

*The Trinity*  
*and*  
*The Eucharist*

*By*  
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# THE TRINITY AND THE EUCHARIST

## INTRODUCTION

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life."<sup>1</sup> In regards to the Eucharist, it states, "the Eucharist is the sum and summary of our faith."<sup>2</sup> The Eucharist is also called the "source and summit of the Christian life."<sup>3</sup> As far as the relationship between the Trinity and the Eucharist, the *Catechism* says that "[the] communion of the Holy Trinity ... is lived out in prayer, above all in the Eucharist."<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, in the encyclical *Mane Nobiscum Domine* which opened the Eucharistic Year, Pope John Paul II explains that "[the] Eucharist is pre-eminently a *mysterium fidei*. Through the mystery of his complete hiddenness, Christ becomes a mystery of light, thanks to which believers are led into the depths of the divine life. By a happy intuition, Rublöv's celebrated icon of the Trinity clearly places the Eucharist at the centre of the life of the Trinity."<sup>5</sup> The three figures in the icon surround a "chalice on the table [which] links the scene with the Eucharist, and hence with the saving and revealing story of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection."<sup>6</sup> In this way, the three figures "form a sort of mystic circle round the altar and they seem to say to us: 'May you all

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<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1994), ¶ 234.

<sup>2</sup> CCC, ¶ 1327.

<sup>3</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, ¶ 11.

<sup>4</sup> CCC, ¶ 2845.

<sup>5</sup> John Paul II, *Mane Nobiscum Domine*, 7 October 2004, Para. 11.

<sup>6</sup> O'Collins, Gerald, *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999), p. 11.

be one as we are one."<sup>7</sup> In another place, the late Holy Father again discusses this icon, saying that "[this] would presuppose and demand ... a profoundly Eucharistic Church in which the presence of the mystery of Christ in the broken bread is as it were immersed in the ineffable unity of the three divine Persons, making of the Church herself an 'icon' of the Trinity."<sup>8</sup>

It is the goal of this paper to explore and identify the connection between these two great mysteries of the Faith.

### TRINITY AND EUCHARIST DEFINED

The Trinity as a term denotes that "God, who is one and unique in his infinite substance or nature is three really distinct persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."<sup>9</sup> Or as stated in the Athanasian Creed, "We worship one God in the Trinity and the Trinity in unity, without either confusing the persons or dividing the substance; for the person of the Father is one, the Son's is another, the Holy Spirit's another; but the Godhead of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is one, their glory equal, their majesty coeternal"<sup>10</sup>

The Eucharist can be defined as the "true Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, who is really and substantially present under the appearances of bread and wine",<sup>11</sup> in other words - the Real Presence. The term Eucharist can be used to indicate "any one or all three aspects of the one

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<sup>7</sup> Raniero Cantalamessa, (Frances Lonergan Villa, Transl.), *The Eucharist, Our Sanctification*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), p. 33.

<sup>8</sup> John Paul II; *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, April 17, 2003, Para. 50.

<sup>9</sup> John A. Hardon, S.J., *Modern Catholic Dictionary*, (Bardstown, KY: Eternal Life, 1999), p. 548.

<sup>10</sup> CCC, ¶ 266.

<sup>11</sup> Hardon, p. 194.

mystery, namely the Real Presence, the Sacrifice [of the Mass], and [Holy] Communion."<sup>12</sup>

## TRINITY AND EUCHARIST IN THE FATHERS OF THE CHURCH

St. Hilary of Poitiers in his work *De Trinitate* "presents the Eucharist with particular clarity as the bond of unity between God and us."<sup>13</sup> He begins his argument by citing John's Gospel where Jesus says, "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him."<sup>14</sup> Hilary then summarizes this by saying that when we receive the Eucharist, "we are in Christ and Christ is in us."<sup>15</sup> Since Christ "is in us through His flesh, and we are in Him, while that which we are with Him is in God."<sup>16</sup> In other words, by partaking of the Eucharist, we are united to Christ, who as the Second Person of the Trinity is united to the Trinity, hence the Father and the Holy Spirit. Speaking of the effects of the Eucharist, Hilary states "that we, who are carnal, have Christ dwelling in us through His flesh, and through Him we shall live in that state in which He lives through the Father."<sup>17</sup> Going further with Jesus' words in John's Gospel we read, "As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me."<sup>18</sup> Or as Hilary summarizes, "[Christ] lives through the Father, and, as He

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<sup>12</sup> Hardon, p. 194.

