

The Eucharist of John

by Jim Seghers

The Eucharistic teaching of St. John is most fully developed in chapter six of his Gospel, which narrates Jesus' long instruction on the bread of life. In that powerful passage Jesus uses explicit and graphic language to affirm that "he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and in him" (Jn 6:56). Jesus' audience understood that he was speaking literally. They responded, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it" (Jn 6: 60)? This is the only time disciples broke with Jesus over a doctrinal issue. We are told: "After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him" (Jn 6:66).

In the bread of life discourse the physical reality of the Eucharist is developed and emphasized. It's really Jesus. However, what is sometimes missed is the expansion of John's Eucharistic theology in chapter 15 verses 1-17 and its connection with John 6. Specifically, this is the beautiful passage in which Jesus describes himself as the vine and the Church as the branches. The Eucharistic motif of John 15 is affirmed by many scholars including Protestant Oscar Cullmann, who asserts: "The relation between the branch and the vine is, therefore, above all, the eucharistic communion of believers with Christ."¹

The two passages are complimentary. John 6 focuses on the reality of Jesus' physical presence in the Eucharist, whereas John 15 amplifies its transforming power. "As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me... for apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:4-5).

Jesus clarifies the meaning of fruitfulness. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends... but I chosen you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide... This I command you, to love one another" (Jn 15:12-13, 16, 17).

The word "abide" is used 9 times in this passage. It is clearly connected with the use of the same word in John 6:56. It emphasizes the physical oneness achieved through the Eucharist. In communion the Christian receives Jesus into his body, but he is absorbed into Jesus and abides in him. St. Paul will expand this idea through his instruction on the Body of Christ (1 Cor 6:15; 10:16; 12:12, 27; Rom 7:4; 12:5; Eph 4:12, 16; 5:23; Heb 10:10). For St. Paul the reality of the real, physical presence of Jesus in the Eucharist is indisputable.

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread (1 Cor 10:16-17). Paul's meaning is clear. If the Eucharist is reduced to a mere symbol than the Mystical Body of Christ becomes an empty metaphor.

¹ O. Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, translated by A. S. Todd & J. B. Torrance, SCM Press, p. 113.

In addition to the “abide” language which connects John 6 and 15 the parallel is reinforced by Jesus’ *egó eimi* (I am) statements, “I am the true vine” (Jn 15:1, 5), which corresponds to “I am the bread of life” (Jn 6:35). It is also significant that Jesus’ discourse in John 15 takes place at the Last Supper where Jesus first uttered the words of institution.

John presents a prefiguring of the Eucharist in the superabundance of the miracle at Cana (Jn 2:6). The amazed steward says to the bridegroom: “But you have kept the good wine until now” (Jn 2:10). In the most profound sense Jesus is the real bridegroom (Jn 3:29). He has indeed kept the best wine until now!

The fruit of the Eucharist is self-sacrificing love. This is the “cup” that Jesus drank to the dregs (Jn 18:11). The power of his transforming presence is beautifully portrayed in the lives of two martyrs, both of whom were instructed by apostles - Ignatius the bishop of Antioch and Polycarp the bishop of Smyrna.

Ignatius was sent to Rome in the company of ten soldiers to be devoured by the beasts. On this journey he wrote seven letters, six to churches and one to Polycarp who he prophetically urged to “stand firm, like an anvil being struck with a hammer”². These letters are important because they affirm the Apostolic Church’s belief in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. For example, Ignatius wrote to the Smyrnaeans:

“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.”³

In his letter to the Romans Ignatius also demonstrates his understanding of the self-sacrificing transformation of the Eucharist. Notice how he employs Eucharistic language to plea with the Christians in Rome not to prevent his execution. “I implore you: do not be ‘unreasonable kind’ to me. Let me be food for the wild beasts, through whom I can reach God. I am God’s wheat, and I am being ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I might prove to be pure bread... Pray to the Lord on my behalf, that through these instruments I might prove to be a sacrifice to God.”⁴

The Martyrdom of Polycarp is wonderfully inspiring. The procouncil urged Polycarp to reject Jesus to avoid being consumed by fire. He replied: “For 86 years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”⁵

The eyewitness account describes Polycarp’s martyrdom as a Eucharistic sacrifice. He appeared “like a splendid ram chosen from a great flock for a sacrifice, a burnt offering prepared and

² J.B. Lightfoot & J.R. Harmer translators, *The Apostolic Fathers* edited by Michael W. Holmes, Baker Book House, p. 116.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

acceptable to God.”⁶ Looking up to heaven he prayed, “I bless you because you have considered me worthy of this day and hour, that I might receive a place among the number of the martyrs in the cup of your Christ... May I be received among them in your presence today, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice.”⁷

As a mighty blaze engulfed the saint the witnesses beheld a miracle. “For the fire, taking the shape of an arch, like the sail of a ship filled by the wind, completely surrounded the body of the martyr; and it was there in the middle, not like flesh burning but like bread baking.”⁸

The martyrdom of Ignatius and Polycarp affirms the transforming power of the Eucharist. “He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit” (Jn 15:5). “The Eucharist is the heart and the summit of the Church’s life, for in it Christ associates his Church and all his members with his sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving offered once for all on the cross to his Father; by this sacrifice he pours out the graces of salvation on his Body which is the Church.”⁹

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⁶ Ibid., p. 140.

⁷ Ibid., p. 141.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ [*Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1407.*](#)