

Literal Body and Blood?

The Real Presence, the Sacrifice of the Mass, and the Men Who Walked Away

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I. Two Claims, Taken Separately

The Catholic Church holds two things, and they should be taken separately because the objections to them are different. The bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. And the Mass is not a second sacrifice but the one sacrifice of Calvary made present. Neither claim was invented in the Middle Ages; both are older than the vocabulary used to state them, and the earliest Christians we can read state them without argument, as men repeating something already settled. This essay takes the objections in order of strength.

II. “Once for All” Is the Catholic Premise

Begin with the strongest objection, because it rests on a misunderstanding the Church has corrected in every century she has been accused of it. Hebrews says Christ offered Himself “once for all” (Heb. 7:27; 9:26–28; 10:10–14), and the objection concludes that a daily Mass must either repeat that offering or imply its insufficiency. But the Church does not teach that Christ dies again, that His sacrifice was insufficient, or that anything is added

to it. She teaches that the one offering of Calvary—the same victim, the same priest—is made present, differing only in the manner of offering. Hebrews is not evidence against that. It is the reason the Church says it.¹

The category needed here is one Scripture already supplies. The Passover was not a pageant about an old deliverance; Israel was commanded to keep it as a *memorial* (Ex. 12:14), and the rabbis drew the plain conclusion: in every generation a man must regard himself as personally having come out of Egypt. A biblical memorial makes the past event present to those keeping it. That is the word Christ used, and the Greek *anamnesis* carries the same weight. If “do this in remembrance” meant only a mental recollection, it was a strange word to choose in a Passover meal. And Malachi had said what would come: in place of the sacrifices Israel was offering badly, God announces that “from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering” (Mal. 1:11). A prophecy of a clean sacrifice offered everywhere, continually, among the Gentiles, is not easily read as a prophecy that sacrifice would cease.²

III. The Word Is Late; the Belief Is Not

That “transubstantiation” borrows Aristotle’s vocabulary is true, and it is no more damaging than the parallel every Protestant accepts. *Homoousios*—of one substance with the Father—is philosophical vocabulary too, absent from Scripture, contested when introduced, and fixed at Nicaea in 325 to defend something the Church already believed. Nobody concludes that the divinity of Christ was invented in the fourth century because the word for it was. The technical term does not create the belief; it fences it, and it was needed only once somebody proposed that nothing changes at all.

The belief itself is on record long before. Ignatius of Antioch, writing about 107 on his way to be killed, says of certain heretics: “They abstain from Eucharist and prayer, because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ who suffered for our sins, which the Father raised up by his goodness.” Justin Martyr, about 155, explaining Christian worship to a pagan emperor with no motive to overstate it, says the food is received “not as common bread and common drink,” but as the flesh and blood of the incarnate Jesus. Irenaeus, about 180, argues from the Eucharist against the Gnostics—the bread and cup that are His body and blood prove the goodness of matter—which only works if his opponents granted the premise.³

Notice what is missing from the record. If the literal understanding were a later corruption, there should be a trace of the earlier reading it displaced, and of the quarrel when it came in. Doctrinal novelties leave marks: Arius left a century of them. Here there is nothing—no protest, no council, no name attached to the change. The first Christian on

record to argue that the Eucharist is merely symbolic is not an apostolic father defending the original faith; he is a medieval and then a Reformation figure arguing against the unanimous inheritance.

IV. What Paul Takes for Granted

Paul is the earliest Christian writer on the subject, and he is writing to correct abuses rather than to expound a doctrine, which makes what he assumes more telling than what he argues. The cup is “a participation in the blood of Christ” and the bread “a participation in the body of Christ” (1 Cor. 10:16), and in the next breath he compares it to the altars of Israel and of the pagans, where eating the sacrifice made a man a partner in it. Then the warning: whoever eats or drinks unworthily “will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord,” and eats judgment on himself if he fails to discern “the body”—which is why, Paul says, many of them are weak and ill, and some have died (1 Cor. 11:27–30). Guilt of a body, and physical consequences, are a great deal to attach to the misuse of a symbol. No one contracts guilt against a man by mishandling his photograph.

Notice what that argument decides between the Reformation’s own positions. Calvin grants a true feeding and a real reception of Christ; the dividing question is whether the gift is joined to the elements, so that what lies on the altar and enters the mouth is the body of Christ, or whether the body remains in heaven while the Spirit lifts the believer to it. Paul settles that narrow question by the negative case: the unworthy communicant is guilty of profaning the body—but on the Reformed account the unworthy receive nothing but bread, and no one profanes an absence. The judgment falls because the gift is objectively there, worthily received or not—which is to say, it is where the bread is.

And the upper-room objection—that “this is my body” must be figurative because His body stood visibly at the table—assumes what it needs to prove: that a body can be present in only one mode. The same night, He handed them the cup of His blood “poured out for you” while that blood still moved in His veins. The Supper gives in advance what the cross accomplishes, as every Mass gives it from behind; the mode is sacramental, and the Church has never claimed it was anything else.

