SILENT HOMILIES

The Bread That Does Not Stay Bread

The sacrament of the Eucharist



Silent Homilies

Little Treasures

The Bread That Does Not Stay Bread

The sacrament of the Eucharist

Before You Begin

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This is not a long book, and it is not meant to be. What follows is the sacrament at the centre of the Church's life. It looks, to every eye in the building, like bread and wine. The Church has never been shy of that fact. She has also never been shy of the next sentence. After the priest has spoken the Lord's own words, it is no longer what it looks like.

Read it before Mass if you can. Then go. The pages are only a path to the altar.

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Chapter 1

The Night He Did Not Wait for a Metaphor

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On the night before He died, Jesus sat at a table with the Twelve and spoke with a plainness that still startles people. He took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and said, "This is my body." He took a cup and said, "This is my blood." Matthew, Mark and Luke all record it. St Paul, writing to Corinth, says he is handing on what he himself received: that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread and said those words. So this is not a later decoration added by a pious century. It is the centre of the night, and it was already the centre of the Church's memory while the apostles were still alive.

You may be wondering why the Church treats the sentence so seriously. He could have said, "This stands for my body." He did not. He could have waited until after the Resurrection, when the Cross was behind Him and the explanation might have felt safer. He did not. He gave them Himself as food while He was still sitting there, so that after the Cross they would have a way of receiving the same gift without needing Him to stay in one room.

John's Gospel does not tell the taking of the bread in the same place. It gives, instead, a long conversation the year before. "I am the bread of life." "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." Many disciples left. This is the detail people sometimes miss. Jesus did not call them back with a softer explanation. He let the hard saying stand, and asked the Twelve whether they would leave too. Peter's answer is the Church's oldest Eucharistic faith in one line. "Lord, to whom shall we go?"

If Mass has ever seemed too ordinary — a weekday, a tired priest, a hymn nobody likes — remember the night. He chose a meal. He chose words that can be said again. Thursday evening was enough. Sunday morning is enough.

Reflection

John 6 becomes harder after the objection, not softer. That is worth sitting with. When people were confused, Jesus did not say, "You have misunderstood me. I only meant a symbol." He repeated the eating and the drinking. The disciples who left heard Him clearly enough to be shocked.

A parishioner who finds the Eucharist difficult is closer to that lakeside than to a textbook. The difficulty is old. Peter did not claim to have solved it. He stayed because he had nowhere else to take a life. Receiving Communion, on a morning when you do not feel much, can be that same staying.

The night in the upper room was not a lecture about presence. It was a gift given to men who would, within hours, fail Him. He did not wait until they were impressive. That is already a mercy, before any theology begins.

A Short Prayer

Jesus, You did not give us a metaphor to admire. You gave us Yourself to receive. Amen.

Chapter 2

Do This

†

The other half of the night is a command. "Do this in memory of me." Memory, in the Bible, is more than a mood. When Israel keeps the Passover, she is not only recalling Egypt as a story from long ago. She is being drawn into the same rescue. The lamb, the bread, the bitter herbs, the night: they make the old deliverance present for people who were not there. When the Church does what Jesus commanded, she is not putting on a play about Thursday. She is obeying a man who intended the gift to outlast the room it was first given in.

That is why "in memory of me" is more than thinking about a past event. The Greek word the Church inherited, anamnesis, means a memorial that makes present, not a memorial that only reminds. The Passover already worked that way. Jesus took that kind of meal and gave it His body and His blood. The Church's doing of it is how a parish that was not in Jerusalem still stands inside that night.

The earliest Christians understood the command quickly. The Didache, a little handbook from the first generations, already speaks of the Eucharist as something the baptised gather for on the Lord's Day. St Justin Martyr, writing to a pagan emperor around the year 155, describes the Sunday assembly: readings, a homily, prayers, bread and a cup of wine mixed with water, and the thanksgiving spoken by the one who presides. What is received, Justin says, is not common bread or common drink. He is explaining the faith to a man who does not share it, and he does not reduce it.

