To Whom Do We Give Thanks in the Eucharist?
Presentation at St. Paschal Baylon Church in Thousand Oaks
For the University Series, March 16, 2023, 7:00 – 8:30 PM
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In 2015 I had the pleasure of visiting Athens with my youngest son. I remember how we enjoyed the site of the first Olympic Games, toured the National Archaeological Museum, and walked around the Parthenon, with the temple of Athena's enormous columns and view of the city. Afterwards we went to the tourist market of the *Plaka* to buy souvenirs and gifts for friends and family at home. I was attracted to the Greek lace, which makes a great gift because it is so easily packed in a suitcase. Although most of what is called Greek lace is now produced outside the country, the Greek island of Lefkada is still a source of traditional embroidered fabrics. I bought an ivory-colored tablecloth, and the friendly clerk said to me, Σας ευχαριστώ (sas efcharistó). She then offered another piece, this time in blue, which I took, and she again said, "sas efcharistó." At this point she recognized in me an eager buyer, and presented several other items, all of which I purchased, and again and again she said, "sas efcharistó."

I tell this story because "sas efcharistó" means thank you. It is related to our word Eucharist. In English, the word Eucharist always refers to the sacrament of Christ's body and blood. But in the Greek language, "sas efcharistó" is the ordinary way of giving thanks. Our sacrament of the Eucharist implies thanksgiving. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that the Eucharist is "an action of thanksgiving to God" (CCC 1328). In it we express our gratitude for creation, redemption, and sanctification. The Eucharist is the sacrament by which we thank God for offering us a "holy communion." We thank God for our communion with Jesus, who shows what it means to be a child of God and to accept a vocation from God.

Tonight I ask the question, "To whom do we give thanks in the Eucharist?" We have just seen the answer of the *Catechism*. It discusses the word "Eucharist" under the heading "What Is This Sacrament Called?" There it says that the Eucharist is an action of thanksgiving for the works of God, the works of creation, redemption, and sanctification. I propose that this is the primary answer to our question. When we ask, "To whom do we give thanks in the Eucharist?" the primary answer is God as creator, redeemer, and sanctifier.

I would like to distinguish this primary answer from what I call the secondary answer. The secondary answer is that we give thanks to Jesus Christ, who is himself present in the sacrament. Many saints, we shall see, have prayed in thanksgiving to Christ for the sacrament of the Eucharist. They thank Jesus for feeding and repairing our damaged human nature, for strengthening us, and for sharing himself with us. I want to argue, however, that this is a secondary answer to our question, "To whom do we give thanks." The primary answer is God, the one to whom Jesus himself gave thanks at the Last Supper.

This distinction between a primary and a secondary answer is my own. I hope to persuade you tonight of its value. Although the *Catechism* does not make the distinction, I quote the *Catechism* in support of it. When I ask, "To whom do we give thanks?" the primary answer is the heavenly Father whom Jesus thanked. The secondary answer is that we thank Jesus Christ for his presence in the sacrament. This distinction, I believe, accords with Catholic thought.

Some of you may object to my distinction, however, on the grounds that Jesus Christ is one in being with God the Father. You may say, "When I give thanks to Jesus I *am* giving

thanks to God." What is the point, you may ask, of distinguishing between the Father and the Son regarding the object of our thanks? Isn't Jesus divine? The question is a complex one. The answer, I believe, has a lot to do with the twofold nature of Jesus Christ, who is fully God and fully man. So let us delve into the matter, starting with the Eucharistic words of Jesus.

The Thanks Given by Jesus

The origin of the Eucharist is the Last Supper. There we read, in Luke's Gospel, that Jesus was gathered at table with the Twelve Apostles. He himself gave thanks. The gospel says:

> He took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body" (Lk 22:19).

St. Luke says that Jesus gave thanks, using essentially the same word for thanks that the Athenian shopkeeper had used with me, "sas efcharistó." Matthew and Mark, interestingly, do not portray Jesus as giving thanks in connection with the act of taking bread. Matthew and Luke say that he "blessed" the bread, rather than "giving thanks" for it (Mt 26:26; Mk 14:22). In Matthew and Mark, Jesus gives thanks in connection with the cup of wine. The two evangelists write that Jesus "took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it" to the Twelve who were with him (Mt 26:27; Mk 14 23). Matthew and Mark differ slightly from Luke in the Eucharistic words. However, all three have Jesus giving thanks.

