

# CENTRIPETAL AND CENTRIFUGAL

## *Mapping Theological Understandings of Christ's Real Presence in the Eucharist*

GAVIN BROWN

**I**N A THOUGHT-PROVOKING article entitled 'There's more to the Real Presence than the Eucharist,' Mark Francis argues strongly that 'we risk impoverishing our rich tradition by an *exclusive* focus on Christ's presence under the appearance of bread and wine.' 'We need to be as passionately convinced,' Francis asserts, 'of the presence of Christ in those 'around the altar' as we are of Christ's presence in the eucharistic elements'<sup>1</sup> Francis's piece is wholly typical of good post-Vatican II sacramental theology: an attempt to remind Catholics that Christ's presence in the eucharistic celebration is multifaceted—Christ is present in the bread and wine *and* the gathered congregation.

My concern in this paper, however, is not simply to reiterate Francis's key points but, rather, to 'map' how scholars have theologised about Christ's real presence in the Eucharist. For example, a close reading of Francis's piece reveals two modes of explanation or *discursive trajectories*. The first, which I have termed *centripetal*, describes a mode of explanation centred upon a univocal understanding. This trajectory is precisely that 'exclusive focus on Christ's presence under the appearance of bread and wine.'<sup>2</sup> To describe it as centripetal is to say that it discursively moves to a singular point of focus and this singularity is constitutive of the discourse itself. But one can also identify a *centrifugal* trajectory in Francis's assertion that Christ is present also in the gathered congregation. By centrifugal I mean a mode of explanation which is predi-

cated on multiplicity, moving outward to embrace many different concepts. The metaphor is particularly apt when considering how Christ's real presence in the sharing of bread and wine has been centrifugally interpreted in a variety of broader and wide-ranging contexts.

My paper will proceed by exploring the centripetal trajectory first, since it represents the immediate pre-Vatican II legacy on Christ's real presence in the Eucharist. I will then explore the nature of the centrifugal trajectory, with reference to the work of some key theologians. By way of conclusion, I will return to Francis's article in an effort to clarify the overwhelming preference for the centrifugal trajectory in recent theologising about Christ's real presence in the Eucharist.

### *A Centripetal Trajectory*

The centripetal trajectory is first discernible during the ninth century, though it is possible to argue that cultural antecedents were already operative from the fourth.<sup>2</sup> From this time, historians and theologians point to a growing rift between two previously complementary notions: symbol and reality. To speak of a symbol in the ancient and early medieval world was to speak simultaneously of the reality which it signified. Indeed, symbols were not thought of as merely 'pointers' to some reality; rather, they *participated* in the reality signified.<sup>3</sup> Such an understanding relied upon a platonic cosmology: the world of the sense-perceptible—images, symbols and figures—

participated in the real world—the world of ideal forms—without at the same time being identical with it.<sup>4</sup> This platonic cosmology provided a framework for early church fathers to speak of the presence of Christ as a spiritual reality disclosed through the sacramental signs or symbols of bread and wine. In his commentary on Psalm 98, Augustine, for example, had Jesus say,

Understand what I have said spiritually. You will not eat this body which you see, nor will you drink the blood that will be shed by those who will crucify me. A sacrament is what I have given to you: understood spiritually, it will give you life. Even if it is necessary to celebrate visibly, it should be understood invisibly.<sup>5</sup>

What is also noteworthy about Augustine's conception of Christ's presence is its more corporate sense: building upon a strong premise of the Eucharist as an ecclesial reality, Augustine could also write, 'If you received well, you are what you have received; for the Apostle says, 'we many are one bread, one body'... You have been made the bread which is the body of Christ. And in like manner unity is signified.'<sup>6</sup> It is evident here that early understandings of Christ's presence in the Eucharist were actually centrifugal in nature.

