



# Theology Corner

Vol 78 – February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019

*Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation*

---

## “Is Christ *Physically* Present in the Eucharist?”

---

When discussing the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, I have heard quite a few people use the terminology that Christ is *physically* present. Because of this misunderstanding, I wanted to offer a little bit of clarification. As Catholics, we absolutely affirm the real presence of Christ: Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity, in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, under the species of either bread or wine. However, while this is a *real* presence, it is **not** considered a *physical* presence. When we speak of the physical aspect of things, we are talking about the material characteristics of something that exists in the real world. For us to say that Christ is physically present, would be to say that the bread and wine that we are consuming when we go up to receive communion is really human flesh and blood. Actually, this is not a new idea. Even some in the early Church had accused Catholics of being cannibals. But this is certainly *not* the case. In fact, the Catholic Church teaches that the physical (accidental) aspect of the bread and wine remain the same. This is essential to understanding why we are not cannibalistic when we receive Christ in the Eucharist. The accidents of bread and wine remain the same, while the underlying *identity* of the bread and wine is transformed.

We are all likely familiar with the term *transubstantiation*. I think this term really makes clear what is actually happening at the consecration. The *substance* of bread and wine transform into the body and blood of Christ. We cannot consider the word “substance” to be in reference to physical matter like we would commonly use it in modern scientific terms. The Latin word *substantia* means “to stand under.” This philosophical definition is what we mean by transubstantiation. Again, it is the underlying identity of the bread and wine that supernaturally changes into the body and blood of Christ. That’s what it means when the Church says that the substance changes while the accidents (physical characteristics) remain the same.

This, I think, is a great clarification to make because it shows how Christ’s divinity always remains *one*. If his divinity was physically present in the Eucharist, that would mean each of us gets a physical “part” of his body, blood, soul, and divinity in each host. However, the Church teaches that God in his divinity is “one”, so this would be impossible. But this issue is resolved when we have the correct understanding of his “substantial” presence in the Eucharist, because the very identity of the bread and wine becomes Christ’s body and blood. So, it can now be understood why it is that Christ is *fully* present in even one crumb of the consecrated host, or just one drop of the consecrated wine.

That being said, I do not want to make it seem like this is very obvious. As the Catechism points out, St. Thomas Aquinas makes it clear that the real presence is not apprehended by the senses, but only by faith which relies on divine authority” (CCC, 1381). Substantial presence is not something that we can perceive through our senses since it is the identity that “stands under” the physical characteristics of it. But in our common experience, when something changes substance, the corresponding accidents change with it. For example, when the palms from Palm Sunday are burned to ash for Ash Wednesday, the palms cease to be “palms” and undergo a new identity as “ash.” However, with the Eucharist, there is a supernatural transformation that does not involve any accidental changes.

The concept of substance can be hard to fully understand without a lot of philosophical study, but I will offer one example that should make it clear. We are human beings in substance. In other words, it is our underlying identity to be a human being. But it can be the case that some of our accidental properties change, such as: losing an arm or a leg, or having a total change in appearance by being burned in a fire. In both cases, we are still human beings. In more modern parlance, one would say something like, “Even if a person looks different, they didn’t change on the inside.” Well, in this usage, it is precisely the case that while the bread and wine do not transform physically into Christ, once the bread and wine have been consecrated, they are indeed Christ himself “on the inside.”