

Liturgy Canada, 28 April 2018  
 Real Presence: Sharing the Meal “The Meal at the Centre of our lives”  
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### Introduction

Like some of you gathered here today, I’m new to Liturgy Canada, so in preparing to speak, I listened as part of a phone conversation with Liturgy Canada board members, and then went searching on the webpage to find out a little more about what the poster for today (labelled as the 4<sup>th</sup> of five conferences on “renewing eucharistic worship from gathering to sending”) actually means. I deduced that one can presume that the 5 conferences are on the 5 structural units of the eucharist

- Gathering
- The proclamation of the Word
- Responding to the word
- Eucharist
- Sending forth

In addition, on the webpage there is a summary of the last conference – which is that third structural unit (responding to the word) that brings us to the eucharistic rite today (and presumably next time there will be presentations on sending forth, dismissal) OK – I think we’re on the same page!

But, there is the other part of the poster – the actual title: “Real Presence: Sharing the Meal” along with the title given to this talk by those who have prepared this day, “The Meal at the Centre of our Lives” – how do these pieces fit together? Now, “real presence in different modes”, for me, is reminiscent of the first document that emerged from the second Vatican council in 1963, which shocked a lot of people because it talked about the presence of Christ – real presence - not just in the eucharist but also in other actions and people:

(6) From that time onwards [the time of the apostles in Acts] the Church has never failed to come together to celebrate the paschal mystery: reading those things "which were in all the scriptures concerning him" (Luke 24:27), celebrating the eucharist in which "the victory and triumph of his death are again made present", and at the same time giving thanks "to God for his unspeakable gift" (2 Cor. 9:15) in Christ Jesus, "in praise of his glory" (Eph. 1:12), through the power of the Holy Spirit.

7. To accomplish so great a work, *Christ is always present in His Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations*. He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of His minister, "the same now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the cross", but especially under the Eucharistic species. By His power He is present in the sacraments, so that when a man baptizes it is really Christ Himself who baptizes. He is present in His word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in

the Church. He is present, lastly, when the Church prays and sings, for He promised: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20).<sup>1</sup>

While there may be some ecumenical quibble with the emphasis on the minister, the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy's* point is that Christ is truly present in the minister of the eucharist, the eucharist itself – particularly the elements – but also in all the sacraments. Christ is truly present in the Word proclaimed, and, Christ is truly in the body of Christ, the Church, as it gathers to do all of this. Real presence, in all of the 5 units mentioned above: gathering, word, responding to the word, eucharist, sending forth, are presented here in 1963.

So, let's put real presence together with meal – with the eucharist, and see what the equation, real presence + eucharistic meal yields!

### I. **Let's start with real presence**

- A. The phrase, 'real presence' is often misunderstood, particularly in conjunction with the eucharist. Instead of asking the question of how this bread and this wine are 'real', or when that exactly happens, or what are the right words that make it happen (in other words, 'the mechanics' of how this happens), we would do better to ask other questions. And lest we think this is only a contemporary question, it's funny to read in Richard Hooker's Anglican manifesto of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the same issue: "should I not wish that men would give themselves more to meditate in silence on what we are given in this Sacrament and to dispute less about how it is done?"<sup>2</sup> The more helpful questions would be to ask 'what is real', 'what is presence', what do we mean by those words?
- B. First – the phrase "real presence" when talking about the eucharist, often leads many practicing Christians immediately to one part of the eucharistic prayer, the "institution narrative, and one context:
 

*"On the night he was handed over to suffering and death, a death he freely accepted, our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had given thanks to you, he broke it, and gave it to his disciples, and said, "Take, eat: this is my body which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me."* This wording of this institution narrative is from Eucharistic Prayer 3 in the *Book of Alternative Services*). While each prayer has a slightly different wording, the narratives are based on the synoptic gospel accounts of Jesus' words at the last supper, recalling that each of the three gospel accounts, plus the Apostle Paul's words, vary in wording and emphasis. This is part of the story, absolutely, but it is not the whole story of 'real presence' in the eucharist. There are other scriptural accounts of Jesus' meals with others (especially the Road to Emmaus) which have shaped eucharistic theology, and there are a

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html)

<sup>2</sup> "The Sacraments: What are They? Who Created Them? What is Their Power?" *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, vol. 5, ed. Philip B. Secor (London: SPCK, 2003) 281.

