

**Bread for the Wilderness** Reflecting on the Eucharist in small faith-sharing groups.  
Faith-Sharing Group Kick-Off Presentation Sunday, October 3, 2010 7:00 PM

I am very happy to be able to speak to you on the issue of Eucharist because the **Eucharist is really the topic or the issue that makes Catholicism distinct.** There is nothing that is quite as important as that. The Church has for some twenty centuries held that the **Eucharist is the source and summit of our worship.** Now that's easy to say, but what does it mean?

It is very interesting that during the Reformation the reformers did not believe that the Eucharist was the source and summit of worship, and they did not believe it was historically so, but this was something that developed later. But now we know historically that it really was **in the early Church the center and the source of the Church's life.**

### Source

So what does it mean to say that the Eucharist is the source of our worship? Well, the source of our worship is the risen Christ. St. Paul says that the foundation of Christian faith is the belief in the resurrection. So when we relate to God **we relate to God through the risen Christ.** It is the risen Christ who has reconciled us to the Father and made true worship possible, that is, **worship in Spirit and truth,** as Jesus remarked to the Samaritan woman. He says this is just what the Father desires: worship in Spirit and truth.

Now this does not mean that other forms of worship have no validity to them. Surely the worship of the temple had some validity, and all forms of true prayer have some validity. But worship in Spirit and truth has to do with **a wholehearted unity between the human heart and God.** And that is **brought about through Christ and only through Christ.**

Now sometimes people say, "Well, don't you Catholics—aren't you really cannibals because you are eating a dead body?" Well, no, **we are eating the living Christ, the resurrected Christ, the glorified Christ.** And we have to keep that in mind. It is not some historical thing in the past that we are celebrating. It is true that in the way in which liturgy progresses, in the words of the liturgy, and even in the words of institution, the death of Christ is represented as something that happened in the past. And it did. **The death of Christ happened in the past, and it will not happen again.** He died once. But **the Eucharist itself is the living presence of the resurrected Christ.**

### Summit

So what does it mean by summit? What is the summit? **Jesus continues his work of reconciliation and atonement.** Atonement is an idea that is found in the Old Testament. It takes a little bit of unpacking because in the **Old Testament atonement** was only possible for **indeliberate, involuntary sins.** Now if you live by the law and the law has

six hundred-thirteen written stipulations and ten thousand interpretations, then involuntary infractions are inevitable. So that's what atonement is about.

Deliberate violations of the Decalogue itself did not allow for atonement. **There was no such thing as atonement for violations of the Decalogue itself.** The punishment that was meted out according to law for violations of any one of the ten stipulations, the Decalogue, was death—**death in every case.** In the case of the first commandment it was not only death to the perpetrator, the one who violated the law by worshipping a false god, but actually to the entire three and four generations of that person's family. So this is a violent way of life. Now the question might be raised: Did the people of the Old Testament really enforce the law literally and kill everyone who violated it? The answer is probably no, but nonetheless that was the idea.

Now at first, until the sixth century, women were exempt from the law. Only men were bound, and only men who had reached adolescence. Children and women were excluded. But in the sixth century in the reform of Josiah women became included as well. Now there is a rather funny story; it's funny if you know the background of it, about the woman caught in adultery. Actually women being stoned for adultery was an add-on. It was the man that was supposed to be stoned, and not only was supposed to be, but had to be. That was the requirement. They were trying to protect marriage, I guess. Anyway, that is the way it was in the Old Testament.

Now **Jesus completely changes this whole attitude toward law and introduced the idea that all sin can be atoned for, and indeed God desires** this because God really is compassion and love. And incidentally, that's a quotation from one of the psalms. But as is so often the case some of the most beautiful ideas were not taken very literally. Cruder ideas were taken literally, but more delicate or sophisticated ideas were not. In this case Jesus took that literally that **God really is mercy and compassion** and therefore desired atonement, desired reconciliation for all people.