By the way, the Gospel of John does not describe the institution of the Eucharist. John describes the Last Supper at length, but he never shows Jesus speaking the Eucharistic words, "This is my body" and "This is my blood." Instead, early in the gospel, John presents Jesus as the bread of life. Whoever eats his flesh and drinks his blood will have eternal life. We will discuss that later this evening.

Now I'd like to give some examples from the saints. Popular piety rightly reflects the act of Jesus, the act of giving thanks to God. St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, has a famous "Prayer after Communion." It begins with these words:

> I thank You, Lord, Almighty Father, Everlasting God, for having been pleased, through no merit of mine, but of Your great mercy alone, to feed me, a sinner, and Your unworthy servant, with the precious Body and Blood of Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.[1]

Here the focus is on God the Father. St. Thomas thanks the merciful God for offering communion with Jesus Christ. Communion with Christ is real nourishment. In receiving Christ, we recall his faithfulness unto death. He is the model for every Christian. In St. Thomas' prayer, we give thanks for the mercy of God. In giving us the sacrament of Christ, he has given us communion with the one who showed the true meaning of faithfulness to God.

At times, however, our eucharistic piety directs thanks to Jesus himself. Many prayers before the Eucharist, even prayers offered by great saints, focus not on thanking God for creation, redemption, and sanctification. Instead, they thank Jesus Christ for his presence in the sacrament. They direct their thanks to Jesus himself. Let me share three examples:

[1] This is taken from https://www.ourcatholicprayers.com/aquinas-after-communion.html, accessed on Feb. 3, 2023.

- St. John Chrysostom (344-407), known as the Doctor of the Eucharist, made the following prayer to Jesus Christ: "We give you thanks, O most merciful Lord and Redeemer of our souls, for this day you have made us worthy by means of these immortal and heavenly mysteries."[2] Here Chrysostom thanks Jesus because the Eucharistic mysteries have given human beings a greater worth and dignity.
- St. Anselm of Canterbury wrote in the 11th century this prayer: "O Lord Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, our Salvation: we praise you and we give you thanks! And though we are unworthy of your gifts, and though we cannot offer you a fitting devotion, yet let your loving kindness supply for our weakness."[3] In this prayer, Anselm thanks Christ for making up for the shortcomings of human nature.
- St. Alphonsus Ligouri, in a book from 1745, made this prayer to Jesus, "I adore You, and I thank you for all the graces you have bestowed on me, especially for having given me yourself in this Sacrament."[4] St. Alphonsus thanks Jesus for offering believers his real presence.

These prayers of thanksgiving for the Eucharist were *not* made to God the heavenly Father of Jesus Christ. Chrysostom, Anselm, and Alphonsus Ligouri thank Jesus himself. They are grateful for what the Eucharist does for our human nature, for how the Eucharist compensates for our weakness, and for sharing with us his real presence.

This sharpens our question tonight, which is, "To whom do we give thanks in the Eucharist?" At the Last Supper, Jesus gave thanks to God. In the Eucharist, we give thanks to God, just as Jesus did. That is the primary answer. The secondary answer is that we give thanks to Jesus, who is one in being with the Father, for the sacrament of his body and blood. In a few minutes, I will give you an opportunity discuss my primary and secondary answers. But before I do that, I want to anticipate an objection.

Some of you may object to my distinction between thanking the Father and thanking the Son. Jesus Christ is the God-man, you will say. He has a divine and a human nature. He is consubstantial with the Father. When we pray to Jesus Christ, we are praying to God. Our prayer to Jesus includes his heavenly Father. Why, you might ask, do we need to distinguish between praying to God the Father and to God the Son? This is a subtle and important point. Before we answer it, we need to consider the two natures of Jesus Christ.

