

# Eucharist As Icon

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*If this most holy Sacrament were celebrated in only one place and consecrated by only one priest in the whole world, with what great desire, do you think, would men be attracted to that place, to that priest of God, in order to witness the celebration of the divine Mysteries! But now there are many priests and Mass is offered in many places, that God's grace and love for men may appear the more clearly as the Sacred Communion is spread more widely through the world.<sup>1</sup>*

Presence as ordinarily understood requires spatio-temporal proximity. If however Christ's presence in the Eucharist is understood as spatio-temporal proximity it would take a miracle to secure multiple location and an additional miracle to cover it up so that the presence of Christ wherever the Eucharist was celebrated made no empirical difference. And, while multiple location is logically possible, such metaphysical miracles—miracles of distinction without difference, which have no empirical import—are problematic.

I propose an account of Eucharist according to which Christ is indeed really and objectively present in the religiously required sense, without benefit of metaphysical miracles.

## Multiple location and Metaphysical Miracles

One of the chief difficulties any account of the real presence doctrine faces is an embarrassment of riches: “there are many priests and Mass is offered in many places.” Consequently, if Christ is really present in the Eucharist, he is really present in a great many earthly regions as well as a heavenly place.

The problem of multiple location is not insurmountable since it is logically possible that a material object occupy regions of space in different ways. An object,  $x$ , may *entend* a region, so that it is wholly and entirely located at a non-point-sized region,  $r$ , and for each proper subregion of  $r$ ,  $r^*$ ,  $x$  is wholly located at  $r^*$ . (Hudson 2005) Prima facie, extension seems to capture what Aquinas, whose doctrine of transubstantiation may be taken as a paradigmatic real presence account, claims about the “sacramental presence” of Christ in the Eucharist. First, it allows us to say, as required, that Christ is wholly located at each of the disconnected spatial regions (apparently) occupied by quantities of consecrated bread and wine: each region that seems to contain a wafer or quantity of wine contains the whole of Christ and not merely a Christ-part. Secondly, on this account, Christ is wholly located at each of the connected spatial sub-regions the consecrated elements (apparently) occupy. Finally, Christ is wholly located at the fusion of disconnected regions that appear to be occupied by quantities of consecrated bread and wine. Though this last claim is not one that Aquinas or other advocates of the real presence doctrine consider, it seems unlikely that they would object to the proposal.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/kempis/imitation.FOUR.1.html>

This account is, we shall assume, logically coherent. We shall assume that is logically possible for a body to extend a large, gappy region of space-time. We shall assume that there is no reason to reject the view that it is wholly present in every region where a quantity of consecrated bread and wine appear to be on purely *logical* grounds.

There is however no reason to hold that Christ's body is such an extending object. In a trivial sense, assuming mereological universalism, there is an object that occupies the large, gappy spatio-temporal region apparently filled by consecrated bread and wine because the fusion of any collection of objects is itself an object. The question is why we should regard *that* mereologically exotic object or the fusion of *that* object and another object which occupies a heavenly region, as Christ's body.

Appeal to God's power to do miracles may not help here: since we want to hold that the presence of Christ in the Eucharist makes no empirical difference, it would take a *metaphysical* miracle, a miraculous event that has no empirical import, to make *that* object Christ's body. And it is not clear that even omnipotence is up to metaphysical miracles.

Consider, for example, one of the strategies Alexander Pruss canvasses for dealing with the problem of multiple location. (Pruss 2009) On this account God shapes space in such a way that all regions that appear to be occupied by post-consecration wine and wafers are the *same* region. Strictly speaking this is not multiple location since, given the deformation of space, appearances to the contrary, all Eucharistic instances occupy the same region.

If it is logically possible that space be structured in that way God could indeed shape it as required, but it is not clear that he could shape space in that way without making observable changes. Euclidean geometry is logically coherent if anything is, so God could make space Euclidean, but the question of whether space actually is Euclidean is an empirical question. Observable phenomena like the precession of the perihelion of Mercury's orbit and the fact that gravitational acceleration is independent of the mass of an object establish that space is not Euclidean.<sup>2</sup> It is debatable whether even God could make space Euclidean while maintaining these and a whole range of other phenomena. To do that would take a metaphysical miracle, which arguably not even God could accomplish. By the same token, God could build a system of loops into space-time so that all regions apparently occupied by post-consecration wine and wafers were the same region. To do that, however, without making other changes that were observable would take a very significant metaphysical miracle indeed.

