

# The Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist—History and Evidence

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The Eucharistic celebration was one of the most significant actions in Jesus’ ministry and redemptive mission—similar in importance to His incarnation, Passion, Resurrection, and Gift of the Spirit. As we shall show, Jesus unequivocally intended that the Eucharistic bread be His real body (given on the Cross at Calvary and in its risen form) and the Eucharistic wine be His real blood (given on Calvary and in its risen form). He further intended that the grace coming through this gift would bring healing, transformation in His heart, forgiveness of sins, unity with all believers, and ultimately, eternal life in Him. The reality and effects of His Eucharistic celebration are so important, that the early Church considered it to be its central spiritual activity—real communion with its Savior, Jesus Christ. We will divide our explanation of this claim into three sections:

Section I—Jesus’ intention and action at the Last Supper

Section II—Transubstantiation

Section III-- The Eucharistic Commemoration in the First Century

## I

### Jesus’ Intention and Action at the Last Supper

Jesus’ Eucharistic words explain His plan to love the world into redemption.<sup>1</sup> Jeremias attempted a reconstruction of the original tradition of Jesus’ Eucharistic words from the four New Testament traditions: I Corinthians 11:23-26; Mark 14:22-25; Matthew 26:26-29; and Luke 22:17-20. Notice that there are two distinct strands of tradition: The Mark-Matthew strand (constructed for liturgical purposes) and the Paul-Luke strand (constructed for a Gentile audience). Jeremias prefers the Mark-Matthew strand for the rite over the bread (body) and the Paul-Luke strand for the rite of the wine (blood). Using literary constructions and Semitisms as clues to resolve other differences within each strand, Jeremias concludes that the rite of the Last Supper probably took the following form.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus gathered with His disciples before the feast of the Passover and indicated to them that He longed to celebrate this Passover with them, but instead of doing so, fasted while the other disciples celebrated.<sup>3</sup> After drinking one of the four Passover cups while they were eating the

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<sup>1</sup> This thesis and the contents of this section are explained in great detail in a comprehensive work by Joachim Jeremias 1966 *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (London: SCM Press). It is also explained in an excellent article by Johannes Betz 1968-70, “Eucharist” in *Sacramentum Mundi*. Ed. by Karl Rahner, Vol. 2. (London: Burns & Oates). pp. 257ff

<sup>2</sup> See Jeremias 1966, Eucharistic Words of Jesus pp 171-173, 208-209, 223-224, and 238-243. See also John P. Meier 1991 *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. Vol. 1. (New York: Doubleday). pp 334-337.

<sup>3</sup> See Jeremias’ convincing argument in 1966, *Eucharistic Words of Jesus* pp. 208-09.

Passover meal (or an adapted Passover ritual), Jesus initiated the ritual of the bread, identifying it with His body: “Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take; this is my body.’” Then, after the completion of the Passover meal, Jesus initiated the ritual of the wine which He identifies with the covenant in His blood. He took a cup of red wine, gave thanks, and gave it to His disciples, saying, “This cup is the covenant in my blood<sup>4</sup> which is poured out for [the] many.”<sup>5</sup> Sometime either prior to or after this (perhaps both), Jesus gives a command to repeat the ritual: “Do this in remembrance of me.”

When He says, “This is my Body which will be given up for you,” the Greek word used to translate His Hebrew (*zeh bašari*) or Aramaic (*den bisri*) was *sōma* instead of *sarx*. *Sarx* means “flesh” and would certainly refer to Jesus’ *corporeal* body given on the cross, while *sōma* is much broader and refers to the *whole* person (mind, soul, will, as well as corporeal body). Thus, *sōma* is much like the word “body” in “everybody” or “somebody” in English. It might, therefore, be roughly translated as “person” or “self.” If we substitute the word “self” for “body” in the Eucharistic words, we obtain “This is my whole self given up for you.” This is remarkably similar to Jesus’ definition of unconditional love in John’s Gospel -- “gift of one’s whole self” (“greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” – John 15:13). Thus, in the Eucharist, Jesus is not only giving us His whole self – His whole person – He is also giving us His love, indeed, His *unconditional* love – that is, a love which cannot be surpassed.

This unconditional love is corroborated by the gift of His blood (which, according to Jewish custom, is separated from the body of the sacrificial offering). When Jesus offered His blood separately from His body, He showed Himself to be making an intentional self-sacrifice.

Blood (the principle of life for the Israelites) was the vehicle through which atonement occurred in sin or guilt offerings. Jesus’ reference to His sacrificial blood would almost inevitably be seen as the blood of a sin-offering – with the notable exception that the sin-offering is no longer an animal, but rather, Jesus Himself, “the Beloved One of the Father.” Jesus

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<sup>4</sup> Though Jesus identifies the red wine with the “covenant in His blood,” it is clear from the red wine, the parallelism with the bread, and the use of “this cup” that Jesus is identifying the red wine with both His *blood* and the covenant in His blood. Jeremias’ notes that the color of the wine is significant here: “The *tertium comparationis* in the case of the bread is the fact that it was broken, and in the case of the wine the red colour. We have already seen...that it was customary to drink red wine at the Passover.... The comparison between *red wine* and blood was common in the Old Testament (Gen. 49.11; Deut. 32.14; Isa. 63.3,6), further Eccl 39.26; 50.15; I Macc. 6.34; Rev. 14.20; Sanh. 70a, etc.” (Jeremias 1966, *Eucharistic Words of Jesus* pp. 223-24).