<sup>13</sup> Figura, Michael; Schindler, David. trl. "Church and Eucharist in the Light of the Trinitarian Mystery." *Communio*, v. 27 Issue 2, 2000, p. 230.

<sup>14</sup> *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version*, (New York: National Council of Churches of Christ, 1973), John 6:56.

<sup>15</sup> McKenna, Stephen, C.S.S.R.; *The Fathers of the Church: Saint Hilary of Poitiers*, (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1954), Vol. 25, p. 286.

<sup>16</sup> McKenna, Vol. 25, p. 286.

<sup>17</sup> McKenna, Vol. 25, p. 287.

<sup>18</sup> RSV, John 6:57.

lives through the Father, we live in the same manner through His flesh."<sup>19</sup>

It is important to note that "the Eucharist ought to become for Christians a living experience of unity with Christ,"<sup>20</sup> and that whoever "rejects a unity of nature between the Father and the Son ... likewise rejects a genuine Eucharistic communion with Christ."<sup>21</sup>

In using the Eucharist to support the doctrine of the Trinity, St. Hilary demonstrates that "[the] Eucharist has been understood in light of the mystery of the Trinity from the inception of the early Church."<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, he "presents the Eucharist with particular clarity as the bond between God and us,"<sup>23</sup> and "shows how it is possible to have access to the mystery of the Trinity through the living reality of the Eucharist in the life of the Church."<sup>24</sup>

Additionally, "Cyril of Alexandria was one of the great patristic teachers about the Eucharist. ... [Speaking] about [John] verse 6:35, he clearly states the link between partaking of Christ's flesh, receiving the Holy Spirit, and participating in God's own nature: ' ... Christ feeds us for eternal life, both through the supply of the Holy Spirit and in the participation of his own flesh, which infuses into us the participation of God'."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> McKenna, Vol. 25, p. 287.

<sup>20</sup> Figura, p. 231.

<sup>21</sup> Figura, p. 231.

<sup>22</sup> Figura, p. 230.

<sup>23</sup> Figura, p. 230.

<sup>24</sup> Figura, p. 230, 231.

<sup>25</sup> Stephen B. Clark, *Catholics and the Eucharist: A Scriptural Introduction*, (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 2000), pp. 158-159.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem speaks of our union "with Christ through the Eucharist by comparing it to two volumes of melted wax: when brought together, they become one. Hence, in Communion, Christ is in us and we in Him."<sup>26</sup> St. Cyprian also teaches that "Our union with Christ unifies affections and wills."<sup>27</sup>

What should be made clear, though, is that while the unity of persons in the Trinity is substantial, our unity with Christ and the Trinity is accidental. For while St. Paul says that "[nothing] else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord,"<sup>28</sup> he also states that "[to] set the mind on the flesh is death".<sup>29</sup> So while nothing outside of us can separate us from God's love, if we turn away from God through sin, we lose this communion with Christ and hence with the Trinity.

## TRINITY AND EUCHARIST IN SACRED SCRIPTURES

The Gospel of St. John provided a great deal of material for the Fathers of the Church to indicate the connection between the Eucharist and the Trinity. Additionally, such verses as: "And we will make our home in him,"<sup>30</sup> speaks of how "Our Lord said that He, the Father and the Holy Spirit would come to anyone who loves them."<sup>31</sup> What a remarkable promise - the three persons of the Trinity do more than just come to we who loves them, but "actually make their home with us."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Formation Letters: The Holy Trinity and the Blessed Eucharist*, (Detroit, MI: Opus Angelorum, 2000), No. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Bernadot, M. V., *The Eucharist and the Trinity*, (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1977), p. 17

<sup>28</sup> RSV, Romans 8:39.