Faux-multiple location such as this account suggests, and genuine multiple location, are logically possible. It is metaphysical miracles that are problematic. I suggest that we can get everything we want from a real presence account without them.

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<sup>2</sup>See [http://theory.uwinnipeg.ca/mod\\_tech/node60.html](http://theory.uwinnipeg.ca/mod_tech/node60.html) Promissory note. There is of course a much longer story here. We could devise alternative theories that modeled space as strictly Euclidean, involving whatever ad hoc hypotheses we please, to explain these phenomena. What God can't do is make them *good* theories.

## Metaphysical miracles and institutional facts

Christ's is said to be "sacramentally present" wherever the Eucharist is celebrated. Christ's body as we should ordinarily understand however it is not a mereologically exotic object that occupies the disjoint spatio-temporal regions where the Eucharist is celebrated: Jesus was an historical figure who lived and died in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine and, according to Christian doctrine, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. So we need to explain the relation between Christ as present in the Eucharist and Christ crucified, resurrected, ascended and "locally present" in heaven, that saves the phenomena of religious practice and explains how participants in the Eucharist in all times and places are en rapport with Jesus Christ.

One way of understanding the real presence that makes sense of this rapport to see it as a claim about reference. Participants in the Eucharist, wherever they are, should be able to express a literal truth by pointing to a region just above the altar and saying, "That is Christ." Prima facie this suggests that Christ, in some manner, occupies all the earthly places where the Eucharist is celebrated. Other features of the story however suggest something quite different. First, the occupants of earthly regions where Christ's body is sacramentally present do not have the causal powers of Christ's body: they appear and behave like ordinary bread and wine. Secondly, Christ is not causally affected by what happens to the occupants of these earthly regions. So Aquinas holds that Christ's is not in the Sacrament "moveably" but is at rest in heaven. (Aquinas 1274)

On the most natural reading, the suggestion seems to be that Christ is present in the Eucharist in the way that an object is present in its image in cases of what we take to be indirect observation. I see myself in a mirror. Pointing toward the mirror I can truly say, "There I am!" even though I am not *locally* present where I appear to be, 3 feet behind the mirror, or on its surface. My mirror image lacks my causal powers and what happens to the mirror, and hence to the image reflected in it, does not happen to me.

It will be objected that "there I am," said while pointing at the mirror, is not *literally* true insofar as my presence on the surface of the mirror or three feet behind it is, at best, presence in an attenuated sense. But that is just to say that I am not *locally* present there. Likewise, on Aquinas' account Christ is not *locally* present on the altar. If someone were to point to the mirror and say, "That's [name suppressed for blind review]!" they would speak the literal truth: they are not referring to the mirror image and saying metaphorically of *it*, "That's [name suppressed for blind review]!" in the way that I might, metaphorically, refer to my domestic cat as a "tiger." They are referring to *me*—not to the image as such—and speaking literally. If the analogy holds then pointing toward the altar it is *literally true* to say, "That's Christ!" in just the way would be literally true for me to point toward my image in the mirror and say, "That's me!" We wouldn't want Christ's presence in the Eucharist to be any more robust than that.

The worry however is that the presence of Christ in the Eucharist is *less* robust. I *see* myself in the mirror in virtue a resemblance and causal connection between my mirror image and me. But the items on the altar don't resemble Christ and whatever causal connection obtains between them and Christ is not such as would license my saying that I *see* Christ, insofar as sense perception is a causal notion.

On the account I propose, however, the presence of Christ in the Eucharist is backed by an institutional convention that establishes a rule for reference. When I point to my image in the mirror the truth of my exclamation “That’s me!” depends on a convention that sets rules for reference. Causal connections and resemblance are not by themselves sufficient for reference. A naïve subject, unfamiliar with mirrors, might respond. “*That’s* you?!?!? Surely not—you’re over *here*. Anyway, that thing is made of some hard, shiny stuff—not flesh and blood.” Even given all relevant information about how hard shiny surfaces reflect light he might still refuse to budge. “Yes I understand all about optics and the causal connection between you and the image in the mirror. But *it* is not *you*.” The naïve subject does not disagree about the empirical facts of the matter: rather he rejects a rule for reference according to which pointing to a mirror image *counts as* picking out the reflected object.

We sophisticates operate according to a variety of conventions for dealing with mirrors and photographs, TVs, microscopes and telescopes. We show our children ultrasound pictures of them in utero and say, “That’s you!” And we don’t turn a hair when we hear that scientists are observing a star that died a million years ago. We’re so used to our rules for reference and conventions for ostension to objects that are not “locally present” that we don’t find these conventions strange—or recognize them as conventions. Linguistically naïve subjects however might well be puzzled by our claims even if they fully understood how these mirrors and cameras, TVs, microscopes and telescopes worked. Even if a person understands the causal story and sees the resemblance between objects and their images or representations, he may still refuse to adopt the referential convention. Causal connection and resemblance are not sufficient for reference.