<sup>5</sup> Mark-Matthew reports “poured out for many” but Luke reports “poured out for you.” Jeremias holds that “for the many” is the more original on the basis of linguistic grounds, namely, “for the many” is a Semitism while “you” is not. Jeremias attributes the replacement of “the many” by “you” as having a liturgical purpose where each worshiper feels him or herself to be individually addressed (by “you”), which would not happen with the indefinite “the many” (See Jeremias 1966, *Eucharistic Words of Jesus* pp. 172). The Greek “*to pollōn*” (“the many”) is an unusual expression, and is probably an attempt to translate a common Semitic expression referring to “all.” This is explained below in this section.

humbled Himself (taking the place of an animal – a sacrificial sin-offering) to absolve the sin of the world forever.

Jesus goes beyond this by associating Himself with the paschal lamb. He intentionally coordinates His arrival in Jerusalem with the Passover feast so that His sacrifice will be associated with that of the Paschal lamb. He loved us so much that He desired to become the new Passover sacrifice, replacing an unblemished lamb with His own divine presence.

The blood of the Passover lamb (put on the doorposts of every Israelite household) was the instrument through which the Israelite people were protected from death (the angel of death passing over those houses) which enabled them to move out of slavery into freedom (from Egypt into the Promised Land). When Jesus took the place of a sacrificial animal, He replaced the worldly freedom offered by the Passover--freedom from slavery in Egypt--with an unconditional and eternal freedom from sin and death. Thus, He made His self-sacrifice the new vehicle for protection from *every* form of sin and death for all eternity by outshining sin and darkness with His unconditionally loving eternal light.

There is yet a third dimension of Jesus' use of blood which He explicitly states as "the Blood of the covenant." A covenant was a solemn promise that bound parties to a guaranteed agreement. When Jesus associates His blood with the covenant, He is *guaranteeing* the "absolution from sin," "freedom from slavery and darkness," and eternal life given through His unconditional love. By referencing the Blood of the *covenant*, Jesus makes a solemn and unconditionally guaranteed promise to give us eternal life and love. If we put our faith in Him, trust in His promise, and try to remain in His teachings, His unconditional love will save us.

Jesus intended His sacrifice on the cross to be universal, and to be the power of love and salvation for all humankind; but He did not stop there. He also provided a way for us to receive His unconditionally loving presence (body, mind and soul) throughout the rest of history. He intended to make His loving presence within us a power of peace, reconciliation, healing, and transformation. He did this by making the actions and words of His Last Supper into a ritual, using the simple phrase, "Do this in remembrance of me." This phrase requires explanation.

We need to understand the first century Jewish view of time and memory to grasp the significance of Jesus' ritual (now known as the "Eucharistic celebration"). In this view, time is not an unalterable physical property (as in the "space-time continuum" of the Theory of Relativity). Rather, time was seen as a surmountable and controllable dimension of *sacred*

history.<sup>6</sup> As Eliade notes, sacred history was seen as superseding profane history (physical history), and through ritual and myth, prophets and priests could return to the sacred time of history as if profane time were not relevant.<sup>7</sup> First century Judaism was no exception to this. Religious authorities believed that the celebration of the Passover Supper was a return to the sacred events of the Exodus, and that reliving this sacred moment would bring them close to the sacred reality (God/Yahweh), which would, in turn, sacralize them – make them holy.<sup>8</sup>

As Jesus enters into the sacrificial meal with His disciples, He brings this view of time and history with Him.<sup>9</sup> When He says, “Do this in *remembrance* of me,” He does not mean, “call it to mind.” His view of “remembrance” (translated by the Greek term “*anamnesis*”) did not separate “mind” from “heart,” or separate a “mental remembrance” from a “ritual reliving.”<sup>10</sup> For Him, the instruction to “do this in remembrance of me,” meant “reengage in this ritual and relive the reality of me in it.” To relive Jesus’ ritual is to return to it – with Him *really* there. Johannes Betz summarizes this as follows:

*Anamnesis* in the biblical sense means not only the subjective representation of something in the consciousness and as an act of the remembering mind. It is also the objective effectiveness and presence of one reality in another, especially the effectiveness and presence of the salvific actions of God, in the liturgical worship. Even in the Old Testament, the liturgy is the privileged medium in which the covenant attains *actuality*. ¶ The meaning of the logion [“Do this in remembrance of me”] may perhaps be paraphrased as follows: “do this (what I have done) in order to *bring about my presence*, to make really present the salvation wrought in me.”<sup>11</sup>

It is difficult for us, as 21<sup>st</sup> century scientifically oriented people, to enter into Jesus’ perspective, because it is so dissimilar from the way we conceive time and reality. Nevertheless, if we are going to understand what He was doing, we will have to make the effort – otherwise, His words and actions will be completely masked by our very different worldview. Let me summarize His intention by inserting His view of sacred time into His Eucharistic actions.

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<sup>6</sup> Eliade phrases it this way: “In *imitating* the exemplary acts of a god or of a mythical hero, or simply by recounting their adventures, the man of an archaic society detaches himself from profane time and magically re-enters the Great Time, the sacred time” –Mircea Eliade 1987. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich).. First Century Jewish views of time follow Eliade’s general form.

<sup>7</sup> Eliade 1987

<sup>8</sup> Jeremias quotes O. Michel, noting, “God’s remembrance is, namely (this is an important fact to which O. Michel called attention), never a simple remembering of something, but always and without exception ‘an *effecting and creating* event.’ When Luke 1.72 says that God remembers his covenant, this means that he is *now fulfilling* the eschatological covenant promise.” Jeremias 1966 *Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, p. 348. See also Betz 1968, pp 260-261.

<sup>9</sup> See Betz 1968 “Eucharist”, pp 258-262.

<sup>10</sup> See Jeremias 1966 *Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, p. 348 and Betz 1968 “Eucharist”, p 260-261.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 260.

