

UNDERSTANDING CATHOLICISM 10: THE BLESSED EUCHARIST - PART I

I. Introduction.

On Holy Thursday Jesus knew that he would “depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (Jn 13:1). Not wishing to leave us desolate, Jesus gave us the sacrament of love in which he comes to us under the humble appearance of bread and wine.

In the astounding mystery of the Incarnation, Jesus’ divinity was so hidden during his earthly life that only his humanity was visible. Thus, St. Paul proclaimed: “though he was in the form of God [Jesus], did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but [he] emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:6-8).

But in the Blessed Eucharist, both Jesus’ divinity and his humanity becomes hidden as he makes himself present under the humble forms of bread and wine. His ardent love drives our Lord to be present in thousands of tabernacles. There he patiently waits for our visits so he can embrace us in his Eucharistic Heart. Do we take the time to join our love with his love, or do we pass him by in indifference with lukewarm faith forsaking the longing of his heart that would transform and comfort us?

It is vital that we fully surrender to Jesus’ real presence in the Eucharist. For the Church teaches us that the Eucharist is “the source and summit of the Christian life” because it contains “the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself.”¹

The Blessed Eucharist is a marvelous *three-fold sacrament*

1. First, it is the sacrament of the *Real Presence*, which will be the focus here. It is truly Jesus body, blood, soul and divinity.
2. Secondly, the Blessed Eucharist is an eternal *sacrifice*.
3. Finally, the Blessed Eucharist is a sacrament as *Holy Communion*. The facets of the Blessed Eucharist as a sacrifice and as Holy Communion will be developed during the teaching on the Mass.

II. Let’s Consider the Marvel of the Real Presence.

A. The belief of the early Church always affirms the Real Presence

1. The historical evidence is overwhelming that the early Church believed that the Eucharist was truly the body and blood of Jesus, as the non-Catholic scholar J.N.D.

¹ CCC, # 1324.

Kelly affirmed.² To be sure, the Fathers of the Church sometimes used symbolic language to describe the Eucharist, just as the Church does today, but the Eucharist was never explained as merely a symbol. So, Kelly explains: “It must not be supposed, of course, that this ‘symbolical’ language implied that the bread and wine were regarded as mere pointers to, or tokens of, absent realities. Rather they were accepted as signs of realities which were somehow *actually present* though apprehended by faith alone.”³

2. Father James O’Connor writes in his excellent study, *The Hidden Manna*: “reading the Fathers can be compared to listening to a sustained hymn of praise for the Eucharist gifts.”⁴
3. The renowned scholar Darwell Stone wrote: “Throughout the writings of the Fathers there is unbroken agreement that the consecrated bread and wine are the body and blood of Christ, and that the Eucharist is a sacrifice.”⁵
4. For example, let’s consider the teaching of St. Ignatius of Antioch:
 - a. Ignatius was a disciple of John the Apostle. He was martyred during the reign of Trajan who ruled Rome between A.D. 98-117).
 - b. On the journey to his death in Rome in the custody of ten soldiers he wrote seven letters, which are a precious witness to the lessons he learned from the author of the fourth Gospel.
 - c. Of particular interest here is his understanding of the Eucharist.

In his *letter to the Romans*, he proclaimed:

“I take no pleasure in corruptible food or the pleasures of this life. I want the *bread of God*, which is the *flesh of Christ* who is of the seed of David; and for drink I want *his blood*, which is incorruptible love.”⁶

In his *letter to the Smyrnaeans* he wrote:

“Now note well those who hold *heretical opinions* [the Gnostics] about the grace of Jesus Christ which came to us; note how *contrary* they are to the *mind of God*. They have no concern of love, none for the widow, none for the orphan, none for the oppressed, none for the prisoner or the one released, none for the hungry or thirsty. They abstain from the *Eucharist* and prayer, because they refuse to acknowledge that *the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ*.”⁷

² *Early Christian Doctrines*, pp. 221, 440.

³ *Early Christian Doctrines*, pp. 41-442 (emphasis mine).

⁴ *The Hidden Manna: A Theology of the Eucharist*, p. 4.

⁵ *The Holy Communion*, p. 37. Stone supports the same conclusion in his monumental two-volume study of this subject in the writings of the Church Fathers: *A History of the Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist*.

⁶ J. B. Lightfoot & J. R. Harmer, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Second Edition, p. 105.

⁷ *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 112.

