

Christianity is different from all the other religions in the world. In other religions, the underlying theme is man searching for God. But Christianity is different, in Christianity God is searching for man.

But even within Christianity, there are differences. What separates Catholics from the different Protestant faith communities, is how and what we believe about the great mystery of the Eucharist. This mystery is celebrated throughout the world today as the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ, or Corpus Christi.

We do not need to understand this mystery completely but every Catholic should understand what it is, how it happens, and why Christ gave it to us.

The Catholic Church has always taught and believed that Jesus Christ is really, truly, present in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

This makes the sacrament of the Eucharist the greatest of all the sacraments, the source and summit of our faith. Here's how the Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it: "In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of Our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, the whole Christ, is truly, really, and substantially contained."

This means that the Eucharist does not represent a spiritual presence or a mere symbol, God is physically present in the Eucharist.

A symbol points to a reality but is otherwise completely unrelated to it. We often use the symbol of a lamb to point to Jesus Christ. But it is just a symbol, Jesus, of course, is not actually a lamb.

Most non-Catholic Christians believe that the Eucharist is like that, just a symbol of Christ's presence, not the real thing. Even Lutherans, who perhaps come closest to what we believe, do not believe that the real presence continues outside of their celebration of the Lord's Supper.

But as Catholics, we know that Christ is not just symbolically present in the Eucharist, He is truly, really present. Orthodox Christians also believe this.

That is what makes the Eucharist a sacrament, instead of just a symbol. A sacrament is a vehicle of God's grace. In today's second reading St. Paul calls Holy Communion a "participation" in the body and blood of Christ. And this is why Jesus Himself, in today's Gospel reading, repeats six times, in just seven verses, that His flesh is real food and His blood is real drink.

Every time an ordained priest pronounces the words of consecration at Mass - when he says "this is my Body...this is my Blood" - Jesus Himself, in a mysterious sacramental way, becomes truly present under the appearances of bread and wine.

This is what Jesus taught, and this is what Catholics have believed since the very dawn of the Church.

And so every time a Mass is celebrated, whether on the battlefield, in a hospital, in a jungle, or even right here in this church, a miracle takes place. Just as Jesus turned water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana, at every Mass He turns bread and wine into His own Body and Blood. Only God can do this, only God can perform miracles.

While we can know **what** happens, we don't exactly know **how** it happens. Theologians describe what happens as "transubstantiation." This means that during the Mass the substance of the bread and wine are changed into Christ's Body and Blood, but the appearance of bread and wine remain the same.

The fact that the Eucharist maintains the appearance of bread and wine, what theologians call the "accidents," is actually a great mercy on the part of God, so that we are not repulsed at the idea of consuming flesh and blood.

Even so, there have been many times throughout the history of the Church that God has allowed Eucharistic miracles to take place to remind us of the reality of the central miracle of the Eucharist. There are documented cases of consecrated hosts, the small wafer of bread that has become the body and blood of Christ, that have begun to bleed, that have turned into flesh, that have been miraculously preserved in the midst of devastating fires.

One of the earliest of these occurred in 1263 when a German priest on a pilgrimage to Rome stopped in the Italian town of Bolsena to celebrate Mass. At the words of consecration, the host began to bleed onto the altar and the corporal cloth. The confused priest stopped that Mass and went to see Pope Urban IV who was in the nearby town of Orvieto. After hearing what happened the pope ordered the host and the bloodstained corporal to be brought to Orvieto. This procession from Bolsena to Orvieto began our tradition of Eucharistic processions, held all around the world on this day.

One of the most recent Eucharistic miracles occurred in Poland only a few years ago.

On October 12 in 2008, at the church of Saint Anthony of Sokolka (so-koow-ka), a consecrated host accidentally fell to the floor during Mass. When the priest noticed it he properly placed it in what is called a vasculum, a small container filled with holy water, in order to dissolve the host. Later, when he checked on it, he found that it had only partially dissolved and that what he had first thought looked like dirt on the host, now looked like a blood clot.

Intense study followed and two world renowned scientists were brought in to lead the investigation, Professor Maria Elzbieta Sobaniec – Lotowska, and Professor Stanislaw Sulkowski, both specialists in pathological anatomy at the Medical University of Bialystok.

These two scientists studied the “blood clot” independent of each other making use of the most modern optical microscopes and the transmission electronic microscope. As a control Professor Sulkowski was not told where the sample came from. Despite this, both scientists reached the same conclusion: the sample examined was neither a clot nor blood, it was human heart tissue, and it was still alive.

These findings are consistent with other modern day Eucharistic Miracles but perhaps the most amazing thing they discovered was that, due to the advanced nature of the equipment they used, they were able to observe that the heart tissue was joined to the consecrated host in an inseparable manner. There is no scientific explanation for this; they penetrated each other, as if a fragment of “bread” had suddenly transformed itself into “body.”

It is not possible to manipulate this type of event. Professor Sobaniec-Lotowska stated that no one, not even the scientists at NASA who have access to the most modern analytical techniques, could artificially recreate such a thing.

Miracles like these, of which history is full, are just reminders of the main miracle that occurs every day. Christ turning bread and wine into His body and blood.

The miraculous presence of Christ is why we give so much reverence to this greatest of all sacraments, the Eucharist. We use precious metals for the sacred vessels used at Mass. We do not receive communion if we have mortal sin on our conscience because mortal sin separates us from God and we cannot receive His body and blood in such a state.

We genuflect towards the tabernacle, we bend the knee in the presence of the King of Kings. We maintain silence when we are in a church, or speak in hushed tones, out of respect for Christ's presence and out of courtesy towards those who wish to pray.

The sanctuary, this space around the tabernacle, as well as the tabernacle itself, is reserved for the clergy and those ministers appointed by the pastor.

We show our reverence to the Eucharist by celebrating our Mass with beautiful music, beautiful vestments, incense, candles, and many other details that allow us to express our faith and gratitude to Christ who has loved us so much that He stays with us, truly present in the Eucharist, until the end of time.

Finally, why did Jesus give us the Eucharist? He did so in order to extend His incarnation into every corner of the world, into every nook and cranny of history.

This is how much He loves us.

The passion of Christ is an eternal moment in time. By participating in the Mass we participate in that eternal moment, we unite our sufferings and sacrifices here on earth with the sufferings and sacrifices of Christ.

God fed the Israelites every day with manna from Heaven, to strengthen them in their journey to the promised land. He continues to feed us with the bread of eternal

life. He does this so that we will grow stronger in our Christian faith, until we are strong enough to cross over into the eternal Promised Land of a new Heaven and a new Earth.

The word Eucharist means “thanksgiving” so as we prepare to receive His body and blood today, let us thank God for this great gift of grace He bestowes upon us.