

Bread: Big B or Little b?

by Brent T. Zeringue

Six hundred boys were present one morning at the oratory for Mass with Don Bosco. Since the ciborium in the tabernacle only had about 20 hosts, the sexton prepared another ciborium for consecration. But at the last moment he forgot it in the sacristy. At communion time, Don Bosco uncovered the ciborium from the tabernacle and a look of distress came over his face. The altar boys observed that he lifted his eyes to heaven, quietly prayed, and then advanced to give communion. One row after another of boys came forth and at the end all were able to receive with as many hosts left over as when he had started. The news of the multiplication of the Bread of Life spread and the boys crowded around him after Mass: "Miracle! Miracle! Don Bosco is a saint!" Don Bosco said in all humility, "Are you sure?" Then he added, "When you think of it, boys, isn't the Eucharist *always* a miracle?"

Always a miracle. Don Bosco said a boy was ready for his First Communion if he understood the difference between bread with a little "b" and Bread with a big "B". At 2 AM, in the wee hours of the night, with our tired bodies, we are in the presence of Bread with a big "B". We call this special time *Yawns for Christ*. But why are we here, yawning for Christ? Without trumpets blaring, the King visits anyway. No red carpets are unrolled, but the entire empire is in the monsternonetheless. If God wrote on the clouds tomorrow that He would be making a visit to planet earth in a week, billions of people would spend every dollar they owned to make way to the site of His appearance. They would pay a fortune for the miracle. And yet, we ignore the simple privilege of what is available every day to any Catholic in the world. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Tonight we are in the presence of the God who made the sun...the sun on which every second 5 million tons of hydrogen fuse into helium. Camouflaged as bread, we have before us the God who made our sun as only one of the 100 billion stars in our Galaxy; the God who made our Galaxy so big that the sun takes 200 million years to go around it one time; the God who took our Galaxy and placed it a universe with millions of other known galaxies and probably billions yet unknown. But this God comes to us not as a supernova in the evening sky or a king in the grandest palace, but as a poor Carpenter, disguised tonight, to paraphrase Mother Teresa, in the distressing disguise of Bread. Every star in this vast universe finds its origin tonight in this Monsternonetheless. We are sitting in the presence of the architect of our identity. This is the best seat in the universe tonight. Let's take out the telescope of human reason and do a little exploring.

What concerns our separated brothers, and too many Catholics, is that they can not see Christ in the Eucharist. Of course, neither can they see the thoughts that flow in their heads or the love that flows in their hearts, but this does not cause them to stop thinking or loving. God seems to them to be an elusive black hole, concealing His identity in the Eucharist. But if He did otherwise, would they really rush to the table? Since 700 A.D. He has appeared on the altar at Lanciano as flesh and blood – type AB to be exact -- and still they abstain. It is as much mercy as mystery that He conceals His identity in bread. I, for one, am quite content to consume an ordinary Host rather than the Host of Lanciano. What we have here in the miracle of the altar is an opportunity to partake in *microscopic*

sanctification. Not microscopic in that if we had more powerful lenses we could discover Him; rather, microscopic in the sense that what appears to our senses as ordinary bread and wine conceals a hidden treasure of graces. The microscopic sanctification offered by the Eucharist should have us lined up every day for the Food that can transform us **from the inside** so that we can go forth **to the outside**, doing the will of God, bringing **macroscopic** sanctification to the whole world.

The Eucharist has the power to transform because it IS Jesus. Though some claim to believe Jesus, and kiss their bibles to prove it, they do not believe the Word of God when He says, "This **is** my body". It makes you wonder -- what part of **IS** don't they understand? Many Protestants, and not a few Catholics, deny the Real Presence. But even Martin Luther understood something of the word "IS". Luther says, "Who, but the devil, hath granted such license of wresting the words of the holy Scripture? Who ever read in Scriptures, that **my** body is the same as the **sign of my body**? or, that **is** is the same as it **signifies**? What language in the world ever spoke so?"

