

When the bread and wine become the sacramental Body and Blood of Christ, the grace of the Eucharist enters and suffuses the whole of the material world. As the prayer of offering in the Mass says, the bread and wine are 'the fruit of the earth and of the vine' and they symbolize the earth which gave it. In the Eucharist, the spiritual fills the material, creation is embraced by the Creator, the human is flooded from within by the divine and man meets God in the depths of his being.

The body shares in this because it is part of material creation. The great temptation for us is to come to regret the body, especially as we get older and experience what Hamlet calls 'the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to.' This regret is an evasion of the implications of incarnation; it is a denial of the innate goodness of the body. The body possesses a beauty of being that it carries within itself. Its inadequacies, limitations, failings and the signs and symptoms of aging, all have their own special dignity.

Many years before I went to seminary, I worked for a time as an assistant in a care home run by an Italian Order of priests and brothers. It was hard work: getting the residents up, washing and dressing them, giving them breakfast, lunch and dinner, helping them with all kinds of everyday procedures that most of us do without even thinking about it – including going to the bathroom. Many of the residents suffered from severe constipation (often the effect of medication) and one of my regular jobs was to administer a laxative suppository to an elderly man then to sit with him as he used the commode. Always with much struggle. One evening, in the middle of this task, I suddenly thought of Julian of Norwich's words about going to the toilet being due to the goodness of God and I was overwhelmed, at least for a space, with a sense of the holiness of what was being done. I've always remained grateful for that experience.

The prophet Isaiah writes: "All flesh is like grass: it withers and fades like the flowers of the field." Yes, it

does – but it is also, ultimately, the object of glorification.

After all, Mary was taken up into heaven in *body* as well as soul; in her, the poor old flesh, the beast of burden – ‘Brother Ass’, as St Francis called it – is not cast off and left to disintegrate into nothingness, but is lifted up and transfigured. Everything it has ever suffered in this life – from bunions to tumours – will be changed into what Julian of Norwich calls ‘signs of glory.’ And this is Eucharistic, because in the Eucharist matter and spirit are reconciled and made one.

In the Eucharist we are led toward a fullness of being that we would otherwise never know. This is not to be fault-free: we will never achieve that in this dimension of the one life; it is to be *whole* – or as whole as we can be, because we’ll never achieve that in this dimension of life either. It is a pilgrimage into spiritual wholeness, completeness, into the fulness of being, which finds its end in infinite Being of God. The word ‘holy’ means ‘whole’ – they have the same root.

Carl Jung had a dream following his wife's death. She appeared to be about thirty years old. He saw her looking at him, wearing a very beautiful dress that a cousin made for her many years before. The expression on her face was one full of wisdom and understanding. He goes on to say that this image of his wife contained within itself the beginning of their relationship, all the events of fifty-three years of marriage, and the ending of her life too. He writes:

“Face to face with such wholeness, one remains speechless, for it can scarcely be comprehended.”

We are all on our own journey into spiritual wholeness and for us, the Eucharist is our nourishment. The Eucharist *is* our wholeness.

The Eucharist is Mystery. Eucharistic Prayers 3 and 4 refer to the celebration of the Eucharist as ‘Mystery’ or ‘mysteries’. This comes from the Greek *mysterion*, which comes from *muo*, which means ‘to keep the mouth closed’ or ‘a closed mouth.’ The sacred religious rites of ancient Greece called their ceremonies ‘mysteries’ and

it has the same use and meaning in the old Rabbinic writings. Essentially it is saying: Take the Eucharist into the tabernacle of your heart, do not try to understand it with your head. Do not talk about it, let your daily life be a monstrance to reveal it to others.

I want to end with three quotations on the Eucharist, which sum it all up far better than I can:

“In this world I cannot see the Most High Son of God with my own eyes, except for his most holy Body and Blood” (St Francis of Assisi)

“There is nothing so great as the Eucharist. If God had something more precious, he would have given it to us.”  
(St Jean Vianney)

“Out of the darkness of my life, so much frustrated, I put before you the one great thing to love on earth: the Blessed Sacrament ... There you will find romance, glory, honour, fidelity, and the true way of all your loves upon earth.”

(J.R.R. Tolkien in a letter to his son Christopher.)