

The Catholic Holy Eucharist

Compliments of Saint Michael's Media

“For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself”

(I Corinthians 11:29)

The Eucharist is the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, God Himself and the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. This is the source and summit of our Catholic faith.

There are many people who do not accept this – and these people are placing themselves in great spiritual danger, because Jesus says that unless we eat His flesh and drink His blood, we have no life within us! This is a serious issue!

Transubstantiation is the correct theological view, held only by the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, and is supported by the Biblical account and the writings of the Church Fathers. Transubstantiation refers to the fact that the substance of bread and wine are annihilated and cease to exist at the moment of consecration. The substance of the bread and wine disappears and is replaced by the substance of Jesus Christ's body and blood. The Eucharistic elements are no longer bread and wine, and are really the body and blood of Jesus Christ. They do not appear to be anything other than bread and wine, and this appearance is referred to as the accidents.

The important points to note about **transubstantiation** are that;

- The Eucharist is the body and blood of Christ
- Jesus Christ is really present in a physical way
- The substance of bread and wine are not there any longer.

Some Protestants believe in Consubstantiation, Spiritual Presence, or Symbolic, and rarely use the words “Eucharist” or “Real Presence”, and their individual believers, pastors or congregations are permitted to believe a number of different positions.

Only the Catholic Church actually does what Jesus commands several times in the Bible and has the Real Presence (that is, the physical and spiritual Real Presence) of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist.

Who Can Receive Communion? (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1384-1390)

In order to receive communion,

- A Catholic must be in a state of grace (that is, not in a state of mortal sin), have been to confession since his committing his last mortal sin,
- Believe in the doctrine of transubstantiation and
- Observe the Eucharistic fast.

The Catholic Church does not allow non-Catholics to receive the Eucharist.

“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. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.” *Corinthians 11:27-28*

The Didache (an early Church document which is regarded by many as being the first catechism) expresses this need to be in a state of grace as well, but does so by specifically referencing the sacrament of confession. “But first make confession of your faults, so that your sacrifice may be a pure one” (Didache 14).

The need to be in a state of grace is the most important requirement for receiving communion, and may never be dispensed with. If a Catholic (or, indeed, anyone) received the Eucharist while in a state of mortal sin then he or she would be guilty of profaning the Eucharist – guilty of profaning God Himself!

The Church teaches that the Catholic must believe in the doctrine of transubstantiation. Technically speaking, this is covered by the necessity to be free of mortal sin – as denial of the doctrine is heresy, which is a mortal sin. There are a number of Catholics who either do not believe in the Real Presence, or who believe something different to what the Church actually teaches. Membership of the Church is dependent on (among other things) orthodox belief. To deny such a central doctrine of the Church as transubstantiation is to deny the central aspect of Catholicism. At that point, the individual is unable to receive communion because he or she has effectively left the Church.

The Catholic must adhere to the Eucharistic fast. In Canon law, this is described as “One who is to receive the most Holy Eucharist is to abstain from any food or drink, with the exception only of water and medicine, for at least the period of one hour before Holy Communion” (CIC 919 §1). Elderly people, those who are ill, and those who are taking care of them are excused from the Eucharistic fast (CIC 191 §3). This teaching (which is not a dogma or doctrine, but rather a discipline, and therefore can – and has been – changed) exists out of respect for Jesus Christ; it is not considered respectful to have Jesus Christ mingle in the stomach with ordinary food as if He were nothing more than a simple meal. The Eucharist is far more than that, and the rules governing which Catholics can receive it reflect that.

Non-Catholics cannot (under ordinary circumstances) receive the Eucharist. This is for essentially the same reasons as exist which might prevent a Catholic from receiving the Eucharist – most non-Catholics deny the doctrine of transubstantiation, for example. In addition, Scripture makes it very clear that the Eucharist is the highest sign of Christian unity (I Corinthians 10:17 - “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread”. If non-Catholics were to receive the Eucharist in a Catholic Church this would imply a unity which does not, regrettably, exist. Why would a non-Catholic want to receive the Eucharist in a Catholic Church? If the non-Catholic believes what the Church teaches about the Eucharist, then why is he or she not Catholic? If the non-Catholic does not believe what the Church teaches, then why does he or she wish to participate in what he or she simply considers to be a symbolic communion? If non-Catholics are made aware of what the Catholic Church actually believes about the Eucharist, then most of them are very happy to not participate out of a degree of respect for Catholic beliefs.

