

Christ in the Eucharist

By Catholic Answers www.catholic.com/tracts

Protestant attacks on the Catholic Church often focus on the Eucharist. This demonstrates that opponents of the Church—mainly Evangelicals and Fundamentalists—recognize one of Catholicism’s core doctrines. What’s more, the attacks show that Fundamentalists are not always literalists. This is seen in their interpretation of the key biblical passage, chapter six of John’s Gospel, in which Christ speaks about the sacrament that will be instituted at the Last Supper. This tract examines the last half of that chapter.

John 6:30 begins a colloquy that took place in the synagogue at Capernaum. The Jews asked Jesus what sign he could perform so that they might believe in him. As a challenge, they noted that "our ancestors ate manna in the desert." Could Jesus top that? He told them the real bread from heaven comes from the Father. "Give us this bread always," they said. Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst." At this point the Jews understood him to be speaking metaphorically.

Again and Again

Jesus first repeated what he said, then summarized: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.' The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?'" (John 6:51–52).

His listeners were stupefied because now they understood Jesus *literally*—and correctly. He again repeated his words, but with even greater emphasis, and introduced the statement about drinking his blood: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him" (John 6:53–56).

No Corrections

Notice that Jesus made no attempt to soften what he said, no attempt to correct "misunderstandings," for there were none. Our Lord's listeners understood him perfectly well. They no longer thought he was speaking metaphorically. If they *had*, if they mistook what he said, why no correction?

On other occasions when there was confusion, Christ explained just what he meant (cf. Matt. 16:5–12). Here, where any misunderstanding would be fatal, there was no effort by Jesus to correct. Instead, he repeated himself for greater emphasis.

In John 6:60 we read: "Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, 'This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?'" These were his disciples, people used to his remarkable ways. He warned them not to think carnally, but spiritually: "It is the Spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (John 6:63; cf. 1 Cor. 2:12–14).

But he knew some did not believe. (It is here, in the rejection of the Eucharist, that Judas fell away; look at John 6:64.) "After this, many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him" (John 6:66).

This is the only record we have of any of Christ's followers forsaking him for purely doctrinal reasons. If it had all been a misunderstanding, if they erred in taking a metaphor in a literal sense, why didn't he call them back and straighten things out? Both the Jews, who were suspicious of him, and his disciples, who had accepted everything up to this point, would have remained with him had he said he was speaking only symbolically.

But he did not correct these protesters. Twelve times he said he was the bread that came down from heaven; four times he said they would have "to eat my flesh and drink my blood." John 6 was an extended promise of what would be instituted at the Last Supper—and it was a promise that could not be more explicit. Or so it would seem to a Catholic. But what do Fundamentalists say?

Merely Figurative?

They say that in John 6 Jesus was not talking about physical food and drink, but about spiritual food and drink. They quote John 6:35: "Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.'" They claim that coming to him is bread, having faith in him

is drink. Thus, eating his flesh and blood merely means believing in Christ.

But there is a problem with that interpretation. As Fr. John A. O'Brien explains, "The phrase 'to eat the flesh and drink the blood,' when used figuratively among the Jews, as among the Arabs of today, meant to inflict upon a person some serious injury, especially by calumny or by false accusation. To interpret the phrase figuratively then would be to make our Lord promise life everlasting to the culprit for slandering and hating him, which would reduce the whole passage to utter nonsense" (O'Brien, *The Faith of Millions*, 215). For an example of this use, see Micah 3:3.

Fundamentalist writers who comment on John 6 also assert that one can show Christ was speaking only metaphorically by comparing verses like John 10:9 ("I am the door") and John 15:1 ("I am the true vine"). The problem is that there is not a connection to John 6:35, "I am the bread of life." "I am the door" and "I am the vine" make sense as metaphors because Christ is like a door—we go to heaven through him—and he is also like a vine—we get our spiritual sap through him. But Christ takes John 6:35 far beyond symbolism by saying, "For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed" (John 6:55).

He continues: "As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me" (John 6:57). The Greek word used for "eats" (*trogon*) is very blunt and has the sense of "chewing" or "gnawing." This is not the language of metaphor.

Their Main Argument

For Fundamentalist writers, the scriptural argument is capped by an appeal to John 6:63: "It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." They say this means that eating real flesh is a waste. But does this make sense?

Are we to understand that Christ had just commanded his disciples to eat his flesh, then said their doing so would be pointless? Is that what "the flesh is of no avail" means? "Eat my flesh, but you'll find it's a waste of time"—is that what he was saying? Hardly.