Now how this comes about involves his death in some way, but we cannot exactly describe what he thought because it's not in the Bible, nor is there in the Bible a theology to explain it. People have tried this, but it doesn't really work. No, we have to say that Jesus had some idea that his death was atoning, but we don't know precisely why. At any rate **the Letter to the Hebrews carries this idea of Jesus' atoning death and continues it in terms of a continual intercession that the heavenly Christ performs.** So it is not simply an event that happened in time, but it is an eternal reality that always is: Jesus' eternal intercession and atonement for the sins of all who go to him for intercession and atonement.

This is the role that is called his **High Priestly role.** In the Letter to the Hebrews the author describes heaven as a prototype of the earthly temple in which there is this empty room. We know it is the Holy of Holies. It had only one thing in it, a chair, a seat, called the *Kaporeth*. That means the seat of atonement. In Greek it was called *Hilasterion*, and it was there that the invisible God dwelt on earth. Once a year the high priest entered with the blood of the atonement. That's on **Yom Kippur**; that's what Yom Kippur is about. And he poured the blood in front of the mercy seat to atone for the involuntary,

indeliberate sins of the people. Now the Letter to the Hebrews uses that knowledge and that custom and that ritual and says now **Jesus is pouring forth the blood that he shed on the cross before the mercy seat of heaven in the true Holy of Holies.** And this is an eternal event that always is, and therefore the believers have access to mercy and reconciliation and forgiveness through this high priestly ministry of Christ.

Now as the Fathers reflected on the Eucharist they said, well, the blood that Christ is pouring forth in the Holy of Holies in heaven is **the very same blood that is in our chalices on our altars,** and therefore this is a presentation on earth of the heavenly atonement, the heavenly sacrifice of Christ. In the Eastern Church this idea led to the building of churches in a temple nature, in a temple style with curtains and doors and so on. In the West, however, even though the theology was accepted, the Roman Church did not follow this practice of building churches like temples and rather used the basilica model, which is more a model of public assembly. Nonetheless, **this is how the ideas of sacrifice become associated with Eucharist.**

### **Fruits of Christ's Redeeming Love**

Now what are the fruits of Christ's redeeming love? In a word, **eternal life.** What does Christ really offer to those who come to him in faith? The answer is **the life of God** himself. Eternal life means God's life. There is no such thing as eternity outside of God; only God is eternal. This is a biblical belief not shared by everybody in the world. For example, Albert Einstein thought that the universe was eternal until his students pointed out to him that it didn't agree with his own calculations. His calculations showed that the universe was expanding, although he didn't believe that could be possibly true, but they showed him, well, this is what this means. And we know that eventually led to the theory of the Big Bang, which is now widely accepted, meaning the universe had a beginning, which means it cannot be eternal.

When the late medieval or you might say early enlightenment Jewish atheist Spinoza promoted the idea of atheism, he promoted it by saying, well, actually the whole universe is divine. That's also called "pantheism." But, of course, that would mean the whole universe always was exactly as it is because that's what divine means: always necessarily is. So **since only God is eternal what Jesus is offering to his followers is God's own life,** and nothing less, and therefore **a share within the relatedness of the Trinity,** to be brought into the Trinity as he himself in his human nature lives within the Trinity, **sharing his human knowledge of God and his human love of God.** This now becomes ours. In traditional way of talking this is called "opening the gates of heaven." The gates of heaven is a way of talking about the humanity of Christ. It is his humanity that makes it possible for us human beings to live in God. Without his humanity it would not be possible.

### **Transformation**

So now we are invited into this life, this new life, and **this life requires and demands transformation.** This word is found throughout the New Testament, and yet it's amazing that many people don't pay too much attention to it. What does it mean to talk about

transformation? Well, first of all **let me distinguish transformation from transubstantiation**. That's a different word. That's a metaphysical idea from the thirteenth century that was used to say that the bread and the wine, the elements used in the Eucharist, remain outwardly the same, taste the same, look the same, feel the same, smell the same, but inwardly their essence changes. That's what transubstantiation means. But transformation does not mean that.

