



DO YOU DOUBT THE REAL PRESENCE? LEARN ABOUT THESE EUCCHARISTIC MIRACLES

By: Michael O'Neill

Earlier this year, atheist biologist Richard Dawkins posted this on his Twitter feed: “Roman Catholics are required to believe that communion wine actually is literally the blood of Christ, and the wafer literally is his body. Not symbolically but literally. Not a metaphor but literally. That way madness lies. At very least it’s a pernicious abuse of language.”

The post from Dawkins was not surprising, of course; he has long been antagonistic toward the Catholic Church. What was truly shocking were the hundreds of comments that followed of many self-identified Catholics and ex-Catholics who argued that this was not the teaching of the Church, or that they had never heard such a thing, or that no Catholic they ever met believed that it was anything more than symbolic.

Known as “transubstantiation,” this dogma asserts that despite retaining all the physical characteristics of bread and wine (known as “accidents”), these food staples, once consecrated, truly become the actual flesh and blood of the Son of God during the sacrifice of the Mass. Many people have ignored this great event as a symbolic act of commemoration and celebration of community. The Gospel of John, however, points to the scandal that Jesus caused with his command: “Jesus said to them, ‘Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day’” (Jn 6:53-54).

Many of Jesus’ followers left him because of this unbelievable and confusing suggestion. Yet he did not clarify his statement or follow with a parable to show the symbolism in his words or chase after all the people who had followed him dutifully up to that point. Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said: “This saying is hard; who can accept it?” Since Jesus knew that his disciples were murmuring about this, he said to them, ‘Does this shock you? What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life,

while the flesh is of no avail. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe” (Jn 6:60-64).

Throughout history, and up through modern day, skeptics and believers alike have questioned and struggled with this core belief. The sheer impossibility of it seems to be matched by the why of it: Why would the creator of the universe humble himself to take the form of a lifeless piece of food, easily ignored and able to be desecrated? The doubt over whether Christ’s body, blood, soul and divinity could be truly present in the Eucharist has caused many to receive this gift when not in good standing with the Catholic Church.

It is indeed the most difficult teaching of the Catholic Church, and it is understandable that many or most people will find it too challenging, but for Catholics to not even know that it is what the Church teaches sheds light on an unfathomable failure of catechesis. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has now made the Eucharist a central focus in an effort to remedy this problem.

In short, the Catholic Church affirms the Eucharist as the central element of the life of faith: “The Eucharist is the source and summit of all Christian life. In the Eucharist, the sanctifying action of God in our regard and our worship of him reach their high point. It contains the whole spiritual good of the Church, Christ himself, our Pasch. Communion with divine life and unity of the People of God are both expressed and effected by the Eucharist. Through the Eucharistic celebration we are united already with the liturgy of heaven and we have a foretaste of eternal life” (Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 274).

TESTABLE MIRACLES

The modern truth-seeker, however, might be less moved by passages from the Bible or excerpts of the Catechism and instead would be motivated to be informed by science. Amazingly enough, in some very rare cases around the world, there have been reports of Eucharistic miracles that have been subjected to scientific examination with some startling results.

While the Eucharist itself, celebrated on altars around the world, is rightfully considered by the faithful to be the greatest miracle of Catholicism, there have been events of different varieties on top of this that are said to be additionally miraculous. Some consecrated hosts have been inexplicably preserved for hundreds of years, or have fortuitously escaped danger by passing through a fire unscathed or vanishing from the clutches of thieves. Some miraculous stories

report the levitation of consecrated hosts. In other cases, the faithful have discerned discolorations in the host to be the face of Christ. In the hagiographies of saints throughout Church history, holy men and women have experienced great miracles of the Eucharist, including the strange phenomenon of surviving on no food except for the bread consecrated into the body of Christ. As remarkable as these reports may be, they generally are passed down in pious tradition and are untestable in a laboratory or lack sufficient documentation collected according to modern standards.

The most convincing cases, however, are those in which the consecrated wafer has been transformed into human flesh or been seen to bleed human blood as verified by scientific testing. A correspondence between samples across countries and centuries has been found. In all cases, testing has shown: 1) the blood is from a human from the group AB (which is also the blood type found on the purported burial cloth of Christ, the Shroud of Turin); 2) the samples had been taken from the heart; 3) there were signs of distress having occurred in the patient. Yet, despite the immense knowledge provided by these tests, no DNA profile has been able to be obtained from any of the samples, perhaps due to age or contamination.

Over the centuries — with an explosion of reports documented in the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries — there have been more than 100 cases of Eucharistic miracles around the world that have received some form of Church recognition, occurring in 20 countries worldwide. Like other miraculous phenomena of the Catholic Church, the majority are documented from Europe, with Italy, Spain and France topping the list. But since 1900, most miracles reported have been discovered outside of Europe, including one case in Mexico. And the number of verified Eucharistic miracles appears to be on the rise.