Do this is why there is a Mass at all. Not because the Church enjoys ritual for its own sake. The Lord left an action, not only a teaching, and the

action needs bread, wine, a priest and a people. Take those away and you still have a beautiful idea. You no longer have what He said to do. If you have wondered whether Sunday is optional, this is the answer, said quietly. He said do this. The Church has been trying, week after week, not to forget.

Reflection

Justin's letter is useful because he had no Christian audience to impress. He was writing to people who might have found the whole thing strange, and he still said the food was not common food. The Church did not grow into this belief after centuries of embroidery. She was already saying it while the empire was still deciding whether to tolerate her.

That should change the way a tired Sunday feels. You are not attending a custom the parish invented. You are doing the thing the Lord told the Twelve to keep doing, in the same order Justin already knew: word, prayer, bread, cup. The building is newer. The command is not.

If you have been away, the command has not expired. Do this was not spoken to the impressive. It was spoken to the men who would scatter before morning. The table is still the way back.

A Short Prayer

Lord, You said do this. Keep us from treating the command as a suggestion. Amen.

Chapter 3

What We Mean by Presence

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Catholics say the Lord is really present in the Eucharist. The word really is doing a lot of work, and it is worth slowing down over it. He is present in many ways: in the gathered people, in the Word proclaimed, in the priest who acts in His person, in the poor. The Church does not deny any of that. She adds a further claim that is harder and more precise. In the consecrated bread and wine He is present truly, really and substantially. The whole Christ: body, blood, soul and divinity. Not a piece of Him. Not a memory of Him. Himself.

Substantially, in ordinary speech, means that what this now is, at the deepest level, is Christ. It does not mean you will feel Him, or that your attention makes Him present, or that a scientist's instruments must register a change. His Eucharistic presence does not depend on our imagination, our feelings, or our ability to sense Him. A distracted parishioner and a saint in the same bench are kneeling before the same Lord. The difference is in them, not in the Host.

This is why a fragment is treated as He is treated, so long as the appearances of bread remain. This is why the tabernacle lamp is lit. This is why a host that falls is not swept up with the dust. Presence, if it is real, changes manners. You do not behave the same way in an empty room and in a room where someone you love is sitting.

The old accusation was cannibalism. The Church's answer has always been patient. We receive Christ sacramentally, under the appearance of food, not as a body carved at a table. He gives Himself as nourishment, in the manner of a sacrament. The manners of a kitchen do not apply. The manners of adoration do. If you have knelt and felt nothing, you are not

thereby absent. Presence is not a temperature. The lamp by the tabernacle is not checking your pulse. It is telling the truth about what is reserved there.

Reflection

There is a loneliness that looks like an empty church. On a Tuesday afternoon the benches are bare, the heaters are off, and the only sound is a door. The tabernacle lamp says the room is not empty. Someone has stayed after everyone else went home to lunch.

That is a different thought from the doctrine of presence, and it is the one that changes a visit. You did not come to inspect a belief. You came into a room where Christ has kept an address. You may say almost nothing. Sitting down is already a form of agreement.

St Charles de Foucauld kept the Blessed Sacrament in his little chapel at Tamanrasset, and thanked God for what he called the first tabernacle among the Tuareg. Almost nobody came to Mass. He still wanted Christ present there. A weekday parish church is a smaller version of the same fact. He stays. The question is whether anyone will sit with Him.

A Short Prayer

Lord, really here, let my manners catch up with what I have been taught. Amen.

Chapter 4

The Bread That Does Not Stay Bread

†

How can it still look like bread and be Christ? This is where Catholics sometimes become confused, and the confusion is understandable. The Church's old word for the change is transubstantiation. It is a long word for a simple, staggering claim. What the thing most deeply is — its substance — becomes the body and blood of Christ. What the senses meet remains: weight, taste, colour, the crumbs on the paten. The Council of Trent called these the appearances, or species.

So a microscope has not been forbidden by the doctrine. You could examine a consecrated host and find the properties of wheat. You would not have disproved the sacrament. You would have confirmed what the Church already says. The appearances remain. What is there is now Christ. Sight, taste and touch still meet bread and wine. Faith says that the bread and wine themselves are no longer there. St Thomas Aquinas, who thought as hard as anyone has thought about this, still ended in that place. In the hymn he left us, the senses fail, and faith supplies what they cannot reach. That is a paraphrase of his lines, not a laboratory report.

