

How the Eucharist Transforms Us into the Image of Jesus Christ

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My name is Kenneth Howell, and I want to welcome you to this wonderful retreat, the Pray More Eucharistic retreat. We're so glad that you're with us, and so I want to ask God to give us grace and His mercy to be able to understand more deeply the importance of the Eucharist in our lives. Let's begin with prayer.

Opening Prayer

The name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Good and gracious God, in your loving mercy, you have called us into fellowship with Jesus Christ, your son. And not only have you given Him to be our savior, but you've given Him to be our food. Strengthen us by the grace that He gives, that we may in our future and lives and future days to come, we may give more deeply of ourselves in your service. Grant us the power and the strength to be your children and to serve you faithfully through Christ our Lord. Amen. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

John Chapter Six

Well, my talk today has to do with the Eucharist and how the Eucharist transforms us into the image of Jesus Christ. In order to understand that a little bit more deeply, we have to recall for just a moment, what our Lord has told us in the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John. In John chapter six, we have that wonderful discourse in which Jesus teaches about Himself, as the bread of life. For example, in John Six, Thirty five, He says, *"I am the bread of the life. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life."*

These wonderful promises that God has given us are something that every Christian should treasure and should understand more deeply every day so that we can become more like Christ Himself. Now, today what I'd like to focus on is the fact that Jesus gives us Himself in the Eucharist so that He can transform us into His own image. And there's several passages in the New Testament which have to do with this transformation. One of the most famous is in Second Peter chapter one, verses one through four.

If you have a Bible, I encourage you to open it and turn with me to this text, second Peter one, one through four. *"Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who've obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ. May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of the Jesus our Lord. His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of Him who has called us to His own glory and excellence by which He has granted to us His great precious and very great promises, so that through them you might become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire."*

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This very rich text by the very first Pope, Peter, it gives us a clue as to what this transformation is about. In verse four, St. Peter says that *"God has given us precious and great promises so that through them we might become partakers of the divine nature."*

Partakers of the Divine Nature

I wish I had the time to show you how many times this expression is quoted by the church fathers, both east and west, when it says that there are part, we are partakers of the divine nature. Now, this seems to be a strange thing to say for a Christian, because God is creator and we are a creature. And no matter how high we rise in the world, we'll never be the creator. There's an infinite distance between God and us.

So what does St. Peter mean when he says that we become partakers of the divine nature? Well, the church fathers give us some guidelines in this when they talk about this transformative experience of deification or sometimes called "divinization", and the Greek word for it is "theosis".

For example, Saint Athanasius of Alexandria sort of made it in a very pithy way when he said "The Son of God became the son of man, so that the sons of men might become the sons of God." This transformation that took place in Jesus Himself is the same transformation that takes place in us. And again, the church fathers have called this deification or divinization. Now, it doesn't mean that we become God, we never can become God, but what it means is that our human nature is raised up to a level to be consistent with His divine nature.

Think about what Jesus said, that the greatest commandment was to love God with all your hearts soul and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself, was the second commandment. When He said that we should love God with everything that we are, the question arises, well, how can we love God with all that we are? How can that still be equal to God's love for us? Well, in one sense it can't. But if we're going to love God as He loves us, our love has to be raised up to the level of His love. Now, St. Peter says in these verses that takes place through his precious and very great promises. What are those promises? Well, those promises are that, like we mentioned in John chapter six, *"He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life."*

Or he put it in a slightly different way when he said, unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, or eat the flesh and blood of the son of man, you have no life in you. And that weird life there in Greek "Zoe", from which we get the woman's name Zoe. Zoe means a heavenly life, a life that is beyond this life. So you see, no matter how good we become in this life, we can never reach the life of God unless God first comes down and enters into our life and into our hearts, into our souls; this is the process of deification. The church fathers spoke about this many times.

On Deification

Today, I'd like to share with you one of those times when St. Gregory of Nisa spoke about this deification in his, in one of his writings, this is from eight on Ecclesiastes, that St. Gregory, a fourth century bishop, wrote about the Eucharist. "Whatever is received in nature goes on to transform the receiver. For example, the mouth of one who receives some sweet smelling aroma

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becomes fragrant. And again, the one who consumes garlic or something more pungent, his mouth becomes foul smelling." Gregory didn't know that I like garlic. So anyway, we won't worry about that, all this, but he says, "All the filth of sin is foul smelling, but the virtue of Christ is wonderful. You see, it is sweet smelling and a loving union." He means a loving union with Christ "Naturally affects a mingling with the beloved. Whatever we choose through love is the very thing we become." That's important. Let me read that again. "Whatever we choose through love becomes the very thing we become. That very thing itself, either the fragrance of Christ or a foul smell for the one who loves goodness is himself good as the goodness of it transforms the receiver into himself, and he who lives forever, that is Christ. He who lives forever places himself before us as food so that once we receive him in them, (meaning the bread and the wine) we may become precisely what he is." You see, that's transformation to become precisely what Christ is a son of God. And in this son of God, we become equal, as it were with Him in praise to the Father.

Making Us Into His Own Image

So when Christ transforms us and changes us, He makes us into His own image. This is so important because so many people, I'm afraid think of salvation as something of like a sort of mental ascent, they believe in Jesus or maybe they have feelings of love for Him. But when we say we believe in Jesus, when we trust Him, what we're saying is we want to make a commitment to Him. It's much like a husband and a wife in marriage. When they say they believe in one another, they're really trusting one another and they're entrusting their lives with one another.

