

From the Heart

A series of essays on basic Catholic doctrines and beliefs

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Vol. 1 No. 2 ©2008

Is Jesus Really Present in the Eucharist?

There is much confusion these days about the official Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist. The Church teaches that the bread and wine of Communion become the body and blood, soul and divinity, of Jesus Christ when the priest says the prayer of consecration during Mass.

Some non-Catholic groups, therefore, accuse the Church of promoting cannibalism. Other groups claim the Catholic Church invented the doctrine of the “Real Presence” during the Middle Ages. To bolster this viewpoint, it is noted that the word “Transubstantiation” did not exist until the 13th century A.D.

Even many Catholics nowadays believe that the bread and wine of Communion are nothing more than symbols, mere reminders of Jesus’ body and blood.

So what does the Catholic Church teach about the Eucharist, and why? The short answer is this: the Church teaches what it has always taught from the very beginning, which is exactly what Jesus taught—the substance of the bread and wine are supernaturally transformed into the real body and blood of our Lord.

For the long answer, we need to turn to Jesus’ own words in Scripture. In the gospel of John, chapter six, Jesus said to a crowd, “I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you...for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.”

The people listening to Jesus interpreted his words literally—and, not surprisingly, they were very shocked. They exclaimed, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” and, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?”

Many people nowadays believe that Jesus was just speaking figuratively here, as he did on many other occasions. However, Scripture clearly shows that when Jesus spoke figuratively, if his audience misunderstood the message and interpreted it literally, Jesus would correct the misunderstanding. (See: Matthew 16:5-12; John 3:3-8; John 4:31-34.)

In John, chapter six, Jesus offered no correction. He did not explain that his words were figurative and symbolic. In fact, many people walked away in disgust, offended by Jesus’ words. Surprisingly, Jesus let them leave! Do you really think Jesus would have let people walk away from him over a misunderstanding? Don’t you think he would have said something like, “Wait, come back! It’s just symbolic. Don’t be offended!” But

Jesus did not say anything like that because he WAS speaking literally.

At the Last Supper, Jesus said, “This is my body....This is my blood.” He did not say or even imply that the bread and wine were mere symbols.

In the first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul wrote about the Lord’s Supper, asking these rhetorical questions in chapter 10: “Is not the cup...a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread we break a participation in the body of Christ?”

In chapter 11, Paul wrote: “Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord....For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.”

It is obvious from these verses that Paul did not consider the bread and wine of Communion to be mere symbols. Otherwise, how else can we explain the phrase, “...without recognizing the body of the Lord”?

Additional proof of the Catholic doctrine can be found in the writings of the early Church fathers. St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote this in approximately 110 A.D. concerning heretics: “They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the Flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ.”

St. Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyon, in 195 A.D. wrote: “[Jesus] has declared the cup...to be His own Blood...And the bread...He has established as His own Body.”

The evidence is abundantly clear, both from Scriptures and the early Church fathers, that the Catholic doctrine of the “Real Presence” of Christ in the Eucharist was believed and taught from the very beginning.

By the way, it is true the word “Transubstantiation” did not exist until the 13th century. At the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, the Church used the word Transubstantiation for the first time. However, it was simply a new word to help define an ancient belief.

During Mass, Jesus truly becomes present in the Eucharist. Can we explain this scientifically? Of course not; it’s a miracle we believe by faith because Jesus said so.

The Lord gave the gift of himself at the Last Supper, and he still gives us that precious gift today. What a great and sacred blessing it is to receive him in the Eucharist at Mass.

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