

The Eucharist – A Catholic Response

(A Catholic response to Protestant objections)

The Holy Eucharist - that is, what Catholics believe to be the body, blood, soul and divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ - is a subject that sharply divides Catholics and Protestants. Whereas, some denominations believe in varying degrees of the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, most flatly deny this doctrine, rendering it mere symbol.

In **1 Corinthians 11:27-30**, Paul speaks to the reality of the Eucharist and the *severity* of the consequences to those who take this lightly: *“Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily **will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord**. A person should examine himself, and so eat the bread and drink the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, **eats and drinks judgment on himself**. That is why many among you are ill and infirm, and a considerable number are dying.”*

This is pretty harsh language for something that Protestants claim is only a *symbol*.

This directly correlates to the Bread of Life discourse in **John 6**, where Jesus stated in no uncertain terms: *“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. For **my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink**. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.”*

It is interesting to note that the usual Greek word used for human eating is *“phagon”*, however, this is not the word used in these passages. St. John uses the word, *“trogon”*, which means, to munch or to gnaw - *like an animal*. Jesus was again using *hyperbole* as he often did to drive his point across so that the crowd would understand that he was not speaking metaphorically. He **meant** what he said.

Just as the Paschal Lamb was to be eaten, it is also true for the **Lamb of God**.

In verse **60**, his disciples said, *“This saying is hard; who can accept it?”*

Did Jesus explain what he *“really”* meant? No, he said: *“Does this shock you?”* He **knew** that some would not believe because they didn't have true faith from the Father.

Protestants often cite what Jesus said next in **John 6:63** as proof that Jesus was speaking symbolically and not literally when he said, *“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life.”* Is that so? Let's examine this claim.

Since when does spirit mean symbolic or metaphoric? To fully understand this verse, we must go back to verses **29** and **44-45**:

Jesus answered and said to them, *“This is the work of God, that you believe in the one he sent.”* (v. 29).

“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him, and I will raise him on the last day.

It is written in the prophets: 'They shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him comes to me." (v. 44-45).

We must also read the verses immediately following verse 63 (64-65): *"But there are some of you who do not believe." Jesus knew from the beginning the ones who would not believe and the one who would betray him. And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by my Father."*

Here, Jesus is telling them that unless we are drawn to him by the Father, we cannot possibly understand him. This is why his followers abandoned him and returned to their former way of life in verse 66. This verse says, *"As a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him."* This marks the only time in Scripture where Jesus' disciples left him for doctrinal reasons. They simply couldn't handle what Jesus was telling them.

It is also important to note what happened after this. Did Jesus plead with them or explain that he was speaking "metaphorically" or "symbolically"? **NO.** He turned to the Apostles and said, *"Do you also want to leave?"* Here it is **completely** evident - except to those who refuse to see - that Jesus meant what he said.

Protestants are fond of pointing out that Jesus said, *"...the flesh profits nothing..."* when refuting the Real Presence. They are correct on one count: **OUR** flesh profits us nothing. **BUT** Jesus' flesh profits us everything. The sacrifice of his physical body profits us salvation. Would Jesus have told his disciples that **HIS** flesh profits nothing? Absolutely not.

As with **1 Corinthians 11:27-30**, the Bread of Life Discourse in **John 6** speaks to the **reality** of Christ's Presence in the Eucharist. At the end of Matthew's Gospel, we read what is known as the Great Commission, where Jesus instructs the Apostles to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them. In the last line (**Matt. 28:20**) Jesus says, *"...and behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age."* This is not simply a symbolic gesture but it points to the reality of his presence in the Eucharist.

It is also important to understand the correlation between the Eucharist and the New Covenant. The new covenant is promised to Jeremiah (**Jer. 31:31**) and is never mentioned again in the Old Testament. In fact, the term does not appear again until the Last Supper when Jesus uses it during the institution of the Holy Eucharist (**Matt. 26-28, Mark 14:24, Luke 22:20**).

Consider also what our Lord said to St. Peter *after* he had instituted the Eucharist. He said, *"Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed that your own faith may not fail; and once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers"* (**Luke 22:31**). At the moment of the institution of the First Eucharist, Satan realized that Jesus would remain with his faithful on earth. He then demanded that they be given to him because he could not deal with the fact that although Jesus was going to the Father – he would remain here on earth with his Church. In **John 14:18**, Jesus promised that he would not leave us orphans - and he has stayed true to his word in the Eucharist.

Early Church Teachings on the Eucharist

Belief in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist (*body, blood, soul and divinity*) was a belief of the historic Christian faith for some 1500 years before the Protestant Reformation. In fact, the early Christians were accused of cannibalism because of this belief and were tortured and put to death because of it. Why was this belief abandoned by some of the Reformers and their successors? Some reasons might include rebellion, spiritual pride and even personal arrogance. Whatever the case may be, they fall into direct opposition with the Historic Christian faith as seen in the writings of the Early Church:

Ignatius of Antioch

Take note of those who hold heterodox opinions on the grace of Jesus Christ which has come to us, and see how contrary their opinions are to the mind of God. . . . **They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, flesh which suffered for our sins and which that Father, in his goodness, raised up again.** They who deny the gift of God are perishing in their disputes (*Letter to the Smyrnaeans 6:2-7:1 [A.D. 110]*).