The fact is that Christ's flesh avails much! If it were of no avail, then the Son of God incarnated for no reason, he died for no reason, and he rose from the dead for no reason. Christ's flesh profits us more than anyone else's in the world. If it profits us nothing, so that the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ are of

no avail, then "your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished" (1 Cor. 15:17b–18).

In John 6:63 "flesh profits nothing" refers to mankind's inclination to think using only what their natural human reason would tell them rather than what God would tell them. Thus in John 8:15–16 Jesus tells his opponents: "You judge according to the flesh, I judge no one. Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is true, for it is not I alone that judge, but I and he who sent me." So natural human judgment, unaided by God's grace, is unreliable; but God's judgment is always true.

And were the disciples to understand the line "The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life" as nothing but a circumlocution (and a very clumsy one at that) for "symbolic"? No one can come up with such interpretations unless he first holds to the Fundamentalist position and thinks it necessary to find a rationale, no matter how forced, for evading the Catholic interpretation. In John 6:63 "flesh" does not refer to Christ's own flesh—the context makes this clear—but to mankind's inclination to think on a natural, human level. "The words I have spoken to you are spirit" does not mean "What I have just said is symbolic." The word "spirit" is *never* used that way in the Bible. The line means that what Christ has said will be understood only through faith; only by the power of the Spirit and the drawing of the Father (cf. John 6:37, 44–45, 65).

Paul Confirms This

Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?" (1 Cor. 10:16). So when we receive Communion, we actually participate in the body and blood of Christ, not just eat symbols of them. Paul also said, "Therefore whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. . . . For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Cor. 11:27, 29). "To answer for the body and blood" of someone meant to be guilty of a crime as serious as homicide. How could eating mere bread and wine "unworthily" be so serious? Paul's comment makes sense only if the bread and wine became the real body and blood of Christ.

What Did the First Christians Say?

Anti-Catholics also claim the early Church took this chapter symbolically. Is that so? Let's see what some early Christians thought, keeping in mind that we can learn much about how Scripture should be interpreted by examining the writings of early Christians.

Ignatius of Antioch, who had been a disciple of the apostle John and who wrote a letter to the Smyrnaeans about A.D. 110, said, referring to "those who hold heterodox opinions," that "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" (6:2, 7:1).

Forty years later, Justin Martyr, wrote, "Not as common bread or 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 nourished, . . . is both the flesh and the blood of that incarnated Jesus" (*First Apology* 66:1–20).

Origen, in a homily written about A.D. 244, attested to belief in the Real Presence. "I wish to admonish you with examples from your religion. You are accustomed to take part in the divine mysteries, so you know how, when you have received the Body of the Lord, you reverently exercise every care lest a particle of it fall and lest anything of the consecrated gift perish. You account yourselves guilty, and rightly do you so believe, if any of it be lost through negligence" (*Homilies on Exodus* 13:3).

Cyril of Jerusalem, in a catechetical lecture presented in the mid-300s, said, "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" (*Catechetical Discourses: Mystagogic* 4:22:9).

In a fifth-century homily, Theodore of Mopsuestia seemed to be speaking to today's Evangelicals and Fundamentalists: "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 to receive them as they are, the body and blood of our Lord" (*Catechetical Homilies* 5:1).

Unanimous Testimony

Whatever else might be said, the early Church took John 6 literally. In fact, there is no record from the early centuries that implies Christians doubted the constant Catholic interpretation. There exists no document in which the literal interpretation is opposed and only the metaphorical accepted.

Why do Fundamentalists and Evangelicals reject the plain, literal interpretation of John 6? For them, Catholic sacraments are out because they imply a spiritual reality—grace—being conveyed by means of matter. This seems to them to be a violation of the divine plan. For many Protestants, matter is not to be used, but overcome or avoided.

One suspects, had they been asked by the Creator their opinion of how to bring about mankind's salvation, Fundamentalists would have advised him to adopt a different approach. How much cleaner things would be if spirit never dirtied itself with matter! But God approves of matter—he approves of it because he created it—and he approves of it so much that he comes to us under the appearances of bread and wine, just as he does in the physical form of the Incarnate Christ.

NIHIL OBSTAT: I have concluded that the materials presented in this work are free of doctrinal or moral errors.
Bernadeane Carr, STL, Censor Librorum, August 10, 2004

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