

LaCrosseRoads
June-July 2014
RCIA

“What’s the Story?” Two Stories about the Eucharist

Berengar the French Monk

Once upon a time, there was a French monk named Berengar. He came from a wealthy family and was himself very generous. He was well-educated, was familiar with the great theologians of the Church’s history (Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome), and was the most notable theologian of the 11th century—but not for the right reasons!

New debates about the Sacrament of the Eucharist came to the fore in this early Scholastic Period. One such controversy concerned the nature and reality what we might call the “outward sign” part of the sacrament—the bread and wine—and the “inward reality”—the body and blood of Jesus. Is there a real change in the bread and wine? Do they become “masks” or deceptions to the senses? Is the body of Jesus present in the same way that it was present during his earthly life in Palestine? If so, how can he be at God’s right hand in heaven and on our many altars? Is chewing the host exactly like chewing Christ’s earthly body? (Did he feel pain when the apostles ate his body at the Last Supper?)

Berengar and many others of his day tried to answer these difficult questions. And in a certain sense, their searching paved the way for St. Thomas Aquinas (d.1274) to finally give satisfactory answers.

In part, Berengar incorporated St. Augustine’s understanding of a sacrament, in which “one thing is seen and another is understood.” So: if in a sacrament one thing is seen and another brought to mind, and if the Eucharist is a sacrament, then in the Eucharist one thing is seen—bread and wine—but another reality is understood. In other words, Jesus’ body is present for our faith and understanding, but *not* in the reality of his flesh.

Things only went downhill for Berengar following this teaching. After a series of hearings and trials—and overall obstinacy on his part—Berengar took an oath in 1079 in which he renounced his false teaching and that he would adhere to the Church’s understanding henceforth. But what is especially noteworthy about the oath is that it contains a formulation, an understanding of the Eucharistic mystery heretofore insignificant, yet one that in the future would be key to our understanding: *substance*. “I believe,” Berengar professes, “that the bread and wine that are placed on the altar are...substantially changed into the true and proper and life-giving flesh and blood of Jesus Christ our Lord,” and that his body and blood are present “in the very truth and reality of their substance.”

Chris the Nebraska College Student

I grew up in south-central Nebraska, along that 450-mile stretch of Interstate 80. After leaving for college at the University in Lincoln, that specifically Catholic element of my faith life waned (i.e., Mom wasn’t going to make me go to Sunday Mass!). But while the good life of college swelled at the same time, a friend of mine from high school, Andy, invited me to Mass with him during the week at the campus Newman Center. Daily Mass time here was 10:00 at night in order to accommodate the students’ schedules.

Mass started at 10:00, and by 10:45 I was waiting for my friend outside the front doors. But he didn’t seem to be in any hurry. Mass did conclude, I reflected, in an unusual way. Near the end, the priest set a large stand—kind of starburst-shaped holder on top of a base—on the altar, and he incensed what it contained—the Blessed Sacrament—while we knelt and sang. Later the next day, Andy called and apologized for not mentioning to me earlier that the end of Mass begins a period of all-night adoration. Little did I know then that I myself would spend many a late-night hour in adoration at the Newman Center.

As the semesters rolled on, I became more and more involved at the Newman Center. At one point I was asked to lead one of its apostolates: directing college students on Monday nights to a convent of religious sisters (they were called “Pink Sisters” because of their pink habits) who themselves prayed perpetually before the exposed Blessed Sacrament. These Sisters—and the Eucharistic Jesus at their center—became a regular part of my own college scene.

In these two instances—and there are others—the substantial presence of Jesus in the Sacrament of the Eucharist became more present, real, and meaningful to me. Jesus is there—is here!—to nourish and strengthen my life.

Two stories, one truth

Here are two stories about the substantial presence of the Eucharist. Both are true stories; both convey some meaning about what the Church believes; both witness to Jesus and his “most excellent presence” in the Church today.

Yet there are differences. The story of Berengar the theologian is history, tends to be abstract, and is the stuff of which theology classes are made. The story of the Chris the college boy is current, grounded, and real.

One type of story is not better than the other; in fact, both need to be told for a fuller understanding and experience of the Mystery of Faith. Berengar without Chris tends to be theological and theoretical; Chris without Berengar lacks content and substance.

What’s the Story with You and God?

At Marathon’s St. Mary Church last month, ordinary Catholics from around the Diocese met to reflect upon—and eventually answer—this question. Why does Steve believe the things he does? How did Mary become the Catholic that she is? When did John come to see the person of Jesus in his Church and her faith?

The truths of the faith—as derived from evidence, from logic, or from authority—are one dimension of why we believe. The story of Berengar is of this type. But how the substance of the faith—which has a name, Jesus—is presented to us happens in many ways during life, mostly outside of classrooms and books. Jesus presents himself to us in events (both happy and sad), works through persons, and touches us in the details of life’s times and places. The story of Chris is this kind of story.

RCIA is a moment of intense training in the Christian life. And just as the Christian life considers truth in its transcendent and objective reality as well as in the real day-to-day details, so does RCIA. RCIA catechists and team members present the truths of the faith to those in formation via catechesis, *but these same truths must also be presented through the lived experience of believers.*

Consider making your story with God an essential component to the RCIA process of which you are a part.