The Great Eucharistic Discourse

The primary Biblical source of the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist is John 6:35-71 – in here we read the clear words of Jesus “if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood you have no life in you”.

John 6:53 begins with the words “Amen, Amen, I say unto you” (or “Truly, truly, I say unto you”, depending on translation). This meant that Jesus was formally swearing by God that what He was about to say was perfectly true. Would He have done this if He did not mean to be taken literally? Reading onwards (John 6:53-58) we see that Jesus confirms His teaching several times, saying His flesh is “real food” and His blood is “real drink”. This is not symbolic language! When Jesus utters these words, there is confusion (John 6:52) and when it is explained many think it is a “hard teaching” (more than likely a repulsive teaching, eating the flesh and drinking the blood of a fellow human!) (John 6:60). But Jesus does not soft-pedal the teaching, nor does he correct those who leave Him (John 6:66). These people leave Him because He is teaching that they must eat His flesh and drink His blood; they are interpreting that literally and are unwilling to accept this. Jesus does not correct them – showing that they understood the teaching correctly, but were just unable to accept it as something they should do. He is willing to let them leave Him over this issue – is Jesus so callous that he would let people leave Him over a mistake? Or would He try to correct them if they had, in fact, misunderstood Him?

A number of Protestants cite John 6:63, saying that Jesus must mean some sort of symbolic communion with Him – for the “flesh is of no avail”. There are a number of reasons why this is a false and incorrect interpretation.

Firstly, hasn't Jesus just spent several verses telling His followers that He is speaking literally? Would Jesus want to confuse His followers on such an important point as this?

Secondly, the correct interpretation of the word “flesh” in this passage is found in I Corinthians 2:14-3:4 – the “flesh” means the sinful aspects of mankind, while the “spirit” refers to the “God-centered” aspects of mankind. Jesus would not say that the flesh is of no avail and mean that physical things were in some way bad; this would go against the clear teaching that the physical world is good.

Most importantly, the Protestant interpretation of John 6:35-71 relies on the fact that the phrase to eat flesh and drink blood can mean “to commune with”, but this is not the case and it is not how Jesus' disciples would have heard it. In multiple passages of Scripture (Psalm 14:4, 27:2, Isaiah 9:18-20, 49:26, Micah 3:3, II Samuel 23:15-17, Revelation 17:6, 17:16) the eating of a person's flesh is shown as being a metaphor for assault, violence or other attacks. It is never shown as being a metaphor for communion, spiritual or otherwise, and this is not how the disciples would have heard and understood it. Would Jesus have used a metaphor He knew people would misinterpret?

In I Corinthians 11:23-29 Paul tells us that we must examine ourselves carefully before going to receive communion (this is an instruction to not receive the Eucharist in a state of mortal sin). Saint Paul tells us that those who receive the Eucharist unworthily are guilty of profaning the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. Why does Paul use such language as this if it is only a symbol? How can one be guilty of profaning the Body and Blood of Jesus if the bread and wine are just that; bread and wine? Paul's words only make sense when they are considered in the light of the Eucharist really being the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, as hard as that is to believe!

In three of the Gospels, we are shown the Last Supper narrative where the Eucharist is instituted (Matthew 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-25, Luke 22:17-20). It is from here that the name “Eucharist” comes – it means “thanksgiving” and refers to the fact that Jesus “gave thanks” for the bread and wine. In all three of the accounts, Jesus uses the words “this is my body” - not “this is a symbol of my body”! Would Jesus have used such language if He did not intend it to be taken literally, especially when considered in light of all the other passages of Scripture which point towards a literal interpretation?

Many people are shocked by the idea of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of a human being, and the Jews were no exception (as is shown by John 6:60). In addition, the Jews were prohibited from eating blood (something which survives today with the Kosher laws). How can Jesus have instructed observant Jews to drink His blood?

The answer lies in Genesis 9:4 and Deuteronomy 12:23; both of these passages say that “blood is life”. In the sacrifices under the Mosaic covenant, the Jews atoned for sin, but did not enter into the full supernatural life with God. With the once and for all sacrifice under the new covenant (the

Christian covenant) we are brought into full supernatural life – hence we consume the blood, which is the life. In addition, the prohibition against blood, (and all other aspects of the Mosaic dietary laws) were lifted by the new covenant.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church makes it very clear that the Catholic Church's teaching on the Eucharist as being a re-presentation of the once-and-for-all sacrifice is entirely in keeping with the Jewish understanding of a memorial (c/f Luke 22:19). In paragraph 1364 of the CCC we read that “every time Passover is celebrated, the Exodus events are made present to the memory of believers so that they may conform their lives to them.”