“In the Jewish view of sacred time (a view which is not restricted to Jewish culture alone), a prophet could make time *collapse* from the present moment into the future, and from the present moment back into the past. We might find this somewhat curious in today’s scientific worldview where space-time in the General Theory of Relativity has definite properties that are not *physically* collapsible in this way. However God transcends time and can take any event in the future or the past and collapse it into an event in the present. This is precisely what Jesus believed and intended at the Last Supper (see the above citations of Jeremias, Betz and Eliade). So what did He intend? When He handed the bread to His apostles at table using the words, ‘Take, this is my body,’ and then after the Supper handed them the cup of wine with these words, ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for the many,’ He intended to collapse the time between the Supper and His death on the cross at Calvary (in the future) through His prophetic utterance. His prophetic words were stated in the present tense – as if the future event was in the present. A prophet’s words were thought to go into the future and bring back the future reality into the present. So when Jesus says, “Take this *is* my body” he is referring to His body hanging on the Cross in the future which is being brought into the present. Further, when He says, “This cup *is* the covenant in my blood which *is* poured out for [the] many,” he is saying that His blood is already being poured out—implying that His future blood is already present at the supper in the cup of the covenant. So Jesus believed that His future body and blood on the cross at Calvary were really present in the bread and wine He offered to His apostles through the efficacious action of His Father, collapsing the future into the present.

That is not all – when Jesus tells His apostles to ‘Do this in remembrance of me,’ He did not mean that they should call this event to mind – or only to celebrate the Supper as a simple recollection. This is a decidedly Greek view of ‘remembrance.’ Rather Jesus had a Jewish view which intended that the apostles *re-live* the Last Supper, and when they did so, the time between their celebration of the Supper and Jesus’ celebration of the Supper (which includes the real presence of His body and blood in the bread and wine) would *really* collapse. This has the effect of bringing Jesus’ bread (transformed into His body on the cross) and Jesus’ wine (transformed into His blood flowing from Him on Calvary) from the past into the bread and wine elevated by the priest (who assumes the *prophetic*<sup>12</sup> power through his ordination) at the altar of celebration (see the above citations from Jeremias, Betz and Eliade).

Thus, every Eucharistic host and Eucharistic cup undergoes two collapses of time at the priest-prophet’s words of institution:

1. The priest collapses the time from his present moment to the time of Jesus’ Last Supper, bringing the bread and wine that Jesus gives His apostles into the present moment,
2. But the bread and wine that Jesus offers His apostles is not simply bread and wine, because Jesus has collapsed the time between His Eucharistic Last Supper and His future Body and Blood on the Cross at the very moment of His words of institution.

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<sup>12</sup> In the early church, the apostles appointed another tier of individuals called “prophets”, second only to them in rank—“God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues” (1Cor 12:28). As will be explained below in Section III these “prophets” were the predecessors of what we now call the “ministerial priesthood,” and priests (in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century) were held to have the prophetic powers to celebrate the Eucharist.

Therefore when the priest says the words of institution, he brings into the present moment the very Body and Blood of Jesus given on Calvary--which is one with the bread and wine He offers to His apostles at the Last Supper.

If we do not impose our view of physical time on Jesus' view of sacred time—or our conceptually biased view of “remembrance” on Jesus' view of “remembrance” as “making *present*” by reliving a sacred event, than His intention of making His body and blood really present to future generations through the actions of a priest-prophet will not seem to be a misrepresentation of fact or history. This is why the Gospel of John states the following so unequivocally in Jesus' Eucharistic discourse:

“This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh” (Jn 6:50-51).”

Notice that Jesus makes three associations in this one passage:

1. He is the bread that comes down from the Heaven (Jesus and Heavenly Bread).
2. “The bread that I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh” (the Heavenly Bread is Jesus' flesh).
3. Jesus' flesh (which is the bread of Heaven) will give eternal life.

Therefore Jesus (incarnate in the flesh) is the bread of Heaven which He will give (implicitly at Calvary) for the life of the world and the eternal life of all believers (i.e., those who do not reject Him<sup>13</sup>).

In sum, the best historical research indicates that Jesus believed He would be *really* present to us in *every* reliving of His Last Supper ritual until the end of time. This intention not only stems from His view of history, time, and ritual, but also from His conviction that He would be raised from the dead,<sup>14</sup> and would be present to us in His risen form throughout the rest of human history. Betz characterizes it in this way:

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<sup>13</sup> In Spitzer 2016 *God so loved the World* (Chapter 7, Section I) I show that the idea of “believers” in John is meant in an inclusive way and not in an exclusive way. This means that “*unbeliever*” refers to someone who has *rejected* belief— not someone who has *not* had an opportunity for belief or understanding. Thus, someone who has never heard of Jesus or the Eucharist—or has not had an opportunity to understand what He was doing in the Eucharist, should not be considered an *unbeliever*.

<sup>14</sup> Jesus had a strong conviction in the resurrection, following Second Temple Judaism. In this regard he sided with the Pharisees and not the Sadducees (who did not believe in a resurrection – accepting only the *Torah* – the first five books of the Old Testament). Jesus makes clear his belief in a personal resurrection which supersedes that of Second Temple Judaism (a merely bodily resurrection) which is evident in his passion predictions (which include the phrase “and rise again on the third day”) as well as his assertion that he would rebuild the Temple in three days (found in two independent sources – Mt 26:61, 27:40 and Jn 2:13-22). If Wright's interpretation of Jesus' trial before the

... *the bodily person of Jesus is present in the supper*, not however in the static manner of being a *thing*, but as the Servant of God who in his sacrificial death affects the salvation of us all and more precisely as the sacrificial offering of the Servant who delivers himself up on the cross. The *real presence* of the *person* is there to actualize the presence of the sacrificial deed and is united with this in an organic whole. The Eucharist becomes, then, the abiding presence in the meal of the sacrificially constituted salvific event “Jesus”, in whom person and work form an inseparable unity.<sup>15</sup>

When Jesus approached Jerusalem knowing that He faced persecution and death, He had a plan to save all humankind throughout history by His act of total self-offering (unconditional love). His plan went further – He intended to initiate a ritual to be re-lived by his disciples throughout the rest of history. He would be really present in His self-sacrifice (body and blood), as well as in His risen form, and would convey through this presence, His healing, forgiving, and transforming love to anyone who received His body and blood in this ritual. He would convey the love of complete self-gift; the forgiveness and healing of the ultimate sin-offering; the liberation from darkness, evil, slavery, and death in the ultimate Passover sacrifice; and the eternal life of love in the blood of the new covenant. His plan was to love us unconditionally – both universally (in His complete self-offering in death) and situationally (in the celebration of His Last Supper). After His resurrection in glory, the early Church believed that He was the unconditional love of God with us – who is still with us until the end of time.