Chalcedon and the Two Natures of Christ

Let me share with you another memory. In 1973, when I was 21 years old, I had the opportunity to travel to the Middle East. I had just graduated from the university. A high school friend invited me to accompany him to Afghanistan. He had visited before and was looking

[2] The prayer of St. John Chrysostom was accessed on Jan. 9 from the website https://www.preces-latinae.org/thesaurus/PostMissam/Chrysostomi.html.

[3] I have not been able to trace the source of Anselm's "Prayer of Thanksgiving." This version of the prayer was accessed on Jan. 9, 2023 at https://catholicharboroffaithandmorals.com/Thanksgiving.html.

[4] In 1745 St. Alphonsus wrote "Visits to the Blessed Sacrament," according to the website https://www.ourcatholicprayers.com/alphonsus-liguori.html, accessed on Jan. 9, 2023.

forward to a summer job at a Christian hospital. The two of us traveled by train from Frankfurt in Germany to Istanbul in Turkey. From there we went East, by trains and buses, through Iran to Afghanistan.

I remember the moment that we entered the Middle East. It is divided from Europe by the straits of the Bosporus. We had arrived in Istanbul, on the European side, on April 10. There we had visited the Blue Mosque, seen the sarcophagus of Alexander the Great, and marveled at the enormous basilica of Hagia Sophia (or "holy wisdom"). At one time it was the largest church in Christendom. Today an imposing mosaic of Jesus Christ from the year 1261 looks down on visitors. I had never seen anything like it.

On the evening of April 14, my friend and I boarded a ferry over the Bosporus. My travel diary notes that we bought some melted cheese sandwiches for dinner. It was cloudy, but the moon shone between rifts in the clouds. We leaned on the railings and looked out. The air smelled like the sea and like diesel exhaust. The water was calm. The trip took less than an hour. We arrived on the other side and wasted no time. We were now in Asia. We walked to the train station and caught the overnight express for Ankara and points east.

I tell this story because, if I had known more, I might have waited before taking the train. The east side of the Bosporus is the modern city of Kadıköy. It is built upon the ancient maritime town of Chalcedon. And that town, Chalcedon, is very important to our question tonight, the question "To whom do we give thanks in the Eucharist?"

Chalcedon is famous in Christian history as the site of a general council of the Church. It took place in the year 451. At that time, the Church faced a heresy known as monophysitism. The heretics proclaimed that Jesus Christ was not only one with God, but also that Father and Son share a single, divine nature. Jesus was not a human being, according to the Monophysite heresy. He only seemed to be human. His outward human appearance disguised his divinity. God's divine nature had absorbed Jesus' human nature. In the view of the Monophysite heretics, being human was incompatible with divine holiness.

Leo the Great, who served as Pope from years 440-461, fought the Monophysite heresy. If Jesus were not fully human, said Pope Leo, he was not one of us. If Jesus were purely divine, no one could say that God and human beings had anything in common. From this viewpoint, men and women are simply mired in original sin. God, by contrast, is the font of goodness. According to this heresy, humanity and divinity are opposites.

Leo had powerful enemies who were narrowly logical thinkers. If Jesus were human, they reasoned, he would have to be born of a woman – and how can the eternal God be born? How can the all-powerful God become a powerless baby? Can God have a human mother? If Jesus were a God-man, the heretics said, he would no longer be a single person. He would be part-this and part-that. God, they said, cannot possibly be human. The Monophysites believed in the divinity of Jesus. He could not have a human nature or be like us. It all seemed logical.

Pope Leo prevailed over the Monophysite heretics. Back in 451, in ancient Chalcedon or modern Kadıköy on the Bosporus, the bishops assembled. They affirmed the true humanity of Jesus. He had a rational soul and a human body. He had a human will but subordinated it to his heavenly father. He had a divine and a human nature. We call him the God-man. But he was not a divided person. In the creed we say that he is "consubstantial" with the Father. He shared the one substance and nature of God. But his humanity was not a disguise. He was fully human.

He was born of his mother Mary. He loved his friends. He suffered in the Garden of Gethsemane. From the cross he cried out, "My God, why have you abandoned me?" Apart from sin, he was like us in all things. In his created humanity, Jesus could say, "I and the Father are one" (Jn 10:30).

