

The Eucharistic Lord

Good morning. Some of you know me already but for those who don't I'm Fr Jeremy Milne and I'm the Parish Priest of St John the Baptist & St Kentigern in Edinburgh West. I'm delighted to be here with you this morning as we seek to be drawn closer to our Eucharistic Lord. Let's begin by asking the Holy Spirit to guide us and enlighten us as we enter so great a mystery.

[SLIDE] – Prayer to the Holy Spirit

[SLIDE] – YouTube clip of Notre Dame burning

I'm sure we can all remember turning on the news on 15th April last year and watching in horror as the great Cathedral of Notre Dame was engulfed in flames.

In the aftermath of it all, the story of Fr Jean-Marc Fournier, Chaplain of the firefighters of Paris, emerged. In an interview he explained:

“As I was on duty, I was called on the scene, and right away two things must absolutely be done: save this unfathomable treasure that is the crown of thorns, and of course our Lord present in the Blessed Sacrament.

When I entered into the cathedral, the spire had already collapsed,” Fr. Fournier recounted.” At any moment, the nave could cave in. There were two braziers on the floor: one in front of the main altar, the other in front of the high altar, in the canons choir. A rain of fire was falling without pause from the roof.

We found the keys. I retrieved Jesus. And with the Blessed Sacrament, I blessed the Cathedral. It was an act of faith. I asked Jesus – Who I believe is truly present in the hosts – to fight the flames and to preserve the building dedicated to His Mother. The benediction coincided with the beginning of the fire in the north tower – and also with its extinction! This was surely Providence ... The two bell towers were saved.”

What extraordinary courage and what a great witness to the power of faith!

Here's another example from just last month:

[SLIDE] – Puerto Rico

And the ultimate example is perhaps the story of Father George Weinmann and Sister Lilian Marie McLaughlin.

[SLIDE] – No Greater Love

On Feb. 20, 1967, fire took hold of the church of St Philip Neri in Rochester, USA. Fr Weinmann, the pastor, rushed into the burning building to save the Blessed Sacrament inside the tabernacle. Sr Lilian Marie, a School Sister of Notre Dame, who was a teacher at the parish school, soon followed to assist him. Neither survived. McLaughlin, who had turned 26 just two days earlier, died on that Monday afternoon. Weinmann, 77, lost his life two days later.

In all these cases people risked and in the latter case gave their lives to rescue the Blessed Sacrament.

Why on earth would they do such a thing? To the faithless mind it makes no sense at all. To risk or give your life for the sake of bread? It sounds crazy.

But the truth is something different. The actions of these people and countless others through history bear witness to the tremendous Catholic faith that, housed in the Tabernacle of every church great and small, from the wonder of Notre Dame to the humble places of somewhere like Puerto Rico, is not bread but the Lord Jesus Christ himself. The Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ really and truly present.

This is the sacred mystery of the Real Presence, the Eucharistic Lord.

Fr Jean-Marc from Notre Dame put it like this:

“Everybody understands that the Crown of Thorns is an absolutely unique and extraordinary relic, but the Blessed Sacrament is our Lord, really present in his body, soul, divinity and humanity and you understand that it is hard to see someone you love perish in the blaze. As firefighters we often see casualties from fire and we know its effects, this is why I sought to preserve above all the real presence of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

[SLIDE] – Pew Survey

In a recent survey carried out in the USA, nearly 70% of the Catholics asked said they believed that the bread and wine during the Mass are symbols of the body and blood of Jesus.

Now, the answers that people give in these kinds of surveys depend a lot on how the questions are framed and also the degree of participation in the life of the Church of the respondents. Nevertheless, such a finding is cause for concern because the Eucharistic Lord ‘truly, really and substantially’ (Council of Trent) present is the essential heart of our faith and it really matters that we believe this.

[SLIDE] – Flannery O’Connor

Many decades before that Pew Survey, Flannery O’Connor, the celebrated American Catholic author was invited to a literary gathering. She writes:

*“Well, toward morning the conversation turned on the Eucharist, which I, being the Catholic, was obviously supposed to defend. Mrs. Broadwater said when she was a child and received the Host, she thought of it as the Holy Ghost, He being the ‘most portable’ person of the Trinity; now she thought of it as a symbol and implied that it was a pretty good one. I then said, in a very shaky voice, ‘Well, if it’s a symbol, to hell with it.’ That was all the defense I was capable of but I realize now that this is all I will ever be able to say about it, outside of a story, except that **it is the center of existence for me; all the rest of life is expendable.** (Flannery O’Connor)”*

The Centre of Existence

In that phrase, “[*the Eucharist*] is the centre of existence for me”, Flannery O’Connor captured the profound mystery of the Sacrament of Sacraments, the source and summit of the Catholic faith.

When we celebrate Mass and the priest consecrates the bread and wine, only the appearances of bread and wine remain. What they are is changed. They become the Eucharistic Lord: the crucified, risen and ascended Lord Jesus really and truly present to us here and now.