Trent did not invent the change. It gave a careful name to what the Church had been doing and adoring for centuries. St Ignatius of Antioch, on his way to death around the year 110, already wrote that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Saviour, and that some people stayed away from it because they would not confess that. The word transubstantiation came later. The faith it protects was already there.

You do not need the philosophical vocabulary to go to Communion. You need the faith the vocabulary is protecting. Christ is present whole and entire under the appearance of bread, and whole and entire under

the appearance of wine. He is present whole and entire in each part, for as long as the appearances remain. The bread does not stay bread. The wine does not stay wine. That is the quietest miracle in the building, and it happens while people shuffle and a baby talks.

Reflection

The word can feel like a wall. It was built for the opposite reason. It was built so that the gift would not be reduced to a symbol we admire and then leave on the altar. You may love symbols. This one, the Church says, is more than that.

What the doctrine does to an ordinary life is strangely practical. You genuflect towards a tabernacle you cannot see into. You receive on a morning when the host tastes of nothing in particular. You do not wait to be convinced by a feeling. The senses are allowed to report what they report. Faith is allowed to say what they cannot.

If the long word has ever kept you at a distance, walk around it and look at the altar. The claim is not that bread has become impressive. The claim is that Christ has made Himself small enough to be carried, broken and received.

A Short Prayer

Faith will tell me Christ is present. Let that be enough for this morning. Amen.

Chapter 5

Sacrifice and Meal

†

The Eucharist is a meal. It is also a sacrifice. Drop either sentence and the Mass goes lopsided. A meal without a sacrifice becomes a religious breakfast. A sacrifice without a meal becomes a drama we watch and do not receive. The Church has refused to choose.

There is only one sacrifice of Christ: the Cross, offered once. The Mass does not crucify Him again, and it is not a second sacrifice standing beside Calvary. This is the point that needs to be said slowly. On the Cross, Christ offered Himself in a bloody way, once for all. In the Mass, that same offering is made present sacramentally. A parish on a wet Tuesday can stand at Calvary without travelling and without pretending that Friday is happening again in the body. The priest is not replacing Jesus. He is lending his voice and his hands so that the same words — "This is my body" — can be said again in this room, over this bread.

Then the meal. "Take and eat." The gift is not left on the altar as something only to be looked at. Communion is not a prize for people who have followed the plot. It is the plot. God feeds the people He has just gathered at the foot of the Cross. That is why the Church is restless when a Catholic never comes forward, and restless in another way when someone comes forward as if it were only bread.

If you have only ever thought of Mass as something you attend, try thinking of it as something offered, and then as something eaten. The night in the upper room used both. He gave His body, and He said take. Sacrifice and Communion belong together because He joined them before anyone else could separate them.

Reflection

A hospital corridor makes the join easier to see than a theology page does. The priest is carrying a pyx to someone who cannot get to the church. What he carries is the same offering that was on the altar that morning. What he gives is food. The person in the bed is not attending a service. He is being fed with the sacrifice.

That is why a Catholic who can receive, and never does, has missed half of what the Mass is. And a Catholic who receives without any sense that a life was offered has missed the other half. The Lord did not hold up the bread and then put it back. He gave it.

The next time the priest lifts the host, you are allowed to remember both things at once. This is Calvary, made present. This is also supper. You were invited to both.

A Short Prayer

Lamb of God, let me stand at Your one sacrifice and not go home unfed. Amen.

Chapter 6

Who May Come Forward

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The Church is open-handed, and she is exact. Any baptised Catholic who is in a state of grace, who has kept the Eucharistic fast, and who believes what the Church believes about this sacrament, may receive. Children are prepared, usually around the age of reason, so that they know they are not eating ordinary bread. The fast is now one hour before Communion. Water and medicine do not break it. The elderly, the sick, and those caring for them may receive even if they have eaten within the hour. It is a small hunger on purpose. The body is told, for a little while, that this food is not the same as the last thing you ate.