The two natures of Christ complicate our question "To whom do we give thanks in the Eucharist?" When I was 21 years old, leaning against the railing of the ferry crossing the Bosporus, I did not understand any of this. It was my first time overseas, crossing into Asia on my way to Iran and Afghanistan. My diary recalls that I was in Kabul from May 8-12 of 1973. At that time, King Mohammed Zahir Shah had ruled Afghanistan for forty years. He would be deposed two months later, on July 17. I learned that news later, when I got back to Europe, but the fact did not fully register. I never suspected that the Middle East would be the focus of war for the rest of my life. At the time I simply marveled to have visited some of the holy places of Islam. They were beautiful, and I was grateful to have safely returned. Thinking about that journey today prompts a reflection. Islam teaches that God is one. But Christian faith says that the one God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Eucharist is our sacrament of thanksgiving. In it we express our gratitude. But the object of our thanks is a complicated question.

The Two Natures and the Eucharist

We have already said that, in the Eucharist, we re-enact the Last Supper. There, in the presence of the Twelve, Jesus took bread. Luke says he "gave thanks" before breaking it. Matthew and Mark say that he "gave thanks" when he took up the cup of wine. St. Paul, probably writing earlier than the evangelists, repeats what Luke said, namely, that Jesus "gave thanks" and broke the bread. Jesus gave it to the Twelve, saying, "This is my body." To those words Paul adds something familiar. We read in First Corinthians the words: "This is my body which is broken for you." Jesus' body will be an offering. Then, in Paul's account, Jesus adds another phrase. He says, "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor. 11:24). We Catholics do as Jesus said. We receive the Eucharist and give thanks to God, just as Jesus did.

The institution of the Eucharist arose as an act of imitation. We imitate the actions of Jesus at the Last Supper. We do so at every Mass, but especially on Holy Thursday. Re-enacting the Last Supper, we recall that the body of Jesus would be crucified the very next day. There, at the Last Supper, Jesus acknowledged his heavenly Father. He broke the bread and distributed it to the Twelve. Today we call it Holy Communion. It is a holy communion with the body and blood of the Lord Jesus, a communion that took sacramental shape on the night before he died. In the sacrament we taste the real presence of Christ's body and blood. We not only have a Holy Communion with him, but we also have a holy communion with one another. We are all sharers of his body and blood.

When the priest speaks the Eucharistic words of Jesus, "This is my body," are they the words of God or of a human being? Was Jesus speaking as God or as man? By now you know the answer. Such a question is misleading. It misleads us in the way that the early heretics were misled. They were unable to grasp the doctrine of the two natures. In their minds, either Jesus was God or Jesus was a human being. If a human being, then he shared our human nature. He could be forgetful, make mistakes, hurt people, get angry, feel emotion, fear danger, or suffer pain and injury. If he were God, it was another matter entirely. God cannot be born. God would not have to learn from his parents. God would not be tempted, would not feel hunger, would

never thirst, and certainly could never die. But the Church, by teaching that Jesus had two natures, stopped all speculation about a divided personality. We cannot say, about the words "This is my body," that they were uttered by either a God or a man. They were spoken by the man Jesus, who was one in being with his heavenly Father.

The Eucharistic words of Jesus provide an important clue to our question tonight. In Saints Luke and Paul, Jesus "gave thanks" before breaking the bread. In Saints Matthew and Mark he gave thanks when he took the cup. Jesus was thanking his heavenly Father. He was not directing the thanks to himself. He was asking the Apostles to give thanks to God in a holy communion with Jesus himself. He had been with them for three years. They had witnessed his teaching, his powerful deeds, and the way he lived. Now he anticipated his death. But he did not want to abandon them. His life and ministry had shown how a man or woman can be "one in being" with God. Jesus wanted his disciples to experience that oneness. As the man from Nazareth, he had accepted God's call to love and service. He would be faithful unto death. Faithfulness meant that he was ready to give up his life. He was willing to make that sacrifice, but he wanted to remain with his disciples. With the Eucharist, he offered them a sacrament of communion with him. By doing as he did, he offered to the Twelve, and now to us, an eternal communion with himself. We commune with the one who showed what it means to be one in being with God. We make a prayer of thanksgiving. We do so in remembrance of him.