<sup>29</sup> RSV, 8:6.

<sup>30</sup> RSV, John 14:23.

<sup>31</sup> Bernadot, p. 48.

<sup>32</sup> Bernadot, p. 48.

Another verse from St. John's Gospel, where Jesus says that "no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him,"<sup>33</sup> or in other words it is as if Jesus is saying to us, "You will never go to My Father unless you enter into the movement of love which unites Me to Him. And you will never come to Me unless the Father draws you into the love with which He turns to Me, and which is consummated in the unity of the Holy Spirit."<sup>34</sup> Or as St. John says in his First Epistle, "our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ."<sup>35</sup>

Because of this union of the Christian with the Holy Trinity, St. Paul can say, "God's temple is holy, and that temple you are."<sup>36</sup> In this way, St. Paul exhorts Christians to show respect, if not reverence for their bodies and not to give in to sinful passions. For through the Eucharist we reinforce our bond to the Trinity through the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

In writing to the Ephesians, St. Paul also says, "Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."<sup>37</sup> Or as the author of Hebrews says, "Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God".<sup>38</sup> Tying this to the Eucharist, we can see that "[the] Eucharist springs from love; the reason for everything was that he loved us".<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, "[the] Eucharist comes to us as the work and gift of the Trinity; the entire Trinity is involved in the institution of the Eucharist: the Son who offers himself, the Father to whom he offers himself and the Holy Spirit through whom he

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<sup>33</sup> RSV, John 6:44.

<sup>34</sup> Bernadot, p. 52.

<sup>35</sup> RSV, 1 John 1:3.

<sup>36</sup> RSV, 1 Corinthians 3:17.

<sup>37</sup> RSV, Ephesians 5:2.

<sup>38</sup> RSV, Heb. 9:14.

<sup>39</sup> Cantalamessa, p. 11.

offers himself".<sup>40</sup> In this way, it can be seen that, "[the] entire Trinity ... takes part in the sacrifice from which the Eucharist comes."<sup>41</sup> And through this, "all is accomplished on the Cross; nothing greater can be thought of or done; it was there that every human and divine resource was consumed: all evil is conquered at its roots, salvation is obtained and every glory is given to the Trinity."<sup>42</sup>

So, the Eucharist brings the individual Christian into closer unity with the Trinity, and in addition the Trinity takes part in the sacrifice that brings about the Eucharist.

### TRINITY AND EUCHARIST IN THE LITURGY

The liturgy as the prayer of the Church is filled with Trinitarian references. From the Sign of the Cross that begins the liturgy ('In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,') to the Final Blessing at the end of the liturgy ('May Almighty God bless you, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,') the Trinity is an integral part of the public prayer. In the Eucharistic Sacrifice of the Mass, this is even more readily apparent in the Canons or Eucharistic Prayers. "The Eucharist is the great sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God for everything that he has done in creation, redemption, and sanctification, everything that he brings about for our sake and for the world today through his omnipotence, and everything that he will one day carry to completion in [his] kingdom"<sup>43</sup> The Eucharistic Prayers are all addressed to the Father as in the opening words of the Roman Canon, "We come to You Father with praise and thanksgiving through Jesus

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<sup>40</sup> Cantalamessa, p. 11.

<sup>41</sup> Cantalamessa, p. 11.

<sup>42</sup> Cantalamessa, p. 12.

<sup>43</sup> Figura, p. 233.

Christ your Son."<sup>44</sup> And all Eucharistic prayers end with the same doxology, "Through Him, with Him, in Him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is Yours Almighty Father, forever and ever."<sup>45</sup>

The high point of the Eucharistic Prayer comes at the words of institution. Here it is where "the sacrifice is effective [and] his word is heard, the word of the Word, by which he transformed his death into an event of meaning and of love, in order that we, through being able to take up his words for ourselves, are led onward into his love, onward into the love of the Trinity, in which he eternally hands himself over to the Father. There, where the words of the Word ring forth, and our gifts thus become his gifts, through which he gives himself, that is the sacrificial element that has ever and always been characteristic of the Eucharist."<sup>46</sup>