Adults who have been away are asked to come through Confession first if they are conscious of grave sin. That is not a barrier invented by unkind priests. St Paul already warned the Corinthians not to eat and drink without discerning the body, and he spoke severely because he believed they were receiving Christ, not a symbol. If there is grave reason and no chance to confess, the Church allows a person to receive after an act of perfect contrition, and to confess as soon as possible. The ordinary road is still the sacrament of Penance.

Christians who are not Catholic may be dearer to you than anyone in the building. The normal discipline is that they do not receive. Communion in the Host expresses communion in the faith and in the Church. To share the Host while the Churches are still divided would say something with the body that the lives have not yet been able to say. Justin said the same in the second century. No one who does not believe as we do is to share.

People sometimes think the only exception is the danger of death. A family deserves the fuller answer. A Christian from an Eastern Church that is not in full communion with Rome may receive if he asks freely and is properly disposed. For other baptised Christians the door is narrower. It opens in danger of death, or in another grave need the bishop has recognised, and only if they cannot go to their own minister, ask of their own accord, believe what the Catholic Church believes about this sacrament, and are ready to receive. Where the Church still says no, she is not judging their goodness. She is refusing to pretend that sharing the Host is the same thing as sharing one faith.

Reflection

The rule hurts most at a family funeral, when someone you love stays in the bench. It can feel like a slammed door. Read it, if you can, as the Church refusing to tell a lie with the holiest thing she has. The person in the bench is not being told they are unloved. They are being told that this food says "one body," and that the one body is not yet complete.

There is a way to honour them that is not a false communion. Pray for them by name at that Mass. Walk back to the bench and sit with them. The Lord who is received by some is the Lord who is sought by others. Seeking is not nothing.

If you yourself have stayed back because you were not ready, that can be reverence rather than absence. Come home through Confession when you can. The table is not closed to the penitent. It is closed to pretence.

A Short Prayer

Lord, I will not come forward as if this were nothing. Make me ready, or make me wait. Amen.

Chapter 7

Fragments, Cloths, and Careful Hands

†

The whole Christ is present under each species, and in each part, for as long as the appearances of bread and wine remain. That is the condition, and it matters. The Church is not claiming that every invisible crumb of chemistry is a separate miracle. She is saying that while what remains is still the consecrated species, Christ is wholly there. That is why the corporal is spread, why the paten is used, and why the vessels are purified with water after Communion. A host that falls is picked up with care. If it can be consumed, it is consumed. If it cannot, it is dissolved in water and poured into the sacrarium, the special drain that goes into the earth, not into an ordinary sink. This can look fussy to a visitor. It looks like faith to anyone who has accepted what the Church says about the change.

Hands matter. Whether you receive on the tongue or in the hand — and both are permitted where the bishops have allowed Communion in the hand — the concern is the same. Reverence. No fragments left to be lost on the way back to the bench. No host taken away as a souvenir. The gift is food. It is received and eaten, not kept in a pocket. The old name for the moment after Communion was simply thanksgiving: a few minutes in which you do not immediately become a person checking a telephone.

The same care is why we genuflect, why we keep silence near the tabernacle, and why a church is not a corridor. Once you know that Christ remains while the appearances remain, you stop treating the house as if it were empty.

If you have been careless, you need a slower Communion. Watch the priest's hands, and let your own learn from them.

Reflection

Christ allows Himself to be carried, and that is a stranger humility than the doctrine alone suggests. The same Lord who cannot be contained by a church can be dropped by a nervous hand. The Church's carefulness is an answer to that humility. If He has made Himself this small, the people who handle Him should not be casual.

A fallen host is not a scandal. It is a reminder. He entrusted Himself to human hands on the night of the betrayal, and He has not taken the risk back. The corporal, the paten and the sacrarium are how a parish tries to be worthy of a trust it cannot fully manage.

The next time you receive, the question is not whether your hands are impressive. It is whether they know what they are holding, for the few seconds they hold it.