multitude of ways to understand real presence from the scriptural accounts. In addition, while eucharistic theology depends on the trans-temporal nature of *anamnesis* (remembering), the historical account does not invite us to take a “trip into the mythic past”<sup>3</sup>, but uses that ‘once and for all’ series of events to bring us face to face with the living God now, here, for the sake of our salvation and the future fulfilment. The theological problem with a sole focus on the last supper is that it is often referred to as the institution of the eucharist. But, theologically it is the dress rehearsal for the eucharist, as the death and resurrection of Christ had not occurred – and this paschal mystery is the context for that meal, those words, and their transformative power until Christ comes again in glory. So, for the sake of our conversation today, I’m going to move away from that often solitary focus on the last supper and the institution narrative of liturgical tradition (because it is so often the only focus) and move us outward to a broad range of possibilities of ‘real’ and ‘presence’.

1. But, to expand our notions of ‘real’ and ‘presence’ in the eucharist, a primary challenge for many people is that material reality, sensed reality, is the *only* reality. This has been the case in cycles of Christian thinking historically, but it lands us in big trouble when it comes to Christian liturgy, particularly sacramental liturgy. The inability or unwillingness, or other reason, to not take seriously so much of scripture, and so much of theology means that today (as in earlier centuries) there are many who do not make the leap from material reality – matter, stuff, to and with the reality behind, above, beyond the physical. There is always more than meets the eye – that is why our creed reminds us, in one form or another, that God is the creator of all that is, seen and unseen, visible and invisible.
2. To include more than meets the eye is actually the foundation of the whole sacramental system: sacramentality, sacraments, and symbols.  
*sacramentality*: So, what is sacramentality? I’m sure most of you have heard of sacraments, many of you will have dabbled in sacramental theology, you may know sacramentals, but sacramentality? This is an umbrella term that holds these other concepts (and many more) under the broad tent that we might call the mystery of God; both God in Godself and God for us. But sacramentality is really a human perspective – how do we see the world? As Christians I hope we see the world sacramentally, which means we see God in all things. **Sacramentality then, is a perspective that makes “the things of this world so transparent that in them and through them we know God’s presence and activity in our very midst, and so experience his grace.”**<sup>4</sup> We may more readily think of the exquisite poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, who says the same thing with different words: divine presence perceived through creation, marred by human abuse, and the power of God guarding the recurring potential of creation:

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<sup>3</sup> With thanks to Robert Taft, who had many sayings like this, on which this version is based.

<sup>4</sup> Drawing in part of John Macquarrie, *A Guide to the Sacraments* (New York: Continuum, 1997) 1.

“The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
 It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
 It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
 Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod? (heed his authority)

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
 And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
 And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil  
 Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;  
 There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
 And though the last lights off the black West went  
 Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—  
 Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
 World broods with warm breast and with ah! Bright wings.  
*God’s Grandeur, 1877*<sup>5</sup>

What do we see, to whom does creation point? The world charged with the grandeur of God, the Holy Spirit brooding over creation, the presence of God – not guiding from a distance but both transcendently other and imminently present in all things, God, yearning for a closer walk with us, loving us into new relationship.

Sacramentality, of course, is not the sole possession of Christianity, it is in many ways, both interfaith and ecumenical, and has been for centuries. But, as Archbishop William Temple, has said “Christianity is the most avowedly materialistic of all the great religions,”<sup>6</sup> and therefore, “matter matters.”<sup>7</sup> And it is matter, physical stuff, that is almost always necessary for humanity to engage with and work through in God’s striving toward us and our movement into God. Both of those directions are key: God’s initiative through matter, and our faithful response through matter. John of Damascus wrote eloquently of this in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. “I do not worship matter; I worship the creator of matter, who for my sake became matter himself...[matter was] instrumental in my salvation, and for this reason is endowed with divine power and grace.”<sup>8</sup>

As Christians, we know that a primary way that ‘matter matters’ is that God became flesh, the incarnation is central to our beginning with the stuff of creation, of created beings, and moving from there to what is unseen, what is invisible to the senses, but is the reality to which sacramentality, sacraments, and symbols point. We’ll come back to the centrality of how symbols are real in a minute, let’s head back to real presence.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/hopkins/section1/>. Hopkin’s poem can be found in many online sites, I chose this one because I really enjoyed their straightforward commentary and interpretation!

<sup>6</sup> See footnote #1 above.