Arguably, they are not necessary either. Suppose I set up a dynamic simulation of the Fall of Constantinople to illustrate the strategies and movement of troops during the siege, using corks and sugar cubes to represent combatants. Given the conventions I establish I can say, pointing to a cork, “that is Constantine XI Paleologos.” Naïve subjects will challenge these claims on the grounds that the Fall of Constantinople occurred over 500 years ago and that the combatants were not corks or sugar cubes. Again, they have the empirical facts right but are either unaware of the conventions I have established or repudiate them. My commentary as I shove around those corks and sugar cubes is *about* events that occurred in 1453 and real, historical figures.

Reference, including ostensive reference, always rests on conventions—not only when I pick out an object by pointing to its image or representation but also when I point in the direction of an object that is “locally present.” The proud alumnus points in the direction of a building remarking, “I gave *that* to the university.” That *what?* That *building?* That *wall?* That *brick?* (Perry 1970). To secure reference we need sortals—creatures of language born of our linguistic conventions.

I point in the direction of the altar and say, “*That* is Christ’s body.” Naïve subjects may object that Jesus lived and died almost two millennia ago and is, according to Christian doctrine, in heaven. But that is beside the point. According to the Church’s convention, established at the Last Supper, the consecrated bread goes proxy for Christ so that in pointing to it I can refer to him—wherever he is “locally.”

## Representation, reference and rapport

On the current account Christ's institution of the Eucharist was a declaration that created an institutional fact. His words of institution at the Last Supper, "This is my Body... This is my Blood... Do this as oft as ye shall drink it, in remembrance of me" were a performative utterance. Understood in this way, they were not a *prediction* that whenever his followers should subsequently perform a ceremony of the appropriate kind a metaphysical miracle would happen, or a *promise* by Christ that he, or some other Person of the Trinity would perform such a miracle.

A predicted event is distinct from its prediction. And the act of promising is distinct from the action one promises to do. A successful act of promising does not guarantee the performance of the act one promises to do. In declarations by way of contrast "the state of affairs represented by the propositional content of the speech act is brought into existence by the successful performance of that very speech act." (Searle, 1995: 34). "War is hereby declared" is a declaration: when uttered by the appropriate functionary, on behalf of the appropriate body, it *constitutes* the declaration of war. On the current account, when a duly appointed representative of the Church utters the appropriate formula, Christ becomes present—as a matter of institutional fact.

Christ *declares* that whenever members of the Church he established perform the rite he instituted the elements of the Eucharist will count as his body and blood. There is nothing more to Christ's real presence in the Eucharist, which is *constituted* by his instituting the Eucharist and his followers enacting it according to his instructions.

This is a real presence doctrine that is not committed to multiple location. On this account, Christ is not locally present but sacramentally present where he is represented in the Eucharist. And multiple sacramental presence understood in this way is not problematic. Representing is not a one-to-one relation: a great many quantities of bread and wine, occupying a gappy region of space-time, can all equally well represent Christ. We can point toward any of them and say, truly, "That is Christ," not because Christ is located in many places but because there are a great many places *from* which we can point to Christ, who is locally present in just one (heavenly) place. We point to Christ in that place in the way that we point to the subject of a picture by pointing at the picture.

This may seem like a very thin interpretation of real presence until we remember that some pictures are not *mere* pictures. Some are icons, which figure as "witnesses to divine action in the world, mediators of divine presence and occasions for participation in the founding events of the church" within the Eastern Orthodox tradition (Cuneo forthcoming). Citing John of Damascus, Terance Cuneo, suggests that "icons are vehicles of divine speech... [which] communicate divine presence," adding that they represent past events so that "we can 'participate' inasmuch as we can presently allow its significance to shape our lives.

For Western Christians, the Eucharist is *the* icon through which we become en rapport with Christ. By participating in the Eucharist "in remembrance of his blessed passion and precious death, his mighty resurrection and glorious ascension" (BCP 1928) we

“participate” in those events and commit to allowing their significance to shape our lives. In venerating the elements of the Eucharist we worship Christ.