So let me summarize what I have said and put some questions to you. I have said that we give thanks in the Eucharist in two ways. The first way is that we give thanks to God for the works of creation, redemption, and sanctification. That is how the *Catechism* answers the question, "What is this sacrament called?" This answer reflects the humanity of Jesus. At the Last Supper, in the presence of the Apostles, Jesus gave thanks to his heavenly Father and distributed the bread and wine as the sacrament of communion with his body and blood.

There is, however, another way to give thanks. I call it "secondary" because it reflects, not the practice of the human Jesus at the Last Supper, but our appreciation of his ongoing sacramental presence in our lives. This is the way of saints like John Chrysostom, Anselm of Canterbury, and Alphonsus Ligouri. They give thanks in the Eucharist, not primarily to God the Father, but to Jesus Christ. They do so because the sacrament is the Lord Jesus' gift of himself. In the Eucharist, Jesus gives us the dignity of a holy communion with him, compensates for our human weakness, and lets us enjoy his real presence. This is legitimate and proper but I call it secondary. It differs from what Jesus did at the Last Supper. There he did not focus on his own divinity but gave thanks to his heavenly Father.

Now let me pose some questions to you. *In the Eucharist, do you find yourself giving thanks to God or to God's Son? Do you affirm the human nature of Jesus Christ as well as his divine nature? In short, do you agree with my distinction between a primary and a secondary answer?*

Thanksgiving and the Eucharistic Revival

Last June, on the Feast of Corpus Christi, the United States Bishops launched a Eucharistic Revival. It has a specific theme: "Created Anew by the Body and Blood of Christ, Source of our Healing and Hope." The aim, according to the bishops, is "to renew the Catholic Church by enkindling a living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist."

Archbishop José Gomez of Los Angeles has promoted the revival. On August 13, for example, some 3,000 people gathered at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels for a daylong Eucharistic Congress. In preparation for the revival, the U.S. Bishops published a 35-page document, "The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church."[5] The document does not distinguish, as I do, between a primary and secondary answer to the question, "To whom do we give thanks in the Eucharist?" But the document reveals the differences that I have pointed out. In the Eucharist, we give thanks to God, say the bishops, and we also give thanks to Christ for the gift of himself.

Let me give some examples. We see the primary answer in paragraph 30 of the bishops' document. There the bishops write, "It is only natural that we give thanks to the Lord for all that he has given to us." Then, in the very next sentence, the bishops quote from Psalm 116: "How can I repay the Lord for all the great good done for me? I will raise the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord" (Ps 116:12). When the bishops speak about repaying the Lord and about calling on the name of the Lord, they are using the divine name, the name revealed to Moses at the burning bush. Giving thanks to the Lord God is what Jesus did at the Last Supper. He even might have prayed in the very words of Psalm 116: "I will raise the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord." Here the Lord is the God of the patriarchs, the kings, and the prophets of Israel. It is the divine name itself. Jesus gives thanks to his heavenly Father.

The bishops affirm the primacy of prayer to the heavenly Father. Jesus' very mission, they say, was to glorify the Father (par. 9). God gives us the ability to be grateful. The bishops make this point (par. 29) by quoting a prayer from the Mass. "Our thanksgiving is itself your gift," the priest-celebrant says, "since our praises add nothing to your greatness but profit us for salvation." When we thank God, God is the one who creates grateful hearts in us. Jesus himself commanded us to give thanks to God (par. 30). His command was, "Do this in memory of me." Ever since the Last Supper, Christians throughout the world have been breaking bread and drinking from the cup, just as Jesus did. By pointing to the command of Jesus, the bishops affirm what I call the first answer to my question. We give thanks to God in memory of Jesus. We do so just as Jesus did.