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Rowell, “The Significance of Sacramentality” in *The Gestures of God: Explorations in Sacramentality*, eds Geoffrey Rowell & Christine Hall. (London: Continuum, 2004) 4.

<sup>8</sup> St. John of Damascus, *De Fide Orthodoxa*, xvi.

3. Because the materiality of reality as the only 'real' body is closely tied to the concrete expression attempted historically through metaphysics (substance and accident) – chiefly the work of scholastic theologians in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, the clarity of Catherine LaCugna's summation of several strands of scholarship (in her book *God with Us*) is helpful. She writes "given the principle that person is more ultimate than nature or substance, an ontological change would be not a change in substance but a personal transformation and renewal, and a new capacity for relationship, so that our true nature may be more perfectly expressed." What does this mean with regard to the eucharist? LaCugna is suggesting that real and presence are not actually, first and foremost, physical changes of substance, but the change in a person, a transubstantiation of us, as Richard Hooker put it.
4. One helpful approach is the articulation of intersubjectivity - I draw on Joseph Bracken<sup>9</sup> who begins with a basic outline that
  1. FIRST, there is an 'uncreated transcendent other' who can be encountered (by us) and
  2. SECOND, he brings that together with an understanding that communication changes us, transforms us...So – there have to be these two subjects, us and God, and both need to be subjects willing to communicate.
  3. Bracken and others turn to the shared experience of how two humans are present to each other, reminding us that physical presence is not enough – often we are there, but not really there (emotionally or mentally somewhere else...) – so attentiveness, focus, intentionality are all important.
  4. But, in addition, they add that we have a tendency to objectify others. Perhaps because of an inability to see the other as a subject because of the subjectification of reality, perhaps because of consumerism, personal tendencies towards control, etc. The classic I-Thou relationship of two free subjects can easily be turned into an I-it relationship. (do we consume God or do we encounter God?)
  5. A subject-subject encounter, attentive, and intentional, stresses and reveals both the differences and the presence. Here, we can begin to understand the reality of the presence of God.
5. Applied to an ecclesial sacrament such as the eucharist, this focuses our attention on the encounter between subjects, not subject and object (which often is a reality for many people as the materiality of bread and wine is objectified rather than the presence of the other), and the exchange of selves. So intersubjectivity, drawn from philosophy and conversations in social sciences, can be helpful in understanding the real presence of the eucharist. This is real presence in real participation, Christ

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph Bracken, "Intersubjectivity and a Theology of Presence" in *A Sacramental Life: A Festschrift Honoring Bernard Cooke*, ed. Michael Horace Barnes & William P. Roberts. (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2003) 57.

in us and we in Christ...as well as *anamnetic* participation, remembering all that God has done, and in this moment propelling us forward, luring us by this foretaste of what will be the fullness of the heavenly banquet.

## II. The Theology of Meal as a theology of the Eucharist

Turning to the other part of our equation after “real Presence” – sharing the meal, let’s reflect on meal theology for just a bit

- A. What does it mean to eat and drink with other people? What does it mean to eat and drink as part of religious rituals? Does it matter what is eaten and what is drunk? And for Christians who practice - who do their religion - what difference is materialized because of their faith in both creation and the incarnation of God?
1. For centuries, in different cultures and places, with different menus and associations, eating together has meant many things. Who you eat with, who you do not eat with is important; when you eat, when you do not eat is important – imposed from within as much as without the human and social body. All of these are in addition, of course, to the basic human reality that to survive means we must eat – these are not basic survival issues, but issues of social survival. In addition, the pattern of having sufficient food or not having enough, has been dependent on climate, on politics, on violence, on status, and certainly, on religion. Even today, in a post-Christian, post-religious environment in large parts of the Northern Hemisphere, the ritual of eating not only remains important but as institutional religious rituals diminish for many, the spirituality of ritual is rising (in other words, the misnomer of “I’m spiritual but not religious” does not cover it...the reality is, for many, “I’m spiritual and ritual, but not religious.”)
  2. Above all, the magic is in the social spiritual dimension of connection: what Mary Douglas calls the “‘grammar’ of food-sharing practices [which] renders their messages decipherable within ‘the pattern of social relations.’”<sup>10</sup> The centrality of this fundamental human activity is evident in movies, in cooking classes, in the re-ordering of home floorplans around the kitchen, in the ‘slow food’ movement, in the rise of farmers’ markets, community gardens, local food movements, and concern about the authenticity of food. All of this is part of the connection for many between food and spirituality, the glue that holds friends and families together, often in a weekly or festive pattern of events. Even our tendency to have a drink and hors d’oeuvres together as a ‘symbolic’ meal around which we gather, to celebrate a birthday around a cake, to mark an important stage in dating someone with the meal invitation home to meet parents, or to have a meal at the centre of important dates such as Thanksgiving; all of these point to the continuing, and in many cases, recaptured, ritual of eating and drinking as central to human social activity and connection.

