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The Theology of Thomas Aquinas, Selected Topics

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Did I Receive the Whole Christ?

The sacrament of the Eucharist is the one sacrament where there are two important elements, the bread and the wine which are respectively transformed into the body and blood of Christ. While the priest celebrating the Eucharist receives both species, it is often the case that the laity receive only one species. Are they missing out on the whole Christ?

Central to St. Thomas' discussion on this topic is the concept of *concomitantia* which means "association".¹ In these questions on the Eucharist, the term first appears in the article on "Whether the whole Christ is contained under this sacrament?"² By the power of the sacrament, the substance of the bread is changed into the substance of the body of Christ, and the substance of the wine is changed into the substance of the blood of Christ. However, Christ is now risen from the dead and exalted in heaven. His body and blood are together, and wherever his body is, there is the whole of him, including his blood, human soul, and Godhead.³ *Concomitantia* refers to the fact that if one part of Christ is present by the power of the sacrament, the whole of Christ must also be present because of natural association of one part to the rest.

In the next article, Thomas specifically addresses the two species of the sacrament. The bread and wine are consecrated separately as a representation of

¹ LATDict - Online Latin Dictionary, <http://www.latin-dictionary.net/info/word/12082.html> (accessed May 3, 2009).

² III, 76, 1 c

³ III, 76, 1 ad1

Christ's passion, when his blood was truly separated from his body,⁴ but they are not separate now, so when we receive Christ's body under the species of the bread, we receive all of him by *concomitantia*, and similarly when we receive his blood under the species of the wine, we also receive all of Christ, body, soul, and Godhead.

Unfortunately, this fact was used to justify the practice of only allowing the laity to receive the sacrament under the species of bread. Not only could such a practice encourage an attitude of inferiority of the laity, but could also weaken the teaching of the importance of both elements of the sacrament. The fact that the sacrament uses bread and wine teaches that Christ is both our food *and* our drink; our complete sustenance. The two elements also teach that Christ's body is offered for the salvation of our body, and his blood for the salvation of our soul.

Therefore I think it is good that the Church usually offers the sacrament to the laity under both species because that most clearly shows the full meaning of the sacrament, but it is also good to know that if circumstances prevent the reception under both species, the fullness of Christ is still received.

⁴ III, 76, 2 ad2