

THE EUCHARIST

Catholic Position Catholics believe that the Eucharist is the literal body and blood of Christ. The moment the priest says the word of consecration, the bread and blood are gone, replaced by the *real presence* of Christ, while only their appearances remain (*transubstantiation*).

Protestant Position Protestants believe Christ is only present symbolically in the Eucharist. The Eucharist is only meant to be a commemorative meal.

The Passover

To understand the Real Presence, we need to enter into the biblical world of Jesus' day with Jewish ears. The Passover is the most significant feast for the Jews. It recalled the great events in Israel's salvation history occurring on the same calendar day of Passover: the creation of the universe, the covenant with Abraham, and Israel's deliverance from Egypt. And it was on this night that the future messianic king was expected to bring redemption. Yahweh instructed them to keep the Passover as "a memorial" (Ex. 12:14). In the biblical understanding of "memorial", the past is not only remembered, but *relived*. All Israelites of all generations were delivered from Egypt, and all were truly united in God's covenant family in this Passover memorial.

Holy Communion

Ancient Israelites considered eating a meal with others a serious affair. Generally, they would do so only with family members and fellow Israelites in the covenant community. This covenant-forging power of meals took on even greater meaning when linked with ritual sacrifice because God was involved in sacrificial meals: part of the animal was offered to God and part of the animal was consumed by the worshipper. Eating the animal, and not just sacrificing it, sealed communion.

This is important, because in the New Testament Jesus is the new Passover lamb offered on the Cross (1 Cor. 5:7; 1Pet. 1:19; Rev. 5:6). John's Gospel portrays Christ's crucifixion with profound Passover imagery:

1. Jesus was sentenced to be crucified at "the sixth hour" on the Day of Preparation for the Passover – which was the same hour the Passover lambs would have been sacrificed.
2. Jesus was stripped of a seamless linen tunic (Jn. 19:23-24). The same word for this "garment" was used to describe the official tunic worn by the high priest during Temple sacrifices (Ex. 28:4; Lev. 16:4).
3. Just as the Jewish Passover lamb had no broken bones, so also Jesus' bones were never broken (Jn. 19:33,36; Ex. 12:46).
4. Jesus was given sour wine raised up to Him on a hyssop branch – the same type of branch used in that first Passover in Egypt for sprinkling the blood of the lamb on the Israelite doorposts (Jn. 19:29; Ex. 12:22).

If Jesus is the true Passover lamb sacrificed on Calvary, it would not be surprising to find a communion meal accompanying the sacrifice on the Cross.

The Eucharist**Real Presence**

In John 6, Jesus reached a new height in His popularity by having performed his greatest miracle to date. However, He then gave one of His most difficult teachings for people to accept. He began by saying, "*I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst*" (v35). The Jews began quarreling among themselves, taking offense that Jesus associated Himself with bread coming from heaven. Jesus went on saying, "*I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh*" (v51). This only provoked the people to anger all the more: "*How can this man give us his flesh to eat?*" (v52).

Notice how the crowd understood that Christ was speaking literally. In Aramaic, to symbolically "eat the flesh" or "drink the blood" of someone meant to persecute and assault him (Ps. 27:2; Is. 9:18-20; Is. 49:2; Micah 3:3; 2 Sam. 23:15-17; Rev. 17:6,16). It made nonsense to them if Jesus told them "whoever persecutes and assaults me will have eternal life."

But, Jesus did not correct them as he usually did as in Jn. 4:31-34 and Mt. 16:5-12. Instead He became only more explicit in v52-58. The Greek word used for the verb "to eat" in v54-58 actually means "to chew". The teaching is so hard to accept (v60) that even some of His disciples left Him (v66). This is the realism of Eucharistic Communion.

Later in the Last Supper, Jesus uses bread and wine, and tells us plainly that "*this is my body*" and "*this is my blood*". Bread and wine are not normal or natural symbols of flesh and blood. Jesus must be speaking literally. If this phrase were metaphorical, a serious difficulty arises in 1 Cor. 11:27, where Paul says that if one eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner he will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. In a Semitic culture, to be guilty of another's body and blood is to be guilty of murder. Yet how could one be guilty of murder if the bread is merely a symbol of Christ?

The Early Church Fathers believed in the Real Presence. St Ignatius of Antioch, a co-worker of the Apostle John, affirms that "the Eucharist is the Flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ" (Letter to the Smyrnaeans 6,2 [110 A.D.]). St Justin Martyr (150 A.D.), St Irenaeus (195 A.D.) and St Cyril of Jerusalem (350 A.D.) also hold the same view in their writings.

READING

The Eucharist's Long Shadow Across the Bible (*This Rock, January 1999*)

Further Research

- What are the many signs and symbols of the Eucharist in the Old Testament? (Gen 14:18; Ex 12:1-20; Ex 16:35; Numbers 17:25)
- In Jn 6:60-70, doesn't Jesus explain he was only speaking symbolically in the previous verses? Notice v63: "*It is the spirit that gives life, while the flesh is of no avail*".
- Jesus calls himself a "vine" (Jn 15:1) and a "door" (Jn 10:9). But he is not literally a vine or a door. So, why don't we suppose that Jesus is likewise speaking figuratively in the Last Supper?
- If the apostles consumed Jesus' real body and blood, wouldn't they be committing cannibalism?
- What are some of the Eucharistic miracles in history? (e.g. the Lanciano monastery incident, Therese Neumann, etc.)