

# This Is My Body

## Christ's Real Presence in the Eucharist

**ISSUE:** Does the Catholic Church teach that we actually eat the body of Christ and drink His blood when we receive Holy Communion?

**DISCUSSION:** Yes. The Catholic Church has always taught that in the Most Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist, the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus—the whole Christ—is truly, really, and substantially present. This teaching is rooted in Scripture, taught by the Fathers and doctors of the Church, and reaffirmed by popes and ecumenical councils throughout Church history. This teaching is summarized in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (nos. 1373-81).

### Bread from Heaven

As the Old Testament attests, almighty God prepared His chosen people for the coming of Christ. He established His covenant with Abraham, confirmed the covenant with Isaac, and raised up a people through the sons of Jacob. When the Israelites were made slaves in Egypt, He led them out of slavery. This rescue from Egypt was just the beginning. Only after many years of trials and hardships would the people finally reach their destination. To prevent them from starving in the desert, God gave the people manna—"bread from heaven" (cf. Ex. 16:4 *et seq.*). He also led them by means of a cloud that hovered over the ark of the covenant (cf. Num. 9:15-23). These were two very tangible ways that the Lord demonstrated He was truly with His people.

As much as God cared for the Israelites in the desert, even more does He provide for His pilgrim Church today, by giving us His Son as our daily bread. As Jesus Himself said,

I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh (Jn. 6:48-51).

There are those today who accept the authority of the Bible but question whether Jesus was speaking literally in the Eucharistic passages, especially John 6. The Greek text itself evidences the Church's constant understanding. In John 6:49, Jesus begins His teaching by first referring to eating manna. He uses the word *εφαγον*,<sup>1</sup> which means "eat" or "consume." This verb can be used literally or figuratively. He then refers to Himself as the new manna, the living bread from heaven, of which those who eat will live forever. In this context, He uses the same word because of the figurative connection with manna.

After verse 52, when the Jews dispute His teaching, Jesus uses more emphatic language to clarify His teaching and address their concerns. He employs two techniques. First, He abandons any figurative association with manna. He no longer speaks of simply "eating," but of "eating flesh and drinking blood." He ends His explanation by stating, "This is the bread which came down from heaven, *not such as your fathers ate and died*" (Jn. 6:58). Second, later in the discourse Jesus began using the word *τρῶγων*,<sup>2</sup> which is rendered "gnaw" or "chew." The verb *τρῶγων* is rarely used figuratively, and in the context used by Christ is evidently to be taken literally.

Many of the disciples had left everything to follow Jesus. They had just witnessed a miraculous multiplication of loaves (Jn. 6:1-14) and probably heard about His walking on water (Jn. 6:16-21), yet now they walk away from Jesus on account of this teaching (Jn. 6:66). This reaction simply would not make sense if Jesus were speaking only figuratively or symbolically.

## Witness of the Church

Even more telling is the fact that during Christianity's first thousand years there was virtually unanimous acceptance of the Church's teaching on the Real Presence by faithful Christians. No one taught that the presence of Christ was only symbolic until Ratramnus (d. 868) and, more notably, Berengarius of Tours (d. 1088). The Church firmly rejected the teachings of both.

Conversely, there are many early Fathers of the Church who affirm Christ's Real Presence in the Eucharist. For example, we have the writing of Saint Ignatius of Antioch (d. 110), whose witness is of unique importance since he was a disciple of Saint John, the author of the fourth Gospel. If there were any confusion as to the proper interpretation of John 6, surely Saint Ignatius could clarify the matter. Yet he never wrote that Jesus was speaking figuratively. Rather, he wrote, "I desire the Bread of God, which is the Flesh of Jesus Christ."<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere he wrote that

[t]hose who hold heterodox opinions on the grace of Jesus Christ which has come to us ... do not confess that the Eucharist is the Flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, Flesh which suffered for our sins and which the Father, in His goodness, raised up again.<sup>4</sup>

Then there is the witness of Saint Justin Martyr (d. 165) from his *First Apology*:

For not as common bread nor common drink do we receive these; but since Jesus Christ our Savior was made incarnate by the word of God and had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so too, as we have been taught, the food which has been made into the Eucharist by the Eucharistic prayer set down by Him, and by the change of which our blood and flesh is nourished, is both the flesh and the blood of that incarnated Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

