

The Eucharist - Witness of the Early Church

by Jim Seghers

Many Christians give a symbolic interpretation to Jesus' thrilling discourse on the Eucharist which John so movingly recounts in his gospel (Jn 6:26-59). Not only did Jesus' listeners understand that Jesus was speaking literally (Jn 6:41, 52), but this is the only recorded incident in which disciples broke with Jesus over a doctrinal issue (Jn 6:66). Tragically, Judas' unbelief in the Eucharist was the root cause of his betrayal (Jn 6:64, 70-71). The text in John's Gospel is so explicit that it is difficult to understand how anyone could distort the meaning with a metaphorical explanation. It's unfortunate that we don't have other writings of St. John which would amplify the clear meaning of this passage.

Fortunately, we possess the next best thing, namely, a faithful witness who was a disciple of John. His name is Ignatius. Ignatius was the third bishop of Antioch. He succeeded Evodius who was the immediate successor of Peter. In the year 110 A.D. Ignatius was sentenced to the beasts in the Roman arena. During the journey from Antioch to Rome to his martyrdom, this hero wrote seven letters to the churches at Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Rome, Philadelphia, Smyrna and a personal letter to his friend, Polycarp of Smyrna, who would also die a martyr's death.

The following quotations from this great martyr's letters clearly demonstrates the instruction he received from John and the belief of the early Church in the Eucharist.

Letter to the Romans: "I take no pleasure in corruptible food or the pleasures of this life. I want the bread of God, which is the *flesh of Christ* who is of the seed of David; and for drink I want *his blood*, which is incorruptible love" (*The Apostolic Fathers*, translated by J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, edited and revised by Michael W. Homes. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, c. 1989, p. 105).

Letter to the Philadelphians: "Take care, therefore, to participate in *one Eucharist* (for there is *one flesh* of our *Lord Jesus Christ*, and one cup which leads to unity through *his blood*; there is one altar, just as there is one bishop, together with the presbytery and the deacons, my fellow servants), in order that whatever you do, you do in accordance with God" (Ibid., p. 107).

Letter to the Smyrnaeans: "Now note well those who hold *heretical opinions* about the grace of Jesus Christ which came to us; note how *contrary* they are to the *mind of God*. ... They abstain from the *Eucharist* and prayer, because they *refuse to acknowledge* that the *Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ*, which suffered for our sins and which the Father by his goodness raised up" (Ibid., p. 112).

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