**Transformation means** that the human nature which has been harmed by belonging to, by living in this sinful world and being affected by sin and being in solidarity with sin, this **human nature is reconstituted**. So transformation involves the idea of **rebirth, which of course comes with faith and Baptism**. Baptism brings a new birth which is not in the physical order. As it says in the Fourth Gospel: "Flesh begets flesh"—the rebirth is not about that—"Spirit begets spirit"—that's what the rebirth is about. It's about a **spiritual newness within the human nature**. And as time went on theologians have come to believe or say that this represents the original intention of God in the first place. It's not an after-thought. It's not: "well, things are such a mess, I better go do something," but rather **in God's original intention in creating the human nature, he created it in such a way that it could be transformed into the divine**. And Aquinas says very clearly that Christ became human so that we could become divine. The Fathers of the Church say we become God. Those are ways of speaking, manners of speaking, but they mean **we really do share in the divine nature. But for that to take place we have to be transformed** because in our fleshly existence, in our first birth, that is not the case.

## **Eucharist**

So the **Eucharist now becomes a means** or a way or—and certainly also a sign, a means and a sign—**of our being transformed**. But for this to take place we have to understand that **the Eucharist is meant to be consumed**. Believe it or not, this was debated in the Middle Ages: Was the Eucharist for consumption? Well, they knew the priest had to consume. There was the canon law and, of course, you can't go against canon law! No one would think about that! But was it really for the people? Well, no, a lot of people thought it really wasn't for the people. When the Fourth Lateran Council said that people must go to Eucharist once a year, it was because they weren't going even once a year. This is not necessarily because of some exaggerated sense of unworthiness. It was simply because they didn't think they should. It just wasn't what it was for. Some people thought Eucharist was to look at or to adore.

So the Council of Trent said, *Ut sumatur institutum*, "it is instituted to be consumed." And so the eating process, because consumption is eating, eating and drinking, is part of the very meaning of the Eucharist. We can't understand the Eucharist unless we see it as food and drink. So **the very reason why Christ instituted the Eucharist was to be eaten and consumed, and food itself is transformative**. We become what we eat in one sense of the word, chemically—that's true. That's why we are supposed to watch our diets. We eat the wrong thing, we become the wrong thing, but only our bodies, as far as I know. But what we eat takes our form. So we become protein or we become whatever, amino acids, or we become fat; that amino acid or protein or fat takes our form. So this is a very interesting and powerful image and symbol of what transformation is about, and

therefore Eucharist is about. **So it is with Eucharist we take on the divine qualities.** That's a word meaning **the energy and the form of God as exemplified in the human nature of Christ.** Whatever we take on always has to be in the human form; nothing can receive anything except in its own form. So we take on the divine qualities exemplified in Christ, and **this is what it means to receive the Eucharist worthily and fervently.**

### **Properly Prepared**

Now in order for the Eucharist to do its work, in a sense we have to be properly prepared. Number one, we have to be free of all serious sin; since serious sin is an abrupt rupture of our relation with God, we can't possibly grow in the Eucharist while we are living in sin. So **we have to be totally desirous of forgiveness and willing to leave behind all serious sin.**

Now the Church adds a law, which is really Church law, that says we must confess our sins in the **sacrament of Penance** if we are aware of serious sin. That's a Church law. **It's meant to make us more disposed to receive the gift of the Eucharist** because without a desire to please God we cannot become God, obviously. And, in fact, if we could, if you think about it, that would be diabolical. If we were able to take in divine qualities while not being desirous of pleasing God or serving God, that would be terribly dangerous. You wouldn't want people like that in the world.

### **St. Paul and Who We Are**

Now St. Paul dealt with the idea of transformation in terms of how it changes our idea of who we are. So we think: Who are we? When we grow up we get ideas from all around. Our parents give us ideas. Our friends give us ideas. Our enemies give us ideas. Culture gives us ideas. It comes from all kinds of different places. But there are also **different levels in the human makeup.**

### **Physical and Spiritual**

**We all identify with our bodies.** Children if they get into a fight, come and say, "He hit me." They don't say he hit my body or he hit my arm. "He hit me." We identify with our bodies very easily. Children do this. St. Paul says as we grow in a Spirit of Christ we move away from the material level or the level of the flesh, if you want to call it that, and **we start to think about ourselves more in spiritual ways.** We move away from a sense-based idea that I am what I see, I am what I get. No, **we start to realize that what we really are is somewhat mysterious and really not something we can easily define.** We become a mystery to ourselves, which is actually good. Hopefully we carry with that sense of mystery, a certain acceptance also that we cannot and will not completely understand all that we are.

