

Has the sacrament become just a symbolic reminder?

Many Catholics no longer know what the Eucharist is all about. What happened?

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According to a New York Times/CBS poll, a few weeks back, roughly two American Catholic adults out of three think the consecrated bread and wine at Mass are "symbolic reminders" of Christ, not Christ's Body and Blood.

The figures are 70 percent among Catholics aged 18-29 and 30-44; 58 percent for those 45-64, and 45 percent for those 65 and older. Other polls have come up with similar findings.

The time is past to speak of an erosion of faith in the Eucharist among American Catholics. The problem now is not erosion, but collapse.

Belief that the consecrated bread and wine are the Real Presence of Jesus Christ — Body and Blood, soul and divinity, as an old formula puts it — is central to Catholic faith. The collapse of that belief is a disaster.

What has caused it? What can be done? Here are some thoughts.

The causes are complex. Some lie beyond the direct reach of the Church. One fundamental cause is the general secularizing of Western culture underway for several centuries.

This secularizing process has given a position of cultural dominance to a rationalistic, scientific world view which, although irrational and ideologically driven, saps many people's capacity for faith in realities of a transcendent, supernatural nature. This is one of the central challenges to faith in our times.

Trends within the Church also have weakened belief in the Real Presence.

Back in the 1960s, for instance, several theologians put forward theories about the Eucharist according to which the reality of bread and wine are changed simply because of the change in their meaning ("transignification") or their use ("transfinalization").

In 1965, in the encyclical *Mysterium Fidei* (on the Holy Eucharist), Pope Paul VI rejected these views and repeated the firm teaching of the Church. As a result of the change effected at the Consecration — a change the Church calls "transubstantiation" — the meaning and use of the bread and wine do change, he said. But that is because they have become "a new reality" — Christ's Body and Blood.

"Once the substance or nature of the bread and wine has been changed into the Body and Blood of Christ," Pope Paul VI wrote, "nothing remains of the bread and the wine except for the species — beneath which Christ is present whole and entire in His physical reality, corporeally present, although not in the manner in which bodies are in a place."

That should have been the end of it, but it wasn't. Ideas rejected by Pope Paul continued to be spread by some liturgists and catechists. They are being spread even now.

Often this is done more or less subtly, without specifically denying Catholic teaching. That happens, for instance, by stressing the reality of the change brought about by a shift in the meaning of bread and wine.

too much wine, for instance, then discarding the excess), virtual abandonment of eucharistic devotions and thanksgiving after Mass.

An especially sensitive set of causes concerns questions of sin and penance — for example, the lesson implicitly taught by omitting first confession before first Communion, and in some cases even delaying confession indefinitely.

Even worse, in its impact on eucharis-

An incident in the life of St. Elizabeth Seton sheds some light on the way out of this bad situation.

After the death of her husband in Italy, she spent some time staying there with his business associates. They were devout Catholics, whose devotion to the Eucharist impressed her.

At Mass one day early in 1804, a tourist whispered some skeptical remark to Mrs. Seton during the Consecration. Suddenly she recalled the words of St. Paul: "For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Cor 11:29).

This warning made very little sense, she realized, if the Blessed Sacrament were merely a symbol of Christ — as her own Episcopal beliefs had led her to suppose. Who would say that people "eat and drink judgment on themselves" by taking a casual view of a symbol?

But St. Paul's warning, she saw, made very good sense if — as Paul plainly was saying and her Italian friends believed — the Blessed Sacrament was the Real Presence of Christ. Not long after, Elizabeth Seton was received into the Catholic Church.

The point is that a renewed eucharistic catechesis should call attention both to the scriptural testimony to the Real Presence and also to the fact that Scripture and Catholic Tradition are trivialized and betrayed by treating the Eucharist as a mere symbol.

Responsibility for initiating eucharistic catechesis of this sort rests with the pastoral leaders of the Church. The need is great.

Meanwhile, all Catholics who believe that the Eucharist is not a symbol but is Jesus Christ truly present can do some things to help.

They can urge priests and catechists to preach and teach sound doctrine. They can protest liturgical abuses. They can communicate respectfully to their bishops about these things.

And they can show reverence to the Eucharist — reverence that gives public testimony to faith — through their conduct in church, their manner of receiving Communion and making thanksgiving after Mass, through adoration before the Blessed Sacrament and taking part in eucharistic devotions where available.

"I am the living bread that came down from heaven," Jesus said. "Whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world" (Jn 6:51). It is a matter of the highest urgency that the Catholics of the United States return to faith in Jesus' own teaching on the Eucharist: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you" (Jn 6:53). □

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IS THIS MY BODY?: A crisis in eucharistic belief

Then people naturally draw the obvious conclusion: If what happens at Mass is a memorial meal in which priest and people use bread and wine, then the bread and wine are not really changed into Christ's Body and Blood, but are only symbolic reminders of Him.

Other things reinforce this way of thinking. These include authorized liturgical changes — for instance, Communion in the hand, extraordinary ministers, reduction of the eucharistic fast, elimination of the altar rail, moving the tabernacle away from the main altar to some obscure part of the church, even English in the Mass. Whatever might be said on behalf of these changes individually, in combination they have weakened eucharistic faith.

So, obviously, have the abuses and omissions — no fast at all before Communion, indiscriminately inviting everyone (including nonbelievers) to receive, using questionably valid matter ("real bread"), a too-casual approach to the consecrated elements (consecrating

tic faith as well as other things, is a pastoral practice that makes very little of matters — especially sexual offenses — that in other times would have prevented people from receiving Communion until they were confessed and forgiven.

To put it bluntly, it appears — from opinion polls and impressionistic sources — that various forms of sexual sin, including adulterous second "marriages," are now very widespread among American Catholics. It also appears that just about everybody receives Communion at Mass.

Yet admonitions are almost never heard from the pulpit or anywhere else cautioning people to receive Communion only if they are in the state of grace and pointing out that deliberate sexual sins, like other grave sins, exclude them from receiving.

Among the false conclusions to which this gives rise is that the Blessed Sacrament — whatever else it is — is not the Body and Blood of Christ.

It comes from bad theology and bad liturgy and a waning sense of sin.