

Another Letter to an Agnostic

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Witnesses to the authenticity of the Eucharist, and answers the agnostic's objections of religion's cannibalism. Recognizing that the Eucharist is a difficult teaching to accept, she argues that its understanding lies in its simplicity. Christ nourishes through His presence and accomplishes this through the most simple elements of life, bread and wine. (DDLW #54).

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[*Editorial Note:*The following is an actual letter addressed to a****friend, and the theological terms used, while not always the usual technical ones, are to be taken in the orthodox sense intended by the writer, as in many ascetical writings.]

It has been only with a great deal of hesitation that I sit down to write this second letter to you, taking up the second objection you have to religion. (It is interesting to note that your objections, as the objections of most Communists and agnostics, are to the *Catholic* Faith. The words *Catholic* and *religion* go together in your mind.)

Blasphemies one hesitates to set down on paper, they are so horrifying. Many would put your second objection in this category. One nun to whom I mentioned it shuddered involuntarily, but she did not try to meet it. And in the past when I have heard it, and all Catholics have heard it many times, I too did not try to answer. You made your objection in good faith, not in any spirit of hatred or malice, and I have heard it made in good faith before. So I think it is just as well to try to meet it though it is hard, well-nigh impossible, to talk of such things to one who has no faith. I am somewhat heartened by something I read this morning in Faber, "It is our duty as well as our privilege to look into this mystery."

You say you object to religion because it has a *cannibalistic* aspect which revolts you. A twelve-year-old girl who was brought up with no knowledge of the Christian religion said almost the same thing to me last winter.

"Catholics believe that they eat the Body and Blood of Christ, don't they?" she said, with a look of distaste. She too did not mean to blaspheme. She was honest. And I'm going to send this letter to her, too, when I have finished it.

I suppose I never felt this objection, this repulsion, because long before I became a radical I had felt deeply the Mysteries of faith, not *the* Faith, but faith nevertheless.

I read the Bible when I was twelve, and Wesley's sermons, picked up in a second-hand store, uplifted my soul to God and I knew what my conscience was and what was good and evil. I had once accepted the doctrine of the Holy Eucharist. So when I came back to God there was not that difficulty to overcome.

It is easy for a little child to accept unquestioningly. That is why the League of the Militant Godless is so anxious to keep religion from little children. Because they know they will accept it, and though they fall away afterward perhaps, in an arrogant and adventurous adolescence, still is not so insuperably difficult to come back to it because there is some kernel of truth lying hidden, there in the soul. You never had any religious instruction when you were a child, so the difficulty is there for you.

If you know the New Testament at all (and you ought to look into it if you do not know it, for many Communists express an admiration for the Man Jesus and I.W.W.'s in the old days used to speak of "Comrade Jesus"), you will find there that the first to whom Christ taught this doctrine of the Blessed Sacrament turned from Him at the hearing of it.

This teaching, that Christ would be their daily bread, was so simple, so elemental a thing, in spite of its mystery that children and the simplest and least of people in the world could understand and accept it.

St. Teresa says that Christ is disguised as bread so that we will not fear to approach Him – so that we can go to Him in confidence, daily, needing Him daily as we need our physical bread.

We are not, most of us, capable of exalted emotion, save rarely. We are not capable of feelings of love, awe, gratitude, and repentance. So Christ has taken the form of bread that we may more readily approach Him, and feeding daily, assimilating Christ so that it is not we but Christ working in us, we become more capable of understanding and realizing and loving Him.

Yes, in bread, Christ has become so simple – has condescended so far that a child, a savage, can understand and eat the sacred food with love and gratitude. He that we would be scandalized, so it is no use being surprised and horrified at the bluntness of your objection. And even the nearest and dearest of His friends were dispersed and fled, not understanding or realizing the mystery of the Redemption, how Christ was laying down His life for all men.

When He prayed in agony in the garden – when all the weight of sins descended upon Him, all the sins that had been and that would be committed throughout the world forever after; when He suffered all the temptations, all the horror, all the remorse for the rest of the world – His disciples did not understand that either. He watched and suffered in His agony and prayed. He had told them that the next day He was to die. And in spite of His miracles they paid so little attention to His words that they slept, as the friend they loved most in the world struggled against the thought of His death. They left Him alone, they slept, and the next day they all fled so little did they understand His teachings, though they had been with Him for three years and listened to His talk.