At any rate our bodies are no longer the center and the central fact of our being. And this **allows us to change our attitude toward suffering and death.** If we believe we are our bodies, which is a natural instinct, instinctive awareness, then we fear death. The Letter to the Hebrews, again, said the devil has kept the world in bondage by the fear of death. It's not that the devil created the fear of death. That's instinctive. But if we don't

believe in anything more than our bodies, then that fear becomes a form of bondage and will make it impossible to live a truly virtuous life, because we will run from every threat.

## Emotional

The second level that St. Paul talks about is the level of our emotions. Now that's also something **we identify with, our feelings**. But looking at our feelings we can see that as we are just thrown into life we tend to be anxious and insofar as we identify with our bodies, we tend to be fearful for our health and welfare and often angry insofar as anger is a reaction to being threatened or abused. And these emotions, some people call them self-emotions, can be the dominant factors in our feeling repertoire, our feeling life. And that's not very rich; that's very poor. **St. Paul then talks about how we can be transformed and our feeling life can be now the fruits of the Spirit.**

## Fruits of the Spirit

Now in addition to anxiety and anger and fear we could add all of the traps that our tradition called "**the deadly sins**": pride, envy, greed, lust, and so on. These are all emotional in a certain nature and they motivate, as emotions motivate, certain behaviors which are **negative, and therefore they are traps**. But the **fruits of the Spirit are very emotional, but they are not traps. They are all forms of freedom**: charity, which is ultimately the unconditioned love of others; joy—joy cannot be produced in your body by the will—joy is a gift. Peace—so many people are so desirous of peace. Well, the only real peace comes from the Spirit of God as a gift. Patience, kindness, generosity, non violence—meekness means non violence because if we are full of the Spirit of God we don't want to be violent toward anyone. Self-control. These are the fruits of the Spirit. And this is **a transformation of our emotional nature**. It doesn't happen all at once, mind you, but it does happen.

## Mental

Thirdly, our mental understanding, our intellectual understanding, if you will, of who we are changes, is transformed. **No longer do we think of ourselves as an individual, alone, but rather we think of ourselves as a member of a body**. To borrow John's imagery, we think of ourselves as a branch on a vine. Our reality is itself very incomplete, our personal reality. It is itself an opening to something larger, and that has to be part of our identity or our self-awareness. So we become a member of the body of Christ. And in Paul, **in St. Paul, the body of Christ means both the Eucharist and the Church**. But in this case **the Church means those who eat the body of Christ and drink the blood of Christ**. That is what makes the Church the Church. So Christ builds his body through the Eucharist. And we understand the work in bits and pieces. But it is **God's work, transforming who we are and how we see ourselves, how we feel about ourselves, how we think about ourselves, and therefore how we act**.

## Unity of All Creation

In turn now **the Church or the body of Christ becomes a symbol of the unity of all creation since nothing is created to be separate**. All the mystics actually of all religions

have always seen a fundamental unity to all things. And St. Paul says that this unity is an unfinished project, but God is gradually becoming “all in all.” But this waits for our approval. **We have to cooperate with this process of God becoming all in all.** We have to give God leeway in ourselves. And so we see it’s a very slow process. St. Paul talks as if he understands it’s a slow process, but at the same time probably he thought it would be finished within a few years. Almost everybody in the early Church believed that the end of the world would be coming quite soon. And then in the Middle Ages they thought it would be then. And, of course, there are people today who think it is going to be now. I wouldn’t bet on it!

## **Beatitudes**

Now the transformation begins a new life for the community which is expressed in the **beatitudes**. This is the key to understanding how the community lives out this new transformation.

