

## The Eucharist is the body of Christ, not the body of Jesus. What we call it matters.

*Kevin W. Irwin* July 11, 2023 [Facebook](#) [Twitter](#) [Email](#)



Auxiliary Bishop Andrew H. Cozzens of St. Paul and Minneapolis carries the Eucharist in a monstrance during a procession June 19, 2021. (OSV News photo/CNS file, Dave Hrbacek, The Catholic Spirit)

Mark Twain once wrote: “The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter. ’Tis the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.”

That insight has a powerful bearing on any discussion of Catholic magisterial teaching and the prayers of the liturgy, both of which are primary sources for sustaining orthodox Catholic faith and belief. Accuracy in citing these texts and in commenting on them is truly “a large matter.”

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During the three-year national eucharistic revival in the Catholic Church in the United States,

including a year of parish revival, a national eucharistic congress in 2024 and the National Year of Mission, I would like to offer three examples where citing the church's magisterium precisely and where offering the Mass according to the "texts and rites" of the Roman Missal are crucial—because sometimes phrases can be misquoted and possibly lead to heterodox ideas.

Taking liberties with the wording of magisterial teachings or the wording of the liturgy is an extremely dangerous and self-serving exercise in terms of the church's belief. Every text and rite of the Roman Missal carries a theological meaning—sometimes more than one. Tampering with words and tinkering with ceremonies can only lead down a slippery slope. Church words and actions are a very large matter.

### **The real presence of Christ**

The first teaching ("canon") about the Eucharist from the 16th-century Council of Trent states that the Eucharist contains (the Latin is "*contineri*") "truly, really and substantially, the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ together with the soul and divinity, and therefore the whole Christ." The teaching from Trent never says that the Eucharist is "the real presence of Jesus." It always uses the term "body of Christ."

To describe the Eucharist as the "body of Jesus" or "the real presence of Jesus" would be too limiting to the historical body and earthly reality of the Word made flesh and the incarnate Son of God. The "body of Christ" refers to the entirety of the mystery of the totality of Christ: his whole earthly ministry and also his suffering, death, resurrection and ascension to the Father's right hand to intercede for us in heaven. The Eucharist is the real presence of this body of Christ, not Jesus only.

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The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy" ("[Sacrosanctum Concilium](#)"), promulgated at the Second Vatican Council, uses the words "is present" (the Latin is "*adest*") when it teaches the following:

Christ is always present in His Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of His minister, "the same now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the cross" but especially under the Eucharistic species. By His power He is present in the sacraments, so that when a man baptizes it is really Christ Himself who baptizes. He is present in His word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church. He is present, lastly, when the Church prays and sings, for He promised: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt 18:20).

Once again, it is notable that the text speaks of the presence "of Christ" not "of Jesus." It is also

notable that the text does not speak of four presences of Christ, but of the presence of Christ in four complementary ways. In his encyclical "[Mysterium Fidei](#)" (1965), Pope Paul VI expands on this fourfold presence of Christ when he says: "He is present [*adest*]" in the Church as she performs her works of mercy" and "He is present [*adest*]" in the Church as she preaches the Gospel which she proclaims as the word of God, and it is only in the name of Christ, the Incarnate Word and by His authority and with His help that it is preached."

The Roman Missal assiduously avoids using the title "Jesus" without a modifier, preferring phrases such as "our Lord," "Jesus Christ," "our Lord Jesus Christ" or "through Christ our Lord." For example, in the Order of Mass, the following words and phrases are used: "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ," "the Lord Jesus Christ," "Lord Jesus Christ, only begotten Son," "praise to you Lord Jesus Christ," "I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ," "and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord," "the Lord Jesus Christ, the King of Glory," "through your Son our Lord Jesus Christ," "Lord Jesus Christ, you said to your apostles" and "at the coming of our Savior Jesus Christ." At Communion, the minister says "the body of Christ."

### **The Importance of Language**

The words *summit*, *source*, *font* and *apex* are English translations of the Latin "*culmen et fons*," which is found in two places in the documents of Vatican II. The first is in "[Sacrosanctum Concilium](#)," which asserts (No. 10) that the liturgy (not the Eucharist only) is the summit toward which the activity of the church is directed; at the same time, it is the font from which all her power flows. The Latin is "*Attamen Liturgia est culmen ad quod actio Ecclesiae tendit et simul fons unde omnis eius virtus emanat.*" The text then goes on to say: "For the aim and object of apostolic works is that all who are made sons of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of His Church, to take part in the sacrifice, and to eat the Lord's supper."