They did not understand even after they had eaten with Him at the Last Supper. They did not understand until the Holy Spirit descended upon them and it was given to them to understand.

So how can I understand or try to tell you about it? If they who *lived* with Him, who could see Him as man, eat with Him, sleep with Him, and wander with Him through the countryside, if they were “offended” and dispersed, how can I try to tell you what is in my heart? I do not ask myself, “How can I try to overcome your objection?” Only God can do that. I am not trying to convert you, but just trying not to let go unchallenged your objections, for fear that my not answering would seem to you a kind of denial of Him whom I love.

There is the question, why did Christ institute this Sacrament of His Body and Blood. And the answer is very simple. It was because He loved us and wished to be with us. “My delights are to be with the children of men.” He made us and He loved us. His presence in the Blessed Sacrament is the great proof of that love.

St. Teresa of Avila said that we should meditate more on the love of God for us, rather than our love for Him. And she emphasizes His sacred *Humanity* and says that by never losing sight of that it is easier for us to realize that love. She is always talking about the Man Jesus.

But it is hard to understand the love of God for us. We pray daily to increase in the love of God, because we know that if we love a person very much, all things become easy to us and delightful. We want, rather unreasonably, sensible feelings of love. St. Teresa says that the only way we can measure the love we have for God, is the love we have for our fellows. So by working for our fellows we come to love them. That you understand, for you believe that you are working for them when you give hours every morning to the distribution of literature, climbing tenement-house stairs, knocking at doors, suffering rebuffs, enduring heat and cold, weariness and hardship, to bring to them what you consider a gospel which will set them free.

And if you and I love our faulty fellow-human beings, how much more must God love us all? If we as human parents, can forgive our children any neglect, any crime, and work and pray patiently to make them better, how much more does God love us?

You may say perhaps: “How do we know He does, if there is a He!” And I can only answer that we know it because He is here present with us today in the Blessed Sacrament on the altar, that He never has left us, that by daily going to Him for the gift of Himself as daily bread, I am convinced of that love. I have the faith that feeding at that table has nourished my soul so that there is life in it, and a lively realization that there is such a thing as the love of Christ for us.

It took me a long time as a convert to realize the presence of Christ as *Man* in the Sacrament. He is the same Jesus who walked on earth, who slept in the boat as the tempest arose, who hungered in the desert, who prayed in the garden,

who conversed with the woman by the well, who rested at the house of Martha and Mary, who wandered through the cornfields, picking the ears of corn to eat.

Jesus is there as *Man*. He is there, flesh and blood, soul and Divinity. He is our leader who is always with us. Do you wonder that Catholics are exultant in this knowledge, that their leader is with them? "I shall be with you always, even to the end of the world."

Christ is bread on our altars because bread is the staple of the world, the simplest thing in the world, something of which we eat and never get tired. We will always have bread whether it is corn, wheat, or rye, or whatever it is made from. We will always find wherever we go some staple which is called bread.

We eat to sustain life; it is the most elemental thing we do. For the life of the body we need food. For the life of the soul we need food. So the simplest, most loving, most thorough thing Christ could do before He died was to institute the Blessed Sacrament and hold up bread and say, "This is my body," and wine and say "This my blood; take and eat. Do this in commemoration of me." If you sat and thought forever and ever, you could not think of any way for Christ to remain with us, which would bring us closer to Him.

I could keep on writing and writing and never come to the end of this letter, but I won't. I only hope that in your sincerity, which acknowledges my sincerity, you will read it through. You know how much emphasis Christ put on the "little ones" who are the majority. Not only the children, but the poor and helpless. Those without learning when it comes to reading books about the Blessed Sacrament or dialectic materialism are another instance of what I mean.

With all my writing to you the products of my thought on this subject, I can only end with the words of Jesus:

"I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: Even so, Father. For so it seemed good in thy sight."

For so it seemed good in His sight!