

The Body and Blood of Christ? Really!

Did you know that more than 50% of the folks who call themselves Catholic choose not to believe what is really the heart of our faith?

You may have forgotten why we believe that Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist. I hope to remind you. For those who have never known why but just went along with the idea of Holy Communion, but lack real faith in the presence of Jesus in Holy Communion, I hope to enlighten you. And for our non-Catholics friends, with the gentle affection of Jesus, I hope to let you know why we Catholics believe the way we do about the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.

Let me be clear: true Catholics are to believe in Jesus' real presence in the Eucharist, that is, the bread IS his Body and the wine IS his Blood. Yes, I know that these are concepts that our human senses make difficult to believe. Mere human logic makes such statements seem impossible. Such statements beg the question how can mere bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ?

But we all know that Christ defies human logic time and time again, right?

Jesus called Peter out of the boat to walk across the stormy waters of the sea by FAITH. Faith is accepting something that can't be proven and marveling at what God has done that humans and the things of this world cannot do. Christ performed some 40 miracles to bolster our faith: from turning water into wine to raising Lazarus from the dead after 4 days of death and decay in the tomb. Faith is the foundation upon which we come to believe in Christ's real presence in the Eucharist.

Matthew, Mark Luke and Paul's testaments were basically the same, quoting Jesus saying about the bread, "Take and eat it...this IS my body". And of the wine: "take and drink, this IS the blood of the new covenant, which will be shed for many".

Isn't it interesting that so many people are willing to profess their faith in the words of the Bible as literally true, yet these simple and straight forward words are dismissed as "merely symbolic", "tokens", and anything other than what they clearly mean?

Jesus did not leave to chance our understanding of what he meant. The basis for our belief is found explicitly in John's Gospel, the 6th chapter.

Matthew, Mark, Luke and Paul's testaments write about the very factual events of the last supper and include the institutional narrative of the words we hear at every Mass: this is my Body.... this is my Blood. Remember that Mark, Luke and Paul were not eyewitnesses to the Last Supper. But, both Matthew and John were eyewitnesses. It is striking, therefore, that John does not include the institutional narrative – good Scripture scholars believe that is because the words of the narrative were so familiar already by the time John wrote precisely because the early Christian community regularly celebrated the ritual we call the Mass today and knew as well as we do the words. Just as we do, John's audience needed to be told by an eyewitness the meaning of the words they were so accustomed to hear.

In John CHAPTER 6 VERSE 30, Jesus begins a conversation that took place in the synagogue at Capernaum. He was addressing his disciples and the other Jews there. Keep in mind that Jesus had just fed 5,000 people with 5 loaves and 2 fish. So, the Jews began to prod him asking him "what sign can you perform so that we might believe that you are the Messiah?" They went so far as to remind him that their ancestors had eaten manna in the desert sent from God for 40 years. Could Jesus top that?

It was at this point that Jesus gave us his sacred command about receiving his body and blood in the Eucharist literally. Merely telling us ONE time wasn't enough. In fact, five times using five different expressions Jesus confirmed exactly what he meant five Times!

So if you'll follow me through John Chapter 6, I'll take you through Jesus' very literal instruction to us that he is the Bread of Life! Again, Jesus said it five times not once because he knew he'd have to make it clear to us weak humans, five times. So listen to this with your ears but hear it with and in your heart:

1 - In verse 51: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

At this point the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" This argument begs the question. Why would they have argued this point about Jesus' ability to give them his flesh to eat if they did not understand him literally to mean that the real bread would become real flesh in some way?

2 - In verse 53: "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood; you have no life in you."

3 - In verse 54: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

4 - In verse 55: "For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink."

5 - In verse 56: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him."

So you've heard Jesus' literal teaching about receiving his body and blood. Could he be clearer? Either it is the truth or he is a fraud. Take it or leave it. It is up to you. But remember: "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18); "For we live by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7).

If you accept his teaching, you will stand in a long line of Tradition. If you do not, you will stand with many who had been his followers who are recorded in verse 60 as saying: ““this is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?’ And they turned back and no longer followed him”.

Now, they had followed Jesus, some for a nearly three years and had seen his miracles, even the raising of the dead and at that point they still left him because Jesus’ words were literal and hard! Imagine EATING his Body and DRINKING his Blood. Jesus words sounded too radical to them. His words meant exactly what he said, literally, for if not, the teaching was not “hard” and would not have resulted in disciples who could not accept it. In fact, this is the only instance recorded in the Gospels of Christ losing followers over a doctrinal matter – because they could not accept his teaching as given.

Alternatively, Jesus could have clarified his statement. He could have stopped them from abandoning him if he had thought they had misinterpreted him or were misrepresenting his intention. John does not record such an effort. Jesus certainly had corrected them so many times before when explaining parables, but he didn’t make any corrections this time. They left Jesus and because they didn’t believe him, and he did not stop them! Have you ever been asked if you have made a decision for Christ, claimed him as your Savior and Lord? Jesus is asking you to make a decision for him: to take the share in the gift of eternal life he offers precisely in and through his Body and Blood in the Eucharist offered to you in Holy Communion at every Mass.

Want more evidence?

“I am the Bread of Life” (John 6:35) is one of the seven “I Am” statements of Jesus. Jesus used the same phrase “I AM” in seven declarations about himself. In all seven, he combines I AM with other tremendous metaphors that express his saving relationship toward the world. All appear in the book of John.

First, by equating himself with bread, Jesus is saying he is essential for life. Second, the life Jesus is referring to is not physical life, but eternal life. Jesus is trying to get the Jews' thinking off of the physical realm and into the spiritual realm. He is contrasting what he brings as their Messiah with the bread he miraculously created to feed the 5,000 the day before. That was physical bread that perishes. He is spiritual bread that brings eternal life.

Third, and very importantly, Jesus is making another claim to be divine. The phrase "I AM" is the covenant name of God (Yahweh, or YHWH), revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). It is this phrase that the Jews who were listening would have automatically understood as a claim by Jesus to be not only human but divine. It is this "I AM" statement that causes the charge to be leveled against Jesus that he claims to be God, a charge of blasphemy.

Fourth, notice the words "come" and "believe" in the Gospel of John. This is an invitation for those listening to place their faith in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. This invitation to come is found throughout John's Gospel. Coming to Jesus involves making a choice to follow him. Believing in Jesus means placing our faith in him that he is who he says he is, that he will do what he says he will do, and that he is the only one who can say: this is MY BODY; this is MY BLOOD and then command that it be repeated so that it is a gift of eternal life to us.

Fifth, there are the words "hunger and thirst." Again, it must be noted that Jesus isn't talking about alleviating physical hunger and thirst. The gift of his Body and Blood is a share in the gift of eternal life.

So, let's look to St. Paul to confirm our faith: in First Corinthians 11:27 Paul said, "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." (1 Cor. 11:27).

Paul wrote further to the Corinthians: “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?” (1 Cor. 10:16). So when we receive Communion, we actually participate in the body and blood of Christ, not just eat symbols of them.

Ignatius of Antioch, who had been a disciple of the apostle John and who wrote a letter around A.D. 110, said, referring to “those who don’t follow what we believe” that “they abstain from the Eucharist and from Eucharistic 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 the Father, in his goodness, raised up again” (6:2, 7:1).

Forty years later, Justin Martyr, wrote, “Not as common bread or common drink do we receive these; but since Jesus Christ our Savior was made flesh 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 66:1–20).