From the ninth century, however, this complementarity of symbol and reality began gradually to unravel. Historians cite a number of complex reasons for this development; however, Frank Senn suggests that the medieval period witnessed the occlusion of a platonic worldview in favour of a more 'empiricist' approach to reality. He writes,

In the world of late antiquity and in the early Middle Ages, people lived 'not in a world of visible facts but rather in a world of symbols.' The symbolic pointed to and participated in the unseen spiritual reality; but in the worldview of the Western Middle Ages there was a desire to see reality. It was an empirical worldview. It was not such a giant step to the next position: that what is visible—that is, what can be demonstrated or documented—is what is really real.<sup>7</sup>

In the context of this empiricism, theological disputes arose over the 'reality' of Christ's



*Dr Gavin Brown is currently a Research Associate with the MCD University of Divinity. His areas of research include the history and theology of the Eucharist, ritual studies and Religious Education.*

presence in the Eucharist. Famous disputes between Paschasius Radbertus and Ratramnus of Corbie Abbey in the ninth century and Berengar of Tours with Lanfranc of Canterbury in the eleventh suggested clearly that the language of symbol was no longer thought adequate to express the true reality of Christ's presence in the Eucharist.<sup>8</sup>

In tandem with this was another critical development: according to Henri de Lubac, whereas the patristic period had associated the body of Christ with the church, theologians in the Middle Ages started associating the body of Christ fundamentally with the consecrated elements of the bread and wine. This association allowed the full ecclesiological dimensions of Christ's presence in the Eucharist to be subsumed beneath an objectified presence centred upon the eucharistic species.<sup>9</sup>

Accordingly, by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, theological interest over Christ's presence in the Eucharist evinced a dominant centripetal trajectory: the chief questions were how is Christ *really* present within the *bread and wine*? How does this *change* occur?<sup>10</sup> Strictly speaking, it is only with the loss of, or distrust of, symbolic language that the very term *Real Presence* emerges within ecclesiastical discourse of the early-to-mid medieval period: to speak of a 'real' presence was to assert something supposedly more real than a 'symbolic' presence.<sup>11</sup>

But how was the 'real presence' of Christ in the consecrated bread and wine to be adequately explained? The distrust of symbolic discourse resulted in the emergence of more

‘scientific’ or ‘metaphysical’ explanatory regimes, which in turn reinforced the centripetal focus on the presence of Christ in the consecrated elements. What became known as *transubstantiation* initially represented only one of a number of theories.<sup>12</sup> But transubstantiation emerged as the preferred explanation, and was given official recognition at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 and subsequently included in canon 2 of the Council of Trent’s *Decree concerning the most holy sacrament of the Eucharist*.

Perhaps one of the most widely misunderstood terms in Christian theology (even against some stiff competition—the Trinity comes to mind!), transubstantiation was an attempt to underpin the reality of Christ’s presence in the bread and wine—a ‘substantial’ not a physical presence which was only discernible through faith—without falling into realist crudities or transgressing the freedom and impassibility of the risen and glorified body of Christ.

Importantly, even at the Council of Trent, which was principally concerned to defend the truths of the faith, transubstantiation was not equated doctrinally with belief in the real presence; rather, it was considered a ‘most apt’ form of explanation.<sup>13</sup> Broken off from trinitarian, pneumatological and ecclesiological considerations, post-Tridentine eucharistic theology concerned itself principally with explaining how the real presence of Christ in the eucharistic species was related to the sacrificial dimensions of the Eucharist.<sup>14</sup>

Arising out of the divorce between symbol and reality, then, the centripetal trajectory associated the real presence with Christ’s ‘substantial’ presence in the consecrated elements of the bread and wine. In doing so, it underscored an objectified sense of the real presence, particularly centred upon the host which became the object of so much extra-liturgical eucharistic devotion.<sup>15</sup> This centripetal trajectory naturally underscored the preeminent role of the priest in the liturgy—he alone had the *power* to consecrate the bread and wine into

the body and blood of Christ.<sup>16</sup> And ever since the theological controversies of the ninth and eleventh centuries, but especially after the Reformation, belief in the real presence (and the accompanying notion of transubstantiation) operated as a marker of Catholic orthodoxy and allegiance until the post-Vatican II period.

However, at least since the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, theologising about the real presence has followed another trajectory.

### *A Centrifugal Trajectory*

The modern origins of a centrifugal trajectory in the theologising of the real presence are not to be found with sacramental theology but, rather, with ecclesiology. Though the image of the Church as the ‘body of Christ’ is an ancient one (going back to the letters of Paul), by the High Middle Ages it had become subsumed beneath the dominant model of the church as a hierarchical society. It first resurfaced in the nineteenth-century work of Johann Adam Mohler who, in turn, influenced luminaries of the ‘Roman school of theology’ such as Giovanni Perrone, Carlo Passaglia, Klemens Schrader, Johann Baptist Franzelin and Matthias Joseph Scheeben. For Mohler, the Church was a living and organic reality which incorporated all members into the body of Christ. In the words of Edward Hahnenberg, Mohler argued that the church was ‘not just the bearer of the mystery of faith, but is itself an aspect of this mystery’.<sup>17</sup>

The idea of the church as the body of Christ won papal recognition with Pius XII’s encyclicals *Mystici Corporis* and *Mediator Dei*, published in 1943 and 1947 respectively. ‘By reason of their baptism’, Pius XII declared in *Mediator Dei*, ‘Christians are in the Mystical Body and become by a common title members of Christ the Priest.’<sup>18</sup> The Church as the ‘Mystical Body of Christ’ thereafter became the dominant ecclesiological model until the Second Vatican Council.

