

The Eucharist

by Sebastian R. Fama

The Church has always taught that the Eucharist is the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ. This doctrine is referred to as "The Real Presence." Understandably this can be a hard teaching to accept. However, belief in the Real Presence rests upon the words of Christ Himself. In John 6:48-57 we read the following:

I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die. **I am the living bread** that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread, will live forever, and **the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.** The Jews quarreled among themselves saying, "**How can this man give us His flesh to eat?**" Jesus said to them, "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. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who **feeds on me** will have life because of me."

Opponents of the Real Presence contend that Jesus was speaking figuratively. They say the words flesh and blood refer to His teachings. And that it is devoured by the ear. But that is not possible. Jesus had already been dispensing that sort of "bread" for the last two years. Concerning the bread spoken of in John 6, Jesus says in verse 51: "**The bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.**" The word will, is future tense. So, the bread in John 6 is something other than that which He had already been giving. Moreover, it was on the cross that He gave the flesh in question "**for the life of the world.**" And that flesh was His literal body.

Read what happens in John 6:60 and 66, – "Then many of His disciples who were listening said, '**This saying is hard, who can accept it?**'... **As a result of this, many [of] His disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied Him.**" Obviously, they took Jesus literally. If they were wrong, why didn't He correct them? Also, if the bread and wine were just symbols, why didn't He just say so? The Greek word *παράβολή* means just that, and is used in Hebrews 9:9 and 11:19.

A year later at the Last Supper, Jesus fulfilled His promise:

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and giving it to his disciples said, 'Take and eat, **this is My body.**' Then He took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it all of you, **for this is My blood** of the covenant, **which will be shed** on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins'" (Matthew 26:26-28).

Note that Jesus held the bread and the cup in His hands when He said, "This is my body," and "This is my blood." If I were holding a baby and I said: "This is my son." No one would think I was speaking figuratively. Likewise, when Jesus holds bread and wine in His hands and says: "This is my body" and "this is my blood," no one should think He was speaking figuratively. Jesus also identifies the blood as that which would be shed on the cross. Are we really to believe that this refers to His teachings? Finally, Jesus says to do this in memory of Him (Luke 22:19).

Paul identifies the cup and bread as the body and blood of our Lord in 1 Corinthians 10:16 and 11:27-29:

The cup of blessing that we bless, **is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?** The bread that we break, **is it not a participation in the body of Christ?**... 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**...For anyone who eats and drinks **without discerning the body**, eats and drinks judgment on himself.

If the Lord's body and blood are not present, how can a wrong be committed against them? Moreover, if the body and blood were figurative, these verses would make no sense. Are we not supposed to preach the Gospel to all nations? Are we really to believe that non-believers need to be made worthy before we present the Gospel to them? No, of course not. To receive unworthily means to receive communion in a state of mortal sin (1 John 5:16).

To recap, Jesus said:

1. I am the Bread of life (John 6:48).
2. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life (John 6:54).
3. Take and eat, this [bread] is my body (Matthew 26:26).
4. Do this in memory of me (1 Corinthians 11:24).

Under the Old Covenant God commanded the Israelites to offer sacrifices to atone for their sins. One of the sin offerings was a lamb (Leviticus 5:1-6). The Old covenant prefigured the New Covenant. The sacrificial lamb of Leviticus is a type or picture of Christ. Jesus is the sacrificial Lamb of the New Covenant: "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

The Old Covenant lamb would be sacrificed and then a part of that sacrifice would be eaten to receive its benefits. (Leviticus 6:24-26). Likewise, Jesus, the New Covenant Lamb, would be sacrificed and His body would be eaten in order to receive its benefits: **"Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink His blood, you do not have life within you" (John 6:53).**

After the resurrection God's relationship with His people changed. In the Old Testament the Holy Spirit was given to a few individuals. But in the New Testament the Holy Spirit is given to anyone who asks (Luke 11:13). In the Old Testament God was present in a special way in the Holy of Holies. But only the High Priest could stand in His presence. In the New Testament God is present in a special way in the tabernacle. But now anyone can stand in His presence. And most importantly, anyone who is properly disposed can receive Him in a most personal way.

The Early Church understood the nature and significance of the Eucharist. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch from the year 69 to 110, writes in his *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*: "But look at the men who have those perverted notions about the grace of Jesus Christ... **They will not admit the Eucharist is the self-same body of our Savior Jesus Christ which suffered for our sins, and which the Father in His goodness afterwards raised up again**" (7:1).

A few decades later, around the year 150, Justin martyr wrote: "Not as common bread or 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**" (*First Apology* 66).

But why the Eucharist? Why couldn't Jesus just strengthen us through prayer? Well, He can, and He does. However, we are physical and the world we live in is physical. The Eucharist is something we can see and touch and that makes it more relatable. Jesus came to earth physically. And He sacrificed His physical body to save us from our sins. Jesus is called the Word of God because he is the physical manifestation of the hidden reality (God). Likewise, the Eucharist is the physical manifestation of the now hidden Christ. Adoring a Jesus you can see is easier than adoring a Jesus you can't see. I am not saying that it is a necessity, but it is an aid. St. Thomas Aquinas said as much in his *Summa Theologica*:

Sacraments are necessary unto man's salvation for three reasons. The first is taken from the condition of human nature which is such that it has to be led by things corporeal and sensible to things spiritual and intelligible. Now it belongs to Divine providence to provide for each one according as its condition requires. Divine wisdom, therefore, fittingly provides man with a means of salvation, in the shape of corporeal and sensible signs that are called sacraments (3:61:1).

It is easy to have faith in Jesus when he tells us to love our neighbor. But how about when He challenges us with something that is outside of our normal realm of experience? Jesus invited Peter to walk on water (Matthew 14:22-29). God told Noah to build an ark to prepare for an event that was, to the natural mind, beyond the realm of possibility (Genesis 6:13-17). God told Abraham He would give him a son in his old age and then once he did, he asked him to sacrifice him on an altar (Genesis 22:1-14). Moses was asked to take on Pharaoh (Exodus 3:1-12), Mary was asked to have a virgin birth (Luke 1:26-35).

When faced with a situation that seems to defy logic, do we believe Jesus, or do we come up with our own plan like Sarah did (Genesis 15:1-6, 16:1-4)? To deny the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, is to deny that God is capable of supernatural acts.