

The Fathers of the Church, the Eucharist, and the Real Presence

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Didache §14

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 they have been reconciled, so as to avoid any profanation of your sacrifice. 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 11:14).¹

St. Ignatius of Antioch

[The Docetists] hold aloof from the Eucharist and from services of prayer, because they refuse to admit that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins and which, in his goodness, the Father raised.²

I take no delight in corruptible food or in the dainties of this life. What I want is God's bread, which is the flesh of Christ, who came from David's line; and for drink I want his blood: an immortal love feast indeed!³

Be careful, then, to observe a single Eucharist. For there is one flesh of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and one cup of his blood that makes us one, and one altar, just as there is one bishop along with the presbytery and the deacons.⁴

St. Justin Martyr

This food we call Eucharist, of which no one is allowed to partake except one who believes that the things we teach are true, and has received the washing for forgiveness of sins and for rebirth, and who lives as Christ handed down to us. For we do not receive these things as common bread or common drink; but as Jesus Christ our Savior being incarnate by God's word took flesh and blood for our salvation, so also we have been taught that the food consecrated by the word of prayer which comes from him, from which our flesh and blood are nourished by transformation, is the flesh and blood of that incarnate Jesus.⁵

St. Irenaeus

But vain in every respect are they who despise the entire dispensation of God, and disallow the salvation of the flesh, and treat with contempt its regeneration, maintaining that it is not capable of immortality. If the body be not saved, then, in fact, neither did the Lord redeem us with His Blood; and neither is the cup of the Eucharist the partaking [communion] of His Blood nor is the Bread which we break the partaking of His Body. For blood can only come from veins and flesh, and whatsoever else makes up the substance of man, such as the Word of God was actually made.⁶

When, therefore, the chalice which has been mixed and the bread which has been made receives the word of God and becomes the Eucharist of the Blood and Body of Christ—due to which things the substance of our flesh is exalted and on which that flesh depends—how can [the Gnostics] deny that the flesh is capable of the gift of God which is eternal life—the flesh that is nourished by the Blood and Body of Christ and is a part of Him?⁷

St. Cyprian

Jesus Christ our Lord and God is himself the high priest of God the Father, and he first offers himself as a sacrifice to the Father, and commands this to be done in his remembrance. It follows then, of course, that the priest who truly acts in place of Christ is the priest who imitates that which Christ did, and offers a true and full sacrifice in the Church to God the Father.⁸

¹ Maxwell Staniforth, trans. *The Apostolic Fathers: Early Christian Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1968), 197.

² *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* §7: Cyril Richardson, trans. *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 114.

³ *Letter to the Romans* §7: Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers*, 105.

⁴ *Letter to the Philadelphians* §4: Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers*, 108.

⁵ *First Apology* §66: Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers*, 286.

⁶ *Against Heresies* 5.2.2: *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, p. 528.

⁷ *Against Heresies* 5.2.3.

⁸ *Letter 63* §14: Allen Brent, trans., *St. Cyprian of Carthage: On the Church, Select Letters* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006), 183.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem

For St. Paul has just distinctly said, “That our Lord Jesus Christ the same night in which He was betrayed, took bread, and when He had given thanks He broke it, and said, Take, eat, this is My Body; and having taken the cup and given thanks, He said, Take, drink, this is My Blood” (1 Cor 11:23–25). Since then Christ Himself has declared and said of the Bread, “This is My Body,” who shall dare to doubt any longer? And since He has affirmed and said, “This is My Blood,” who shall ever hesitate, saying that it is not His Blood? He once turned water into wine in Cana of Galilee, at His own will, and is it incredible that He should have turned wine into blood? . . . Therefore with fullest assurance let us partake of the Body and Blood of Christ: for in the figure of bread is given to you His Body, and in the figure of wine, His Blood in order that you, by partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, might be made of the same body and the same blood with Him.⁹

What seems bread is not bread, though bread by taste, but the Body of Christ; what seems wine is not wine, though taste will have it so, but the Blood of Christ.¹⁰

St. Ambrose

Perhaps you say: “The bread I have here is ordinary bread.” Yes, before the sacramental words are uttered this bread is nothing but bread. But at the consecration this bread becomes the body of Christ. Let us reason this out. How can something which is bread be the body of Christ? Well, by what words is the consecration effected, and whose words are they? The words of the Lord Jesus. All that is said before are the words of the priest: praise is offered to God, the prayer is offered up, petitions are made for the people, for kings, for all others. But when the moment comes for bringing the most holy sacrament into being, the priest does not use his own words any longer: he uses the words of Christ. Therefore, it is Christ’s word that brings this sacrament into being.

What is this word of Christ? It is the word by which all things were made. The Lord commanded and the heavens were made, the Lord commanded and the earth was made, the Lord commanded and the seas were made, the Lord commanded and all creatures came into being. See, then, how efficacious the word of Christ is. If, then, there is such power in the word of the Lord Jesus that things begin to exist which did not exist before, how much more powerful it is for changing what already existed into something else.

To answer your question, then, before the consecration it was not the body of Christ, but after the consecration I tell you that it is now the body of Christ. He spoke and it was made, he commanded and it was created. You yourself were in existence, but you were a creature of the old order; after your consecration, you began to exist as a new creature.¹¹

St. Augustine

We come now to what is done in the holy prayers which you are going to hear, that with the application of the word [of consecration] we may have the body and blood of Christ. Take away the word, I mean, it’s just bread and wine; add the word, and it’s now something else. And what is that something else? The Body of Christ, and the Blood of Christ. So take away the word, it’s bread and wine; add the word and it will become the sacrament.¹²

So Christ our Lord, who offered by suffering for us what by being born he had received from us, has become our high priest for ever, and has given us the order of sacrifice which you can see, of his body that is to say, and his blood. When his body, remember, was pierced by the lance, it poured forth the water and the blood by which he cancelled our sins. Be mindful of this grace as you work out your salvation, since it is God who is at work in you, and approach with fear and trembling to partake of this altar. Recognize in the bread what hung on the cross, and in the cup what flowed from his side.¹³

For Further Reading:

Lawrence Feingold, *The Eucharist: Mystery of Presence, Sacrifice, and Communion* (Steubenville: Emmaus Academic, 2018), esp. Chapter 4.

⁹ *Mystagogical Catechesis* 4 §1–2: F.L. Cross, trans., *St. Cyril of Jerusalem: Lectures on the Christian Sacraments* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1951), 68.

¹⁰ ¹⁰ *Mystagogical Catechesis* 4 §9: F.L. Cross, trans., *St. Cyril of Jerusalem: Lectures on the Christian Sacraments* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1951), 71.

¹¹ *On the Sacraments* 4.14–16: Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1994), 132–33.

¹² *Sermon* 229 §3: R. Teske, trans., *Works of Saint Augustine* vol. III/6 (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1993), 266.

¹³ *Sermon* 228B §2: R. Teske, trans., *Works of Saint Augustine* vol. III/6 (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1993), 261–62.