5. Belief in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Blessed Eucharist was unchallenged and unchallenged for a thousand years. In the eleventh century Berengarius of Tours was the first Christian to deny the Real Presence around the year 1040, but his heresy was a mere blip on the radar because he had no support for his error.
7. Disbelief in the Real Presence became a major issue during in the sixteenth century when Zwingli taught that Jesus' presence in the Eucharist was merely symbolic: a position many Protestants hold today.

B. Let's Examine the Evidence from the New Testament

Few Christian doctrines are taught in the Bible as clearly and as explicitly as is the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. We will study this important teaching in three parts: First, we will examine the Institution Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and First Corinthians. Secondly, we will explore two additional statements made by St. Paul about the Eucharist in his First Letter to the Corinthians. Finally, we will examine the Eucharist as a sacrifice.

C. Let's begin with the Institution narratives during the Last Supper:

Mt 26:26-28

"Now as they were eating, 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."

Mk 14:22-24

"And as they were eating, he took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them, and said, 'Take; *this is my body*.' And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, '*This is my blood* of the covenant, which is poured out for many'."

Lk 22:19-20

"And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, '*This is my body* which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And likewise, the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant *in my blood*'."

Is the statement, "This is my body," literal, or can it mean something symbolic like, "This bread symbolizes my body?" Let's look at the Greek text of the passages cited in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, each of which use the identical Greek words for

“This is my body.” Granted, this discussion is a little technical, but it is worth the effort to understand the correct meaning of the sacred text. I have listed the Greek words with the English translation below each word along with the proper gender.

<i>Touto</i>	<i>estin</i>	<i>to</i>	<i>soma</i>	<i>mou</i>
This	is	the	body	of me
(neuter)			(neuter)	

When the inspired Greek text is examined, only one meaning is possible. The bread is no longer bread because it is changed to the substance of Jesus’ body. The Greek language uses endings that make it clear what adjectives modify what nouns. *Touto* (this) is a neuter demonstrative adjective. It can’t modify or imply “bread,” which is not in the text, because bread is a masculine noun. Instead, it can only modify *soma* (body), which is a neuter noun. Therefore, the only possible translation in English is: “*This*, the substance Jesus held in his hand that was bread, *is my body*.” In addition, the verb “is,” *estin* in Greek, does not mean symbolize. It is the verbal equivalent of the mathematical equal sign (=).

Now let’s turn our attention to the institution narrative in the letter to the Corinthians:

1 Cor 11:23-26

“For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘*This is my body* which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, ‘this cup is the new covenant *in my blood*. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me’.”

St. Paul (1 Cor 11:24) used a slightly different Greek construction than did the three Gospels cited earlier, but the meaning remains the same.

<i>Touto</i>	<i>mou</i>	<i>estin</i>	<i>to</i>	<i>soma</i>
This	of me	is	the	body
(neuter)				(neuter)

The apostle’s positioning “of me” (*mou*) strengthens the meaning of “this” (*touto*). The text is clear that Jesus declared “this of me,” the bread he was holding, is changed into

his body. This understanding is reflected in most English translations including Protestant versions.⁸

D. Now let's Focus on Additional Teaching from St. Paul in the same letter:

1. **1 Cor 10:16-17** (Context - Addressing problem with idolatry)

"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? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread."

In this the first letter to the Corinthians Paul addressed the serious problem of idolatry that troubled this church. In his teaching against idolatry, he wrote:

"Therefore, my beloved, shun the worship of idols. I speak as to sensible men; judge for yourselves what I say."

Then Paul goes to the heart of his argument by demonstrating the absurdity of participating in the sin of idol worship and receiving the Eucharist.

"The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing [*koinonia* - fellowship, communion] *in the blood of Christ?* The bread that we break, is it not a sharing [*koinonia*] *in the body of Christ?* Because there is one bread, we also are many *are one body*, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:16-17).

Notice, the words "blood of Christ" and "body of Christ" are clearly used literally. There is nothing in the passage to indicate these words have a symbolic meaning. The literal meaning is further underscored in the next verses where Paul contrasts sharing, eating and drinking the Eucharist with the eating that occurs at idolatrous sacrifices (1 Cor 10:18-21). Paul taught that participating in pagan sacrifices made one a partner with demons. So, he concluded, "You cannot partake of the table of the Lord [the Blessed Eucharist] and the table [sacrifices] of demons" (1 Cor 10: 21).

2. In the next passage of our consideration, **1 Cor 11:27-30**, Paul addressed the problem of sacrilegious communions, receiving the Eucharist in a state of sin.

27 - 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.

