

SOLEMNITY OF CORPUS CHRISTI - CYCLE A - 2008

Is the Holy Eucharist a difficult doctrine to accept? Is it rationally flawed and emotionally disturbing?

According to St. John's Gospel, Jesus Christ introduced His followers to the doctrine of the Holy Eucharist at the synagogue in Capernaum. He presented Himself as the Bread of Life that descended from God the Father to satisfy their spiritual hunger and nourish them for all eternity.

When certain hostile Jews and Gentiles began to argue among themselves about Jesus' self-designation as bread from heaven, He insisted that He was indeed the true Bread of Life and that whoever ate of this Bread would live forever. He explicitly identified this life-giving, heavenly Bread with His human flesh, made available for the life of the world.

When His words provoked heated argument among His listeners, Jesus interjected Himself in their argument saying, "I tell you most solemnly, *if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you will not have life in you. Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink My blood has eternal life...*"

Upon hearing these words of Jesus, many of His followers were disturbed to say the least. They found His words intolerable. How significant, that in St. John's Gospel, it is chapter **6**, verse **66**, that tells us: "After this, many of His disciples left Him and stopped going with Him." Anyone who rejects His word is an *anti-Christ*.

The Apostles, the chosen Twelve, did not abandon Jesus because they had come to recognize in Jesus the Holy One of God Who carried the message of life eternal. But for a substantial number of the followers of Jesus, Christ's doctrine of the Holy Eucharist proved to be a stumbling block.

The Catholic Church's doctrine of the Holy Eucharist, reflecting the Gospel of St. John, still constitutes a stumbling block even today...among both Catholics and would-be Catholics. A Passionist priest, delivering a homily recently at St. Ann's Basilica in Scranton, PA, told of a friendship he had with a Jewish colleague at a university in Massachusetts. The man was strongly attracted to the Catholic Church.

After years of dialogue with the priest, the Jewish scholar was on the verge of embracing Catholicism. Only one thing stood in his way: the doctrine of the Holy Eucharist. This doctrine, for him, was a major obstacle to overcome.

Eventually the Jewish scholar's mind and heart were illumined by grace, and he embraced Catholicism. But his initial discomfort with the Eucharist is understandable.

If Catholicism taught that the bread and wine simply *represented* the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, as many non-Catholic denominations do, Its Eucharist teaching would be much easier to accept!

But Catholicism instead teaches that with the words of the consecration at every Mass, the bread and wine disappear, though the outward *accidents* remain. They are replaced *substantially* by Christ Himself: by His Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity. That is to say, Christ is truly present in the Eucharist, though in a unique manner of sacred presence.

The Catholic Church takes very seriously the words of Jesus: "This is My Body...This is My Blood." She authoritatively declares that the "whole substance of bread is changed into the substance of Christ our Lord and the whole substance of the wine is changed into the substance of His Blood." Christ is more than just symbolically present in the bread and wine.

Some Catholics, if called upon to do so, would find it embarrassing or difficult to explain the doctrine of the Holy Eucharist to non-Christians and non-Catholics. They might be tempted to dilute it. Some Catholics dilute it even for their own consumption. The Real Presence of Jesus becomes mere symbol. We need to consciously remind ourselves: *would the martyrs of the Church have given their very lives in defense of a mere symbol?*

Actually the doctrine of the Holy Eucharist is magnificent and marvelous and makes perfect sense. We really should not expect anything less than what Catholicism teaches from an utterly and supremely loving God! Having to articulate the doctrine should be viewed as a joyous opportunity and distinctive privilege!

God in the Old Testament, pursues intimacy with His people. That pursuit is brought to its fulfillment in the Holy Eucharist. In the Eucharist, the closeness between Jesus and us is analogous to that between a mother and her child in the womb. How so? A child *in utero* feeds off his mother. He obtains his nutrition and strength from her, from her blood. He lives because of her.

Even the life breath, the child receives from his mother. She breathes for him. If the mother's blood is impure, the child will suffer. The relationship between the mother and her offspring is superbly intimate.

Jesus Christ, God and Man, chose to have a similar, intimate relationship with us. Christ was not satisfied to put His arms around us as He did the little children, however. He wanted us to receive directly from Him life, nourishment and strength...not the kind that is destroyed by sickness and death, but the type that lasts forever; the kind that can only come from Someone Who is Himself infinite and eternal!

“He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood lives in Me and I live in him. As I, Who am sent by the living Father, Myself draw life from the Father, so whoever eats My flesh will draw life from Me.”

As the Church teaches: “The Church draws Her life from the Eucharist. In the humble signs of bread and wine, changed into His Body and Blood, Christ walks beside us as our strength and our food for the journey.”

We truly, physically and directly feed off the bread and wine that have been transformed by the Holy Spirit into the Body and Blood of Christ! Nourished by Christ’s living flesh, we experience in the Holy Eucharist the closeness of the preborn child to her mother. The image of the child within her mother’s womb is in many ways a very fitting analogy of what transpires in the experience of Holy Communion.

It is an imperfect yet quite appropriate depiction of the life-producing Gift that Jesus chose to bestow on all who would become His followers!

Dorothy Day, the co-foundress of the Catholic Worker Movement, in a talk years ago, used the *in utero* analogy to explain and defend the Catholic doctrine of the Holy Eucharist, indicating that the child within the womb is fed by her mother’s blood, nourished by her mother’s substance. Day went on to say that no one is shocked by what happens in the womb.

Why then, she reasoned, should anyone be disturbed when the same thing occurs in the Holy Eucharist? Why, indeed?!

The doctrine of the Holy Eucharist may initially appear to be shocking and intolerable, especially to non-Catholics. As I said, even some Catholics are tempted to say that Jesus’ words should be accepted figuratively at best.

But, the Catholic doctrine and belief offers an accurate explanation of what transpired at the Last Supper, and the correct statement of Christ's intent. Our Catholic belief and teaching *is faithful to the authentic meaning of the Holy Eucharist*. The Holy Eucharist is a magnificent Gift of love, an ingenious way for the Son of God to share in the life of His followers, and for them to share in His life and that of the Father and Holy Spirit.

Jesus' teaching on the Holy Eucharist in St. John's Gospel and elsewhere, which the Catholic Church faithfully reflects, *is* neither intolerable, nor impossible to embrace, but rather, in the truest sense, utterly awesome!

Here at St. John, we have the blessing of ***Eucharistic Adoration, Benediction and times of prayer with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament on the eve of each First Friday and on the First Fridays themselves!*** As your pastor, I invite and encourage YOU to consider signing up for a Holy Hour each month! The blessings that await our parish are here! We cannot but grow in love with Jesus if we approach the Holy Eucharist in adoration! Spending time with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament is invaluable! ***Come, let us adore Him!***