

Eating God?
Can the Eucharist
Really be Jesus?

Alexander Pruss

Is it so?

Presence and
Absence
Bible
Symbol?
Early Church

Why?

The body
Marriage
Grace

Why not?

How?

Senses
Omnipotence
Partial presence
Omnipresence
Time travel
Locational relation
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Locational accidents
Shape and size?

Conclusions

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Terminology

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- **Eucharist:** Christian offering of thanksgiving initiated at the Last Supper.
- **Real Presence:** Catholics, the Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans, Lutherans and some other Christians agree Jesus is really, substantially present in the Eucharist.
- **Real Absence:** Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox further believe the bread and wine changes into Jesus. (Catholic term: transsubstantiation)
- **Double Presence:** Anglicans and Lutherans think bread and wine stays present along with Jesus. (Consubstantiation)
- Main focus will be on Real Presence rather than debate between Real Absence and Double Presence.

Last Supper Narrative

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*Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, "Take, eat; **this is my body**." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you; for **this is my blood** of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Mt 26:26–28; see also Mk 14:22–24, Lk 22:19–20, 1Cor 11:23–25)*

- Taken literally implies Real Presence.
- Strongly suggests Real Absence, since otherwise the "this" refers to the visible bread and wine, even if Christ's body and blood is invisibly present.

Bread of Life Discourse

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*The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you **eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood**, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him...." ...*

After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him. Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (Jn 6:52–56,66–68)

Symbolic or literal?

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- Maybe the Eucharist is only symbolic of us eating Christ's body?
- Biblical symbolism:
 - Crossing of Red Sea → Baptism
 - Washing with baptismal water → Cleansing from sin
 - Form of a dove → Holy Spirit
 - Feeding of 5000 → Eucharist
 - Eucharist → eating Christ's body?
- Reality *A* symbolizing reality *B*.
- If washing with baptismal water is a reality, then cleansing from sin is a reality.
- So, if the Eucharist is a reality, then eating Christ's body is a reality.
- But where else do we really eat Christ's body except in the Eucharist?
- So symbolism theory also leads to Real Presence!

Symbolic *and* literal

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- Appearances of bread and wine → Jesus's body and blood
- The crossing of the Red Sea is a case where a real miracle symbolizes a deeper reality. Similarly:
 - Jesus giving us his body and blood → Jesus dying for us on the cross
 - Jesus coming to be in our body → Indwelling of the Spirit from Jesus
 - Eating Jesus's body and blood → Spiritual nourishment
 - And much more

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*I have no taste for corruptible food nor for the pleasures of this life. I desire the **bread of God, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, who was of the seed of David; and for drink I desire his blood, which is love incorruptible.** (St. Ignatius of Antioch, ca. AD 110)*

*For not as common bread nor common drink do we receive these; but since Jesus Christ our Savior was made incarnate by the word of God and had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so too, as we have been taught, the food which has been made into the Eucharist by the Eucharistic prayer set down by him, and **by the change of which our blood and flesh is nurtured, is both the flesh and the blood of that incarnated Jesus.** (St. Justin Martyr, ca. AD 151)*

- This is why the Romans accused the early Christians of cannibalism.

Gnostic heretics

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*But consider [the gnostics who deny that Christ came in the body], how opposed they are to the will of God. They have no regard for love; no care for the widow, or the orphan, or the oppressed; of the bond, or of the free; of the hungry, or of the thirsty. They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer because **they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ**, flesh which suffered for our sins and which that Father, in his goodness, raised up again. (St. Ignatius of Antioch, ca. AD 110)*

Incarnation

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*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... And **the Word became flesh** and dwelt among us.... (Jn 1:1,14)*

- The gnostic heretics thought bodies were evil, and so Christ at most **looked** human.
- Compare: Friends of the Singularity who long to be uploaded to a computer.
- We are not souls running bodies like some kind of a drone.
- We are beings of soul **and** body.
- Both aspects will be glorified in the resurrection **of the body**.

*I am with you **always, to the close of the age**. (Mt. 28:20)*

- In the Eucharist, Jesus is still with us in soul **and body**.
- No Eucharist in the Singularity!

Marriage

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"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church (Eph. 5:31-32)

- In the Old and New Testament, the relationship between God/Christ and the Church is compared to marriage.
- Christ came to be with his beloved Church.
- But Jesus says:

[In marriage] they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder. (Mt. 19:6)

- So, Christ is still with the Church **in body**.
- By bodily Eucharistic union, we are united to one another.
- Modern gnostics deny importance of body in marriage.

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Conclusions

- The Eucharist is a deep source of grace for the individual and the Church.
- God could give this grace apart from the physical presence of Christ.
- God could give this grace apart from any physical signs.
- But it fits well with the Incarnation and our embodied nature that grace come through a bodily union with Jesus.