But in addition to its sacrificial nature, it can also be said that "[the] Eucharist is above all the memorial (*anamnesis* or *memoriale*) of the Lord who was crucified, resurrected from the dead and raised on high, who becomes present among us in the eucharistic gifts of bread and wine, which become his body and blood through transubstantiation." This memorial aspect is emphasized in *Sancrosanctum Concilium* where the Council, in using the term 'memorial' "endeavored to formulate a new understanding of the Mass".<sup>47</sup> In addition, St. Augustine held that "memory ... together with intelligence and will was actually a sign and vestige of the Trinity".<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> James Socias, Editor, *Daily Roman Missal*, (Chicago, IL: Midwest Theological Forum, 1998), p. 683.

<sup>45</sup> Socias, p. 699.

<sup>46</sup> Joseph Ratzinger (Henry Taylor, trl.), *God Is Near Us*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), pp 66-67.

<sup>47</sup> Figura, p. 234.

<sup>48</sup> Cantalamessa, pp. 56-57.

The Greek Fathers "have elaborated a rich Eucharistic spirituality based on the words of Jesus and which are used in the liturgy: *Do this in memory of me*. For them, the spiritual fruit of the Eucharist is nothing else but the constant memory of Jesus. It is through this constant remembrance, in fact, that God comes to dwell in a soul and makes it his temple."<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, "[the] Latin word for 'remember,' *recordari*, ... literally means to bring back again (*re-*) to the heart (*cor*). Therefore, it is not just an activity of the intellect, it is also one of the will and the heart; to remember and think of with love. In fact, Jesus attributes the fact that we are able to 'remember' him to the Holy Spirit (cf. John 14:26)."<sup>50</sup>

Just prior to the words of institution is the *epiclesis*, that is, the "prayer in which the Holy Spirit is entreated to make the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ".<sup>51</sup> By way of the *epiclesis*, "the Holy Spirit makes present the resurrected Christ ... [and] eternity irrupts into our time; ... [and] the Spirit gives us a foretaste of what will one day be in eternity."<sup>52</sup>

But other than the structure of the prayers, can it be said that "the Eucharist itself, is a Trinitarian mystery? The first, immediate answer is likely to be that the Eucharist is the mystery of the body and blood of Jesus Christ and must therefore be understood Christologically. The answer is correct, but there is no Christology without Trinitarian theology".<sup>53</sup> An explanation of this is that "we should say that in the Eucharist Jesus Christ the Son is *naturally* present (that is, in his divine and human nature) and he is *personally* present (in the person of the Son); *directly*, the Father and the Holy Spirit are only present nat

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<sup>49</sup> Cantalamessa, p. 57.

<sup>50</sup> Cantalamessa, p. 57.

<sup>51</sup> Figura, p. 236.

<sup>52</sup> Figura, p. 237.

<sup>53</sup> Figura, pp. 213-214.

ually (by virtue of the divine nature), whereas *indirectly*, by virtue of the interpenetration (*perichoresis*) of the three divine Persons, they are also present personally. In fact, in each of the three persons of the Trinity, the other two persons are present."<sup>54</sup>

So the Eucharist becomes the action of the entire Trinity and provides a glimpse of what will be experienced in the Beatific Vision. This sacrifice (1) to the Father, (2) where the Son offers himself, and we remember his saving action, (3) by the power of the Holy Spirit; cannot be separated from the Trinity.

#### TRINITY AND EUCHARIST IN THE WRITINGS OF THE SAINTS

St. Catherine of Siena's "theology of Eucharist may be described in brief as the way that humanity comes to find itself in love."<sup>55</sup> Combining this with her description of the life of the Trinity, she indicates that "to be placed within love is foremost to find oneself in the Trinitarian life of God."<sup>56</sup> This she expresses the idea of a unity between the Trinity and the Eucharist in a short prayer:

O Trinity! Eternal Trinity! O, Fire, abyss of Love! Would it not have been enough to create us after your own image and likeness, causing us to be re-born through grace and by the Blood of Your Son? Was it still necessary that You should give us even the Holy Trinity as food for our souls? Yes, Your love willed this, O Eternal Trinity. You gave us not only Your Word through Redemption and in the Eucharist. But You also gave us Yourself in Your fullness of love for Your creature. Truly the soul possesses You Who are the supreme Goodness.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Cantalamessa, p. 32.

