

## **Why do Catholics believe the Eucharist is the true Body and Blood of Christ?**

Jesus gave his Church many wonderful gifts, but far above all of these is the gift he gave us of his very self in the Eucharist. Every time a priest says the words of the consecration at Mass, the bread and wine become the very Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus Christ. Jesus instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper on the night he instituted the priesthood. Gathered in the upper room the night before the beginning of his passion, "Jesus took bread, and blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, 'Take, eat, this is my body.' And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'" (Matthew 26:26-28). What Jesus had earlier done with the multiplication of loaves and fish to feed the bodies of his followers he now did with the Bread of Heaven to feed their souls.

This first Eucharist fulfilled what Jesus had said while preaching: "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 anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh." (John 6:48-51). The Jews disputed among themselves, asking how Jesus could give them his flesh to eat. He replied, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him." (John 6:53-56).

Many of his disciples, horrified at the prospect of eating his flesh and drinking his blood, left him. Jesus did not explain at that time that his flesh and blood were to be contained in the Eucharist, because he wanted to see who among his disciples would remain loyal to him despite his seemingly barbaric suggestion. Seeing many leave him, Jesus turned to the Apostles and asked, "'Will you also go away?' Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.'" (John 6:67-69). Certainly, the Apostles and the disciples who remained with Jesus were just as confused and dumbfounded as the departed disciples regarding what Jesus had just said, but they put their complete trust in him in spite of their human doubt and confusion.

It is crucial to note how Jesus responded to those who questioned his meaning when he told them they would have to eat his flesh and drink his blood. He did not say that he was only speaking figuratively, but affirmed his intention for them to truly consume his flesh and blood. John wrote his Gospel in ancient Greek and used a form of the word "phago" for "eat" when Jesus first began talking to the Jews. This word was the normal term for eating. But when Jesus clarified his meaning to the Jews, John used the word "trogo" for "eat," which translates literally as "crunch between the teeth." Jesus, who spoke in Aramaic, purposefully selected a different expression for "eat" in order to leave no doubt as to his meaning. It was this clarification which led many of his disciples to leave him. Had his answer assured them that he was only speaking figuratively, there would have been no reason for them to do so.

St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians confirms the belief in the early Church of Jesus' true presence in the Eucharist: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the Blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is not a participation in the Body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16). "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the Body and Blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drink without discerning the Body eats and drinks judgment upon himself." (1 Corinthians 11:27-29).

The writings of the early Church Fathers also unquestionably support our belief in the true presence of Jesus in the Eucharist:

"You must not let anyone eat or drink of your Eucharist except those baptized in the Lord's name. For in reference to this the Lord said, 'Do not give what is sacred to dogs.' After you have finished your meal, say grace in this way: 'We thank you, holy Father, for your sacred name which you have lodged in our hearts, and for the knowledge and faith and immortality which you have revealed through Jesus, your child. To you be glory forever. Almighty Master, 'you have created everything' for the sake of your name, and have given men food and drink to enjoy that they may thank you. But to us you have given spiritual food and drink and eternal life through Jesus, your child'" (The Didache).

"Pay close attention to those who have wrong notions about the grace of Jesus Christ, which has come to us, and note how at variance they are with God's mind. They care nothing about love: they have no concern for widows or orphans, for the oppressed, for those in prison or released, for the hungry or the thirsty. They hold aloof from the Eucharist and from services of prayer, because they refuse to admit that the Eucharist is the flesh of our

Saviour Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins and which, in his goodness, the Father raised [from the dead]. Consequently those who wrangle and dispute God's gift face death. They would have done better to love and so share in the resurrection... Nobody must do anything that has to do with the Church without the bishop's approval. You should regard that Eucharist as valid which is celebrated either by the bishop or by someone he authorizes. Where the bishop is present, there let the congregation gather, just as where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. (Letter of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans).

"Be careful, then, to observe a single Eucharist. For there is one flesh of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and one cup of his blood that makes us one, and one altar, just as there is one bishop along with the presbytery and the deacons, my fellow slaves. In that way whatever you do is in line with God's will" (Letter of Ignatius to the Philadelphians).

"For when the mixed cup and the bread that has been prepared receive the Word of God, and become the Eucharist, the body and blood of Christ, and by these our flesh grows and is confirmed, how can they say that flesh cannot receive the free gift of God, which is eternal life, since it is nourished by the body and blood of the Lord, and made a member of him? ... And just as the wooden branch of the vine, placed in the earth, bears fruit in its own time-and as the grain of wheat, falling into the ground and there dissolved, rises with great increase by the Spirit of God, who sustains all things, and then by the wisdom of God serves for the use of men, and when it receives the Word of God becomes the Eucharist, which is the body and blood of Christ-so also our bodies which are nourished by it, and then fall into the earth and are dissolved therein, shall rise at the proper time, the Word of God bestowing on them this rising again, to the glory of God the Father" (Irenaeus - Doctrine of Redemption in Reply to the Gnostics).

"Try to gather together more frequently to celebrate God's Eucharist and to praise him. For when you meet with frequency, Satan's powers are overthrown and his destructiveness is undone by the unanimity of your faith. There is nothing better than peace, by which all strife in heaven and earth is done away" (The Letter of Ignatius to the Ephesians)

(Matthew 26:26-28; John 6:35-69; 1 Corinthians 10:16, 11:27-19; The Didache; Letter of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans; Letter of Ignatius to the Philadelphians; Irenaeus - Doctrine of Redemption in Reply to the Gnostics; The Letter of Ignatius to the Ephesians)

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