A Short Prayer

Jesus, present while the appearances remain, teach my hands the manners of faith. Amen.

Chapter 8

Food for the Road and for the Dying

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The Church carries the Eucharist to people who cannot come to Mass. That ordinary visit has a name of its own when death is near. Viaticum means food for the journey. It is Communion given to a person who is setting out on the last road. Communion to the sick and Viaticum are related, and they are not the same thing. A person in hospital for a week may receive Communion. A person approaching death is offered Viaticum, and the Church wants them to receive it while they can still swallow, and while they can still know what they are receiving.

That is why families should not wait until the last hour. Call the priest earlier. Confession, Anointing and Viaticum belong together at the end of a life, and Viaticum is the climax of them, not an extra if there happens to be time. The Host in that room is not a ceremony. It is provision. Thursday night was a borrowed room too.

The same sacrament is carried to the sick who are not dying. A priest, or a commissioned minister of Holy Communion, takes a pyx through streets and hospital corridors. What is inside is not a token of the parish's goodwill. Bells used to be rung in the street so that people could kneel. We are quieter now. The fact has not changed.

If you have a parent who can no longer come to Mass, ask. The Church is not only a building that waits. She is a people who carry. Some of the most honest Communions in the world happen on a bedside table, with a glass of water and a television muttering in the corner.

Reflection

A family beside a bed often does not know what to ask for. They know the person is ill. They do not know the difference between a visit and Viaticum, and nobody wants to say the word death too soon. The kinder mistake is to call early. A person can receive Communion many times in an illness. Viaticum is for the journey itself, and it cannot be given to someone who can no longer swallow.

There is a particular beauty in the Church putting the same food into a hand that can barely close. The Lord who fed the Twelve does not wait for a stronger congregation. He comes to the last room. The corridor is as much His church, for those minutes, as the building with the bell.

If you are the one who will make the phone call, make it before the fear decides for you. Food for the journey is meant to be eaten on the road, not remembered after the road has ended.

A Short Prayer

Christ, food for the road, come down every corridor we cannot walk. Amen.

Chapter 9

The Same Presence, Still

†

After Mass the consecrated hosts that remain are placed in the tabernacle. The lamp is lit. The presence does not expire when the last hymn ends. It lasts as long as the appearances of bread last. This is why a church in the afternoon is not an empty hall. Someone is there. You may sit. You may say almost nothing. Adoration is the Mass's faith continuing after the dismissal.

A monstrance, the vessel that holds a host upright for people to see, came later. It lets the same presence be looked at as well as eaten. Exposition is that looking, prolonged. Benediction is the blessing given with the Host at the end of it. Corpus Christi is the day the Church takes the same Host into the street, so that the faith of the altar is not kept only indoors. They are not four unrelated devotions. One practice leads to the next: reserve, look, bless, carry.

You do not have to feel mystical. Staying is enough. St Charles de Foucauld's hidden life in the desert was largely a life in front of the tabernacle, and he did not wait for a crowd. After he was killed at Tamanrasset in 1916, the officer who reached the hermitage found a small monstrance in the sand. The Host was still there.

If your parish keeps a quiet hour, go once without a programme. Ten minutes is a beginning. The lamp does not require a speech. It requires a body in a chair.

Reflection

Genuflecting when nobody is watching is a small test of whether the doctrine has reached the body. In a full church the gesture can be habit. In an empty one it is a decision. You bend because of who is there, not because of who might see you.

That is also why the lamp matters more than the decoration around it. A parish can have a beautiful sanctuary and an uncertain tabernacle. The lamp is the honest sentence. He is here. The rest of the building can be plain.

Stay a little longer than you planned. The Presence did not leave with the procession. The least you can do is not leave at the first chance either.

A Short Prayer

Lord of the lamp, I will sit down. Stay with me as You stayed after Emmaus. Amen.

Chapter 10

People Who Have Eaten God

†

The danger of a book like this is that it leaves you informed and unfed. The Eucharist is not finally an idea to be held. It is a Person to be received, and then a life that has to make room for having received Him.