Lanciano, Italy (c. 750)

Lanciano miracle:

The reliquary displaying the relics of the Lanciano miracle, along with a closeup of the host transformed into flesh. Public domain

In perhaps the earliest known case of a Eucharistic miracle, generally regarded as the most famous, a Basilian hieromonk of Lanciano, Italy, around the year 750, entertained serious doubts about whether the Eucharist constituted the true flesh and blood of Christ. At the monastery of St. Longinus, after saying the words of consecration (“This is my body. ... This is my blood ...”), a ring of human flesh formed around the wafer, and in the chalice five globules of human blood formed (in correspondence to each of the five wounds traditionally ascribed to Christ at the crucifixion). This great physical miracle was reserved in a monstrance or ostensorium for future generations to visit in adoration.

The prodigious Eucharist has undergone four investigations throughout history, beginning with the first objective, quantitative study in 1574 by Archbishop Antonio Gaspar Rodríguez. He conducted a study that weighed the five “globules” of blood in the chalice. Despite being different sizes, all weighed the same amount. Still more, each individual globule, regardless of size, weighed the same amount as all five of them weighed together, or any other combination. Each weighed exactly 15.85g, and all parts together also weighed the same 15.85g. This is considered the “miracle of the weights,” and the testing has been repeated at each subsequent investigation with the same results.



LANCIANO MIRACLE

Closeup of the host transformed into flesh. Wikimedia Creative Commons via AFC photo

In the 18th and 19th centuries, other examinations of the miracle were made, but 20th-century science has given the most conclusive and astounding proof of the miraculous. In 1970, the bishop of Chieti, Italy, charged two doctors and university professors with the task of carrying out a thorough analysis of samples of the miracle. In 1971, Dr. Odoardo Linoli, professor emeritus in human anatomy at the University of Siena, was assisted by Dr. Ruggero Bertelli, a retired professor of human anatomy, pathological histology, chemistry and clinical microscopy at the University of Siena. In their findings, they determined that there was no trace of preservatives in the flesh, which was determined to be human striated muscular tissue of the heart wall. The blood was also found to be of human origin and of the same type AB blood group as the flesh. In the blood were found proteins in the same proportions as are found in the seroproteic makeup of fresh normal blood. They also mention in their 1973 report that blood spoils rapidly when taken from a cadaver, and only a skilled modern surgeon could have removed the tissue sample, ruling out the possibility of a medieval hoax.

BETANIA, VENEZUELA (1991)

But not all Eucharistic miracles are from hundreds of years ago. Some, such as the miracle in Venezuela, happened more recently. Near the Finca Marian Shrine in Betania, Venezuela, site of the Church-approved Marian apparitions to Servant of God Maria Esperanza de Bianchini, a Eucharistic miracle occurred on Dec. 8, 1991. During the consecration at Mass, the priest broke the host into four parts, consuming one part himself. It was later discovered that one of those pieces began to show a red spot that eventually began exuding a red substance. A resulting series of studies was initiated by the bishop of Los Teques, later leading to 500 independent tests. The results confirmed that the blood group was AB, and the sample was determined to be taken from a living heart. Since some people had wondered if the priest had bled onto the host, it was also verified that the blood of the priest did not match the blood found on the Eucharist. The miraculous host

has been put on display in the Augustinian Recollects convent of the nuns of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Los Teques.



Buenos Aires, Argentina (1996)

Eucharistic miracle

Relic from the Eucharistic miracle of Buenos Aires. Public domain

On Aug. 15, 1996, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, a local priest of the parish of Santa María, Padre Alejandro Pezet, found a discarded host on the ground in the church after Mass. Following standard procedure, he placed the recovered host into a bowl of water in the tabernacle to dissolve. A week later, when it was moved into a new tabernacle, a reddish substance was discovered. After it continued to dissolve for 11 more days, permission was given in October 1999 by the local ordinary, Archbishop Jorge Bergoglio (the future Pope Francis), to test a sample. Professor Ricardo Castañón Gomez, University of Sydney professor Dr. John Walker, forensic pathologist Dr. Robert Lawrence and Italian professor Edoardo Linoli (who examined the Lanciano miracle) all participated in the initial studies of the sample.

On March 2, 2004, professor Frederick Zugibe of Columbia University in New York, an expert in forensic medicine of the heart, received the sample without disclosure of the source. Professor Zugibe identified the presence of intact white blood cells when it was brought into the laboratory, indicative of a living person. He confirmed that the sample was of the AB blood type that, like at Lanciano, was from the upper left ventricle of the myocardium. He also found markers indicative of trauma in the chest and that the patient could not breathe for lack of oxygen. No genetic profile nuclear DNA testing was conducted in three independent DNA labs. In 2006, the results were presented to Cardinal Bergoglio. Today, the miraculous host can be seen in a monstrance in a small shrine in the parish of Santa María.



