

The Early Church Fathers on The Eucharist

The Early Fathers recognized the clear meaning of Scripture regarding the “Real Presence” of Christ in the Eucharist. While some found it hard to accept, (John 6:60-66) Jesus was adamant in proclaiming that his flesh and blood were real food and drink. And He did not correct those who abandoned him over this. And that is because they understood Him perfectly. There was no symbolism involved. The early Christians were even persecuted for this belief as they were accused of being cannibals. So clear is the meaning of John 6, that even Martin Luther was compelled to tell his followers in Strasburg, in 1524: “I am caught, I cannot escape, the text is too strong.” While the Eucharist is the actual body and blood of Christ, it retains the appearance of bread and wine.

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]).

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 [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]).

Athanasius

You shall see the Levites bringing loaves and a cup of wine and placing them on the table. So long as the prayers of supplication and entreaties have not been made, there is only bread and wine. But after the great and wonderful prayers have been completed, then the bread is become the Body, and the wine the Blood, of our Lord Jesus Christ... (*Sermon to the Newly Baptized, from Eutyches* [A.D. 295-373]).

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]).

Ephraim the Syrian

After the disciples had eaten the new and holy bread, and when they understood by faith that they had eaten of Christ's body, Christ went on to explain and to give them the whole sacrament. He took and mixed a cup of wine. Then He blessed it, and signed it, and made it holy, declaring that it was His own blood, which was about to be poured out (*Homilies* 4:6 [ante A.D. 373]).

Gregory of Nyssa

The bread again is at first common bread, but when the sacramental action consecrates it, it is called, and becomes, the Body of Christ (*On the Baptism of Christ* [A.D. 383]).

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]).

John Chrysostom

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not communion of the blood of Christ? Very trustworthily and awesomely does He say it. For what He is saying is this: "What is in the cup is that which flowed from His side, and we partake of it" (*On First Corinthians* 24:1:3 [A.D. 392]).

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]).

Augustine

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]).