Still, the Eucharist only has the power to transform us if we receive Him in a state of grace. As a priest friend recently said: "It is very important that we be humble enough to avoid receiving Holy Communion when we are aware of any mortal sin. Sometimes it is too easy to jump into the communion line without properly examining ourselves or without having the courage to stay in the pew because we are afraid of what others might think." What a radical! Not really -- he was merely echoing Christ, speaking *in persona Christi*. Remember, speaking through Paul, Christ first said, "...*whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily sins against the body and blood of the Lord. A man should examine himself first; only then should he eat of the bread and drink of the cup. He who eats and drinks without recognizing the body eats and drinks a judgment on himself.*" If we're talking here about bread with a little "b", only a symbol, why did He instruct us to eat it? Who eats symbols? If it is little "b", how can you sin against bread? As Judas and the others walked away they said in Jn 6: "...*this sort of talk is hard to endure. Who can take it seriously?*" That's just the point -- it wasn't just "**talk**". It was reality. The reality that God has power over matter is not something with which we are altogether comfortable. It is why the Jehovah Witnesses can not accept the Incarnation. It is why most Protestants can not accept transubstantiation. But C.S. Lewis did. He writes: "He uses material things like bread and wine to put new life into us. We may think this rather crude and unspiritual. God does not. He invented eating. He likes matter." God likes matter. He didn't snap His fingers and call the debt settled. No, He took on flesh to save us. The Eucharist – the perpetual incarnation of Calvary. God the Father gave us the Bread of Life on Calvary; Mary gave us the Bread of Life in Bethlehem. Bethlehem – a word that means "House of Bread."

Despite cleverly crafted two hour sermons, big box churches, exciting youth programs, and well-funded Sunday schools, the most fabulous and roaring Protestant congregation can never leave you feeling full as can the simplest Catholic Mass celebrated by the lowliest priest in the poorest parish in the world. Quite simply, the Catholic altar really is a table. One eats at a table. With all due respect, our Protestant brothers are all dressed up with nothing to eat. What else in the whole universe will ever fill you if the God who

created the whole universe can not? When one has Christ in his body, one is as full as he will ever be.

The Eucharist reveals many things to us if we see with the eyes of Faith. In the biological world, it is known that we are what we eat. The proteins in the meats we eat give our bodies the amino acids to form proteins, for example. And Christ confirms this biological and theological meeting in the Eucharist when He says, "*The man who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him.*" You can make the connection -- the body and blood, soul and divinity of Christ is consumed and invades the membranes of our cells, pushing deeper and deeper down into the minute organelles. Imagine millions of mitochondria, the energy factories of the cell, now switched on by the ultimate energy source, *the God who gave light to the stars*. This is why the reality of Eucharistic miracles and healings can not long surprise us. This is why we can understand how saints like Catherine of Sienna subsisted solely on bread with a big "B". As someone said, the Eucharist is God hugging us from the inside. *Microscopic sanctification*. If we fully understood it, it wouldn't be a mystery. If it wasn't a mystery, it wouldn't require Faith. If it didn't require Faith, it wouldn't be such a great gift. But as St. Francis de Sales asked, "Why shall he who made all things out of nothing, not make the body of Christ out of bread?"

Vatican II calls the Eucharist the source and summit of the Christian life. Indeed! But the Eucharist is more than merely the food for microscopic sanctification. It is also the springboard for our apostolic zeal. *Communion feeds community*. For there to be true community, true brotherhood, there must be *common blood*. The Christian pedigree originates with baptism, the indelible mark of our family tree. But the Eucharist sustains that kinship. In the Eucharist *we truly become blood brothers*. It is a fraternity that is more than the *symbolic* blood of the lamb; it is brotherhood sealed by the *common* blood of our brother, Christ. We thirst...Christ gives His blood. We drink...Christ gives His life. We take His life out into the world and reclaim the modern world for Christ. Microscopic sanctification gives birth to macroscopic sanctification. We eat so that we can work for the Kingdom.

The Hebrews hastily prepared unleavened bread because the exodus left no time for the Bread to Rise. Reminiscent of that call to live in a new land, Roman Catholics likewise consume unleavened, consecrated Bread. Should we live a thousand lifetimes, we too would lack the time to adequately prepare for our exodus into the Promised Land. This is why the Eucharist is a perpetual sacrifice, a constant bridge between what was done on Calvary and what is being completed in us when we take Communion. We will never be fully ready for the Great Commission, but the Eucharist nourishes us as we venture into the Valley of Tears on our sojourn Home. The Ascent is not easy, but as the Italian mountain-climbing Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati reminded us, Verso l'alto! -- "Toward the Top!"

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