

The Early Church's Understanding of the Eucharist

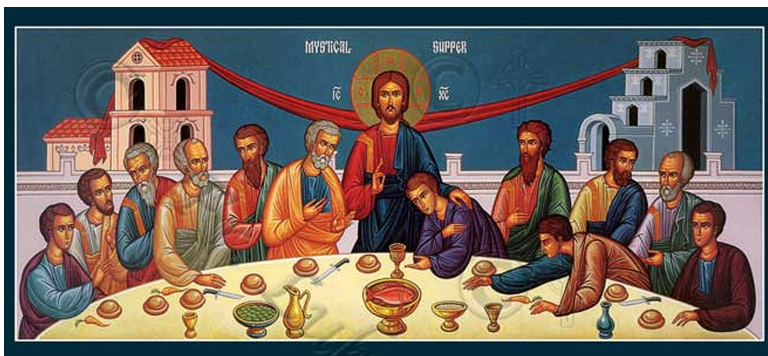
There are many different beliefs, interpretations, and thoughts about what the Eucharist is, especially in the landscape of Christian denominations found in the United States. Is it a symbol of the Body and Blood of God? Is it a way for Christians to come together in unity to remember our Lord's Sacrifice on the Cross? Does the bread and wine that is offered truly become the Body and Blood of God Himself?

One of the best ways to answer the difficult questions in Christian Theology is to look at what the earliest Christians (those who were either taught by the apostles or their descendants) believed. Below, you will find various quotes regarding the Eucharist from some of the earliest Bishops and Saints of the Church during the first 3 centuries. The final quote is from perhaps the greatest Christian Orator of all time, St. John Chrysostom, whose Divine Liturgy we celebrate on Sundays outside of Great Lent.

Holy Scriptures

What better place is there to start than through Holy Scripture? Although there are numerous references to the Eucharist, let us look at two of them which can help answer our question about what Holy Communion truly is.

Our Lord said in Luke 22, "This **IS** my Body...this **IS** my blood." He never says these gifts merely symbolize His Body and Blood. Critics have charged that Jesus also said of Himself "***I am the door***" (John 10:7), and He is certainly not a seven foot wooden plank. The flaw in that argument is obvious: At no time has the Church ever believed that Christ was a literal door. She has, however, always believe that the consecrated gifts of bread and wine are truly His Body and Blood, as we will discover in the writings of the early Church later in this study.



St. Paul's words in his first letter to the Corinthians, speak about how those who receive Christ's Body and Blood unworthily are said to bring condemnation to themselves: ***"Therefore whoever eats this bread and drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the***

bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner, eats and drinks judgment to himself not concerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep" (which literally translated "are dead")

One might ask why St. Paul would use such strong language if Holy Communion was but a mere symbol?

St. Ignatius of Antioch (110 A.D.)

St. Ignatius was a disciple of the Apostle John, and was the second Bishop of Antioch, one of the original local Churches. Tradition suggests that it was St. Ignatius who was the small child that Christ hugged before saying: *“Unless you turn and become as little children, you shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven”* (Matthew 18:3). St. Ignatius is sometimes called “God Bearer”, not only because he bore God in his heart and prayed unceasingly to Him, but because it was God incarnate Who once held St. Ignatius in His own arms.



Here are some of St. Ignatius’s quotes on the Eucharist, taken from his letter to the Romans and to the Smyrnaeans:

“I have no taste for corruptible food nor the pleasures of this life. I desire the bread of God, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, who was the seed of David; and for drink I desire His blood, which is love incorruptible.”

“Take note of those who hold heterodox opinions of 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 (151 A.D.)

After being baptized at age 13, St. Justin spent a majority of his life preaching the Gospel among the Pagans of the Roman Empire. During the first persecution of Christians, he was known for many of his writings and debates against various Pagan and Jewish Philosophers. He was eventually tortured and martyred in Rome in the year 165.