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<sup>10</sup> Mary Douglas, “Deciphering a Meal,” *Daedalus* 101 (1972) 61.

- B. Meals among humans have meaning – when meals are embedded in a religious system, the layers of meaning multiply. For many religions the metaphorical language of “hunger” and “thirst” already adds meanings of desire beyond the physical acts of eating and drinking, and places the physical with the metaphysical. But in a particularly helpful way in an article on religious meals, Philippe Rouillard created four categories into which religious meals can fit, and for which the addition to “human meal” is that in a religious meal the god or gods intervene in some way. His four are:
1. humans let themselves be eaten by the god, “more or less symbolically, as a sign of homage” (although human sacrifice was a facet of religious meals for centuries)
  2. Humans eat “the god, in order to receive from [the god] strength and immortality”
  3. Humans and the god “share the same meal, for example, to seal a covenant”
  4. Humans “celebrate a memorial meal in order to commemorate an event in the history of the relations between the divinity and [the] people”<sup>11</sup>
- C. Christianity and its meal practices get even more complicated, however, because while inheriting the Jewish practice of celebrating a memorial meal in order to commemorate an event, as well as a substantial fasting tradition, there is that second category of meal theology in Rouillard’s scheme – humans eat the God, in order to receive from the God strength and immortality. “I am the bread of life... Jesus said to them, ‘very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.’” (John 6)

It is difficult to imagine how appalling this must have sounded to first century Judaism: “eating a man’s body and especially drinking his blood... in a Palestinian Jewish cultural setting”<sup>12</sup> was far less about cultural and religious continuity with Judaism (even with the use of bread and wine as shared foodstuffs) than it was about a radically counter-cultural language of religious meal. But these two strands of religious meals, commemoration of the story in meal, and eating the god, along with perhaps a fifth category missing in Rouillard – a religious meal that binds its participants together in anticipation of the fullness of the kingdom of God, are all present in early Christianity and shape the complexity of Eucharistic theology to this day and into the future.

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<sup>11</sup> Philippe Rouillard, “From Human Meal to Christian Eucharist” in *Living Bread, Saving Cup*, ed. Kevin Seasoltz. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1987) 133.

<sup>12</sup> Geza Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*. (London: SCM Press, 1993) 16.

Some biblical and liturgical scholars have argued that the meals of Jesus during his ministry and continuing in the post-resurrection accounts use the “act of consuming food and drink together” as an important part of the primary point – eating together, rather than the commodity of what was eaten.<sup>13</sup> Paul Gibson, former liturgical officer for the Anglican Church of Canada, argued that this eating together was not so much about remembering the death and resurrection of Christ through the meal of the last supper, but rather an eating in reflection of and toward the fulfillment of all meals in the heavenly banquet. That feast of feasts, which on the mountain the “Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines...” (Isaiah 25:6), that feast would be a gathering that erased all divisions. This kind of banquet needed to be ‘rehearsed’ in the gatherings of followers of Jesus. Modelled on the meals of Jesus, where Christ ate with social outcasts and all manner of those with whom one should not eat, Gibson writes that “the actualization of God’s kingdom in meals and other actions of eating and drinking...involved transgression of recognized boundaries of class, race, ritual purity, sectarian division, and religious status...”<sup>14</sup> In other words what alone bound these participants together in a foretaste of the heavenly kingdom was their union in Christ – understood by the church as instigated in baptism, and what made the meal efficacious was the social and political transgressions of homogeneity. It’s not the foretaste of heaven if one only eats with others like oneself. In a very similar way, Eastern Orthodox theologian Jean Zizioulas wrote that this is not only a eucharistic requirement but essentially a fundamental marker of being church. To be church – made in the eucharist – is to step beyond the construction from the anamnestic reality of the eucharist to an “anamnesis of the future”<sup>15</sup> – church as eschatological event signified in a substantial way by the gathering together in the same place of people who by their very diversity, by the very unlikelihood that they would ever gather together, show forth the Kingdom of God in this assembly. So, even within this last section on the complexity of Christian meals – the tension (a life-giving tension between historical roots and future fulfilment as the primary guide for forming interpretation, can be seen as an ongoing contribution to the reality that there are multiple theologies, multiple meanings, to the eucharist.

