THE EUCHARIST IN EARLY MEDIEVAL EUROPE

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In 843 or 844, Pascasius Radbertus, a monk of the Carolingian royal monastery of Corbie and its abbot from 843 to c. 847, presented King Charles the Bald (d. 877) with a special gift: a treatise about the Eucharist that Pascasius had written for Corbie’s mission house of Corvey between 831 and 833.1 Located in the eastern Carolingian territory of Saxony, Corvey had been founded from Corbie in 822 to help cement Christianity, and with it Carolingian rule, among the Saxons whom Charlemagne (d. 814) had forcibly converted from paganism around the turn of the ninth century. Pascasius must have recognized the significance of his gift’s timing, made either at Christmas (843) or at Easter (844).2 One of the key precepts expounded in this work, the first Latin treatise specifically on the Eucharist, is that through the Mass, bread and wine are inwardly, mystically changed into the historical flesh and blood of Christ. The sacrament that the king received in the feast honoring the incarnation (Christmas) or resurrection (Easter) was holy food and drink, the source of eternal salvation, because it contained the very body born of Mary in Bethlehem and crucified in Jerusalem.

Pascasius wrote De corpore et sanguine Domini (“On the Lord’s Body and Blood”) in the midst of the rebellion of the three older sons of Emperor Louis the Pious (d. 840). By 843, the civil strife this unleashed had torn the Carolingian Empire apart;3 when Louis’ youngest son,
Charles, visited Corbie, the Treaty of Verdun dividing the Carolingian provinces between him and his half-brothers, Lothar and Louis the German, had been signed for less than a year. Lothar held the imperial crown, a dream that Charles only realized for himself toward the end of his life, in 875.⁴ Pascasius’ presentation to Charles of a treatise composed at Corbie, a monastery under the king’s protection, for its sister monastery of Corvey in the realm of Louis the German, was perhaps also meant to recall Corbie’s spiritual bonds with the eastern kingdom and the loss of imperial unity. Seen from this perspective, the presentation aligned the treatise’s proclamation of unity between the Eucharist and Christ’s incarnate body, the foundation, according to Pascasius, of the unity of Christ’s body the Church, with hope for the restoration of unity in the political sphere.

Probably a decade or so later, Ratramnus, also a Corbie monk, sent Charles a copy of his own treatise on the Eucharist. This begins by thanking the king for the question that allegedly prompted its composition and praises him for wanting faith to be unified. All Christians should hold the same truths, Ratramnus notes, yet “some people” wrongly believe that Christ is physically and visibly present in the bread and wine, whereas others disagree, and the quarrel has caused “great schism.”⁵ Without identifying Pascasius he goes on to argue that, while the Eucharist is indeed Christ’s body and blood, its contents are spiritual, not physical, and thus different from the incarnate blood and flesh.

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⁵ Ratramnus, De corpore et sanguine Domini 2; ed. J.N. Bakhuizen Van Den Brink, 2nd ed. (Amsterdam, 1974), p. 43: “Dum enim quidam fidelium, corporis sanguinisque christi [misterium] quod in ecclesia cotidie celebratur dicant, quod nulla sub figura, nulla sub obvelatione fiat, sed ipsius veritatis nuda manifestatione peragatur, quidam vero testentur quod haec sub misterii figura continantur, et alid sit quod corporeis sensibus appareat, alid autem quod fides aspiciat, non parva diversitas inter eos esse dinoscitur. Et cum apostolus fidelibus scribat, ut idem sapiant et idem dicant omnes, et scisma nullum inter eos appareat, non parvo scismate dividuntur, qui de misterio corporis sanguinisque christi non eadem sentientes elocuntur.” Translation in Early Medieval Theology, ed. and trans. George McCracken (Library of Christian Classics) 9 (Philadelphia, 1957), pp. 109–47. The same volume contains a partial translation of Pascasius’ treatise (pp. 90–147). Ratramnus’ concern that Christ is believed to be visibly present in the bread and wine is tied to the doctrine, discussed below, that his body and blood change into bread and wine. See Ratramnus, De corpore 2; ed. Van Den Brink, p. 43. Cf. Pascasius, Ep.ad Fredugardum; CCCM 16, p. 147 ll. 66–70 (expressing a similar concern).