<sup>55</sup> Susan F. Parsons, "St. Catherine of Siena's Theology of the Eucharist", *Heythrop Journal*, Vol. 44, p 459.

<sup>56</sup> Parsons, p. 459.

<sup>57</sup> *Formation Letters*, No. 2.

St. Therese of Liseaux made her First Holy Communion at the age of 11 in 1884. In her reflection on this moment she wrote, "It was not to remain in the ciborium that He descends each day from heaven, but in order to find another heaven, which is infinitely more pleasing to Him than the first one, the heaven of our soul, created in His image, the living temple of the adorable Trinity."<sup>58</sup>

Blessed Angela of Foligno prays, "O uncreated God! O God, so lovingly incarnate! Man has eaten Your flesh and drunk your blood, that he may be one with You through endless ages."<sup>59</sup>

What we can see in the writings of the saints and blessed is that the Eucharist as a union with Christ expands into a union with the Godhead in the Trinity. This is the same union that we saw in the writings of the Fathers, in Sacred Scripture, and manifested in the liturgy of Holy Mass.

## REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of the Sacraments is to bring us into the life of the Holy Trinity. Our Baptism brings us into the Family of the Trinity, Confirmation strengthens the life of the Holy Spirit within us, and Eucharist brings us into union with Christ. Through the Eucharist we are drawn closer into the life of the Trinity, especially because this Sacrament can be repeated daily if one is so disposed. The purpose of the Eucharist is not only fulfilled by "making us Sons of God, but we are also called to share in the wonderful exchanges of the Blessed Trinity. With Christ, in Him and through Him, we love the Father as Christ does; we offer the Father an infinitely worthy love because Christ's love is

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<sup>58</sup> *Formation Letters*, No. 2.

<sup>59</sup> Bernadot, p. 20.

ours. We are not at a loss because of our personal poverty in receiving and loving Christ because the Father gives us His own personal love in the Holy Spirit: We can love Christ with the Father's own love."<sup>60</sup>

Father Faber, with the unique prose of the 19<sup>th</sup> century speaks of the knowledge of God brought about through the reception of Holy Eucharist:

"Our dear Lord comes in the Blessed Sacrament, as dumb and meaner than a child, to live two lives; one towards men, because He is God; one towards God, because He is man. It is this latter one which we are now considering. The Blessed Sacrament is the exponent of God. We can nowhere get a more clear or more extensive knowledge of God than we can gather from the Blessed Sacrament. God is the model of it, the idea of it. It reveals His intimate and peculiar perfections more than anything else. Our truest notions of Him are derived from the operations of the Holy Eucharist"<sup>61</sup>

By embracing the humility shown by Our Lord, not only in his Incarnation, life, death, and resurrection - but especially in the humility shown by his coming in the Holy Eucharist; we gain a share in the life of the Blessed Trinity which gives us a foretaste of heaven. By making ourselves temples of the Trinity through reception of the Eucharist, gain a glimpse of our ultimate goal, namely eternal life.

Finally, "[in] considering the Eucharist, we must not, then, limit ourselves to discovering traces of the action of the Blessed Trinity such as we can find in the work of creation. We must see the Real Presence as the centre and pivotal point of a whole new series of relations be

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<sup>60</sup> *Formation Letters*, No. 2.

<sup>61</sup> Frederick William Faber, *The Blessed Sacrament*, (Rockford, IL: TAN Books and Publishers, 1978), p. 245.

tween us and the Blessed Trinity".<sup>62</sup> The Eucharist then is a vehicle into deeper relationship with the Trinity as we grow in the life of grace.

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<sup>62</sup> Taymans d'Eypernon, *The Blessed Trinity and the Sacraments*, (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1961), p. 135.

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