As this ecclesiology progressively devel-

oped in the mid-to-late twentieth century, it concomitantly exercised a profound influence upon sacramental theology, principally through the work of Edward Schillebeeckx and Karl Rahner. In their different ways, both argued that sacraments were not 'things' or mechanical dispensers of 'grace' but existential encounters with the very person of Christ,<sup>19</sup> who was the 'primordial sacrament', 'the sacrament of the encounter with God.'<sup>20</sup> And so the church represented 'the sacrament of the risen Christ.'<sup>21</sup> Within the church's sacramental system—that is, within the context of the entire worshipping community—one encountered not a thing, but a person.

Explaining the 'how' of such an encounter led both Schillebeeckx and Rahner to place great emphasis on the sacraments as *symbolic actions*. Indeed, in such a personalist approach to the sacraments, both suggested that symbolic mediation was the necessary *human* condition for such an encounter (hence the incarnation), since we are by our very nature symbol-making and symbol-participant beings. Furthermore, both affirmed that sacraments as symbolic actions not only pointed to the graced reality of Christ but also made this reality present in the very act of signifying it. These profound theological insights exercised a decisive influence in moving theological understandings of Christ's presence in the Eucharist along what I have termed a centrifugal trajectory.

In the first place, once theologians began conceptualising the church as a *corporate* reality predicated on the person of Christ—the body of Christ—it no longer made sense to locate his presence purely within an object, the consecrated elements. Christ was now understood as present in multiple ways. In its groundbreaking document on the liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Second Vatican Council drew attention to *four* modes of Christ's presence:

To accomplish so great a work 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 in the Eucharistic species...He is present in his word since he himself speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church. Lastly, he is present when the Church prays and sings, for he has promised 'where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them' (Mt. 18:20).<sup>22</sup>

To speak of Christ's presence in four ways, however, is not to assert four undifferentiated modalities of presence; within the eucharistic celebration, they are differently expressed but nevertheless form a unity.<sup>23</sup> So, according to Schillebeeckx, 'the Eucharistic presence is thus no longer isolated. We no longer say, 'Christ is there,' without asking for whom he is present.'<sup>24</sup> Fundamentally, then, Christ's presence in the Eucharist is a 'presence for,' that is, centred upon relationships within the gathered body of Christ. Frank O'Loughlin sums this up nicely when he suggests, 'We need to see each mode of presence within the context of Christ's relationship to his disciples being gathered into the communion of his Church which is becoming his Body.'<sup>25</sup>

In the second place, a centrifugal trajectory in theological thinking has pushed the conceptualisation of Christ's real presence well beyond the immediate liturgical context. In a symbolic and personalist approach to the sacraments, the real presence of Christ is not a 'thing' but, rather, an experiential reality which calls us to *be* the body of Christ *in the world*. Theologians interested in drawing out the interconnectedness of liturgy and life stress that Christ's presence must flow from the liturgy out into the world through the 'members' of his body. In the words of Brian Gleeson, 'Eucharist means mission.' Indeed, it is a mission arising out of a new eucharistic consciousness—that we really encounter Christ's presence in our service to the poor and needy. For Gleeson, 'until the second coming of Christ the most complete manifestation of the activ-

ity of Christ in the Eucharistic Assembly is our life-style afterwards, a life-style of service, of binding up wounds, of self-emptying love and sacrifice, according to the teaching and example of our Lord.<sup>26</sup>

Some theologians have even begun to understand Christ's presence flowing out of the Eucharist as the beginnings of a 'cosmic' re-vivification of life and reality. For Margaret Scott:

The Eucharist is also the sacrament of humanity, stretching St. Paul's notion of Christ's embodied eucharistic presence in the community to global presence...the corporate Body of Christ goes beyond its local embodiment to embrace nations, international communities, and the entire world in the thrust toward the 'fullness of Christ.'<sup>27</sup>