**“Blessed are the poor in spirit.”** It is not what they have that tell them who they are, but **what tells them who they are, is the kingdom they belong to.** They belong to it and it belongs to them. This is a new way of being. And the very idea of blessed—this idea of **blessedness has nothing to do with materiality**, although people have usually thought of blessedness in terms of what they have, going back to Abraham. He was supposed to be a blessing. Well, what does that mean? Well, people were supposed to do well around him, do well and be well, which is not bad. But the idea of blessedness is deeper in Scripture. **We are blessed because God is in our lives and because we are in God.**

**“Blessed are they who mourn.”** Grief is still real, but there is no hopelessness for the community, for anyone in the community. God’s presence is in the community. We have loved ones and when we lose a loved one that is sad and naturally there is grieving going on, but **the community also mediates the presence of God, and, after all, who is a loved one but someone who has been a minister of God to us.** We say literally in Matrimony or Marriage the wife and the husband minister God to each other, but in a certain way that is true of all true forms of love, married or otherwise. So even when there is loss, there is **nonetheless the healing presence of God in the community.** So we can say, “Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” The comfort, of course, comes from **the Holy Spirit, who is the Comforter; and the Holy Spirit lives and abides in the hearts of the community that is able then to touch and to be with the grieving.** And, indeed, the comfort is not only for the grieving, but for all in pain. The Holy Spirit **helps the community deal with all pain and suffering** because the **Holy Spirit is the very soul of the community, the soul of the body of Christ as an assembly of those who consume the Eucharist.** And there is always an element of unfinished business in the life of the body.

**“Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, they will be satisfied.”** How? Well, first of all, hunger is a very acute instinct—thirst perhaps even more so. So to **hunger and thirst** for justice or for righteousness means to be **motivated toward that beyond everything else.** If you are really hungry, and we probably don’t know what hunger is; I don’t think we do, most of us. We might know what thirst is, maybe. But

when you are really thirsty, let's say being out in the hot weather and doing a lot of work or something, pretty soon you can't do anything until you take care of that thirst. And people who are really hungry can't do anything until they take care of that hunger, which is one reason why the poor often don't do anything. They can't. So this is a motivation to action, this thirst and hunger. **We can't do anything until we get moving, and nothing will abate that hunger except action within the body for justice, for righteousness.** So the members of the body are drawn into service for justice, which of course changes the world because the **Church is sent to the world.** It isn't something that is supposed to exist in a hermetic seal.

Now there were all kinds of religions that talked about faith sealing a person against the world. And Christianity did, unfortunately, experience some of that influence. So there have been forms of spirituality, forms of religious life, in which the community was sealed against the world. But that is not actually biblical. That is not the New Testament. That doesn't go back to Christ. Rather, he sends the apostles right to the world and so therefore the community, **his body, has to be working for this world to bring about changes in the world that also edify the community** because as the community works the community is edified. **As we minister we are ministered to.** And this is, again, the work of the Eucharist. The Eucharist is motivating all of this.

**“Blessed are the pure of heart.”** The grace of the Eucharist unveils the face of Christ in others as it strips away the impurity of pride and self-centeredness. The clean of heart, the pure of heart, are **those who have lost their centeredness on self, who have gone through the transformation physically, emotionally, and intellectually, who now understand themselves in a different way and who are working and committed to living in Christ rather than in self.** And as that self-centeredness is cleansed from us we start to see Christ. “Blessed are they who are pure of heart, they shall see God.” We see God in each other, in others, in the world, in everything because **God actually is everywhere. And only our self-centeredness blinds us to this.**

So gradually just as a lump of dough rises with the yeast, so **the Eucharist transforms the community that feasts upon it and then through action and witness of this body of Christ the whole world is reclaimed by Christ for the glory of the Father.**

**Now this work is God's work and it depends on God's power, which we call “grace.”** It does not work without **our cooperation.** We have to put out the effort to ponder, to understand, to accept, to cooperate with, to strive, to embody. Hopefully during this next period of small group work, you will be **able to aid one another** and they will be able to aid you in seeing just how this process is touching each of us at this time and how we might be able to become more open to it.