

## Comments on the significance of the phrase “physically present” in relation to the Eucharist

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A couple of references from St. Thomas are a useful starting point for this examination.

Sententia De anima, lib. 2 l. 1 n. 10. Secundo hanc, quod est actus primus, ibi, hic autem dicitur dupliciter. Concludit ergo primo ex praedictis, quod *cum corpora **physica** maxime videantur esse substantiae, et omne corpus habens vitam, sit corpus physicum, necesse est dicere quod omne corpus habens vitam sit substantia.* Et cum sit ens actu, necesse est quod sit substantia composita.

In de Anima, Book 2, l.1, n.10: “... since physical bodies are principally seen to be of substance, and every body having life, is a physical body, it is necessary to say that every body having life is a substance.” (Italics translated by me)

III, 76, 1, ad 3: “After the consecration the whole substance of Christ's body and blood is contained in this sacrament, just as the whole substance of the bread and wine was contained there before the consecration”. We could adapt this to say: “Just as the whole substance of the bread was physically present before the consecration, so the whole substance of Christ's body is physically present after the consecration”. For the whole substance of Christ's body is of a body having life, which is present in the Eucharist as a physical body.

But, let us look more closely at the different meanings of “physically present” (Webster's) -

1. present corporeally, i.e. existing as a physical body.
2. present to our knowledge in a physical manner, i.e. to our senses, sensibly (visibly),  
or to our intellect, intelligibly (naturally).
3. present really, as opposed to figuratively, morally etc.

Meanings 1 and 3 are verified in the Eucharist, but not 2. For our knowledge of Christ's bodily presence in this life is by faith only. However, the meaning in 1 is affected by the unique way in which Christ's body exists in the Eucharist. The ordinary meaning still applies in so far as it intends to signify the actual presence of “the whole substance” of Christ's physical body. But his physical body is not present in the ordinary manner of a physical body. Though the existing body is natural or physical, the mode of existence is supernatural, not natural or physical.

This is the reason why it is not limited by extrinsic physical conditions, such as of place. This is the reason also why it cannot be known by any natural power of knowledge. That is to say the physical body is not detectible by the senses and our intellect through its own physical accidents, as every physical body naturally is.

Substantially, then, Christ's body is physically present, i.e. as a bodily substance, under the appearance of bread, but its mode of existence is not physical or natural.

In ordinary language we do not make this distinction between a physical thing and its mode of existence. It becomes necessary, however, in speaking of the Eucharist. Hence, taking the Eucharist into account, we have four possible meanings of “physically present”.

1. present corporeally, i.e. existing as a physical body.
2. present corporeally, i.e. existing as a physical substance, together with its physical accidents existing according to their natural accidental mode.
3. present to our knowledge in a physical manner, i.e. to our senses, sensibly (visibly),  
or to our intellect, intelligibly (naturally).
4. present really, as opposed to figuratively, morally etc

The fourth meaning is generally readily accepted without demur. For it is the widest meaning of the term “physical”. In that sense it includes, as St. Thomas notes about it, “metaphysical”. The same extended usage applies to “natural”. It thus includes “spiritual”, as when we refer to our spiritual souls as “physically present” in our bodies, as a natural substantial part of ourselves.

But we have to be careful even here. “Really present” cannot be limited to “spiritually present” in this natural sense, if we mean to say that it is knowable to a created spiritual being or power of knowledge. For, according to St. Thomas, not even the angels can detect naturally the presence of Christ's body under the accidents of bread and wine. Christ's body is really present, as it is physically present, but its unique mode of existence prevents his bodily existence from being known to others except supernaturally, i.e. by faith or divine vision. It is not even true to say that Christ's body is “spiritually” present if we mean not “bodily” or “physically” as if he was not there in his own natural and material body. Still less is it right to use the term “spiritual” in the sense of moral or figurative.

The difficulties, and arguments, come about when we include the normal presentation to our senses within the essential significance of “physically present”. Such difficulties are inherent in any empiricist or kantian/positivist understanding of bodily reality. For this mentality substitutes appearances (phenomena) for reality (noumena), and cannot distinguish accidents from substances. Underlying this is the basic idealist presupposition of much modern philosophical and scientific thinking which cannot distinguish between knowledge and reality.

So, in speaking in theology to anyone outside the thomist tradition, which understands the distinctions that are referred to above, it is perhaps necessary

when using the phrase “physically present” to point out that one is not using it in the third sense of the fourfold senses listed, nor is one denying the supernatural mode of existence of Christ's body in the sacrament whereby our knowledge of Christ's physical presence is by faith alone.

The phrase “physically present” is not found in relevant Church documents on the subject, nor is it used directly by St. Thomas. This may be because of the possibility of mistaking the meaning by confusing it with senses 2 and 3 above. If anything, however, today we need to bring out its application in senses 1 and 4. For, to deny these senses means equating the sacramental presence to a purely “spiritual” one. That would mean either Christ is present in his divinity or his spiritual soul only, or according to his power only, i.e. morally.

One final consideration, senses 1 and 4 are the meanings that first come to mind in using the word “physical” at a common sense level. The third sense belongs to a more philosophical discussion and the distinction in the second is needed only in a theological one. One should therefore be careful to note the context of the discussion, and not arbitrarily exclude any of the senses from the discussion.