## II

### Transubstantiation

In the Middle Ages, theologians – particularly St. Thomas Aquinas – articulated the change that occurs when the bread and wine are consecrated by the priest acting in place of Christ (reenacting and re-presenting Jesus’ self-sacrificial words at the Last Supper). Though they were not familiar with Jesus’ Semitic understanding of making the bread and wine into His body and blood, they faithfully interpreted the passages of the New Testament (from the gospels in Saint Paul) and the tradition they had received from earlier Church fathers – particularly Saint Ambrose and Saint Augustine – which emphasized Jesus’ real crucified and risen presence – body, blood, and whole being – in the Holy Eucharist. The metaphysical interpretation they developed is perfectly consistent with Jesus’ Semitic understanding of His real presence. In order to see this, we must give a brief explanation of the medieval doctrine of transubstantiation.

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Sanhedrin is correct, then Jesus must have said something to warrant the charge of “blasphemy” which probably included his belief in being the eschatological judge who would return to judge the world – “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:62). This presumes his resurrection as more than a “resuscitated corpse.” (See the previous article on this landing page “Contemporary Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus”)

<sup>15</sup> Betz 1968-70 “Eucharist”, p. 260.

The term “transubstantiation,” developed by Archbishop Lanfranc, Archbishop of Canterbury in the 11th century, received its first conciliar approval at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. The deepest and most nuanced interpretation of this doctrine was given by Saint Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* (III, Q. 75, A4) using two concepts from Aristotelian metaphysics – “substance” and “accidents:”

**I answer that,** as stated above (Article 2), since Christ’s true body is in this sacrament, and since it does not begin to be there by local motion, nor is it contained therein as in a place, as is evident from what was stated above (1, ad 2), it must be said then that it begins to be there by conversion of the substance of bread into itself. Yet this change is not like natural changes, but is entirely supernatural, and effected by God's power alone... For it is evident that every agent acts according as it is in act. But every created agent is limited in its act, as being of a determinate genus and species: and consequently the action of every created agent bears upon some determinate act. Now the determination of every thing in actual existence comes from its form. Consequently, no natural or created agent can act except by changing the form in something; and on this account every change made according to nature’s laws is a formal change. But God is infinite act, as stated in I, 7, 1; 26, 2; hence His action extends to the whole nature of being. Therefore He can work not only formal conversion, so that diverse forms succeed each other in the same subject; but also the change of all being, so that, to wit, the whole substance of one thing be changed into the whole substance of another. And this is done by Divine power in this sacrament; for the whole substance of the bread is changed into the whole substance of Christ’s body, and the whole substance of the wine into the whole substance of Christ’s blood. Hence this is not a formal, but a substantial conversion; nor is it a kind of natural movement: but, with a name of its own, it can be called "transubstantiation."<sup>16</sup>

This passage is not intended for philosophical or theological neophytes – so please do not be discouraged if it is not immediately intelligible. First the term “accidents” does not resemble the way we use the term today – it means only those qualities of a natural being that give rise to its appearance – size, shape, color, molecular constituency, atomic constituency, and any other quality that gives rise to detectable or measurable physical attributes. The term “substance” does not mean “a particular kind of matter with uniform properties,” but the most fundamental expression of a thing’s reality.

Don’t get discouraged yet. These technical terms can be made a little clearer. Saint Thomas Aquinas looks at a being from the opposite way a contemporary scientist does. Instead of starting with the appearance of things (which Saint Thomas called “accidents”) as scientists

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<sup>16</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas 1947, *Summa Theologica*, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Providence (New York: Benzinger Brothers) pp. 2449-2450 (Part III, Ques. 75, art. 4).

do, he begins with the most fundamental dimension of a reality which is necessary for it to be what it is. So what dimension of reality is most necessary for any being – including God? Saint Thomas said it is its *existence*. For him, God is pure existence itself -- existing through itself (“*ipsum suum esse subsistens*”). Since there can only be one reality that exists through itself, all other realities must exist through the causation of God – the One uncaused reality (see "the article—the Thomistic metaphysical proof of God"—on the “science, reason, faith” landing page on this website). So what is the most fundamental – the most necessary – part of any reality that is *not* God? It must be the existence (*esse*) it receives from God in order to exist. Without *esse*, a thing is merely hypothetical – not real.

Now here is where we come to the concept of “substance” – the essential power or activity that determines what a thing is. For Saint Thomas the substance of God is His pure uncaused existence through itself. He proves that this unique reality must also be an unrestricted act of thinking that creates everything else in reality (see the “Thomistic metaphysical proof of God” cited above). As we noted there, this being is a purely spiritual, self-reflective, unrestricted power or activity – and is therefore the highest of all substances.