The Writings of the Church Fathers

Unsurprisingly, the Catholic view of the Eucharist is found in the writings of the earliest Christians, and the documents of the Church Fathers do speak very clearly of the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist.

Ignatius of Antioch: “I have no taste for corruptible food, nor for the pleasures of this life. I desire the bread of God, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, who was of the seed of David; and for drink I desire his blood, which is love incorruptible” (Letter to the Romans 7:3 - 110 AD)

“Take note of those who hold heterodox opinions on the grace of Jesus Christ which has come to us, and see how contrary their opinions are to the mind of God. . . . They abstain from the Eucharist and from 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 that Father, in his goodness, raised up again. They who deny the gift of God are perishing in their disputes” (Letter to the Smyrnaeans 6:2-7:1 - 110 AD)

Justin Martyr: “We call this food Eucharist, and no one else is permitted to partake of it, except one who believes our teaching to be true and who has been washed in the washing which is for the remission of sins and for regeneration [i.e., has received baptism] and is thereby living as Christ enjoined. For not as common bread nor 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 nurtured, is both the flesh and the blood of that incarnated Jesus” (First Apology 66 -151 AD)

Irenaeus: “If the Lord were from other than the Father, how could he rightly take bread, which is of the same creation as our own, and confess it to be his body and affirm that the mixture in the cup is his blood?” (Against Heresies 4:33-32 - 189 AD)

“He has declared the cup, a part of creation, to be his own blood, from which he causes our blood to flow; and the bread, a part of creation, he has established as his own body, from which he gives increase unto our bodies. When, therefore, the mixed cup [wine and water] and the baked bread receives the Word of God and becomes the Eucharist, the body of Christ, and from these the substance of our flesh is increased and supported, how can they say that the flesh is not capable of receiving the gift of God, which is eternal life – flesh which is nourished by the body and blood of the Lord, and is in fact a member of him?” (Against Heresies 5:2 - 189 AD)

Clement of Alexandria: “‘Eat my flesh,’ [Jesus] says, ‘and drink my blood.’ The Lord supplies us with these intimate nutrients, he delivers over his flesh and pours out his blood, and nothing is lacking for the growth of his children” (The Instructor of Children 1:6:43:3 - 191 AD)

Tertullian: “[T]here is not a soul that can at all procure salvation, except it believe whilst it is in the flesh, so true is it that the flesh is the very condition on which salvation hinges. And since the soul is, in consequence of its salvation, chosen to the service of God, it is the flesh which actually renders it capable of such service. The flesh, indeed, is washed [in baptism], in order that the soul may be cleansed . . . the flesh is shadowed with the imposition of hands [in confirmation], that the soul also may be illuminated by the Spirit; the flesh feeds [in the Eucharist] on the body and blood of Christ, that the soul likewise may be filled with God” (The Resurrection of the Dead 8 - 210 AD)

Hippolytus: “‘And she [Wisdom] has furnished her table’ [Proverbs 9:2] . . . refers to his [Christ’s] honored and undefiled body and blood, which day by day are administered and offered sacrificially at the spiritual divine table, as a memorial of that first and ever-memorable table of the spiritual divine supper [i.e., the Last Supper]” (Fragment from Commentary on Proverbs - 217 AD)

Origen: “Formerly there was baptism in an obscure way . . . now, however, in full view, there is regeneration in water and in the Holy Spirit. Formerly, in an obscure way, there was manna for food; now, however, in full view, there is the true food, the flesh of the Word of God, as he himself says: ‘My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink’ [John 6:55]” (Homilies on Numbers 7:2 - 248 AD)

Cyprian of Carthage: “He [Paul] threatens, moreover, the stubborn and forward, and denounces them, saying, ‘Whosoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily, is guilty of the body and blood of the Lord’ [I Corinthians 11:27]. All these warnings being scorned and contemned - [lapsed Christians will often take Communion] before their sin is expiated, before confession has been made of their crime, before their conscience has been purged by sacrifice and by the hand of the priest, before the offense of an angry and threatening Lord has been appeased, [and so] violence is done to his body and blood; and they sin now against their Lord more with their hand and mouth than when they denied their Lord” (The Lapsed 15–16 - 251 AD)