St Augustine told his people, in a sermon on the Eucharist, that if they were the body of Christ, then it was their own mystery on the altar. He told them to answer Amen to what they are, and to become what they receive. The wording in the sermon is "Be what you see; receive what you are." The point is the same. The Body of Christ, eaten, is meant to make a body of Christ that can be seen in the street: patient, willing to forgive, unwilling to leave the poor unfed.

A parish that adores the Host and ignores the hungry has not yet understood the meal. A parish that feeds the hungry and treats the Host as a symbol has not yet understood the meal either. The two hungers belong together. Adoration that never becomes charity has stopped too soon. Charity that never returns to the altar has forgotten where the strength is supposed to come from.

Go to Mass. Keep the hour before Communion. Confess when you should. Come forward when you may. Stay a minute after. That is the practical centre of the chapter. The rest is the long work of letting the Presence rearrange a week. If these pages have done their work, the next host you see will not look like a disc that only reminds you of God. Receive it. Then live as someone who has.

Reflection

Augustine's sentence is an invitation, not a scolding. He did not tell his people they had failed to become the Body. He told them that receiving it was how they would. A person who has just come back to Communion does not need a list of improvements. He needs to be told that the food is already at work.

Forgiveness belongs here as much as the poor do. It is hard to receive the Lord who gave Himself and then keep a small war going in the family. The meal does not cancel justice. It does make lasting hatred look strange in the mouth that has just said Amen.

Become what you receive. Not all at once. Not by a feeling. By the next ordinary decision, made by someone who has eaten.

A Short Prayer

Lord, I am not worthy. Only say the word — and then let me become what I receive. Amen.

A Last Word

†

If these pages have done their quiet work, the next host you see will not be a disc that reminds you of God. It will be the bread that did not stay bread.

Keep the book if it helps. Give it away to someone who goes to Mass and has forgotten why.

May you receive. May you stay a minute after. May you become what you have eaten.

St Thomas Aquinas, pray for us. St Charles de Foucauld, pray for us.

Sources and Further Reading

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Scripture: Matthew 26:26–28; Mark 14:22–24; Luke 22:19–20; 1 Corinthians 11:23–29; John 6:35–68; Luke 24:13–35. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1322–1419, especially 1362–1377 on sacrifice, presence and transubstantiation, and 1384–1390 on reception.

Council of Trent, Session 13, on the Most Holy Eucharist. Code of Canon Law, 897–958, especially 915–916 on worthy reception, 919 on the fast, 921–922 on Viaticum, and 844 on sharing sacramental communion with other Christians. The one-hour fast does not bind the sick and elderly in the same way.

General Instruction of the Roman Missal, on the purification of vessels and the care of fragments. Redemptionis Sacramentum, on reverence, Communion in the hand where permitted, and a fallen host. Pastoral Care of the Sick, on Communion to the sick and Viaticum.

St Justin Martyr, First Apology 65–67. St Ignatius of Antioch, To the Smyrnaeans 7. St Augustine, Sermon 272: "Be what you see; receive what you are." St Thomas Aquinas, Adoro te devote. The Didache 14, on the Lord's Day assembly. St Charles de Foucauld, on the reserved Sacrament and the first tabernacle among the Tuareg, in his Tamanrasset writings. René Bazin, Charles de Foucauld: Hermit and Explorer (1921), records that after his death on 1 December 1916, M. de La Roche found a small monstrance in the sand still containing the Host.

For the Next Place at the Table

†

A loaf looks simple when it reaches the table. Before that, seed was planted, grain grew, someone milled it, someone kneaded, someone waited, and someone baked. A host is smaller still, and the road behind it is longer.

These pages are free to read. A gift is not payment for them. They are already yours. What a gift adds, if you are able to give one through the Silent Homilies website, is help towards the next place at the table: the hours spent with Scripture, Trent, the canons, Justin and Augustine, so that a difficult belief is explained without being thinned.

I would be truly grateful. It is a practical help with time and resources, not a condition of reading.

If you cannot give, nothing is owed. Share the booklet with someone who has forgotten why they go to Mass. Or spend ten minutes with Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. That would already be a good use of these pages. www.silenthomilies.com

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