and compassion or conversely Hitler brings to visceral consciousness hatred of the Jews. The resulting presence symbol-making beings create is the love, care and friendship in community18.

Community is constitutive of presence, we become aware of one another’s presence. Awareness relies upon symbol which depends on a common language and culture.

Sometimes this breaks down but with honesty we can be truly present to each other. Cooke states that Jesus insisted on two moral precepts one of which is honesty19. For us to be symbolic toward others words must be meaningful and connected to life. The symbol-making reality of who we are depends on our self-acceptance and knowledge, giving ourselves in freedom. How much we reveal of ourselves and our openness to others makes us basic sacraments of God’s saving presence20.

The gift of Real Presence must be lived out, reaching out to other people. Lived community creates an interdependence between brothers requiring a constant giving and taking. Sin can be summed up as a deliberate refusal to love. We have the ability to know and to shape ourselves making us a source

15 Ibid., 10.
16 Ibid, Ch 7
17 Ibid., 44.
18 Ibid., 47.
19 Ibid., 53.
20 Ibid, 91.
of life for others. It is in our freedom to shape ourselves in most important matters. Growing in awareness we can make life happier. By helping and caring barriers to harmonious living are surmounted. The force of evil is real confronting us with its strange deception, only with God is it possible to overcome. Jesus transformed our human experience making friendship a basic sacrament of God’s saving presence.