Saint Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386), at the end of a sermon on the Christian faith, taught:

[T]hat which seems to be bread, is not bread, though it tastes like it, but the Body of Christ, and that which seems to be wine, is not wine, though it too tastes as such, but the Blood of Christ.... [D]raw inner strength by receiving this bread as spiritual food and your soul will rejoice.<sup>6</sup>

Christ's presence is clearly the work of God. In the words of Saint John Chrysostom (d. 407):

The priest standing there in the place of Christ says these words but their power and grace are from God. "This is My Body," he says, and these words transform what lies before him.<sup>7</sup>

This teaching has been repeated over and over again by the great Fathers, doctors, and saints of the Church through the centuries.

In the sixteenth century, when the Church's constant teaching was called into question by the Protestant reformers, the Council of Trent solemnly reaffirmed Our Lord's Real Presence in the Eucharist:

But since Christ, our Redeemer, has said that that is truly His own body which He offered under the species of bread [cf. Mt. 26:26 ff.; Mk. 14:22 ff.; Lk. 22:19 ff.; 1 Cor. 11:24 ff.], it has always been a matter of conviction in the Church of God, and now this holy Synod declares it again, that by the consecration of the bread and wine a conversion takes place of the whole substance of bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord, and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of His blood. This conversion is appropriately and properly called transubstantiation by the Catholic Church [can. 2].<sup>8</sup>

When the words of consecration are spoken by the priest (cf. Mt. 26:26-29; Mk. 14:22-25; Lk. 22:17-19; 1 Cor. 11:23-25), Christ is true to His word: Through the action of the Holy Spirit, the bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ. Through the Eucharist, we are, among other things, nourished and strengthened in our Christian pilgrimage, and experience Christ's assurance that He will be with us always (cf. Mt. 28:20).

## Gift of Faith

Pope John Paul II has said that there is today a “crisis of faith” (*Redemptoris Missio* 2), and declining belief in and reverence toward the Real Presence is perhaps the case in point. Yet we know that the ability to accept this “hard teaching” (cf. Jn. 6:60) is possible only through the gift of faith. As Saint Bonaventure teaches:

There is no difficulty about Christ’s presence in the Eucharist as in a sign, but that He is truly present in the Eucharist as He is in heaven, this is most difficult. Therefore to believe this is especially meritorious.<sup>9</sup>

When discussing our faith with Christians who aren’t Catholic, we must build upon our shared love for Christ. Their willingness to follow Christ as Lord is the essential pathway to accepting Christ’s teaching about the Eucharist (cf. Jn. 6:67-69). If Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist, then He is truly there for all. A shared faith in Christ will lead us to a shared love of Him in the Blessed Sacrament.

Let us pray to our Eucharistic Lord, then, for an increase of faith for ourselves and for all, so that, united as brothers and sisters in the Lord, we may together share in the one heavenly banquet.

<sup>1</sup> Aorist of ἐσθίω (esthio).

<sup>2</sup> Present participle of τρώγω (trogo).

<sup>3</sup> Letter to the Romans, 7, 3, as translated in William A. Jurgens, ed., *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, vol. 1 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1970), 22.

<sup>4</sup> Letter to the Smyrnaeans, 7, *ibid.*, 25.

<sup>5</sup> *First Apology*, 66, *ibid.*, 55.

<sup>6</sup> As quoted in *Mysterium Fidei* 48.

<sup>7</sup> As quoted in *ibid.*, 49.

<sup>8</sup> Council of Trent, session XIII, “Decree on the Most Holy Eucharist,” chapter 4, as quoted in Henry Denzinger, ed., *The Sources of Catholic Dogma* (Powers Lake, ND: Marian House, 1957), trans. by Roy J. Deferrari, 267-68. Cf. Catechism, no. 1376.

<sup>9</sup> As quoted in *Mysterium Fidei* 20.

## Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

1. What is my attitude toward the Blessed Sacrament? How do my thoughts, words, and actions bear witness to the Real Presence?
2. How does the constant teaching of the Church affirm the biblical evidence for Christ’s presence in the Eucharist?
3. What can I do, with God’s grace, to foster greater Eucharistic faith and devotion in myself, my family, and my friends and colleagues?

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