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The Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist — Do You Believe It?

By Rich Cleveland

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?¹

Since the 1990's a lot of Protestant and Evangelical leaders; pastors, missionaries, educators, theologians, and authors, have chosen to embrace Catholicism and become Catholic. Rooted in faith and Scripture, they found that historic Catholicism completed and enhanced both their understanding of Scripture and the practice of their faith in Christ. Most had to wrestle through their head and their heart certain Catholic theological positions which they previously did not hold, and in many cases had opposed; one of which is the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.

I was no different. I had never opposed the Catholic understanding of communion, in fact I always thought during my thirty-six years of attending various Protestant denominations that taking communion was somehow uniquely special, although I had never developed a definitive understanding of why it seemed so unique. Simultaneously, I did understand that the Catholic belief of communion was theologically different, and was rejected by most Protestants, though like me, they probably did not know why. When in 1993 the door opened for me to begin leading some evangelical small-group bible studies in two Catholic parishes, with the blessings of both the bishop and the two priests involved, I resolved that in relating to Catholics that I would not speak negatively against any Catholic beliefs or practices until I understood their beliefs as thoroughly as did knowledgeable Catholic leaders. (Otherwise, I would be talking authoritatively about something of

which I knew little.) Thus began three years of intensive reading and investigating *what Catholics say they believe*, rather than *what Protestants say Catholics believe* — which in many cases were strikingly different.

When trying to assess what I believed about mass and the celebration of the Eucharist, I vacillated back-and-forth. On one hand I believed that Scripture revealed and supported the Catholic understanding that “this is my body ... this is my blood,” but on the other hand I struggled with the mystery of it all, the very possibility of it being so. That Christ is present in some way in the Eucharist, was reasonable, but that the bread and wine actually becomes his flesh and blood, I hesitated to believe. Then one Advent as I was reading the Bible and praying, and just meditating on the wonderfulness of the Incarnation, a new thought came to me in the form of a question which I believe was from the Holy Spirit, — “Rich, if you can believe that the tiny little human seed that was conceived in Mary’s womb was *Emmanuel*, *God With Us*, and grew to become Jesus, who lived, died, and arose from the dead for us, why is it that the miracle of turning the bread and wine into his body and blood, is so difficult for you?” What a gift that insight was for me, no longer was it an issue of doubting the possibility; for in the Incarnation God demonstrated that anything is possible with God, **now the issue was one of faith — will I believe it, or will I not.**

After Gail and I became Catholic, well-meaning friends would often say; “I don’t see

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¹ *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, by John Henry Newman, page 215, Penguin Books, publisher.

From the Heart By Michael Donovan

The Emmaus Road

When I learned that the Emmaus account is the model for the Divine Liturgies celebrated world-wide, it helped me begin to contextualize the reality of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist, ...

The Gospel of Luke gives us the Emmaus Road story. In the account, Jesus journeyed with two despairing disciples for long enough to hear what had been plaguing them and to set their hearts ablaze with hope by interpreting “in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.” In addition, Jesus was invited to stay with them as their guest and all of this took place without their knowledge of his identity because, as the passage says, “... their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”

This story is particularly meaningful for me and my journey with the Catholic faith. I'm what many call a “cradle Catholic” because I received a Catholic baptism in my infancy and had some level of engagement with Catholicism in the first decade of my life. This would not be the right venue to lay out my entire testimony — how I'd been caught up in the world and then rescued from a promiscuous life by being evangelized into Protestantism. But suffice it to say that Catholicism had been a form of “check-box Christianity” in which I grudgingly did what was required.

My journey through Protestantism added a great deal to my relationship with God. To begin, I had heard “The Gospel” (what Catholics call the *Kerygma*) which simply refers to an articulation of who Jesus was and what he came to do that included an invitation to respond in faith, which I did. On my Protestant journey I learned to highly value the word of God in scripture and to appropriate the truths of scripture for myself. These experiences with the scriptures facilitated experiences akin to that of the disciples on the Emmaus Road in which their hearts were “burning within them.” I became so passionate about this that I devoted myself to regular study, memorization and meditation on a great many passages that were “radioactive” for me. These devotions became the means by which I came to abide in Christ and fostered growth in my relationship with the Lord. But little did I know that all of that was preparation to encounter and abide in Christ through the Eucharist.

The Emmaus story reaches its pinnacle when the disciples, having been prepared by Jesus's scriptural teaching, approached their destination and invited this “fellow-traveler” to stay with them. “When Jesus was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them; their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.” Then he vanished. Dr. Brant Pitre has pointed out that “*Jesus was pointing them to the way he would be present with them from now on ...*,”¹ sacramentally. The term mystery (from which we get the word *sacrament*) has been helpfully defined as a “[truth] of faith which [is] entirely beyond the natural powers of reason to apprehend.”² While a mystery may not be able to be fully understood, we unfortunately often treat it as though there is no understanding to gain from it. Such had been the case for me with this account. However, when I learned that the Emmaus account is the model for the Divine Liturgies celebrated world-wide, it helped me begin to contextualize the reality of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist, and *that* understanding powerfully illuminated a great many mysterious passages that had



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¹ *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist*, (page 201).