Saint Thomas then examines substances other than God. Perhaps the best way of describing “substance” for him is the word “soul” as used by Aristotle. Though we think of “soul” as the transphysical, self-reflective, conceptual, reality that apprehends the five transcendental desires and God’s presence to us – the transphysical reality capable of surviving bodily death -- Aristotle also conceived of lower levels of “soul” than ours. He called our soul “the rational soul,” but he also noticed that animals had consciousness that was not self-reflective and rational, but nevertheless, capable of awareness needed for self-movement (which he called a sensitive soul or “an animal soul”). He also saw an even lower “soul” that differentiated living beings – such as plants – from non-living beings (which he called a “vegetative soul”). Why call these lower sources of activity “soul”? Because Aristotle (and Aquinas) perceived that animal consciousness and the life principle of plants and other living beings could not be explained solely in terms of physical elements (that are not themselves living or conscious). Each higher level of activity required a greater *sensitivity to itself*. Physical processes – such as atomic and molecular processes -- do not give rise to greater interior sensitivity – only more complex extrinsic activities.<sup>17</sup>

Now here is the rub – even though a thing’s “soul” gives rise to its most sophisticated activities -- its interior sensitivity to itself, which organizes its extrinsic activities – a soul cannot be directly observed or detected by even the most sophisticated instrumentation – like an electron microscope. It can only be known by its *effects*. Thus we know that a bacterium or a plant has sufficient interior sensitivity to itself to react as a whole to outside stimuli (revealing its lower level of soul), but we cannot put the bacterium under an electron microscope to detect that soul. In Saint Thomas’ words, we can only see the extrinsic activities (its “*accidents*”) that give rise to its appearance. This as we shall see is very important to the notion of the invisibility of transubstantiation which we will talk about below.

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<sup>17</sup> I explain this in much greater detail in Robert Spitzer 2015 *The Soul’s Upward Yearning: Clues to Our Transcendent Nature from Experience and Reason* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press), Chap. 6.

Now if you are not completely confused at this juncture, we can now examine the six levels of “invisible” souls that give rise to “interior sensitivity to self” on higher and higher levels – from which we can discern six levels of *substance*. Remember these levels of “interior sensitivity to self” organize the extrinsic activities we observe and detect through scientific experimentation. Let us proceed from the lowest level of “interior sensitivity to self” and proceed to the highest levels:

1. *A purely natural substance* -- no interior sensitivity to self – no soul of any kind (e.g. an atom, a molecule, or any complex set of atoms or molecules giving rise to a non-living reality).
2. *A vital soul* -- an elementary sensitivity to self, allowing an organism, such as a bacterium, to react *as a whole* to outside stimuli – giving rise to the search for nutrition (attraction to salutary environments), self-defense (aversion to hostile environments), and reproduction. This vital soul is also present in complex cellular organisms such as plants.
3. *A sensitive conscious soul (e.g. animalic soul)* -- a higher sensitivity to self that allows the whole organism to have a sense of self (though not an awareness) of self. This sense of self enables an animal to *feel* pain, pleasure, desire, and self-satisfaction sufficient to awaken perceptual cognitive activities and self-movement to seek biological opportunities and to avoid biological dangers. Higher mammals seem to have an even greater interior sensitivity to self, giving rise to an elementary form of empathy and even desire for affection beyond merely instinctual pack behavior.
4. *A rational self-conscious soul (human soul)* – an even higher sensitivity to self, enabling a person to be aware of his awareness, to formulate conceptual ideas, to desire perfect truth, love, goodness, beauty, and home, and to be aware of God and the numinous.<sup>18</sup>
5. *An angelic substance* – a purely spiritual substance that is not unified with natural substances – and is capable of perfectly reflexive acts of consciousness and will. Though these beings transcend time and space, they are not unrestricted in consciousness – nor do they exist through themselves.
6. *The divine substance* – complete and unrestricted sensitivity to self within complete and unrestricted existence through itself – a being which must be completely unique, completely present to itself, and present to everything else it causes to exist through its unrestricted creative mentative activity (the one God).

For Saint Thomas, these levels of substance organize all of the other extrinsic activities (that we call “physical processes” today) – which in turn determine the observable and detectable data of appearances that Saint Thomas called “accidents.”

Now we are in a position to talk about “transubstantiation” in the Holy Eucharist. Let’s go back to the quotation from Saint Thomas cited above. Saint Thomas indicates that the *substance* of the bread is transformed into the substance of Christ’s body and that the *substance* of the wine is transformed into the substance of Christ’s blood. It might be easier to think about

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<sup>18</sup> For a complete explanation of these powers, see Robert Spitzer 2015 *The Soul’s Upward Yearning*.

this by translating the genitive “of” to “underlying.” Thus we might retranslate Saint Thomas’ sentence as follows, “The substance underlying the bread (a purely natural substance) is transformed into the substance underlying Christ Himself (the spiritual substance underlying the unique person of the God-man Jesus Christ) – and the substance underlying the wine (a purely natural substance) is transformed into the substance underlying Christ’s blood (the spiritual substance underlying the unique person of the God-man Jesus Christ).”

As noted above, this substantial change cannot be directly observed or detected – it can only be known by its *effects* within the human being who receives this transformed substance faithfully into himself. Saint Thomas notes that all of the “accidents” – the extrinsic physical activities giving rise to observable and detectable appearances -- remain those of bread and wine – so the host still looks like bread – and if subjected to microscopic and electron microscopic analysis – would still have the same atomic and molecular constitution. However, the substance – the interior sensitivity to self (the invisible organizing principle giving rise to interior self-sensitive activities) -- has changed radically – from a substance with no interior self-sensitive activities (the substance of bread and wine) to a spiritual substance of the highest level of interior self-sensitive activity – the self-consciousness of the unique person of the God-man, Jesus Christ.

