

# The Sacred Mystery of Christ's Body

“...the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said,

**‘This is my body which 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 Lord’s death until he comes.”

— 1 Corinthians 11: 24-26

In 1 Corinthians 11, St. Paul testifies that an important part of his apostolic mission is to communicate the Sacrament of the Eucharist to the Church and to do it properly.

St. Paul uses the same words that are given in the synoptic Gospels, “This is my body which is for you.” Then St. Paul says that when we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. In this way, the Holy Spirit associates the Mass with the death of the Lord. The Mass is the mystical Presence of the Sacrifice of Christ crucified and also resurrected. The Mass is a proclamation of the death of the Lord. It proclaims his death in its action. This is what Christians have believed from the beginning of Christianity. Unfortunately now, even many, many Catholics do not believe in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass as confecting the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Let’s look at *our* life for a moment.

When a woman is pregnant, we say she is expecting. And when the baby is delivered from the woman’s body, both parents and everyone else delights in gazing on the beauty, the purity, the innocence of the baby.

The baby too makes her own declarations. Her very existence announces her needs to be protected, fed and loved.

Present in the world in this new

way, her very existence declares, “this is my body!” This is my body! I need your love. And when you love me, you will discover yourself. You discover your limits and your goodness in new ways. You will see just how much you are capable of loving.

There is a saying: the child is father to the man. That is the meaning of that saying; that we see what is really inside of us when we have children.

When a man and a woman get married, they seek to give their bodies to each other because the body is a kind of effusion of the soul. In giving the body, one gives one’s whole self. That is the message that is sent. The man and the woman say, “this is my body,” and in their highest aspirations they say, “it is given for you.”

The one who offers their body is full of hope that what they offer will satisfy the other.

I think we *all* hope to live in such a way that when we die, we will be remembered as noble, virtuous and selfless people. The more noble and loving we are, the more honor will be happily bestowed on us. This is, of course, not the *reason* we try to be noble or loving. We do not seek honors. Such an attitude empties all the good out of our good acts.

But there in the coffin, or through the photos and other remembrances, we hope that people will treasure how, with our life, we said, “this is

my body — my life — it is for you.”

The soldier, the police officer who has died in the act of serving; the mother who sacrifices herself giving birth... they display their generosity in their supine forms: “this is my body — it was given for you.”

Christ gives his body to us with *all* these meanings. In his purity, innocence and divine beauty, he actually surpasses a baby’s beauty. Jesus gives himself to us like a lover with tenderness and vulnerability as well as self-sacrificing love.

When Jesus said, “This is my body,” he summarizes the whole mystery of his human life. He recalls his coming in the flesh in Mary’s womb, he anticipates his death by saying, “given for you,” and, because he is God, he *continuously* offers his body for the communion of love available to all.

In giving his body, Christ mystically extends his very self to us through the Incarnation. When we receive Christ’s body, we become members of his body by his initiative and power. Because Jesus Christ has identified with us so deeply — making himself one with us down into the very reality of our nature and existence — in one sense, *Jesus gives himself to himself by giving himself to us*. And we who *are* the body we receive, *become* the body we receive. In these acts we trace the reflections of the mutual outpouring of the Trinity within itself at work in our midst.

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Jesus Christ refers to himself as the living bread that came down from heaven (John 6: 51). He is the living bread because he is divine life itself that comes to nourish our souls with his indwelling. First, the flesh of Jesus will be baked in the fire of his sufferings and only then be glorified and distributed for all to consume who believe in him.

When Christ commanded his apostles to offer the sacrament of his body to others, the apostles

identified the crucial formula: “this is my body, which is for you.” It is Jesus himself who speaks these words through apostolic succession to draw us to himself.

“The bread that I give for the life of the world is my flesh.” The food that I give is my flesh. I want you to be nourished in, and draw strength from my flesh. I want to provide you the fulfillment of being united to me and living my life by my very flesh.

Christ’s body is the sacrament of the Father. It is the sacrament of

love. It is love.

Christ’s body is undying love! It is infinite love! St. Augustine exhorted his flock to become what you receive (sermo 57). To become what we receive is to become the love of God. God wants us to become his love in *this* — “my” body.

— Father Gerald

“This is my body” is also in Matthew 26: 26, Mark 14: 22, Luke 22: 19; all three synoptic Gospels use the same language.

## Did Jesus Give Us His “Body” or His “Flesh”?



Following the indications of the Gospel accounts, we could have thought that Jesus used the term “body” and not “flesh”. Indeed these accounts report the formula, “This is my body”. What we have, however, is a Greek translation, and the problem is to know what Aramaic term was used by Jesus.

There is every indication that Jesus used the term “flesh”. Indeed, “flesh” is the Semitic term used in parallel with “blood”. We always find in the Bible the pair “flesh and blood” and never “body and blood”. Jesus himself uses the expression “flesh and blood” to indicate the human as opposed to what is revealed by the Father (Matt. 16: 17).

John’s Gospel confirms this use of the term “flesh” in a Eucharistic context. It reports the basic declaration according to which flesh and blood are indissolubly joined: “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (John 6: 53). The expression “the flesh of the Son of Man” has a particular Semitic flavor that harks back more clearly to Jesus’ language, given that Jesus was accustomed to designate himself as the Son of Man when he wished to express his divine origin

and his mission. Speaking of the flesh of the Son of Man, he sought to convey that his body was not given as food as the body of an ordinary human being living on

earth could have been: his flesh could be given as food only by virtue of the glorious lot assigned to the Son of Man. Later, in order to clarify the sense of the Eucharistic proclamation, he will define his flesh as the flesh of the Son of Man restored to heavenly glory through the Ascension (John 6: 62).

The flesh of the Son of Man is none other than the flesh of Jesus, so that the very assertion of his power to give his life is expressed through the words “my flesh”: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day (John 6: 54).

The declaration is very akin to the accounts of the institution of the Eucharist: “Eat my flesh” and “drink my blood” correspond to the words, “Eat: this is my body; drink: this is my blood”, with the difference that the term used is “flesh” (in Greek, *sarx*) and not “body” (*soma*). We believe that the author of the Gospel, here recounting the institution that he had not included in his account of the Last Supper, attributes to Jesus the following words: “Eat: this is my flesh,” and “Drink: this is my blood”.

The expression “my flesh” is emphatically used in Christ’s justification of the invitation to eat and

drink: “For my flesh is true food and my blood true drink: (John 6: 55). This better explains why Jesus does not speak of bread or wine. All the reality of the nourishment is found in his flesh, and all of the reality of the drink is found in his blood.

This use of term “flesh” in the formula of the consecration is also implicit in the declaration “The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (John 6: 51). The word “bread” is pronounced, but certainly not in the ordinary sense of the term, nor is it used to designate the material bread that serves as a sign in the Eucharistic celebration. It is a matter of the “living bread that came down from heaven” (John 6: 51), which is Jesus himself. “Bread” is used as a synonym for “nourishment”.

The assertion “is my flesh” not only confirms the supposition that Jesus expressed himself in this way at the Last Supper but also indicates the formula in its most complete version: “for the life of the world...my flesh” indicates the flesh given or offered for the salvation of humanity, or else, in parallel with what is said of the blood “poured out for many”, the flesh sacrificed for many, for the human multitude. The indication of this purpose is essential: Christ’s flesh is given as food in virtue of the sacrifice offered for the world.

from *The Eucharist, Gift of Divine Life*, by the Theological-Historical Commission for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, pages 66-68. This is printed without any permission whatsoever. I just typed it right in. But it is out of print so... I decided to live dangerously. FrG