## Real enough for you?

The serious worry is that an account of this kind represents the Eucharist as a fiction, which at bottom does not depend on the truth of further theological claims. Some pictures, after all, do not represent anything, some stories we tell to one another are fictions and some acts of ostension fail. Christians, as Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger notes, want to affirm that “what is going on in the Eucharist is...not just something agreed among ourselves (Ratzinger 2003).” Cardinal Ratzinger continues:

If the latter were true then the Eucharist would be...a fiction by which we agreed to regard ‘this’ as ‘something else’. Then it would be only a game, not reality... The world of the Eucharist is no game; it does not rest on conventions, to which we agree and which we can also renounce (Ratzinger 2003).

Ratzinger fails to give conventions their due. Some social practices that rest on conventions are not mere games or fictions whose character depends upon whether any given individual agrees to the conventions of which they are constituted or renounces them.<sup>3</sup> Checks are issued and used for various financial transactions even though some people pass rubber checks and some checks expire uncashed, some merchants operate cash-only businesses and most people in the world do not have bank accounts. A check written on an account with funds to cover it retains its face value even if it falls into the hands of someone ignorant of check-writing practices, who uses it for origami.

On a grand scale however the check-writing game *does* depend on agreement. If no individuals or businesses accepted checks and checks ceased to play the role they currently do in the economy, the check-writing game would be over. By the same token, if everyone repudiated the conventions constitutive of the Eucharist, and the Church collapsed, the Eucharist could not be celebrated.

But isn’t this exactly what Christians who believe that Christ is really present in the Eucharist would want to say? We want to say that Christ’s presence in the Eucharist is bound up in the most intimate way with his life and redeeming work, and with the Church as a “continuation of the Incarnation,” embodying doctrine and continuing his work in the world. We can imagine our remote descendants participating in ceremonies that bear some

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<sup>3</sup> See Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, Free Press, 1995, esp. Ch. 2. Searle notes that many social facts are “self-referential” in the sense that the social fact of something’s being an F is constituted by its being used as an F, thought to be an F, regarded as an F, etc. So money is just what people regard as money and use as money. Searle notes that “if everybody stops believing it is money it ceases to function as money, and eventually ceases to be money.” Nevertheless, he suggests, when it comes to money, a particular token—in fact a great many tokens—could be money even though no one thought it was money. What is going on here, Searle continues, is that because the institution of currency and exchange is codified in an official form the self-referentiality is a feature of the type rather than any given token. My suggestion is that likewise a ceremony does not count as a celebration of the Eucharist because they regard it as such because the self-referentiality is a feature of the type rather than any given token.

resemblance to contemporary liturgy but which do not play a role in their lives comparable to the role liturgy plays for Christians, without a clue as to their origin or significance, in the spirit of Wittgenstein's clueless natives decorating their tee-pees with mathematical symbols. I doubt that we should count their activities as Eucharistic liturgy or suggest that Christ was really present in virtue of their activities.

Given the account of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist I have proposed, it may take some delicacy to determine what counts as a valid celebration of the Eucharist and hence the circumstances in which we can say, truly, "That's Christ." That is because determining the conditions for reference is a subtle matter. For centuries people talked *about* St. Nicholas, a fourth century bishop of Myra, and told increasingly fanciful tales *about* him—who was known variously as Sancte Claus and Sinterklaas. At some point however Santa Claus stories ceased to be legends *about* Bishop Nicholas. Currently, some stories, pictures and displays represent St. Nicholas while others, which also trace their descent back to that historical figure, do not. I can point to the statuary in the Basilica of St. Nicholas in Bari and say, truly, "That's Nicholas, Bishop of Myra." I cannot however refer to that historical figure by pointing to a lawn display featuring Santa Claus in full department store regalia surrounded by elves and reindeer. And this is not a psychological disability on my part: the narrow content of my psychological state does not determine whether I am picking out Bishop Nicholas or engaging in pure fantasy.

Likewise, it is the institutional conventions established by Christ and current in the Church, not my narrow psychological states, which make it possible for me to point in the direction of the altar and say, truly, "That's Christ." Apart from Christ's institution and the Church's practice of doing the Eucharist in remembrance of him it would not be so. My experience of Christ in the Eucharist is therefore not "subjective" as it would be if I merely conjured up a feely psychological state for myself through some yogic practice or had one conjured up for me by the operators of an Experience Machine.

On the current account, the Eucharist is not merely a symbol through which we affirm our religious commitment or a device for inducing religious experience, communal bonding or the resolve to go into the world to do good works. The experience of participants in the Eucharist is an experience *of* Christ. If that is not good enough make it a real presence doctrine, it is hard to see why we should want one.

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