In this way the risen Lord remains truly with us always as he promised, feeds us with himself as he promised and gathers us into participation in the life of heaven as he promised.

The Eucharistic Lord present on the altar is the centre of all existence because He is the meeting point of heaven and earth, reality invisible and reality visible joined as one. In the Eucharist, heaven is present on earth and earth is gathered into heaven with only the thinnest veil of the appearance of bread and wine between them.

To understand this, as far as we are able, we need to look at the Scriptures, especially passages in Hebrews and Revelation and then relate these to the Institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper and finally, St Paul’s great hymn of adoration in his letter to the Ephesians.

RECAP – Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection, Ascension

[SLIDE] – Incarnation and Passion

[SLIDE] – Resurrection and Ascension

“He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.”

[TAKE UP HANDOUT]– readings from Hebrews, Revelation, Matthew, Ephesians

READ Hebrews 8-9 (cf. Exodus 25:10-40) [HANDOUT]

The writer of Hebrews speaks of the need for the perfection of the Old Testament priesthood, humanity's need for a high priest who is not tainted and temporary as of old but who is "holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens". Then he goes on to say:

8 ¹ Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, ² a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent which is set up not by man but by the Lord. ³ For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer.

[SLIDE] - Tabernacle

9 ¹ Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary. ² For a tent was prepared, the outer one, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence; it is called the Holy Place. ³ Behind the second curtain stood a tent called the Holy of Holies, ⁴ having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, which contained a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant; ⁵ above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat.

Of these things we cannot now speak in detail. ⁶ These preparations having thus been made, the priests go continually into the outer tent, performing their ritual duties; ⁷ but **into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood which he offers for himself and for the errors of the people.**

¹¹...But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) ¹² **he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood**, thus securing an eternal redemption.

²³ Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. ²⁴ **For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into**

heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.

You remember when Jesus died on the Cross, the Gospel writers tell us that there was a great earthquake and... *“the veil of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom.”* This shows that by dying on the cross, Jesus the High Priest enters the Holy of Holies, the presence of God, that is heaven, once and for all to offer his own blood on our behalf for the forgiveness of our sins.

Now if we look at the passage from the Book of Revelation we see in the great vision of St John, an image of Jesus, High Priest and Sacrificial victim, offering himself in the Holy of Holies, to God.

READ Revelation 5 [HANDOUT]

⁶ And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, **I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain**, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth; ⁷ and he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. ⁸ And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and with golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints; ⁹ and they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals, for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, ¹⁰ and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on earth." ¹¹ Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹² saying with a loud voice, "**Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!**" ¹³ And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein, saying, "To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!" ¹⁴ And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped.

[SLIDE] – Ghent altarpiece

This image of the lamb that was slain, surrounded by the living creatures, the elders and saints offering him homage, is an image of the crucified and risen Lord, at the throne of God, offering himself on our behalf.

The Real Presence

So now the Lord, the Lamb of God, united to our human nature, having entered the Holy of Holies, stands before God, interceding on our behalf with the blood of his sacrifice.

But he said before he ascended there, *“I will be with you, always, even to the end of time”*. He promised not to leave us orphans. But how?

READ Matthew 26 [HANDOUT]

²⁶ Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." ²⁷ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you; ²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹ **I tell you I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.**"

At the Last Supper Jesus unites this meal of bread and wine with his sacrificial death and in commanding the apostles to *“do this in memory of me”* institutes the Sacrament of the Eucharist whereby he gathers us to take part in the eternal offering of himself to God and communicates his divine life to us by giving his body and blood in sacramental form to us.

[SLIDE] – Pope Francis

At the altar, through his words spoken by the priest, ‘this is my body, this is my blood’, his body and blood replace the entire substance of the bread and wine while the appearances remain. The bread and wine really and truly become his body and blood; the sacrificial body and blood who stands before God interceding for us

How can we imagine what is happening here? Well words are not enough of course. We cannot fully capture this mystery in words. The mystery is too great.

[SLIDE] – Thomas Aquinas

[ASIDE] ST THOMAS AQUINAS – so much straw!

On the feast of St. Nicholas [in 1273, Aquinas] was celebrating Mass when he received a revelation that so affected him that he wrote and dictated no more, leaving his great work the *Summa Theologiae* unfinished. To Brother Reginald’s (his secretary and friend) expostulations he replied, “The end of my labors has come. All that I have written appears to be as so much straw after the things that have been revealed to me.” When later asked by Reginald to return to writing, Aquinas said, “I can write no more. I have seen things that make my writings like straw.”

St Paul was granted great visions of the realities beyond and captured the limitations of our earthly vision when he wrote in 1 Cor 13:12:

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. (1 Cor 13:12)

Acknowledging and accepting the limitations to our imagination and understanding of so great a mystery, we’ll press on in the darkness guided by faith and our love of the Lord.