2 Corinthians 3:12-18

The second text we're going to look at today is from St. Paul's letter to this Corinthians, second Corinthians chapter three verses twelve through eighteen. *"Therefore, since we have such hope, we act very boldly and not like Moses who put a veil over his face so that the Israelites could not look intently at the cessation of what was fading. Rather, their thoughts were rendered dull for to this day, the same veil remains unlifted when they read the Old Covenant, because through Christ, it is taken away. To this day in fact, whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their hearts. But whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the spirit and where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all gazing with an unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the image from glory to glory as from the Lord who is the spirit."*

In this last verse, St. Paul is reminding us of this process of transformation that takes place when we gaze upon the Lord. He says, we in fact, all of us reflecting the Lord's glory with an unveiled face are being transformed from glory to glory as from the spirit of the Lord. Now, when Paul says that we are being transformed, he links it to this little verb, which means "to gaze". And the particular word that's used here by Paul means like to look into a mirror and to see something reflected.

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Of course, mirrors in the ancient world weren't as good as our mirrors, but they were like, you know, pieces of silver or something where they could look in and you could see a reflection. The reflection was dim, but nevertheless, the idea's the same, that by looking at Christ, we are reflecting who He is and we reflect even more so on who we are. This process of transformation is actually come over into the English language by the word metamorphosis, because that's the word that Paul uses here we are being metamorphasized, we are being transformed.

You see, we can't enter into heaven in the state that we are. We are still in a sinful state. We still have inclinations that are wrong. And even if they weren't wrong, we still, again, could not rise to the level of loving God as He loves us. But this is what grace is, grace is doing what we cannot do; it's giving us what we need in order to reach up to God.

The Catholic Church's Stance on Pelagianism?

I can't stress this enough, it must have been, oh, about years ago I was giving a retreat to some men, in Indianapolis, and it was kind of an all day Saturday retreat for the men of the parish. And I'd given already a couple of talks and then it was, became to the end of the day.

Well, as I was talking, I just happened to mention, in an unplanned way. I mentioned that, you know, many Catholics fall into Pelagianism. Well, a man raised his hand and said, well, what's Pelagianism? And I said, well, Pelagianism is the belief that if you just pull yourself up by those bootstraps and you, work hard, you get to heaven one day. And he said, well, I thought that's what Catholic is. And I said, no, it's not. That's not what Catholic, the Catholic church rejected Pelagianism a long time ago.

You see, if we didn't need a savior, if we could do it ourselves, then Jesus didn't need to come into the world. We need the grace of God, not just toward us, but inside of us in order to transform us in order to be like Him. Saint Augustine, the great opponent of Pelagius, was also wrote one of the most beautiful books in all of Christian history called The Confessions. If you've never read the Confessions, I encourage you to do so.

Christ Is Our Source of Growth and Holiness

But in book seven, chapter ten of the confessions, Saint Augustine says this, speaking to God, he says, *"When I first recognized you, you lifted me up to see that there was something I'm looking at, but I was not yet one who could see. And you broke through the weakness of my vision radiating out in me powerfully. And I trembled with love and awe. And I discovered that I was far from you in the region of dissimilarity."*

In other words, he means he was so far from God and it wasn't like God at all. And then he says this, *"It is as if I heard a voice from on high saying, I am food for the strong grow and you will consume me, nor will you change me into you as the food of your body does, but you will be changed into me."* Christ is speaking to Saint Augustine and He's saying in the Eucharist, we receive, we don't just receive Jesus, but he transforms us into Himself. This is why we must always look to Christ as the source of our growth and holiness, and the very summit of our lives.

Second Corinthians 4:16-18

We will think about this for just a moment together in one last text I'd like to read in the, in the chapter just before this one, Saint Paul says again, or rather, the chapter after the second Corinthians chapter four verses sixteen through eighteen. In these verses, St. Paul, just before them, he's been talking about how all the troubles and trials that he's going through, and even though he sometimes faces death he's not, undone by this. And then he says, *"Therefore, we are not discouraged; rather, although our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day for this momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. As we look not to what is seen, but what is unseen and what is seen is transitory, But what is unseen is eternal."*

I think this is very important because he's telling us here that in the midst and the trials of difficulties of life, we should most of all not be discouraged. You know, so I think it was Saint Ignatius of Loyola who said that, that the final and the strongest tool that the devil has in his toolbox is discouragement and despair. The devil will try to get at you in many different ways, particularly focusing on your weakness. Suppose for example, you have a particular love for money. Well, he'll try to get you through greed or lust or the desire for power, but if he can't get you those ways, he will resort to discouragement and despair. Paul says, though we have all these things happening to us, we are not going to be discouraged because God is at work in us and at the end of this section that we read, he's talking about the fact that our return reward is becoming more certain day by day.

How is it becoming more certain? Because day by day we are growing closer to God, we're growing more deeply in faith with God. Great spiritual directors tell us that sometimes we can't even see that about ourselves. But if we're receiving Christ in the Eucharist and if we're placing our trust in Him and seeking to be obedient to His will, then we can be sure that Christ is indeed bringing us on the path to heaven, which someday will be brought to its fullness in all the grace of God and the mercy and the love of God.

Fix Our Eyes Upon Him

So what should we do? Well, I think these verses make it very, very clear. We should look at Jesus. We should fix our eyes upon Him. As until His life, His thoughts, His feelings, His humanity becomes a part of us. And in a practical way, picking up on the themes perhaps that we've had during this past Lent, we could say, Lord, reorient my values toward heaven. Take my money, my talents, my good desires, and show me how I can store up treasures in heaven. You know, there's a beautiful prayer, the church often that we hear in mass, so that we would so love the things of heaven that we would judge rightly the things of earth. My friend embrace Christ, He loves you.