- D. And so we move to contemporary eucharistic practice with the deep inheritance of first, a religious meal in which one eats God, or a symbol of God which itself must truly participate in the reality which it symbolizes, thereby receiving strength and immortality; a religious meal in which the story is retold and then eaten, remembering and finding the community present again in an ancient act of liberation and in recommitment to the divine-human relationship; and third, a religious meal eaten together as God’s people, which means eating with those whose very company

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<sup>13</sup> See Paul Gibson “Forum: Eucharistic Food – May We Substitute?” *Worship* (2002) 446

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 254.



transgresses social boundaries and expectations, so that the heavenly banquet is foreshadowed, anticipated, and nudged towards fulfillment.

It probably goes without saying, but perhaps I'll say it anyway, the facile and misleading dichotomy of many a poorly constructed sermon that opposes meal and sacrifice is simply wrong. All meal involves sacrifice – an animal died, perhaps suffered, for you to eat, or the potential for life was ended in the eating of eggs and even grain – the seed that contains everything, all the potential that would be a living plant or being, must die to produce and then die again. The hard work of growing and harvesting these foods is often disproportionate to those who have enough to eat. The planet suffers from growing the wrong things in the wrong places, or the use of chemicals that raise the marketable yield and damage the environment. All meal is sacrifice, and the eucharist may be nourishment, but it is also always sacrifice.

### III. The meal at the centre of our lives

So real, presence, and meal theology – the other title that we were to deal with today is the meal at the centre of our lives, which brings us back to symbol and centre (to augment real, presence, and sacramentality).

- A. “Symbols give rise to thought...” to quote Paul Ricoeur,<sup>16</sup> we start with the first level of a symbol, usually something tangible, material, which points beyond itself to a plethora of meanings, what does water mean? What does bread mean? What does wine mean?
- B. But we cannot stop there, symbols may all be (or include) signs, but signs are not symbols.<sup>17</sup> Signs do not participate in the reality they signify – they point to it. A deer sign is not, in reality, part deer – it simply points to it. A road sign with antlers hanging on it – might be confusing, but it begins to lead us down the path of a symbol which participates in the reality to which it points, to which it signifies, and does not mean one thing – it means many things, it needs interpretation.
- C. The meal, with its layers and layers of meaning – human, religious, Christian, salvific, symbolic, sacramental is not just at the centre of our life – it is that, and it is our life – the means of our life. It is the means of encounter, of engagement with God. It is the action of God, it is communion with God, and by extension from that divine-human communion, communion with one another. And this “works” because of symbol – pointing beyond what meets the eye AND participating in the very reality toward which it points
- D. The eucharist as meal, therefore, is not to be domesticated, even though it begins with the familiar, with matter – it is meal and encounter and sacrifice and offering and foretaste of heaven and tradition (living) and a commandment of Christ and the practice of the whole communion of saints, until he comes again...

<sup>16</sup> *The Symbolism of Evil*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967) 347.

<sup>17</sup> A point developed by Ricoeur, *ibid*, 15.

- E. But, in putting real presence and meal theologies together, there is one additional and crucial theology: sacraments are symbols, symbols are real, but to the point here, symbols always point to something greater than what they are, and they participate in that which they signify. If the presence, the real presence, is somehow understood as complete, say in the consecrated bread and wine, to what do the symbols point?

What is also essential is real absence which reminds us that it cannot be “complete” or done. This is not the same as a memorialist stance toward eucharist presence, real absence is in ongoing tension with real presence, it is an eschatological lure, rather than a void. It is biblically rooted in the Apostle Paul, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (I Cor. 11:26)

Real absence reminds us, the church, but especially the clergy, that we do not possess or control the fullness of God’s presence, we do not make God do anything. We live in the tension of already-not yet, we still pray, even after countless eucharistic celebrations, “Come Lord”.

Real Absence is an essential dimension, it helps us remember the future, pointing toward the real presence complete in the mode of “futura” full real presence.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See Lizette Larson-Miller, *Sacramentality Renewed*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016.