Tixtla, Mexico (2006)

Blood on the consecrated host in Tixtla, Mexico. Creative Commons/ Catedrales e Iglesias

During an October 2006 retreat Mass at the Parish of St. Martin of Tours in Tixtla, Mexico, a consecrated host was found to be effusing a reddish substance. The diocese initiated a study to discern its cause and origin and to eliminate the possibility of fraud. The examination under the microscope showed the source of the blood to be emanating from within, thereby eliminating the possibility for the blood to have been placed on the host from the outside. The blood group was determined to be AB. It was reported that “the reddish substance analyzed corresponds to blood in which there are hemoglobin and DNA of human origin. ... Two studies conducted by eminent forensic experts with different methodologies have shown that the substance originates from the interior, excluding the hypothesis that someone could have placed it from the exterior. The blood type is AB, similar to the one found in the host of Lanciano and in the Holy Shroud of Turin. A microscopic analysis of magnification and penetration reveals that the superior part of the blood has been coagulated since October 2006. Moreover, the underlying internal layers reveal, in February 2010, the presence of fresh blood. The event does not have a natural explanation.”



Legnica, Poland (2013)

Legnica miracle

On Sunday, Oct. 12, 2008, at 8:30 a.m., at St. Anthony's Parish in Sokolka, Poland, a consecrated host fell to the ground during the distribution of Communion. In order to dispose of it properly, the host was then placed in a vasculum to dissolve by the parish sacristan, Sister Julia Dubowska of the Congregation of the Eucharistic Sisters, who then placed the container in the parish sacristy safe, which only she and the pastor had keys to.

A discoloration could be seen on the host a week later when she checked on its condition. The pastor thought that it was likely simply dirt, but brought it to the attention of the metropolitan archbishop of Bialystok, Edward Ozorowski. The stained host was put back in the tabernacle, but this time placed on a small corporal and kept there in secret for three years.

A histopathological study was done on the host when the archbishop eventually formed an ecclesial commission. In the resulting inquiry, professor Maria Elżbieta Sobaniec-Łotowska and professor Stanisław Sulkowski, two specialists of pathological anatomy at the Medical University of Białystok, in independent tests and with the source unknown, found in agreement that human cardiac muscle tissue from the upper left ventricle (as in the cases of Lanciano and Buenos Aires) had been joined to the Eucharist in an inseparable manner. The structure of the transformed fragment of the host is identical to the myocardial heart tissue of a living person at death. The heart muscle fibers were found under electron microscope to be inseparably connected at the molecular level with that of the "bread" in a manner that was not humanly possible

In his official statement, the Metropolitan Curia of Bialystok declared: "The Sokolka event is not opposed to the faith of the Church; rather, it confirms it. The Church professes that, after the words of consecration, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the bread is transformed into the Body of Christ, and the wine into His Blood. Additionally, this is an invitation for all ministers of the Eucharist to distribute the Body of the Lord with faith and care, and for the faithful to receive Him with adoration."

On Christmas Day 2013, at St. Jack Parish in Legnica, Poland, Msgr. Zbigniew Kiernikowski retrieved a consecrated host that had fallen to the floor and placed it in water to dissolve. When a reddish color later began to appear, a commission was assembled by the former Bishop of Legnica, Stefan Cichy. Testing began in

Szichen in 2014, and two years later, the results were announced with the determination that the sample contained striated heart tissue of human origin.

The Department of Forensic Medicine stated that “the histopathological tissue fragments were found containing fragmented part of the skeletal muscle. ... The whole image ... is the most similar to the heart muscle ... with the changes that often are accompanied by the agony” of death.

Bishop Zbigniew Kiernikowski of the Diocese of Legnica approved the Eucharistic miracle and established a small shrine within the church for the faithful to visit.

POSSIBILITY OF A HOAX?

Is it possible that these cases could be the result of elaborate hoaxes? It seems extremely unlikely. But could some knowledgeable person simply obtain some blood or heart tissue of a person with the right blood type, gain access to a consecrated host, and carefully transfer the blood and flesh to the host? At first glance, such a fraud seems plausible, but careful examination under a microscope would certainly rule that out.

The presence of white blood cells found in some cases especially point to the impossibility. White blood cells imply a living person, as they are not present after death. To obtain a sample of heart tissue with white blood cells (embedded in the ventricle wall due to trauma), it would require access to the heart of a living, tortured person — while the heart is still beating. And perhaps even more impossible, achieving the transmutation and interweaving of the two substances — bread and heart tissue — on a microscopic level seems to go beyond human capabilities. How far would the Catholic Church need to go to pull off such a hoax?

THE MEANING OF EUCHARISTIC MIRACLES

When a potential case is brought to his attention, the local bishop may initiate an unbiased study by a panel of experts of the consecrated host in question. While on very rare occasions these examinations into the organic, physical reality of the host may establish the presence of flesh and blood, of course there is no scientific test for the transcendent: the Real Presence of the soul and divinity of Jesus Christ. By making a declaration of approval of a Eucharistic miracle for the world, we as the faithful are invited to reaffirm our assent to this most challenging of Catholic beliefs: What was once bread and wine is indeed now the body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ — a true miracle, indeed.