Though this substantial change is not observable or detectable (because the extrinsic physical processes have *not* changed), the *effects* of this substantial change on the soul of the human being who receives this transformed substance faithfully is enormous. Saint Thomas says that this substantial change can only occur through the supernatural act of God Himself. Why? Because an effect must have a cause commensurate with it – in other words a purely natural substance cannot produce a spiritual substance, because it lacks the interior self-sensitive activities that would be necessary to produce a spiritual substance. Indeed, no lower level substance can produce a higher level substance, because the lower level substance lacks the very quality and activity necessary to transform it into the higher one. Since the substantial change that occurs in transubstantiation is the most pronounced one possible – from the lowest level of substance (a purely natural substance) to the highest level of substance (the spiritual substance of the self-consciousness of the unique God-man, Jesus Christ), only God can cause it to occur. Even though a priest mediates this transubstantial change by reenacting the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, only God can cause this radical substantial change to occur through the priest’s mediative action.

By now the reader may be thinking, “Was all this really necessary to explain how the body and blood of Christ can be present in the bread and wine – without a change in the appearance and atomic structure of bread and wine?” The answer is pretty much – yes. Strange as it may seem, this metaphysical explanation does show *how* the detectable and observable atomic and molecular constituents do not change while the essence – the substance – moves from the lowest order to the highest order through the supernatural activity of God. The analysis of the six kinds of substance (from no soul to divine substance) is not merely medieval thinking – it recognizes an essential component of reality often overlooked by many natural scientists today – the interior self-sensitive

activities that determine the levels of being. It must be emphasized that no scientist has yet discovered an explanation for this kind of interior self-sensitive activity by means of physical processes alone. That is why there is no complete explanation of how to produce life from non-living constituents and processes, how to produce sensate consciousness from non-conscious constituents and processes, and how to produce self-consciousness from non-self-conscious constituents and processes. Indeed, many scientist philosophers – such as Alfred North Whitehead, Michael Polanyi, Bernard Lonergan, Sir John Eccles, Friedrich Beck, Henry Stapp, and David Chalmers – insist that physical processes will never be able to produce these interior self-sensitive activities because they lack interior self-sensitivity altogether. I have written extensively about this (and the thought of these philosophers and scientists) in *The Soul's Upward Yearning*.<sup>19</sup>

Is this metaphysical explanation of transubstantiation consistent with Jesus' Semitically conceived intention at the Last Supper? It certainly is. Jesus' intention at the Last Supper was to make His whole self – his future crucified and risen self – present in the bread and wine of the Last Supper – and in the bread and wine of future reenactments of the Last Supper. The above metaphysical explanation affirms this intention and shows *how* this is possible without altering the atomic and molecular structure and appearance of bread and wine. By taking seriously the doctrine of transubstantiation, we show that Jesus' intention and claim at the Last Supper – “This is my body” and “This is my blood” is not a vexing, contradictory, or inexplicable act. It is completely consistent with the highest form of undetectable change within the extrinsic exterior activities of the atomic and molecular constituents of bread and wine. Saint Thomas' explanation not only shows *that* Jesus' claim is possible – but *how* it is possible through a metaphysics which is applicable to, complementary to, and needed within contemporary scientific paradigms of physical processes. If readers are interested in how what appears to be bread and wine can affect the most radical kinds of interior transformation by the simple reenactment of Jesus' words at the Last Supper, they will benefit from the time, study, and thought they give to Saint Thomas Aquinas' brilliant and valid explanation.

### III

#### The Eucharistic Commemoration in the First Century

Since the time of Christ's resurrection, the Christian Church was obedient to Christ's command to reenact His Eucharistic words within the community. Saint Paul, writing to the Corinthians (around the mid- 50's) implies that the ceremony of the blessing cup and the breaking of the bread – which is a participation in the blood and body of Christ – has been taking place for a long time – presumably since Jesus' resurrection and gift of the Holy Spirit:

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread [the Body of Christ] (1Cor. 10: 16-17).

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Spitzer 2015 *The Soul's Upward Yearning*. Chapters 3&6.

In the 30's and 40's, the Eucharist was celebrated within the context of a supper, but the supper was distinct from the reenactment of Jesus' Eucharistic words which held the same sacrificial meaning with which Jesus intended His own words. Paul's recounting of the Last Supper makes this sacrificial context clear:

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'

In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you *proclaim the Lord's death* until he comes (1 Cor. 11: 23-26).

Thus, the reenactment of the Eucharistic words make present Jesus' body and blood sacrificed for us in His passion and death. The early Eucharistic celebration was therefore a combination of a celebratory feast with the recollection of Jesus' sacrifice which brought the gathered community into communion with Him.

As time passed, however, the reenactment of the words of institution were separated from the supper, and the supper was no longer part of the Eucharistic celebration.<sup>20</sup> At this juncture, seven dimensions of Jesus' actions and words of institution were repeated: The Lord took bread; gave thanks; broke it; distributed it with the corresponding words; took the chalice; gave thanks; and handed it to His disciples with the corresponding words.<sup>21</sup> This formed the center of an expanded liturgy with four major actions:

1. Preparing bread and wine (with water);
2. The thanksgiving prayer;
3. The breaking of the bread (with the seven repeated actions and words of institution); and
4. The communion.<sup>22</sup>

Once the four-fold Eucharistic action was separated from the supper, the *sacrificial* significance of the reenactment of the Lord's words and actions became the central focus of the assembly. The Eucharistic (thanksgiving) words and actions were closely associated with the sacrificial actions as they had been for Jesus. At this juncture (at the end of the first century), the tables – for supper – were removed from the place of commemoration, and it was transformed into an assembly hall with everyone focused on the one table of Eucharistic and sacrificial reenactment (*anamnesis*).