[SLIDE] – Eucharist, source and summit

How can we imagine our Eucharistic Lord, present to us under the appearance of bread and wine? Does Jesus come down and sort of get inside the bread and wine? No, because then bread and wine would remain coexisting with the Lord and that's not what we believe. We believe that after the consecration the bread and wine cease to exist. And anyway if we imagine the risen Lord coming down into each consecrated host and chalice there's a danger of us imagining either that the Lord is somehow divided up and we only receive part of him or that he is multiplied with copies of him present here and there.

Perhaps a better way to imagine it is that through the words of consecration given us by Our Lord, *This is my Body, This is my Blood*, the elements of bread and wine are gathered into the reality of the crucified, risen and glorified Lord who stands now before the throne of God and are transformed to become the Body and Blood of that crucified, risen, glorified Lord while continuing to appear as bread and wine.

Fr James T. O'Connor (The Hidden Manna, p291)

At the Consecration of the liturgy, the heavenly King touches these elements directly by and through the power of his Spirit. He touches them so mightily that – if we may put it this way – he extracts from them their very reality, dominating it and attracting it (forcefully pulling it even) toward himself, so subjecting it to himself that its own true being is lost to it as it becomes the very Lord who has mastered it

This reminds us that the Eucharistic Lord, the Lamb that was slain, is eternally before God as the one pure sacrifice by which all of creation is being drawn into union with God.

[SLIDE] – Ephesians 1

READ Ephesians 1 [HANDOUT]

⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸ which he lavished upon us. ⁹ For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰ as a plan for the fulness of time, **to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.**

The Eucharistic Lord present on the altar and in the Tabernacles of the world is the meeting point of heaven and earth where reality invisible and reality visible are united.

Through the Eucharist the Lord is fulfilling that plan of unification of heaven and earth. The grace of the risen Lord flows through the Eucharist into the world, gathering creation to himself and drawing it, again through the Eucharist, into union with God.

Through the Eucharist the Lord breathes out heaven into the world and breathes in the world to the life of heaven.

That's why the Eucharist was described as the source and summit of Christian life in the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

The source of grace is the Eucharistic Lord breathing heaven into the world directing all that it contains, human beings first and foremost, to the summit of existence which is eternal life with God.

Eucharistic Adoration

[SLIDE] - Monstrance

Now hopefully we can understand afresh why we adore the Blessed Sacrament; why we reverence the tabernacle by going down on one knee; why we keep silence or at least speak in hushed tones before the Eucharist?

It is because we are before the Eucharistic Lord, the Lord of Life. We are in the very presence of God, veiled by the appearance of bread but closer to us here than any other experience we can have.

Unworthy?

The mystical nature of what we have said may lead us to a heightened sense of our unworthiness before so deep a mystery.

Are we unworthy? Yes, of course we are, we all are. But our Lord would not want us to be paralysed by our sense of unworthiness. He calls us in spite of our unworthiness.

Remember St Peter's reaction when Jesus told him to "put out into the deep and let your nets down for a catch". On seeing the miraculous haul of fish, Peter fell down on his knees at Jesus' feet and cried "*Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.*" Jesus' reply was "*Do not be afraid. Follow me.*"

Again, in the Gospel of John, Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. Peter says, "*You shall never wash my feet!*" Jesus replies, "*If I do not wash you, you have no part in me.*"

From the depth of his humility our Lord and Master invites us in love to be ministers of his presence.

The Lord in his intimacy invites us to touch, feel, hold and consume him that his holiness might 'rub off on us' as it were.

The Eucharistic Lord invites us to abide with him that he, and only he, may make us worthy of his promises to us.

In handling the Lord we might think that we have taken him into our unworthy hands. Instead we should think that he has placed himself into our unworthy hands. In reality, by handling him and consuming him, actually we are placing ourselves into his hands in the most complete way possible.

So, in handling and consuming the Lord, we are never casual, always reverent. But neither, I suggest, should we feign gesture of exaggerated piety such that we would throw our body over a spilled drop of the Precious Blood or something. Above all, our relationship to our Eucharistic Lord should be loving.

It is in love that due reverence and the natural, calm intimacy of familiarity find their proper balance.

Conclusion

I hope that you will go away from this day with a renewed sense of wonder at the mystery of the Eucharist:

By which we are drawn into the real presence of the great and glorious, crucified and risen Lord who stands in the Holy of Holies before the throne of God interceding for us;

By which God fulfils his plan to unite all things in heaven and on earth and draw them to himself;

In which our Eucharistic Lord, gentle and humble towards us, invites us to 'take and eat' so that we too may be drawn into the perfect communion of heaven.

Hebrews Chapters 8 and 9

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Revelation Chapter 5

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saying, "Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals, for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, ¹⁰ and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on earth." ¹¹ Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹² saying with a loud voice, "**Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!**" ¹³ And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein, saying, "To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!" ¹⁴ And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Matthew Chapter 26

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Ephesians Chapter 1

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