The phrase "to take part" used there is exceedingly important for the theology of the Eucharist. The Latin of the final two clauses is "*Sacrificium participant et cenam dominicam manducent*," which gives us the verbal forms of the words "participation" or "active participation" regularly cited as one of the goals of the reform of the liturgy after Vatican II. It is also significant theologically because it also refers to the sacrifice of Christ. The Eucharist is a sacrificial sacrament.

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The language of "summit and source" is expanded in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church ("[Lumen Gentium](#)"), in an important and carefully worded assertion (No. 11): "Taking part in the Eucharistic sacrifice, which is the fount and apex of the whole Christian life, they offer the Divine Victim to God, and offer themselves along with It." The Latin is "*Sacrificium eucharisticum, totius vitae christianae fontem et culmen, participantes, divinam Victimam Deo offerunt atque seipsos*

*cum Ea.*”

The text continues: “Thus both by reason of the offering and through Holy Communion all take part in this liturgical service, not indeed, all in the same way but each in that way which is proper to himself. Strengthened in Holy Communion by the Body of Christ, they then manifest in a concrete way that unity of the people of God which is suitably signified and wondrously brought about by this most august sacrament.”

This statement is rich in theological meanings, none of which can be reduced to a phrase such as “the Eucharist is the source and summit of the church’s life.” Three in particular are worth expanding on.

***The Eucharist as a sacrificial sacrament.*** The above text from “Lumen Gentium” explicitly links sacrifice as an essential part of the “source and summit” that is the Eucharist. That means the phrase “real presence of Christ” itself is insufficient to describe the full reality of what the Eucharist is. It is clear that the Eucharist as a “sacrament” and “sacrifice” were often treated separately in dogmatic manuals after the 16th century and in popular catechetical resources like *Of Sacraments and Sacrifice*, by Clifford Howell, S.J., which was perennially popular from its publication in 1952 through Vatican II. One historical factor in this separation of what we know to be inseparable is that at the Council of Trent the canons on the real presence were issued 11 years apart: in 1551 for “presence” and in 1562 on “the most holy sacrifice of the Mass.”

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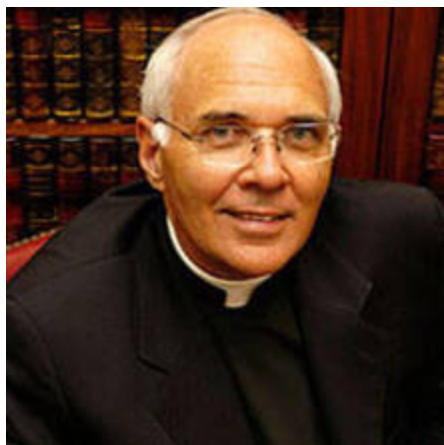
***Who offers the Mass?*** A second important implication of the “Lumen Gentium” text cited above is found in the declaration that the baptized and the ordained “offer” the Mass “each in that way that is proper to [themselves].” This explains why the Roman Canon has always used “we offer” (“*offerimus*”) to refer to the action of the Mass, not “I offer” on behalf of the laity. Recall that at the anointing with chrism after baptism with water, the minister proclaims, “God now anoints you with the Chrism of salvation so that you may remain members of Christ Priest, Prophet and King.” As Vatican II stressed, the baptismal priesthood and the ministerial priesthood are complementary, and are both derived from the mystery of the priesthood of Christ the High Priest.

The need to sustain the intrinsic relationship between sacrament and sacrifice is the reason why those who revised the Mass after Vatican II decided to change the words of Jesus at the Last Supper in the eucharistic prayers. In the former Missal it says, “This is my body.” The revised text says, “This is my body given for you.” The addition of “given for you” is from Luke’s account of the Last Supper (Lk 22:19), which means that Christ’s body is a sacrifice, a body broken for our salvation. In effect, we find both presence and sacrifice in the same sentence.

***Celebration and service.*** A third theological implication of the “Lumen Gentium” text cited earlier

is that it is crucially important to recall that “summit/source” language asserts the intrinsic connection between the celebration of the Lord’s Supper and serving others in mission and service. Joseph Ratzinger wrote in his 1967 essay “Is the Eucharist a Sacrifice?” that “a life of faith...and love for one’s brethren is depicted as the true worship, without which external worship becomes an empty, indeed, repulsive farce.”

Is it any wonder that in the latest English edition of the Order of Mass, in addition to the familiar text “Go forth; the Mass is ended,” three additional texts specify mission even further? In “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord,” in “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life” and in “Go in peace,” we are reminded once again that—to paraphrase Mark Twain—church words and actions are “a very large matter.”



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