² *Catholicism*, by Richard P. McBrien, (page 244).

From the Heart

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I began to discover how every interaction with scripture is naturally oriented towards its fulfillment in the sacramental life where Christ is most powerfully made known and the eyes of faith are opened.

previously left me confused — passages like John 6 where Jesus says that “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” and “whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him.” Or the words of our Lord at the institution of the Lord’s supper when he said, “This is my body.” These only scratch the surface. I finally felt able to “take him at his word.” And from this experience, I began to discover how every interaction with scripture is naturally oriented towards its fulfillment in the sacramental life where Christ is most powerfully made known and the eyes of faith are opened.

The real presence of Christ in the Eucharist is as much of a mystery as is the incarnation — what St. Paul reflects upon when he writes, “even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer.” I have come to find that in faith, one need not comprehend, in order to apprehend. Instead, as St. Augustine wrote, “Seek not to understand that you may believe, but believe that you may understand.”³ And I believe Christ is truly present not because I understand; but, in apprehending his presence by faith, I am now able to comprehend with more clarity and fidelity the entirety of his Word to us in the sacred scriptures.

Michael Donovan, his wife Deidre and their four children live in New York City where they minister at a local Catholic parish. They facilitate Bible studies, are involved in music ministry and recently joined the Emmaus Journey Ministry.

³ Tractate 29 on John 7.14–18, St. Augustine of Hippo.

Tools You Can Use

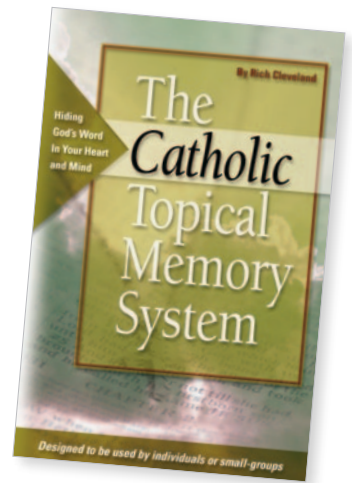
Why Memorize and Meditate on Scripture?

The Bible is foundational to our life and health in Jesus Christ. The Psalmist says that the Scripture revives the soul, makes wise the simple, causes joy in our heart and enlightens our understanding (Psalm 19:7-10). The individual who is serious about following God will become a student of sacred Scripture, finding that as he meditates on it and aligns his life with it that the benefits will far outweigh the effort expended.

We memorize scripture to:

1. Follow Jesus example — “Catholics are first and foremost called to be followers of Jesus Christ.”
2. Enhance our meditation — “We benefit from sacred Scripture when we are able to think about it, grasp its meaning and apply it to our daily lives.”
3. Equip us for life and ministry — “... many times, in moments of crisis, or in opportunities for ministry, the Holy Spirit would use some memorized passage to provide guidance or assistance ...”
4. Learn our way around the bible — “As you begin to memorize key verses you will not only gain insight into those passages but they will also provide invisible bookmarks in your memory to help you find your way around the bible.”

In response to this need, Emmaus Journey has developed *The Catholic Topical Memory System: Hiding God's Word in Your Heart and Mind*. This small-group resource enables Catholics to become strong in their knowledge of the Scripture by combining Bible study discussion on thirty-five important topics of spiritual formation with an effective plan for Scripture memorization. Additionally, each book comes with 35 perforated verse cards and a handsome verse card holder.



The Catholic Topical Memory System

BUY NOW

The Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist — Do You Believe It? *continued from front page*

*“Truly, truly, I say to you,
unless you eat the flesh of
the Son of man and drink
his blood, you have no
life in you; he who eats
my flesh and drinks my
blood has eternal life,
and I will raise him up at
the last day.”*

any difference in the appearance of the bread and wine after the consecration, then I did before the consecration, how come, if it is supposed to be changed into his flesh and blood it appears to be the same?” First, let me say that believing in transubstantiation is a gift, it is not something I can convince someone to embrace. My friends and family were being honest, their senses did not affirm the Catholic conviction. A passage from the following prayer regarding Jesus’ presence in the Eucharistic species explains why one’s senses cannot affirm it, and identifies what is the solution to this dilemma:

“Sight, touch, taste are all deceived in their judgement of you,

but hearing suffices firmly to believe.

