

The Early Church Fathers and the Eucharist

What did the Early Church believe about other key Catholic doctrines like the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist?

In our first installment of the Early Church Fathers, we saw how their writings, while not possessing the inerrant, inspired nature of Sacred Scripture, clearly and historically testify to the fact that the early Church was stunningly Catholic in its structure - a church possessing the authority and office of the apostles, and founded by Jesus himself on Peter and his successors.

But the similarities to the present-day Catholic Church certainly don't end there. We see other key doctrines not only present but clearly explained in the most Catholic of terms, giving us critical insights into both Apostolic Tradition and how the Early Church, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, interpreted Sacred Scripture.

One of the most important areas for Catholics of course is the Eucharist. Did the Early Church hold to the Real Presence of Jesus as we have it today? Absolutely! In fact, here we have some of the strongest testimonies of all the Early Church writings.

In 110 AD, St Ignatius of Antioch, disciple and co-worker of St John the Apostle wrote (and recall that St John was the inspired human author of Jesus' great "Bread of Life" talk in John 6): *"Take note of those who hold heterodox opinions... 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 the Father, in His goodness, raised up again."*

Around 150 AD, St Justin Martyr would write one of the clearest defenses of the Real Presence that anyone could ask for. Considered one of the greatest defenders of the Christian Faith, and undoubtedly taught by St John's disciples in Ephesus, he would write: *"We call this food Eucharist; and no one is permitted to partake of it, except one who*

believes our teaching to be true... For not as common bread nor common drink do we receive these; but.... as we have been taught, 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."

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, put 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."*

St Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem and a great theologian and defender of the faith himself, writing near 350 AD, captured the essence of the Real Presence probably as well as any of the Fathers when he wrote: *He (Jesus) himself, therefore, having declared of the Bread, "This is my Body," who will dare any longer to doubt? And when He Himself has affirmed and said, "This is My Blood," who can ever hesitate and say it is not His Blood?" 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 faith, not doubting that you have been deemed worthy of the Body and Blood of Christ.*

But let me leave you with a final quote from perhaps a bit of a surprising source -Martin Luther himself! He writes: *"Who ever read in the Scriptures, that "my body" is the same as "this is a sign of my body"?.... 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". Surely it is not credible... that they should never... so much as once, say.... "It is bread only" or "the body of Christ is not there", especially it being of great importance, that men should not be deceived. Certainly in so many Fathers, and in so many writings, 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 of them unanimous.**"*

How have other Christian denominations strayed so far from their own Catholic roots? As St Peter testified about Jesus' Eucharistic teaching in John 6, "you have the words of eternal life". Amen, Amen!

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