The prayer of thanksgiving was quite well developed at this time. Though it was not like one of the later full Eucharistic prayers, it had many of its components: thanksgiving for the work of creation and redemption – recalling particularly Jesus' divinity, incarnation, sacrifice,

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<sup>20</sup> Josef Jungmann, *The Mass: an historical, theological, and pastoral survey* (St. Paul, MN: The North Central Publishing Company), p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> See *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

death, and resurrection. The core of these thanksgiving prayers may be found in the early Christological hymns (dating back to as early as the 40's) recorded in the New Testament Epistles – Colossians 1: 12-22; Philippians 2:5-11; 1 Timothy 3:16; and 1 Peter 3: 18-21. Also, the Johannine hymn (John 1: 1-6), and the prayers of thanksgiving in the Book of Revelation – (Revelations 4:11; 5: 9-14; 11: 17-18; 15: 3-4), as well as John's Farewell Discourse (John 14-17) may also have been included.<sup>23</sup>

The *Didache* (*The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*) – an early work (written toward the end of the first century – c. 90 A.D.) is the first complete catechism of the Christian Church. It contains a wealth of information about church rituals, authority, ethical norms, disciplinary practices (e.g. fasting), and church organization. It is of great importance to our discussion, because it contains two full early Eucharistic prayers, an identification of the Eucharist with sacrifice, and an identification of who was celebrating this sacrificial reenactment of the Last Supper.

With respect to the identification of the Eucharistic (thanksgiving) commemoration with sacrifice, the *Didache* notes:

Gather together on the day of the Lord, break bread, and give thanks, but first confess your sins, so that your *sacrifice* may be pure.<sup>24</sup>

The *Didache* not only uses the word “sacrifice” to describe the commemoration, it tells how important this interpretation of the commemoration was – for it required the early Christians to insert a penitential rite (a confession of sins) to assure that the celebration of the sacrifice by the congregation was pure – not defiled -- in conformity with the pure sacrifice of Malachi (see Mal. 1:11, 14). If the sacrificial meaning of the commemoration had not been essential, there would have been no need for the early Christians to develop a penitential rite at the beginning of the commemoration. This view of the commemoration as sacrifice has remained quite strong throughout the centuries – in the Church Fathers, the medieval theologians, the Council of Trent, until today.

The *Didache* also tells us *who* was celebrating the Eucharistic commemoration in the earliest times -- apostles and prophets.<sup>25</sup> Evidently the apostles were given authority by Jesus to preside over the Eucharistic commemoration. But why does the *Didache* mention prophets? Prophets are not necessarily people who foretell the future, but rather those appointed by Yahweh to speak on His behalf (Exodus 7:1). Sometimes this involves foretelling the future or initiating a direction of the future, but not always. Prophets in the early Christian Church were designated as those having a charism of the Holy Spirit to speak for God – delivering messages and teachings for the good of the Church. In Paul's ranking in 1 Corinthians 12, they are listed as second in authority, immediately after the apostles (see 1 Cor. 12: 28). Given their charism to speak in place of God, they were naturally thought to have the charism to speak the words of commemoration on behalf of Christ (along with the apostles). Thus, they were viewed as acting *in the place of Christ* in the reenactment of Christ's self-sacrificial words.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 22.

<sup>24</sup> Anon. *Didache* Ch. 14: 1.

<sup>25</sup> See anon. *Didache* 10:7 – “But suffer the prophets to hold Eucharist as they will.”

The *Didache* indicates that in missionary territories, itinerant apostles and prophets were probably celebrating the Eucharistic commemoration.<sup>26</sup> However, as churches became more stable, they had their own local authority structure that replaced itinerant apostles and prophets.<sup>27</sup> These local authorities – having the power of apostles and prophets – by ordination – are called *Episcopoi* (overseers) and *Presbyteroi* (elders).

In the earliest church organizations, *Presbyteroi* were *ordained* clergy – having authority to preside over the Eucharistic commemoration as well as teaching authority. In the Jerusalem Church, the *Presbyteroi* were under James – the head of the Jerusalem Church (Acts 11:30 and 15:22). Paul ordained *Presbyteroi* for local churches he initiated in Asia Minor (Acts 14:23).<sup>28</sup> The proliferation of presbyters for local church assemblies (by ordination) incorporated the prophetic role of presiding over the Eucharistic commemoration into itself, and the word “prophet” disappears as an ecclesiastical ranking, and is replaced by “*Presbyteroi*” in the Letters of 1 Timothy and Titus (in the early second century).

Throughout most of the first century, the distinction between *Presbyteroi* and *Episcopoi* was not clear – and often *Presbyteroi* were described as having the same overseeing function as *Episcopoi* (Acts 20:17; Titus 1:5-7; and 1 Peter 5:1). However, by the end of the first century, “*Episcopoi*” designated bishops (the head of the council or college of Presbyters) while “*Presbyteroi*” designated “priests who derived their authority from the bishop” (1 Tim 1:3; Titus 1:5, 2:15).

The idea of ministerial priesthood is vague in the New Testament, but this can be explained. As noted above, prophets were leaders in the Church (second only to the apostles) who had the authority to celebrate the Eucharist wherever they wanted (*Didache* 10:7). Furthermore, the role of prophets was assumed into the role of *Presbyteroi* (elders) who were ordained by the apostles to give stability to local churches. Thus, ordained leaders (prophets -- and later presbyters) had the authority to celebrate the Eucharist after Jesus’ resurrection – from the inception of the Church.

Yet there is no clear mention of a ministerial priesthood in the New Testament. Though there is reference to the priesthood of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 7) and the royal priesthood of the faithful (1 Peter 2:9), there is no clear expression of priesthood with respect to Christian ministry. Why didn’t the early Church clearly associate prophets and presbyters with “priests” who were designated as “offerors of sacrifice” in the Old Testament? After all, Jesus<sup>29</sup> (and His followers<sup>30</sup>) clearly associated the Eucharist with His self-sacrifice -- and the authority to celebrate that sacrifice (the Eucharist) was given to the apostles and prophets, and then to the *Presbyteroi*.

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<sup>26</sup> In *Didache* Chapter 11, a set of rules is given to distinguish true apostles and prophets from false apostles and prophets, with the implication being that there were itinerant apostles and prophets who had to be tested before they would be allowed to celebrate the Eucharist (see *Didache* 10:7) and instruct the faithful.