Notice, these words express violence at the person of Jesus. This statement makes sense because Paul understands that the Eucharist is literally the body and blood of the Lord. If the Eucharist were merely a symbol, Paul could say the

⁸ See, for example: Revised Standard Version, New Revised Standard Version, New International Version, New American Version, King James Version, New King James Version, and the New Jerusalem Version.

unworthy reception of the Eucharist is profaning the *image* of the Lord, but not his “body and blood.” Then he continued:

28 - *Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.*

The word “examine” in Greek carries the meaning: “to prove” or “to scrutinize,” in order to discover if something is genuine or not. Why would such a careful examination be necessary for eating something that is a mere symbol like crackers and grape juice? Continuing, the apostle added:

29 - *For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself.*

The Greek word translated as “discerning” means, “to judge,” “to separate,” “to withdraw from.” The Greek word translated, as “judgment” is *krima*, which means “damnation,” “condemnation.” Paul is warning the Corinthian church that they will bring the curse of damnation on themselves if they fail to properly judge the state of their soul and receive the Blessed Eucharist unworthily in a state of sin, which is a sacrilege. Paul’s striking language makes no sense if Paul is speaking about a mere symbol. Thus, he concluded:

30 - *That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.*

It is inconceivable that God would render such severe punishments for disrespect to a mere symbol. Indeed, there is no other instance in the New Testament where death is a common penalty for a sin much less for the misuse of a symbol.

Reflection

Who can understand the depth of God’s love? In the Blessed Eucharist Jesus enters our bodies in Holy Communion and begins the process of transforming us into himself as we request in the opening Jesus prayer. Present in our tabernacles, Jesus longingly awaits our visits for he longs to share his transformative love with us so he can heal our wounds and give us the peace the world can never give.

In his lovely hymn, *Adoro te* - “I adore you”, St. Thomas Aquinas captures the marvelous mystery of the Hidden Jesus:

Humbly I adore you, hidden God, who have concealed yourself truly beneath these forms [of bread and wine]: my heart wholly surrenders itself to you, because in gazing upon you, it is wholly at a loss.

Sight, touch, and taste are deceived in you; hearing alone may safely be believed. I believe whatever the Son of God has said: nothing is truer than the very Word of truth.

Deity alone was hidden upon the cross, but here [your] humanity is hidden too. Yet believing and confessing both, I seek what the [good] thief in his repentance sought.

I cannot behold the wounds as Thomas did, but still {I} confess you to be my God. Make me ever more fully believe in you, have hope in you, and love you.

III. Let's Now Turn Our Attention to the Eucharist is a Sacrifice

A. We will begin with the Belief of the Early Church

1. The Non-Catholic historian J.N.D. Kelly observed: "The eucharist was also, of course, the great act of worship of Christians, their *sacrifice*. The writers and liturgies of the period are *unanimous* in recognizing it as such."⁹ What was taught and believed in the early Church is still taught and believed in the Catholic Church today.¹⁰
2. The Catholic Church affirms that because the Eucharist is the *memorial* of Christ's Passover, it is also a sacrifice. The sacrificial character of the Eucharist is manifested in the very words of institution: "This is my body which is *given for you*" and "This cup which is *poured out for you* is the New Covenant in my blood" (Lk 22:19-20). In the Eucharist Christ gives us the very body which he gave up for us on the cross, the very blood which he "poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:28).¹¹

B. Consider the evidence from the New Testament

1. The letter to the Hebrews draws a sharp contrast between the numerous sacrifices of the Levitical law and the *singular* sacrifice of Jesus.
 - a. The sacrifices of the Old Law were many and weak. They were not capable of reconciling mankind's broken relationship with God:
 - b. "For it is impossible," Hebrews proclaims, "that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins" (Heb 10:4).
 - c. However, Jesus' unique sacrifice occurred once and is infinitely powerful. It is so potent that it alone is fully capable of restoring sinful humanity to divine sonship. The contrast between the countless Levitical sacrifices and the one unique sacrifice of Jesus is briefly summarized in Hebrews 10:11-14:
"And every [Levitical] priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time *a single sacrifice* for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, then to wait until his enemies should be made a stool for his feet. For by *a single offering*, he has perfected *for all time* those who are sanctified."
2. The Bible teaches that Jesus' priesthood is eternal active.
 - a. Jesus' suffering ended. However, his priestly offering continues in eternity because his priesthood is eternal.

The book of Hebrews affirms: "We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner shrine beyond the curtain, ["the inner

⁹ *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 214 (emphasis mine).