I believe all that the Son of God has spoken:

there is nothing truer than this word of Truth.”²

The three senses of seeing, touching, tasting deceive us into thinking that no change has taken place within the host, but our sense of hearing — inwardly, what Jesus said biblically, can be, and should be more authoritative than that which we can only perceive physically. So, we are faced with the dilemma; “whom are we going to believe?” Perhaps this is not dissimilar to the incident of St. Peter walking on water; after successfully beginning his walk to Jesus, he felt the wind and saw the waves, and he stopped believing what Jesus said, and instead relied on his senses and began sinking. Jesus, ever gracious, reached out to grasp Peter and enable him to safely re-enter the boat. However, Jesus also admonished him for having such little faith — such little faith in what Jesus said, after all, who previously had ever heard of a man walking on top of the water. It is enough, or should be enough, to know that Jesus, the Son of God, said, “Take, eat, **this is my body** ... gave it to them and said, drink of it, **this is my blood.**” As the writer of the prayer said, “I believe all that the Son of God has spoken. There is nothing truer than **this word of Truth.**” **Faith, co-ops feeling.**

When we selectively decide which of Jesus’ words we are going to believe, and which ones we are going to reason away, we are in danger of

subtlety entering on the path of those followers who walked away when Jesus spoke of the Eucharist in John 6: “*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me.*”

Consequently, many of his disciples drew back and no longer walked with him, so Jesus asked his disciples, “Will you also go away?” Having been with Jesus only a short time, but having both seen and heard what the Son of God did and said, they confessed that they would not be leaving, because there was no alternative other than him. They did not understand all that Jesus was talking about at that point in their journey, but they did know enough by faith to believe what Jesus said, and wait for understanding to come later. **Faith untangles our confusion** until the Holy Spirit can give us further insight.

Both Protestants and Catholics have struggled over these passages. Recent polls and surveys have indicated that many Catholics do not understand or believe in transubstantiation, so in both cases it is time to let faith, co-op our feelings, and to **let faith, believe and trust**, in the Holy Spirit for future clarification. The Gospels are full of miracles that cannot be understood or explained, but nevertheless are true accounts of what Jesus said and did. The Gospel accounts must be seen as miracles that are to be believed and acted upon, lest when we finish reasoning away truth, the Gospels are whittled down to being simply a series of *feel-good* stories, about a good man. Like the followers in John 6 we can agree that, “This is a hard saying,” — but what miracle is not? “Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt, as I understand the subject; difficulty and doubt are incommensurate.”³ Newman means here that difficulties and doubts are not of equal importance or value, and that difficulties do not change *truth*, especially the truth coming from the Lord’s mouth. **Is it not time that we let hearing Jesus’ word on the subject, be sufficient for us to believe?**

After thirty-five years as evangelicals, Rich Cleveland and his wife Gail became Catholic. Rich is the founder of Emmaus Journey, and he and his wife continue to serve Emmaus Journey, and live in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

2 *Handbook of Prayers*, “I Devoutly Adore You,” page 321, Midwest Theological Forum, publisher.

3 Op. Cit, 215



Mission

Emmaus Journey is a lay Catholic evangelization and discipleship ministry which partners with parishes, small groups, and individuals to facilitate a personal encounter with and conversion to Christ, thereby forming missionary disciples actively living for Jesus.

Vision

By encountering Christ through scripture, discipleship, and community — individuals experience:

- 1) Conversion to Christ.
- 2) Transformation in Christ; and,
- 3) Mobilization for Christ, where they are actively involved in sharing their faith with others and living out their faith in the greater community.

Thus, achieving Goal One of the USCCB's initiative on evangelization, "To bring about in all Catholics such an enthusiasm for their faith that, in living their faith in Jesus, they freely share it with others."

Here is just a sample of what Emmaus Journey offers:

Small Catholic Communities.

Emmaus Journey offers a complete line of resources that include high-quality, thoroughly Catholic, practical small group Bible study materials, and discipleship resources. Most are also available in Spanish.

Reflecting on Sunday's Readings.

More than 30,000 individuals download this publication and use it in preparation for Sunday Mass or as a Scripture study. Also available in Spanish.

Daily Lectionary Reading Record.

The Lectionary Reading Record is a helpful tool for following the Scripture readings used in the daily mass. It also helps a person become consistent in their daily intake of Scripture.

Training Materials. Guides for small group facilitation.

PRAY WITH US

- We pray that Catholics may place the celebration of the Eucharist at the heart of their lives, transforming human relationships in a very deep way and opening to the encounter with God and all their brothers and sisters.
- We pray for Young Adults, may they listen to the call from God and have the courage to dedicate their lives to the path He chooses for them.
- We pray for the Church movements and groups, such as Emmaus Journey, may rediscover their mission of evangelization each day, placing their own charisms at the service and needs of each other.
- We pray for the spread of peace and non-violence in the United States, and that the use of weapons by individuals that cause such damage and anguish in our communities will stop.
- We pray for the international community that it may commit in a concrete way to ensuring the abolition of war and guarantee support to victims and their families affected by war.

BECOME A PARTNER WITH US

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