The bishops do not slight, however, the second answer. They do so by referring to Jesus as the Lord. In the Mass, they say, we celebrate the "risen Lord," Jesus Christ (par. 2). We all attend Mass on Sunday, "the Lord's Day" (par. 28). In the Eucharist, the bishops remind us, the "Lord Jesus" gives himself (pars. 31 & 33). At the dismissal, we are to proclaim the good news, glorifying the Lord Jesus by our lives (par 56). In all of these cases, the Lord refers to Jesus himself. With this usage, the bishops reinforce the second answer to the question, "To whom do we give thanks?" We give thanks to Jesus as well as to his heavenly Father. The bishops do not speak of a primary or secondary answer to our question, "To whom do we give thanks," but they help us see the difference between the two.

Some of you may still object that Jesus is both God and man. It is perfectly legitimate, you will say, to refer to Jesus and to God the Father as Lord. I freely concede that this is true. But the Church itself distinguishes between the two natures in Jesus. It recognizes that Jesus, in

[5] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the* Church, developed by the Committee on Doctrine of the USCCB and approved by the full body of the USCCB at its November 2021 General Meeting. Accessed on the USCCB website on Jan. 10, 2023.

his humanity, had a human mind and soul. Jesus was born of Mary and died on the cross. He had to subordinate his human will to the Father's divine will. All of that is the church's teaching. Yes, it is perfectly acceptable to use the word Lord to speak of Jesus as his heavenly Father. But this usage can lead to confusion.

The Church emphasizes the human nature of Jesus because it does not want to confuse us. That's why I say that there are two answers to the question, "To whom do we give thanks in the Eucharist?" The primary answer, I say, is the answer of the *Catechism*. In the Eucharist, we give thanks to God for creation, redemption, and sanctification. We do as Jesus did, thanking our heavenly Father, even as we anticipate our deaths. We do so in memory of Jesus. To be sure, we also give thanks to Jesus for his presence in the Eucharist. He heals our human nature, compensates for our weakness, and nourishes us with his real presence. But that is the secondary, not the primary answer, to our question.

Conclusion: The Bread of Life

At the beginning of my talk, I mentioned that the Gospel of John does not describe the institution of the Eucharist. John's 6th chapter does provide, however, a Eucharistic commentary on the miracle of feeding the 5,000. The miracle took place in Galilee on the feast of Passover. A multitude had followed Jesus, and they were hungry. A boy provided "five barley loaves and two fish." There was no wine. Jesus gave thanks and distributed the loaves and fishes. After feeding the 5,000, the disciples gathered up the leftovers, which filled twelve baskets.

The next day, the crowd followed Jesus to Capernaum. Jesus warned them, "Do not labor for the food which perishes but for the food which endures to eternal life" (Jn 6:27). They asked him to explain. Jesus told them that they must "believe in him whom he [that is, God the Father] has sent" (v. 29). The crowd asked Jesus to work a miracle, like the manna which Moses gave to the Israelites to eat in the desert. Jesus replied that it was not Moses, but God the Father, who gave to Moses the miraculous manna. The crowd then asked Jesus to give them this "bread from heaven" (v. 32). Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger and he who believes in me shall never thirst" (v. 35). He explained, "I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me" (38). These words show Jesus' obedience. Doing the will of his heavenly Father – that is the truest nourishment.

The Bread of Life discourse invites us to look more deeply into the reality of the Eucharist. The people who listened to Jesus were confused about his call to labor for "the food that endures to eternal life." They thought that Jesus was speaking about manna in the wilderness. But he did not mean manna. He talked about doing the works of God. The capacity to do those works is a kind of food from heaven. Jesus is the true bread because he has come to do the will of the Father. His listeners thought he was glorifying himself. But he was talking about doing the will of the Father in a specific way, namely, the way that is available to us. We are not gods but human beings. We Christians recognize that Jesus, in his very humanity, was one with his heavenly Father. We too are called to do the Father's will in a holy communion with Jesus our brother. To whom do we give thanks in the Eucharist? Our primary answer must be that we thank God the Father, just as Jesus did. God has given us this capacity. It is the ability to discover the divine will, to accomplish it, and to live forever.