¹⁰ *Not By Bread Alone*, p. 421 taken from Michael Davies, *Liturgical Shipwreck* quoting Regin Prenter's *Skabelse og Genloesning*, 2nd edition, pp. 531-533 (emphasis mine).

¹¹ CCC, # 1365.

shrine” refers to the Holy of Holies which symbolized paradise] where Jesus has gone as a forerunner *on our behalf*, having become a high priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek” (Heb 6:19-20). Then it continues:

“For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one [the Jerusalem Temple], but into heaven itself, *now* to appear in the presence of God *on our behalf*” (Heb 9:24).

- b. The word “now” is critical. It reinforces Jesus’ ongoing priestly mediation in heaven. So, while Jesus’ death and suffering ended on Calvary, the offering continues in heaven. Jesus is eternally surrendering himself in love to the Father for us.
3. Therefore, Jesus’ eternal sacrifice fulfills Malachi’s prophecy:
“For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations [Gentiles], and in every place, incense [sacrifice] is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts” (Mal 1:11).¹²

This prophecy can’t refer to the crucifixion, which occurred once only and in one location. However, the unbloody sacrifice of the Mass fulfills this prophecy perfectly, because it liturgically makes present Jesus’ unique sacrifice on Calvary.

4. Book of Revelation offers additional insight:
 - a. The unbloody sacrifice of the Mass provides additional insight into John’s vision of Jesus in Rev. 6:5: “a Lamb standing as if it had been slain.” Slain lambs don’t stand; they collapse. However, this image makes sense in the context of Jesus as the eternal priest and the eternal *victim* forever *offering himself* to the Father in heaven.
 - b. No wonder, Jesus is identified as a “lamb” 28 times in *Revelation*, and only 4 times in the rest of the New Testament.¹³
 - c. John also identifies an altar in paradise 7 times, which is also significant. An altar by definition is a place of sacrifice. If the cross is the only true altar of Jesus’ sacrifice, there can be no other legitimate altar elsewhere, including heaven.
5. Thus, the *Catechism* concludes:
“In the New Testament, the *memorial* [of Jesus’ Passion] takes on a new meaning. When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, she commemorates Christ’s Passover, and *it is made present*: the sacrifice Christ offered once for all on the cross remains *ever present*.”¹⁴ This explains St. Paul’s use of sacrificial language in his *First Letter to*

¹² Sungenis, *Not by Bread Alone*, pp. 82-83.

¹³ John 1:29, 36; Acts 8:32; 1 Peter 1:19.

¹⁴ CCC, # 1364, (emphasis mine).

the Corinthians. In verse 21 of chapter 10 he refers to the “table of the Lord,” which contemporary Jews would recognize as a clear reference to an altar of sacrifice (Leviticus 24:6; Ezekiel 41:22; 44:16; and Malachi 1:7, 12).

- a. Jesus is a “priest forever” (Heb 5:6), that is, he has an eternal priesthood. So, when Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to the Father he did not retire from his priestly office.¹⁵
- b. Therefore, when the Book of Hebrews speaks about his “once for all” sacrifice (Heb 7:27), it means Jesus’ sacrifice is *perpetual* or *everlasting* in the heavenly sanctuary.¹⁶
- c. “Once for all” does not mean that Jesus’ sacrifice is over. It means it is everlasting!
- d. The reason the Church has always taught that the Mass is not a repeat of Jesus’ sacrifice is because that sacrifice has never ended. In the words of the Catechism “the sacrifice Christ offered once for all on the cross remains *ever present*,”¹⁷ and “the sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are *one single sacrifice*.”¹⁸

Reflection

One of my favorite hymns asks this question; “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” I can join other Catholics by answering, “Yes! For every time I attend Mass, I stand by the cross with Mary and the holy women, offering myself with Jesus as I pray, “Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.” When we participate in Mass with this understanding, it is transformative.

In profound regret for his sinful past, St. Augustine lamented, “Lord, how late have I loved Thee.” When I think of that cry from the depth of his heart, I add my own lament: “And how poorly do I love Thee still!”

© 2022

¹⁵ See: CCC, # 1137, 1138, 1139, 2642.

¹⁶ CCC, # 1139: “It is in this *eternal liturgy* that the Spirit and the Church enable us to participate whenever we celebrate the mystery of salvation in the sacraments.”

¹⁷ CCC, # 1364 citing Heb 7:25-27, (emphasis mine).

¹⁸ CCC, # 1367, (emphasis mine).