In his First Apology 66, written in 151 AD, St. Justin writes about why it is important to have received baptism before partaking of the Eucharist, thus showing the importance of “Closed Communion”:

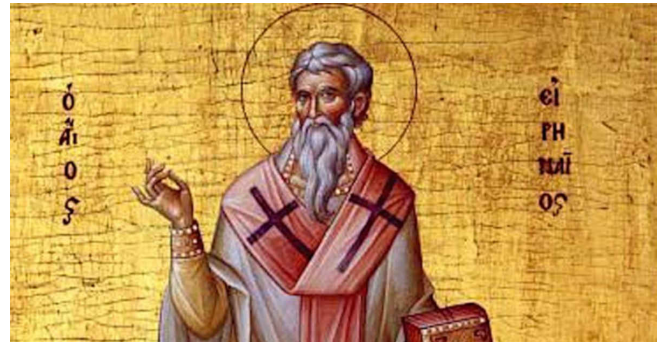
“We call this food Eucharist, and no one else is permitted to partake of it, except one who believes our teaching to be true and who has washed in the washing which is for the remission of sins and for regeneration (baptism) and is thereby living as Christ enjoined. For not as common bread nor common 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 blood of that incarnated Jesus.”

St. Irenaeus of Lyon (189 A.D.)

St. Irenaeus was born in 130 A.D., and was a disciple of St. Polycarp, who received the faith and the laying on of hands by St. John the Evangelist Himself. Throughout his lifetime, many heresies (choosing to believe something other than what was passed on) began to creep up in Christianity. St. Irenaeus was especially known for his writings on refuting these heresies, and famously spoke out against the dangers of personal interpretation of the faith:

“Anyone who desires to know truth ought to turn to the Church, since through Her alone did the apostles expound the Divine Truth. She is the door to life!”

In St. Irenaeus’s writing “Against Heresies,” written in 189 A.D., St. Irenaeus wrote **against** the thought that it is impossible for the Eucharist to be the Body and Blood of God.



“He has declared the cup, a part of creation, to be His own blood, from which He causes our blood to flow; and the bread, a part of creation, He has established as His own body, from which He gives increase unto our bodies. When, therefore, the mixed cup and baked bread receives the Word of God and becomes the Eucharist, the body of Christ, and from these the substance of our flesh is increased and supported, how can they say that the flesh is not capable of receiving the gift of God, which is eternal life—flesh which is nourished by the body and blood of the Lord, and is in fact a member of Him?”

St. Cyprian of Carthage (A.D. 251)

St. Cyprian was born in Carthage in about the year 200. He was a very gifted orator and a teacher of rhetoric and philosophy in the school of Carthage. After he became Bishop, St. Cyprian was known for his writings to those who had left the faith under the pressure of Christian Persecution. In his writing called “The Lapsed” written in 251 A.D., talks about the importance of confession and the cleansing of the conscience before partaking of the Holy Eucharist:

“St. Paul threatens, moreover, the stubborn and forward, and denounces them saying, “Whosoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily is guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. (1 Cor. 11:27)”. All these warnings being scorned and contemned, lapsed Christians will often take Communion before their sin is expiated, before confession is made of their crime, before their conscience has been purged by sacrifice and by the hand of the priest, (and so) violence is done to His body and blood; and they sin now against their Lord more with their hand and mouth than when they denied their Lord.”

St. John Chrysostom (4th Century)

St. John Chrysostom was born in Antioch in the year 347. His pastoral zeal, as well as his famous homilies, gave him the nickname “St. John the Golden Mouthed”. He is known for many of his writings, and is revered not only amongst the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, but also by many Protestant Scholars as well. His homily on Great and Holy Pascha is still read to this day after the Midnight Service on the Eve of the Resurrection.

In perhaps one of the most striking images of what the Eucharist is, Here is one of St. John Chrysostom’s homilies on 1 Timothy, where he speaks in the person of Christ about what the Eucharist truly is, and what it does for us as Christians:

“But what shall I say? Is it not in this way only that I have shown My Love to you? Why have I suffered? For you I was spit upon. For you I was scourged. I emptied myself of glory. I left my Father and came to you, who hates Me, and turns from Me, and loathes to hear my Name.

I pursued You. I ran after You that I might overtake You. I united and joined You to myself! “Eat Me, Drink Me” I said. Above I hold You and below I embrace You. Is it not enough for You that I have Your first fruits above? Doesn’t this satisfy Your affection?

I descended below. I not only am mingled with You, I am entwined in You. I am masticated (chewed), broken into minute particles, that the interspersion and commixture and union may be more complete. Things that are united remain in their own limits, but I am interwoven with You. I would have no more any division between us. I will, that we both be one.”

