



# “Participation in the Body of Christ”: The Eucharist

The Year of St. Paul  
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*Is the Eucharist a symbol of Christ, or is it really the body of Christ?  
Why do Catholics call the Eucharist a “sacrifice”? Why is this celebra-  
tion so important for the Church?*

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Since the time of the Reformation, Protestant and Catholics have differed in their understanding of the **Eucharist, or the Lord’s Supper**. **The Protestant Reformers, while disagreeing with each other on exact details, all rejected the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation (i.e., that the bread and wine of Communion cease to be bread and wine and truly become the body and blood Christ) and the belief that the Eucharist is a real participation in Christ’s sacrifice.**

This outline will address three underlying aspects of Catholic teaching regarding the Eucharist:

1. At the Last Supper, while celebrating the Passover with his Apostles, Jesus instituted the Eucharist. Jesus Christ is the new Passover sacrificial Lamb, and the Eucharist is the New Passover Feast.
2. In the Eucharist, Jesus Christ and his saving sacrifice are truly, not just symbolically, made present for the disciples of Jesus Christ.
3. **The Eucharist is the central act of the Church’s worship and is essential to the Church’s identity.**

## The New Passover

It is universally understood that, when Christ instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper, he did so within the context of the Passover meal. In the first Passover in Egypt, the Jews were commanded to slaughter a lamb, place its blood on their door posts, and eat the lamb, and they would be protected from the final plague—the death of all firstborn. God thus delivered them from slavery in Egypt and commanded them to keep the Passover each year. The first Passover was a celebration of their deliverance, a participation in the sacrifice of the lamb, and a source of nourishment for their Exodus journey.

Christ is the new Passover Lamb whose blood delivers humanity from slavery to sin. At the Last Supper, Christ told the Apostles to eat his body and drink his blood, just as the Jews had been told to eat the flesh of the first Passover Lamb. The new Passover is a celebration of deliverance from sin, a **participation in Christ’s sacrifice, and a source of nourishment, and a sharing in Christ’s life.**

Mark 14:22—24 While they were eating, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, and said, “Take it; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, and they all drank from it.

He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed for many.

John 6:49—59: Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died; this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world." The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us (his) flesh to eat?" Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever." These things he said while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum.

*See also Matthew 26:26—28; Luke 22:19—20 John 1:29; ; Exodus 12; Colossians 1:27; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 3:14—17; John 15:4—7; Leviticus 17:11*

## Real Presence, Real Sacrifice

**The root of the disagreement between Catholics and Protestants is whether Scripture's teaching on Communion is to be taken literally or figuratively.** Catholics understand Scripture to literally mean that the bread and wine of communion become the body and blood of Christ, while Protestants have **offered various symbolic explanations.** **Scripture does not imply that Jesus teaching on the Lord's Supper is merely symbolic, and the earliest Christians all understood him literally.** Similarly, Scripture **implies that the Eucharist is truly a participation in Christ's sacrifice, and the earliest Christians frequently referred to the Eucharist as a sacrifice.**

1 Corinthians 11:20—32: When you meet in one place, then, it is not to eat the Lord's supper, for in eating, each one goes ahead with his own supper, and one goes hungry while another gets drunk. Do you not have houses in which you can eat and drink? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and make those who have nothing feel ashamed? What can I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this matter I do not praise you. For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes. Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. A person should examine himself, and so eat the bread and drink the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are ill and infirm, and a considerable number are dying. If we discerned ourselves, we would not be under judgment; but since we are judged by (the) Lord, we are being disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

St Ignatius, who was trained by the Apostle John, wrote: I have no taste for corruptible food nor for the pleasures of this life. I desire the bread of God, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, who was of the seed of David; and for drink I desire his blood, which is love incorruptible...

Take note of those who hold heterodox opinions on the grace of Jesus Christ which has come to us, and 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 that Father, in his goodness, raised up again. They who deny the gift of God are perishing in their disputes.

St. Justin Martyr wrote in the second century: We call this food Eucharist, and no one else is permitted to partake of it, except one who believes our teaching to be true and who has been washed in the washing which is for the remission of sins and for regeneration [i.e., has received baptism] and is thereby living as Christ enjoined. For not as common bread nor 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 nurtured, is both the flesh and the blood of that incarnated Jesus.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem wrote in the fourth century: The bread and the wine of the Eucharist before the holy invocation of the adorable Trinity were simple bread and wine, but the invocation **having been made, the bread becomes the body of Christ and the wine the blood of Christ....**

**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 the faith, not doubting that you have been deemed worthy of the body and blood of Christ. . . . [Since you are] fully convinced that the apparent bread is not bread, even though it is sensible to the taste, but the body of Christ, and that the apparent wine is not wine, even though the taste would have it so, . . . partake of that bread as something spiritual, and put a cheerful face on your soul.

Hebrews 9:24—26: For Christ did not enter into a sanctuary made by hands, a copy of the true one, but heaven itself, that he might now appear before God on our behalf. Not that he might offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters each year into the sanctuary with blood that is not his own; if that were so, he would have had to suffer repeatedly from the foundation of the world. But now once for all he has appeared at the end of the ages to take away sin by his sacrifice.

1 Corinthians 10:16—21: The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. Look at Israel according to the flesh; are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? So what am I saying? That meat sacrificed to idols is anything? Or that an idol is anything? No, I mean that what they sacrifice, (they sacrifice) to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to become participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and also the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and of the table of demons.

St. Ignatius of Antioch: Make certain, therefore, that you all observe one common Eucharist; for there is but one Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, and but one cup of union with his Blood, and one single altar of sacrifice.

The *Didache*, **written around 70 AD as a summary of the Apostles' teaching, says: Assemble on the Lord's day, and break bread and offer the Eucharist; but first make confession of your faults, so that your sacrifice may be a pure one. Anyone who has a difference with his fellow is not to take part with you until he has been reconciled, so as to avoid any profanation of your sacrifice [Matt. 5:23–24]. For this is the offering of which the Lord has said, 'Everywhere and always bring me a sacrifice that is undefiled, for I am a great king, says the Lord, and my name is the wonder of nations'**

Malachi 1:11: For from the rising of the sun, even to its setting, my name is great among the nations; And everywhere they bring sacrifice to my name, and a pure [grain] offering; For great is my name among the nations, says the LORD of hosts.

St. Justin Martyr: God speaks by the mouth of Malachi, one of the twelve [minor prophets], as I said **before, about the sacrifices at that time presented by you: 'I have no pleasure in you, says the Lord, and I will not accept your sacrifices at your hands; for from the rising of the sun to the going down of the same, my name has been glorified among the Gentiles, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering, for my name is great among the Gentiles . . . [Mal. 1:10–11].** He then speaks of those Gentiles, namely us [Christians] who in every place offer sacrifices to him, that is, the bread of the Eucharist and also the cup of the Eucharist"

*See also Hebrews 7:24—25; Psalm 110:4 (quoted in Hebrews 5:6, 6:20, 7:17, 7:21); Genesis 14:18—20;*

## Central to the Church and Her Identity

**Since the Reformation, the celebration of the Lord's Supper has tended to become less and less significant among Protestant communities.** While some still celebrate weekly, others celebrate monthly, quarterly, annually, or not at all. The New Testament is clear, however, that the earliest Christians celebrated communion every Sunday, even daily. The breaking of the bread was central to their identity.

Acts 2:46: Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes.

*See also: Acts 20:7*