

Q: Why do Catholics believe that Jesus is “truly present” in the Eucharist? (PART 1)

This objection to the Catholic Church’s teaching on Jesus’ Real Presence in the Eucharist reaches right back to the time of the Apostles: *“This saying is hard; who can accept it”*, many of the Jews would murmur. **(John 6:60)**

Let’s start with miracles. If God can raise the dead and create our world from nothing, He can turn bread and wine into His Body and Blood, *“for with God, nothing will be impossible”* (see Luke 1:37). But the question remains: did He do that?

Now to the Last Supper. In Matthew 26:26-30, Jesus said, ***“Take and eat; this IS my body.”*** Then he took a cup... saying, ***“Drink from it, all of you, for this IS my blood of the covenant ...”***. Jesus is giving no indication of speaking symbolically here. The most basic principle of Scriptural interpretation is that the literal sense of a passage is the primary sense, unless it is obviously problematic. A person would have to impose their own interpretation on this passage if they were to suggest that Jesus was speaking symbolically here, because this passage simply does not say that. The clear and plain literal meaning is that Jesus is giving the Apostles His Body to eat and His Blood to drink.

Even Martin Luther himself would write: *“Who but the devil, hath granted such a license of wresting the words of the Holy Scripture? Who ever read in the Scriptures, that “my body” is the same as “this is a sign of my body”? Or, that “is” is the same as “it signifies”? What language in the world ever spoke so?”* Surprisingly to some, Luther unquestionably believed in a form of the Real Presence.

In some cases, other passages from Scripture can help shed light on a related passage. In this case, John 6 gives incredible confirmation that Jesus was speaking literally at the Last Supper.

In the span of nine verses, Jesus says a stunning **THIRTEEN TIMES!!!** that you must eat His flesh and drink His blood to *“have eternal life”*. Here is just a sample: *“Amen, amen... unless you **eat the flesh** of the Son of Man **and drink his blood**, you do not have life within you. **Whoever***

eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.” (John 6:53-57) Incredible!

And this isn't just a case of people misunderstanding Jesus' wording. The Jews clearly understand what He is saying, and “murmur” about it: “*How can this man give us his flesh to eat?*” (John 6:52). Scripture confirms that “*Jesus knew that his disciples were murmuring about this*” and “*said to them, ‘Does this shock you?’ ... As a result of this, many of his disciples... no longer accompanied him*”. Jesus knows that the Jews understand Him to be speaking literally, and many leave because of it. He doesn't correct them or call them back. **HE LETS THEM GO – BECAUSE HE IS SPEAKING LITERALLY!**

On other occasions where people misunderstood His use of symbolism, Jesus quickly clarified things. In fact, in **Matt 16:11-12**, Jesus is again **speaking about bread**, and His disciples misunderstand his symbolism. Jesus realizes this and immediately clarifies things: “*How is it that you fail to perceive that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” Then they understood that He did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.*”

But Jesus gives no such clarification in John 6. In fact, as the Jews press Jesus further about His teaching here, Jesus' response is not to move to more symbolic language. In fact He does the exact opposite. He gets more literal, more visceral and more emphatic. The Greek words He starts using become very graphic, literally meaning to chew or gnaw. And He repeats Himself over and over.

And on top of this, in the symbolism of Jesus' day, if you were truly intending to speak symbolically and say that you were going to eat somebody's body or drink their blood, it meant that you were going to persecute or kill them, and this certainly wasn't what Jesus was trying to convey!

Similarly, in **1 Cor 11:27-29**, St Paul would write that whoever receives the Eucharist “*in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body*

*and blood of the Lord... and... any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. That is why many of you **are weak and ill, and some have died.***” According to St Paul, many of those who have received the Body and Blood unworthily are sick or have died! This is **not just symbolism!**

The context of John 6 helps even further. We see Jesus has just performed the miracle of the feeding of the 5000 with five loaves and two fish. But the Jews are not sufficiently impressed. “*What sign can you do, that we may see and believe in you*”, they ask? “*What can you do? Our ancestors ate manna in the desert*” (**John 6:30-31**). The Jews are asking, “*What sign can you do*” that will prove you are the Messiah? God miraculously fed approximately one million or more of their ancestors in the desert for decades. Jesus has only fed 5000 in one afternoon.

So what **greater “sign”** can He do? Jesus’ answer will be the Eucharist. He will give His Flesh and Blood for over a billion to eat, some of them daily, and from it, they will receive eternal life. “*Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died; this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die.*” (**John 6:49-50**). If the Eucharist were only a symbol, this would be a pretty poor “**sign**” to answer the Jews with.

But how about the Early Church? Did it believe in the Real Presence? Unquestionably yes! And Martin Luther has more to say on this too. “*Not one of the Fathers, though so numerous... ever said, ‘It is only bread and wine’; or, ‘the body and blood of Christ is not there present’... Certainly in so many Fathers... the negative might at least be found in one of them had they thought the body and blood of Christ were not really present: but they are all... unanimous.*” (Luther’s Collected Works, no. 7, p 391).

Wow! And he is absolutely right! Every Church Father that wrote on this in the first 1000 years of the Church believed in the Real Presence. Not one wrote against it. **Not one!** Unquestionably, the Early Church believed in the Real Presence of the Eucharist.

For example, in 110 AD, **St Ignatius of Antioch**, a disciple of St. John the Apostle himself would write: “*Take note of those who hold heterodox... 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.*" (Letter to the Smyrnaeans).

Similarly, in 150 AD, **St. Justin Martyr** would confirm: "*We call this food Eucharist... For not as common bread nor common drink do we receive these... the food which has been made into the Eucharist by the Eucharistic prayer set down by Him... is both the Flesh and the Blood of that incarnated Jesus.*"

But finally, consider this. Could people who saw Jesus in person 2000 years ago tell that the man before them was truly God by their senses alone? Similarly, Jesus truly present in the Eucharist, cannot be perceived by our senses alone, but by faith in Jesus' words, "*this is my body*".

Amen, Amen! Stay tuned for Part 2!

© Graham Osborne