Teilhard de Chardin invites us to consider the body of Christ in its 'fullest extension': 'over every living thing which is to spring up, to grow, to flower, to ripen during this day, say again the words: This is my Body.'<sup>28</sup> And Michael Himes has even taken a notion better known for its centripetal resonances and cast it off into a centrifugal direction: for Himes, the Eucharist 'is the first step in the transubstantiation of all of creation...the destiny of the universe.'<sup>29</sup>

A final word on this centrifugal trajectory is necessary, for insofar as it has allowed theologians to re-conceptualise Christ's real presence as moving out into the world, it has also moved theologians to consider how the world flows back into the eucharistic liturgy. This is fundamental: if liturgy is to be authentic, if Christ's presence within the gathered assembly is to be 'real', then it must be grounded in the recognised realities of a world which is both beautiful and terrible, a world of joys and suffering, a world of hope but also of pain, confusion, and disillusionment. Christ's presence in the eucharistic liturgy is only 'real' to the extent that our liturgical actions are anchored in the 'real world'.

Drawing upon Rahner's notion of the 'liturgy of the world', Nathan Mitchell claims that

'the primary liturgy through which Christians experience the Real Presence of God in Christ is nothing more or less than 'the liturgy of the world'. It is to this liturgy, 'smelling of death and sacrifice', that all the Church's ritual actions return...We arrive at Mystery, at Real Presence, at God, only by embracing the human with all its poignancy and terror.'<sup>30</sup>

### Conclusion

Most contemporary theologians proceed via the centrifugal trajectory when theologising about Christ's real presence in the Eucharist. As the preceding discussion has shown, this has undoubtedly enriched our understanding of this central article of the faith. However, we must not lose the key assumption upon which the centripetal trajectory was always predicated.

To make this point, I will return to Francis's article quoted at the beginning of this paper. While I find myself agreeing wholeheartedly with Francis's key assertions in his piece, I nevertheless have misgivings about his article's title. What Francis is actually asserting would be better characterised as 'there's more to the Real Presence than the consecrated bread and wine'.

This is not a minor semantic quibble. If the centripetal trajectory served essentially to objectify Christ's presence in the bread and wine—an approach which Francis rightly criticises—it nevertheless continues to remind us that the essential actions of the eucharistic celebration, Christ's presence revealed in the sharing of bread and wine, remain the unifying symbol out of which the centrifugal trajectory proceeds. Surely the danger exists that we might regard Christ's presence within the bread and wine as belonging to a different symbolic order than Christ's presence in the 'breaking' of the Word or the gathered congregation. And so we might assert uncritically that 'there's more to the Real Presence than the Eucharist.' This statement is not untrue *per se*, but it could be misleading. For it is pre-

cisely *in the Eucharist itself* that Christ's multifaceted real presence is *recognised*. The centrifugal trajectory is not a movement from Eucharist to Word, congregation or even world, through some kind of transference in which the original eucharistic actions are dissolved, but, rather, a movement *toward a eucharistic worldview* which incorporates Word, congregation (or other Christians) and, indeed, the world. It remains, therefore, the principal lens through which Christ's real presence is perceived.

No doubt my attempt to 'map' how the real presence has been a subject of theological discourse is open to fair criticism: does so simple a schema really do justice to the vast com-

plexity of the matter? If some sort of definitive schema is being proposed, then I would say certainly not. However, the schema proposed in this paper is altogether heuristic rather than definitive. My aim has been to frame the contours of the discourse, but within such a frame the complexity and sometimes sheer opacity of this topic is quite evident, as the work of Herbert McCabe or Jean-Luc Marion on eucharistic presence reveals.<sup>31</sup> Yet precisely because the centrifugal trajectory embraces multiplicity, those who continue to theologise about Christ's real presence in the Eucharist are discovering ever new theological and philosophical horizons against which to test and deepen our original insights.<sup>32</sup>

## NOTES

1 Mark Francis, 'There's more to the Real Presence than the Eucharist,' *U.S. Catholic* 67 (June 2002): 30.

2 See Nathan Mitchell's discussion of the gradual shift in understanding of the Eucharist from a communal symbol to a ritual drama in *Cult and Controversy: The Worship of the Eucharist Outside Mass* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1982), 44-62.

3 William R. Crockett, *Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1989), 80.

4 *Ibid.*, 82.