<sup>27</sup> See *Ibid*.

<sup>28</sup> The Greek words “*ceirotoneantes cheirotoneantes*” (literally – “hand-outstretching selecting”) means more than “appointment.” It refers directly to the laying on of hands which refers to ordination to the Presbyterate (see 1 Tim. 4:14).

<sup>29</sup> See Section I above.

<sup>30</sup> See *Didache* 14:1 – as explained above in this section.

An implicit answer is given in Hebrews 7 with respect to the ministerial priesthood of Jesus in contrast to the Levitical priesthood of the Jewish synagogue:

If another priest like Melchizedek appears, one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life. For it is declared, “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.” The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God. And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him: “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest forever.’” Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant. Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests men in all their weakness; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever (Heb.7:15-28).

Though the Letter to the Hebrews is written in about 85 A.D. – when tensions between the Jewish and Christian churches was forcing a formal separation between them – this passage points to themes relevant to the *earlier* church that explain the Church’s reticence to associate prophets and Presbyteroi with priests. First, the early church would have had a keen interest to distinguish the animal sacrifices of the Levitical priesthood from the complete self-sacrifice of the Son of God. As noted above (in Section I), Jesus replaced the sacrificial animal with Himself – as the exclusive Son of the Father – to make perfect, eternal, and unconditional sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins, liberation from evil, and sure impetus toward eternal life. The early church, recognizing the perfection and superiority of Jesus’ sacrifice (over previous sacrifices), would have wanted to keep them quite distinct.

Secondly, the Jewish priesthood was derived from the lineage of Aaron (Moses’ brother and the first high priest of the Israelites). Jesus’ self-sacrifice was meant for *all people* – not simply for the Jewish people served by the Levitical priesthood (in the lineage of Aaron). This universal character of Jesus’ sacrifice and priesthood would have deterred the early church from making an association of Jesus’ priesthood (manifest in the Eucharistic self-sacrifice) with the priesthood of Aaron. Furthermore, Jesus wanted to separate Himself from the Jewish temple (located in Jerusalem and associated with a single people) so that He would become in His own body the new universal temple for all people and all nations.

Thirdly, the Christian Church did not want to associate its apostles, prophets, and Presbyteroi with the lineage of Aaron, because it wanted to become – as Jesus had instructed – a universal Church where those who presided over the Eucharistic celebration could come from every race, people, and nation. As noted above, Paul ordained Presbyteroi in the local churches he initiated. A close association between prophets-presbyters and priesthood (which would have been associated with the Jewish Levitical priesthood) would have contradicted this – or at the very least, confused the issue.

After 80 A.D., when tensions between the synagogue and the Christian Church would force a separation between them, the Christian Church wanted to establish the superiority of Jesus' high priesthood over that of the Levitical priesthood of Aaron. Indeed, this is precisely the reason why the author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes not only Chapter 7 (cited above) but also the rest of the letter.

So when did the concept of ministerial priesthood become attached to the Presbyteroi who were presiding over the Eucharistic commemoration of Jesus' self-sacrifice? The first clear indication is found in about 180 A.D. in St. Irenaeus' work, *Against Heresies*:

And all the apostles of the Lord are priests, who do inherit here neither lands nor houses, but serve God and the altar continually.<sup>31</sup>

Around 232-235 A.D., Origen associates the apostles and their successors with priesthood:

So, too, the apostles, and those who have become like apostles, being priests according to the Great High Priest and having received knowledge of the service of God, know under the Spirit's teaching for which sins, and when, and how they ought to offer sacrifices, and recognize for which they ought not to do so.<sup>32</sup>

Cyprian of Carthage (in about 250 A.D.) ordered an interdict against Novatian who is claiming to be a valid spokesman of the Church. Cyprian responds by negatively comparing Novatian to Cyprian's priesthood:

For the Church is one, and as she is one, cannot be both within and without. For if [the Church] is with Novatian, she was not with Cornelius. But if she was with Cornelius, who succeeded the bishop Fabian by *lawful ordination*, and whom, beside the honour of the *priesthood*, the Lord glorified also with martyrdom, Novatian is not in the Church; nor can he be reckoned as a bishop, who, succeeding to no one, and despising the evangelical and apostolic tradition, sprang from himself.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> St. Irenaeus of Lyons *Against Heresies* Bk. 4, Chap. 8, par. 3.

<sup>32</sup> Origen *On Prayer*, Chapter 18.

<sup>33</sup> Cyprian of Carthage, *Epistle 75*, par. 3.

In about 336 A.D., in a work called *The Canons of Hippolytus*,<sup>34</sup> we find well worked out rules for priesthood and the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice:

Of the keeping of oblations which are laid upon the altar -- that nothing fall into the sacred chalice, and that nothing fall from the priests, nor from the boys when they take communion.<sup>35</sup>

In this passage, the priest is clearly seen within a sacrificial context – making an oblation (an offering of sacrifice) on an altar – which sacrifice is considered to be sacred.

In sum, we see a clear association of *Episcopoi* and the *Presbyteroi* with priesthood beginning in about 150 A.D. (with St. Irenaeus) and a continuous theological development of this association throughout the second and third centuries, culminating in *Canons* (these rules) for priestly performance of the Eucharistic sacrifice on an altar. This association was strengthened and clarified until the present day.

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<sup>34</sup> *Canons of Hippolytus*, Canon 28. Though this work is attributed to Hippolytus of Rome, supposedly written around 210 A.D., some scholars believe that it may have been composed by Egyptian Christian authors between 336 and 340 A.D. Other scholars – such as Jungmann – still date it to 210 A.D. I used the more conservative (later) dating here.

<sup>35</sup> Hippolytus *The Canons of Hippolytus*, Can 28.