That Paul goes on calling it bread proves less than it seems. Scripture regularly names a thing by its appearance or its origin: the rods of the magicians “became” serpents and are still called rods (Ex. 7:12), and Christ’s risen body is called a man by those who did not yet know Him. The Church has never denied that what is seen, tasted, and chemically analyzed is bread. That is precisely what the disputed word was coined to say.

V. John 6, and the Men Who Walked Away

This section answers the memorialist rather than the Lutheran, who does not need it. Christ tells the crowd at Capernaum that unless they eat His flesh and drink His blood they have no life in them. They understand Him to mean it literally and object on exactly that ground: how can this man give us his flesh to eat? He does not correct them. He repeats it more sharply, switching to a blunter verb for eating—*trogein*, to gnaw or munch—and when many disciples leave over it He lets them go and asks the Twelve whether they will go too (John 6:52–67).

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Set that beside how He handles every other figure of speech. When Nicodemus takes rebirth literally, He explains. When the disciples mistake the leaven of the Pharisees, He explains. When the woman at the well misunderstands living water, He explains. Here alone He explains nothing and loses a crowd. As for “the flesh is of no avail” (John 6:63), the phrase cannot mean His own flesh is useless without emptying the Incarnation; He is contrasting the merely natural way of understanding—the way that had just walked out—with the Spirit’s.⁴

VI. Adoration Has No Middle Ground

The charge of idolatry is the right charge to press, and the Church has no way to soften it. If the host is not Christ, then Catholic worship is idolatrous in the strict sense, and no appeal to good intentions helps. But the converse binds just as tightly: if it is Christ, then to withhold adoration would be the sin. Thomas Aquinas put the argument in exactly that form, and it cannot be settled by taste in liturgy. So the practice is not a separate objection at all. It is the conclusion of the argument the rest of this essay has been making, and it stands or falls with the question of what happened at Capernaum, what Paul thought a man could be guilty of, and what the men who knew the apostles believed they were receiving on Sunday.⁵

VII. The Cup, and an Objection That Was Answered

The grievance over communion in one kind was a real one and deserves a direct answer rather than a defense. Christ said “drink of it, all of you,” the early Church did, and the medieval West stopped, for reasons of reverence and practicality that never justified setting aside the plain form of the command. The Church’s teaching was that Christ is wholly present under either kind, so that nothing is lost to the communicant; but that answers what is received, not why the cup was withheld. What matters now is that the complaint has been met. Since the Second Vatican Council the chalice has been restored

to the laity, and communion under both kinds is ordinary in the Latin Church. On this point the Reformers were pressing for something the Church has since done.

VIII. The Reply in Brief

The dispute is not finally about a Greek philosopher or a thirteenth-century council. It is about whether a plain sentence spoken in an upper room may be read as a figure of speech, and the New Testament will not cooperate with the reading. A crowd took Him literally and left; He let them go. Paul says a man can be guilty of a body by eating badly, and that people had died of it. Neither is how anyone writes about a symbol. And on the sacrifice, the objection and the doctrine are not actually opposed: the Church agrees that Calvary was once for all, which is why she says the Mass makes it present rather than repeats it. Hebrews is quoted against a position nobody holds.

What is left is the historical question, and the record runs one way: the men close enough to the apostles to have known them describe the Eucharist in terms no symbolic account can absorb, and describe it as men who had been taught it rather than as men arguing for it. If this is right, the Lord's Supper is not a ceremony recalling something distant, and the disagreement is not a technicality. It is the difference between a memory and a meeting—offered daily, and open to anyone who will come.

Endnotes

1. Council of Trent, Session XXII (1562), ch. 1–2: the same victim, the same offerer, *the manner of offering alone being different* — summarized; Catechism of the Catholic Church 1366–1367.
2. Exodus 12:14; the Mishnaic principle (Pesahim 10:5) is summarized; Malachi 1:11, RSV. On *anamnesis* as effective memorial, the treatments in the site's reference library on the Jewish roots of the Eucharist are summarized.
3. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 7.1, quoted exactly from the Kirsopp Lake translation in the site's reference library; Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 66, cited from the Greek text on the same shelf in the standard English rendering; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.18 and 5.2, summarized from the library copies.
4. John 6:52–67; the verb shift to *trogein* begins at v. 54. Nicodemus: John 3:3–5; the leaven: Matt. 16:6–12; the living water: John 4:10–15.
5. Aquinas on the adoration dilemma, *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 75, summarized.

For Further Reading

This Is My Body—An Evangelical Discovers the Real Presence, by Mark P. Shea.

Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist—Unlocking the Secrets of the Last Supper, by Brant Pitre.

The Hidden Manna—A Theology of the Eucharist, by James T. O'Connor.

The Mass of the Early Christians, by Mike Aquilina.

The Faith of the Early Fathers—Volumes 1, 2, and 3, by William A. Jurgens.

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“This is my body.” — Luke 22:19

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of *the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.