5 Taken from Paul H. Jones, *Christ's Eucharistic Presence: A History of the Doctrine* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 39.

6 *Ibid.*, 41.

7 Frank Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 241. Within this passage, Senn quotes Lynn White Jr., 'Natural Science and Naturalist Art in the Middle Ages,' in *Medieval Religion and Technology: Collected Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 33.

8 For a good discussion of the dispute between Paschasius Radbertus and Ratramnus, see Raymond Moloney, *The Eucharist* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 116-118. Miri Rubin provides a clear commentary on the debate between Berengar and Lanfranc in *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991),

14-25.

9 Henri du Lubac's chief work on this development, entitled *Corpus Mysticum*, has not been translated into English. His ideas have been used in a range of other monographs. Most useful are Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957), 193-206 and William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and the Eucharist: Theology, Politics and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 207-220.

10 I am indebted to Gerard Kelly for drawing these central questions out of the complex theological debate of the period. See his article 'The Eucharistic Doctrine of Transubstantiation' in *The Eucharist: Faith and Worship*, ed. Margaret Press (Sydney: St. Paul's, 2001), 58. Nathan Mitchell offers an excellent discussion of transubstantiation in his book *Real Presence: The Work of Eucharist* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2001), 101-104.

11 Moloney, *The Eucharist*, 55.

12 See Jones, *Christ's Eucharistic Presence*, 72.

13 *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, trans. Rev. H. J. Schroeder (St. Louis, Missouri: B. Herder, 1941), 79. Kevin W. Irwin provides a very useful discussion on the language of Trent's teaching on Christ's real presence and transubstantiation in *Models of the Eucharist* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 252-256.

14 See Robert J. Daly, 'Robert Bellarmine and Post-Tridentine Eucharistic Theology,' in *From*

*Trent to Vatican II: Historical and Theological Investigations*, ed. Raymond F. Bulman and Frederick J. Parrella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 88-98.

15 See Benedict J. Groeschel and James Monti, *In the Presence of Our Lord: The History, Theology and Psychology of Eucharistic Devotion* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1997).

16 Patrick J. Dunn, *Priesthood: A Re-examination of the Roman Catholic Theology of the Presbyterate* (New York: Alba House, 1997), 84-85 and 94-97.

17 Edward P. Hahnenberg, 'The Mystical Body of Christ and Communion Ecclesiology: Historical Parallels,' *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70 (2005): 7. See also Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Image Books, 2002), 44-54.

18 Pope Pius XII, *Mediator Dei* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1947), #92.

19 See Karl Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments* (Freiburg: Herder, 1964), 36-37.

20 Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 13.

21 *Ibid.*, 47.

22 Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium (The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy)*, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1979), #7.

23 It should be noted that certain questions regarding the way these modes of Christ's presence

in the Eucharist and the liturgy are related and understood have been the cause of some ongoing dialogue among sacramental theologians. See Michael G. Witzak, 'The Manifold Presence of Christ in the Liturgy,' *Theological Studies* 59, no. 4 (December 1998): 696-697.

24 Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Eucharist* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 104.

25 Frank O'Loughlin, *Christ Present in the Eucharist* (Strathfield, NSW: St. Paul's Publications, 2000), 51.

26 Brian Gleeson, 'Eucharist means Mission.' *Online Catholics* (14 June 2006), 2, <http://onlinecatholics.acu.edu.au/issue108/commessay1.html> (accessed 2 April 2011).

27 Margaret Scott, *The Eucharist and Social Justice* (New York: Paulist Press, 2009), 88.

28 *Ibid.*, 89.

29 Michael Himes, *Doing the Truth in Love: Conversations about God, Relationships, and Service* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 129.

30 Nathan Mitchell, 'Who is at the Table? Reclaiming Real Presence,' *Commonweal* 122, no. 2 (January 27, 1995): 15.

31 See Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1987) and Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

32 Interreligious dialogue is one such horizon. See, for example, John P. Keenan, 'A Mahayana Theology of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist,' *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 24 (2004): 89-100.

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*'When I was younger I was rather severe. I said: the sacraments are sacraments of faith, and where faith does not exist, where the practice of faith does not exist, the sacrament cannot be conferred either... Then I too, with time, came to realise that we must follow, rather, the example of the Lord, who was very open even with people on the margins of Israel at that time. He was a Lord of mercy, open with sinners, welcoming them and letting them invite him to their dinners, drawing them into his communion.'*

—Benedict XVI to the priests of Brixen in South Tyrol.