Council of Nicaea I: “It has come to the knowledge of the holy and great synod that, in some districts and cities, the deacons administer the Eucharist to the presbyters [i.e. priests], whereas neither canon nor custom permits that they who have no right to offer [the Eucharistic sacrifice] should give the Body of Christ to them that do offer [it]” (Canon 18 - 325 AD)

Aphrahat the Persian Sage: “After having spoken thus [at the Last Supper], the Lord rose up from the place where he had made the Passover and had given his body as food and his blood as drink, and he went with his disciples to the place where he was to be arrested. But he ate of his own body and drank of his own blood, while he was pondering on the dead. With his own hands the Lord presented his own body to be eaten, and before he was crucified he gave his blood as drink” (Treatises 12:6 - 340 AD)

Cyril of Jerusalem: “The bread and the wine of the Eucharist before the holy invocation of the adorable Trinity were simple bread and wine, but the invocation having been made, the bread becomes the body of Christ and the wine the blood of Christ” (Catechetical Lectures 19:7 - 350 AD)
“Do not, therefore, regard the bread and wine as simply that; for they are, according to the Master’s declaration, the body and blood of Christ. Even though the senses suggest to you the other, let faith make you firm. Do not judge in this matter by taste, but be fully assured by the faith, not doubting that you have been deemed worthy of the body and blood of Christ. . . . [Since you are] fully convinced that the apparent bread is not bread, even though it is sensible to the taste, but the body of Christ, and that the apparent wine is not wine, even though the taste would have it so, . . . partake of that bread as something spiritual, and put a cheerful face on your soul” (Catechetical Lectures 22:6, 9 - 350 AD)

Ambrose of Milan: "Perhaps you may be saying, 'I see something else; how can you assure me that I am receiving the body of Christ?' It but remains for us to prove it. And how many are the examples we might use! . . . Christ is in that sacrament, because it is the body of Christ" (The Mysteries 9:50, 58 - 390 AD).

Theodore of Mopsuestia: "When [Christ] gave the bread he did not say, 'This is the symbol of my body,' but, 'This is my body.' In the same way, when he gave the cup of his blood he did not say, 'This is the symbol of my blood,' but, 'This is my blood'; for he wanted us to look upon the [Eucharistic elements] after their reception of grace and the coming of the Holy Spirit not according to their nature, but receive them as they are, the body and blood of our Lord. We ought . . . not regard [the elements] merely as bread and cup, but as the body and blood of the Lord, into which they were transformed by the descent of the Holy Spirit" (Catechetical Homilies 5:1 - 405 AD)

Augustine: "Christ was carried in his own hands when, referring to his own body, he said, 'This is my body' [Matthew 26:26]. For he carried that body in his hands" (Explanations of the Psalms 33:1:10 - 405 AD)

"I promised you [new Christians], who have now been baptized, a sermon in which I would explain the sacrament of the Lord's Table. . . . That bread which you see on the altar, having been sanctified by the word of God, is the body of Christ. That chalice, or rather, what is in that chalice, having been sanctified by the word of God, is the blood of Christ" (Sermons 227 - 411 AD).

"What you see is the bread and the chalice; that is what your own eyes report to you. But what your faith obliges you to accept is that the bread is the body of Christ and the chalice is the blood of Christ. This has been said very briefly, which may perhaps be sufficient for faith; yet faith does not desire instruction" (Sermons 272 - 411 AD).

Council of Ephesus: "We will necessarily add this also. Proclaiming the death, according to the flesh, of the only-begotten Son of God, that is Jesus Christ, confessing his resurrection from the dead, and his ascension into heaven, we offer the unbloody sacrifice in the churches, and so go on to the mystical thanksgivings, and are sanctified, having received his holy flesh and the precious blood of Christ the Savior of us all. And not as common flesh do we receive it; God forbid: nor as of a man sanctified and associated with the Word according to the unity of worth, or as having a divine indwelling, but as truly the life-giving and very flesh of the Word himself. For he is the life according to his nature as God, and when he became united to his flesh, he made it also to be life-giving" (Session 1, Letter of Cyril to Nestorius - 43 AD).

All the historical, Scriptural and other evidence, show that the belief in the Real Presence was widespread from the days of the Church Fathers and was never seriously challenged. Such an important doctrine would have been challenged if it was false.

Since the Eucharist really is Jesus Christ then the truth demands that we not only acknowledge that truth, but also spread it to as many people as possible, and fight against falsehoods that might deny it. Remember; when you are defending the Eucharist, you are defending Jesus Christ!