Why not?

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- But isn't this cannibalism and morally repugnant?
- Fortunately, we receive Christ's body and blood under the appearance of bread (leavened or unleavened) and wine.
- In cannibalism, the victim's body is destroyed.
- But when we receive Christ into our bodies, Christ is also in heaven, unchanged by this.

Doesn't look it!

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- What is present looks like bread (or a wafer) or wine.
- Of course the Church Fathers all knew that.
- God who made all things maintains the full appearance of bread and wine, all the way down to the minutest microscopic level.
- It is only by God's word that we know that this is Christ's body and blood.

How?

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- How is the Real Presence possible?

[W]ith God all things are possible. (Mt 19:26)

- But... God cannot create an uncreated stone!
- St. Thomas Aquinas: God can do anything, but self-contradictories don't count as things.
- Creating an uncreated stone is self-contradictory.
- What if it's self-contradictory for one entity to be in heaven and in many churches at once?
- Three responses:
 - Take it on faith that there is no contradiction.
 - Offer analogies to show that it's not clearly contradictory.
 - Speculate on a way in which God might do it. (Risky!)

Speculation: Partial presence

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- G. W. Leibniz (17th century philosopher and co-inventor of calculus) suggested that Christ's body could extend to make the bread part of itself.
- Problem: "This is my body" should be "This is a small part of my body."
- By eating, we would be destroying a part of Christ's body.
- Not theologically satisfactory.

Analogy: Omnipresence

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- God is present everywhere at once.
- God's presence is real but not physical.
- So it is possible to have a real presence in multiple places at once.
- **Lesson:** There is more than one way of being present in a location.
- **Speculation:** There could be a sacramental presence that is compatible with having multiple locations.

Analogy: Time travel

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- Suppose in ten years you invent a time machine and go back in time to shake hands with yourself.
- Then you will be in two places at once.
- There is no contradiction in such time travel.
- So no contradiction in being in more than one place at once, even physically.
- This is obviously not how God does it in the case of the Eucharist, but it may show that the contradiction argument fails.

Speculation: Locational relation

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- Places in space are real things.
- To be in a place is to stand in a certain “location relation” to that place.
- We cannot say much more about what that relation is besides that.
- You can have the friend-of relation to multiple people.
- So why can't you have the location relation to multiple places?

Speculation: Pinching space and time

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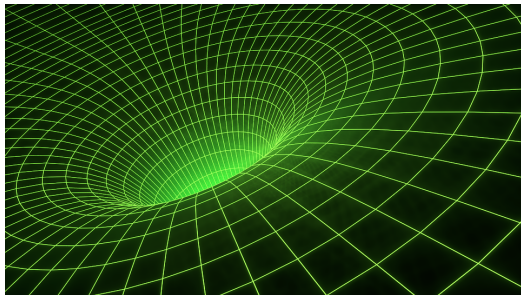
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- Einstein's Theory of Relativity: Space-time is curved.
- God could make space-time curve back on itself so that a place in heaven and one or more places on earth are literally the same place.
- Not contradictory.
- Nothing is difficult for an all-powerful being!

Speculation: Locational accidents

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- St. Thomas Aquinas thinks that objects have a location by having in them a certain kind of locational “accidental property” (a property a thing can exist without).
- While the bread and wine cease to exist, their accidental properties remain. (Shape, color, etc.)
- The locational accident of bread and wine remains.
- Christ’s body comes to be located both by means of its own locational accident (in heaven) and by means of the remaining locational accidents of bread and wine (on earth).

Further question: Shape and size

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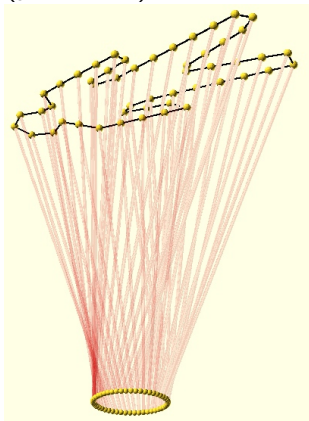
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- But the Eucharist is much smaller than a man!
- Speculation: We can adapt the above models to make larger places in heaven line up with smaller ones on earth, or to make individual parts (particles?) of Jesus be located in differently shaped places.



Conclusions

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- There is good reason based in Scripture and early Church teaching to believe in the Real Presence.
- It is important that grace come to us from Christ present in body.
- There are multiple accounts, some speculative and some analogical, showing that there is no contradiction in one thing being present in more than one place at once. If it's not contradictory, God can make it happen. And nothing is too hard for God.