

## **Q: The Real Presence: Why do Catholics believe that Jesus is “truly present” in the Eucharist? PART 2**

My last column finished with a quote regarding the belief in the Real Presence in the Early Church from Martin Luther himself. Here are a few more brief examples from some of the best-known Early Church writers as well.

Around 195 AD, **St Irenaeus**, a student of St Polycarp (also a disciple of St John), and probably the greatest theologian in the first centuries of the Church, wrote his great work, “Against Heresies”. There is much we could quote, but here is a particularly strong passage: *“He (Jesus) 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 to our bodies.”*

Similarly, in 350 AD, **St Cyril**, Bishop of Jerusalem and a great theologian and defender of the faith, captured the essence of the Real Presence probably as well as any of the Fathers when he wrote: *“We call this food Eucharist... 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.”*

This, really, should answer our question. The belief in the Real Presence was a constant and universal teaching of the Church, right from the time of the Apostles. But despite all this overwhelming testimony, there are still those that doubt.

For example, some bring up the prohibition of drinking blood found in **Leviticus 17:10-14** and **19:26**. What they don't realize is that these prohibitions were part of the Old Covenant Jewish ceremonial law. Jesus will fulfill this Old Covenant and institute a New Covenant at the Last Supper: *“This cup is the **new covenant in my blood**”, (Luke 22:20) “Drink from it, all of you, for **this is my blood of the covenant**” (Mat 26:26-30)*. With this New Covenant also comes a new law, and the old ceremonial Levitical laws no longer apply. If Jesus commands us to drink His blood, we must do just that.

We read very clearly of this “*change of law*” in **Heb 7:11-25**: “*When there is a change of priesthood [from the Old Testament High Priesthood to Jesus], there is necessarily a change of law as well... a former commandment is annulled... a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.*” Other examples of this “*change*” of Old Covenant law include Jesus’ New Covenant repeal of Moses permission to divorce in **Mat 19:6-9**, where He reinstates God’s original plan for marriage: “*what God has joined together, no human being must separate.*” Or again, where Jesus says, “*You have heard, ‘an eye for an eye...’, but I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil.*” (**Mat 5:38-39**).

Additionally, Jesus Himself would ultimately teach that all food (including, and especially, His Body and Blood) is now considered “*clean*” and can no longer defile a person: “*Everything that goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters not the heart... (Thus He declared **all foods clean**)*” (**Mark 7:15-21**). Jesus unequivocally has answered our question!

Another objection involves **John 6:63**: “*It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words I have spoken to you are spirit and life.*” Some suggest that this is finally evidence that Jesus was talking “*spiritually*”, or symbolically, all along, and that “*the flesh is of no avail*” - in other words we don’t really have to eat His flesh after all. But nothing could be further from the truth!

For starters, something that is a spiritual reality is as true as anything gets! This would include God Himself, who **IS** spirit, Heaven, the angels, and a host of other spiritual realities. Saying that something is a spiritual reality doesn’t in the least suggest it is simply a symbolic representation –on the contrary, nothing could be **MORE** real!

And when Jesus confirms that “*the flesh is of no avail*”, He is absolutely not talking about **HIS** flesh. He’s talking about “**THE** flesh”, St Paul-style. He is talking about a “*fleshly*” or earthly understanding of the spiritual realities He has just revealed. A “*fleshly*” or earthly understanding cannot possibly comprehend these truths.

St Paul clarifies this perfectly in **1 Cor 2:12-15** where he writes: *“Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might **understand the gifts** bestowed on us by God... **interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit.** The unspiritual (i.e. fleshly) man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is **not able to understand them** because they are spiritually discerned.”*

St Paul is telling us that spiritual realities, like the Real Presence, cannot be understood by the fleshly man, and in fact they would appear as nonsense to him. This would be why many would leave Jesus in John 6.

Another objection we will consider is to the word, “transubstantiation”, a word used by the Church to describe the complete change of the substances of bread and wine to the actual Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Himself that occurs at the moment of Consecration. Only their physical appearances and properties remain [theologically referred to as “accidents”]. The objection goes that this actual word is not in the Bible and it didn’t come into use until the 1100’s –and it wasn’t formally defined until the Council of Trent in the 1500’s. From this, people assume that Catholics “invented” this doctrine in the 1100’s. But again, nothing could be further from the truth.

The word, “Trinity” is not in the Bible, but it was adopted in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries of the Church because it describes the spiritual reality of God well. Similarly, transubstantiation was adopted simply because it described the physical and spiritual reality of the Eucharistic change well. But as I think anybody can see from our earlier points, particularly regarding the early Church, the belief in this truth, whether we call it transubstantiation or something else, existed in the Church right from the time of the Apostles, and takes some of its strongest evidence straight from Sacred Scripture itself.

And finally, some argue that Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross was made *“once for all”* (cf. **Heb 9** and **10**), and that the Catholic Mass somehow re-sacrifices Jesus, in violation of Scripture. Those who hold this understanding do not truly understand the Mass.

Much could be said here, but in **Rev 5:6**, St John is given a glorious vision of Jesus in Heaven. What does he see? The Lion of the Tribe of Judah? The Son of Man in glory? No: *“Then I saw standing in the midst of the throne... a Lamb that seemed to have been slain”*. He sees Jesus, the Lamb of God, looking as if a lamb slain. Why? Because Jesus is constantly offering the sacrifice of Himself on Calvary to the Father in Heaven on our behalf, as the only worthy and acceptable sacrifice that can obtain forgiveness for our sins. By the power of the Holy Spirit and Jesus’ words of consecration that He used at the Last Supper, this same sacrifice is made present outside of space and time (just as it exists in Heaven) on the altar of every Catholic Church at the moment of consecration, and then offered to the Father on our behalf. This is the heart of the Mass: the offering of the once-for-all sacrifice of the Son, made present by the power of God, to the Father. Awesome!

If we could only fully grasp the depth of this profound heavenly reality every time those eternally powerful words are spoken: *“This **is** My Body...”*

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