. . . and are now ready to obey your bishop and clergy with undivided minds and to share in the one common breaking of bread – the medicine of immortality, and the sovereign remedy by which we escape death and live in Jesus Christ for evermore (*Letter to the Ephesians 20 [A.D. 110]*).

Justin Martyr

We call this food Eucharist, and no one else is permitted to partake of it, except one who believes our teaching to be true and who has been washed in the washing which is for the remission of sins and for regeneration [i.e., has received baptism] and is thereby living as Christ enjoined. 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 nurtured, is both the flesh and the blood of that incarnated Jesus** (*First Apology 66 [A.D. 151]*).

Irenaeus

He has declared the cup, a part of creation, to be his own blood from which he causes our blood to flow; and the bread, a part of creation, he has established as his own body, from which he gives increase unto our bodies. When, therefore, the mixed cup [wine and water] and the baked bread receive the Word of God and become the Eucharist, the body of Christ, and from these the substance of our flesh is increased and supported) how can they say that the flesh is not capable of receiving the gift of God, which is eternal life — flesh which is nourished by the body and blood of the Lord and is in fact a member of him? (*Against Heresies 5:2 [A.D. 189]*).

Clement of Alexandria

"Eat my flesh)" [Jesus] says, "and drink my blood." The Lord supplies us with these intimate nutrients, he delivers over his flesh and pours out his blood, and nothing is lacking for the growth of his children (*The Instructor of Children 1:6:43:3 [A.D. 191]*).

Hippolytus

"And she [Wisdom] has furnished her table" [Proverbs 9:1] . . . refers to his [Christ's] honored and undefiled body and blood, which day by day are administered and offered sacrificially at the spiritual divine table, as a memorial of that first and ever-memorable table of the spiritual divine supper [i.e., the Last Supper] (*Fragment from Commentary on Proverbs* [A.D. 217]).

Aphraahat

After having spoken thus [at the Last Supper], the Lord rose up from the place where he had made the Passover and had given his body as food and his blood as drink, and he went with his disciples to the place where he was to be arrested. But he ate of his own body and drank of his own blood, while he was pondering on the dead. *With His own hands the Lord presented his own body to be eaten, and before he was crucified he gave his blood as drink* (*Treatises* 12:6 [A.D. 340]).

Cyril of Jerusalem

The bread and the wine of the Eucharist before the holy invocation of the adorable Trinity were simple bread and wine, but the invocation having been made, *the bread becomes the body of Christ and the wine the blood of Christ* (*Catechetical Lectures* 19:7 [A.D. 350]).

Do not, therefore, regard the bread and wine as simply that, for they are, according to the Master's declaration, the body and blood of Christ. Even though the senses suggest to you the other, let faith make you firm. Do not judge in this matter by taste, but be fully assured by faith, not doubting that you have been deemed worthy of the body and blood of Christ. . . [Since you are] fully convinced that the apparent bread is not bread, even though it is sensible to the taste, but the body of Christ, and that the apparent wine is not wine, even though the taste would have it so. . . partake of that bread as something spiritual, and put a cheerful face on your soul (*ibid.*, 22:6,9).

Theodore

When [Christ] gave the bread he did not say, "This is the symbol of my body" but, "This is my body." In the same way when he gave the cup of his blood he did not say, "This is the symbol of my blood," but, "This is my blood," for he wanted us to look upon the [Eucharistic elements] after their reception of grace and the coming of the Holy Spirit not according to their nature, but receive them as they are, the body and blood of our Lord. We ought . . . not regard [the elements] merely as bread and cup) but as the body and blood of the Lord, into which they were transformed by the descent of the Holy Spirit (*Catechetical Homilies* 5:1 [A.D. 405]).

Ambrose of Milan

Perhaps you may be saying, "I see something else; how can you assure me that I am receiving the body of Christ?" It but remains for us to prove it. And how many are the examples we might use! . . . Christ is in that sacrament, because it is the body of Christ (*The Mysteries* 9:50, 58 [A.D. 390]).

Augustine

I promised you [new Christians], who have now been baptized, a sermon in which I would explain the sacrament of the Lord's table, which you now look upon and of which

you last night were made participants. You ought to know that you have received what you are going to receive, and what you ought to receive daily. That bread which you see on the altar having been sanctified by the word of God is the body of Christ, That chalice, or rather, what is in that chalice, having been sanctified by the word of God, is the blood of Christ (*Sermons 227 [A.D. 411]*).

What you see is the bread and the chalice, that is what your own eyes report to you. But what your faith obliges you to accept is that the bread is the body of Christ and the chalice is the blood of Christ. This has been said very briefly, which may perhaps be sufficient for faith, yet faith does not desire instruction (*ibid. 272*).