

A DIALOGUE: THE EUCHARIST, PART I

By: Christopher J. Aubert

(The following is Chris Aubert's response to a question regarding the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.)

Barry, thanks again for all the time and effort Tuesday. I REALLY enjoyed it, and I appreciate all that you have done for me over the years.

I have researched and prayed about Exodus 20:4, as you requested, in the context of the Eucharist. This note shall explain my response to your inquiry. I have typed this myself, and I hope you will overlook any typos or other grammatical mistakes – I'm a pretty good lawyer but a lousy secretary!

Before I give you my response, I think I should set a few guidelines.

THREE BACKGROUND POINTS:

First, let's agree on what the passage at issue says. My Bible says, "You shall not carve idols for yourselves in the shape of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth." I found a NIV Bible that says, "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below." I trust that these two translations are two that you can accept as valid, but to give you every benefit of the doubt I will, in my comments below, refer solely to your NIV Bible's translation. In this regard, I also understand, from our brief subsequent telephone conversation, that you want me to consider the word "anything" as the operative term in this verse. I will do that.

Second, let's see if we agree on the issue you raise, or the point you wish to make by the comparison of Exodus 20:4 to the Eucharist. The issue or point, as I see it, is whether the Eucharist given at Catholic Mass is the body and blood of Jesus Christ. I, as a Catholic, firmly believe that the Eucharist is, in fact and indeed, the body, blood, soul, and divinity

of Jesus Christ Himself. You as non-Catholic do not believe this, and, instead, believe that the Eucharist is merely a symbolic representation or symbol of Jesus Christ.

More particularly with regard to this second background guideline, I will presume, respectfully, that your point is, the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist being the actual body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ is contrary to God's Word in Exodus 20:4 and that it is rebellion to the Word of God to partake in the Catholic Mass because it is an abomination to worship and adore a piece a bread and cup of wine. Such a Catholic belief, I presume the point continues, constitutes a form of idol worship that directly violates Exodus 20:4. I assume that you will agree that I have correctly identified the issue at hand.

Third, let me make one simple observation that I am sure you will agree with. That observation is: The Catholic position that the Eucharist is, in fact and indeed, the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus Christ Himself has only two possible answers: (1) it is either true, or (2) it is false. There is no other possibility, and there is no middle ground. Again, I assume that you will agree with this observation.

With these observations in mind, the real question, I think you will agree, thus becomes, very simply, which of us is correct?

MY RESPONSE TO YOUR INQUIRY:

My short answer to your inquiry is: there is no connection whatsoever between Exodus 20:4 and the Catholic concept of the Eucharist. Now, let me elaborate.

A. Exodus 20:4 is true.

I should assure you up front that I believe every single word of Exodus 20:4, and that I believe that the words are true and constitute the inerrant and binding Word of God. I dispute absolutely nothing in or about Exodus 20:4.

B. The History of the Ten Commandments.

In Exodus 20:2–17, which gives the Ten Commandments, there are actually 14 imperative statements. To arrive at Ten Commandments, some statements have to be grouped together, and there is more than one way of doing this. Since, in the ancient world, polytheism and idolatry were always united—idolatry being the outward expression of polytheism—the historic Jewish numbering of the Ten Commandments has always grouped together the imperatives “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3) and “You shall not make for yourself a graven image” (Ex. 20:4). The historic Catholic numbering follows the Jewish numbering on this point, as does the historic Lutheran numbering. Martin Luther recognized that the imperatives against polytheism and idolatry are two parts of a single command.

Jews and Christians abbreviate the commandments so that they can be remembered using a summary, ten-point formula. For example, Jews, Catholics, and Protestants typically summarize the Sabbath commandment as, “Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy,” though the commandment’s actual text takes four verses (Ex. 20:8–11).

When the prohibition of polytheism/idolatry is summarized, Jews, Catholics, and Lutherans abbreviate it, as “You shall have no other gods before me.” This is no attempt to “hide” the idolatry prohibition (Jews and Lutherans don’t even use statues of saints and angels). It is to make learning the Ten Commandments easier.

The Catholic Church is not dogmatic about how the Ten Commandments are to be numbered, however. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, “The division and numbering of the Commandments have varied in the course of history. The present catechism follows the division of the Commandments established by Augustine, which has become traditional in the Catholic Church. It is also that of the Lutheran confession. The Greek Fathers worked out a slightly different division, which is found in the Orthodox Churches and Reformed communities” (CCC 2066).

Perhaps more to your point, and more simply stated, the moral laws or commands in Exodus 20 were laws and commands given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. (The Decalogue in Deuteronomy 5, which contains much the same language as Exodus 20, tells us that there are 10 distinct commandments, no matter how they may be grouped together.) Jesus Christ then interprets these commandments in Matthew 5. The wording of the 10 commandments of Christ may differ in different Bible translations, but the substance is the same. Brought down to its essence, Catholics traditionally consider the first six verses of Exodus 20 to be one commandment. This commandment – Jesus’ commandment in Matthew 5 – is that Jesus is the Lord God, and that we SHALL (mandatory) have no other gods besides Jesus.

C. What does Exodus 20:4 mean when it refers to an “idol”?

Exodus 20:4, taken individually as opposed to as but one of the first six verses of Exodus 20, very clearly (again using your NIV translation) establishes a prohibition against making idols. An idol, by definition, is a representation of an animal, object, false love, or person that is set up for the purpose of worshipping that idol as a god or magic source of power.

Similarly, idolatry is the giving to another person or thing (an idol) the worship that is due to God alone. This would include intending to worship, or actually worshipping, a creature or thing as God (formal idolatry), and worshipping God only externally (material idolatry). Clearly, worshipping idols or engaging in idolatry is prohibited by Exodus 20:4. To that prohibition I say, without hesitation, “Amen, I believe.”

In the Bible, there are several references to the people of God (like the pagans) making crude representations of false gods set against the true God. This heresy – idol worship - was wrong, because man was seeking to discover in things – idols – that which could only be discovered in Almighty God Himself. (See, e.g., Wisdom 13:1-10 and Romans 1:18-32.) The Old Testament idols were overthrown by the coming of Jesus Christ and the establishment of the New Covenant. While modern man certainly and often makes

idols of material things (or the greed for such things), it is a fact that Christ will finally triumph.

There is no question, Barry, that you and I agree that idol worship and idolatry are always wrong and always constitute a grave sin because God and God alone is worthy of worship.

D. So, why don't I agree with you on Exodus 20:4 as it relates to the Eucharist of the Catholic Mass?

Despite our agreement on the sin of idol worship and idolatry, I am unable to make the leap from our agreement to your point that a Catholic accepting the Eucharist as the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus Christ constitutes, itself, idol worship. Let me explain my position by first explaining true and orthodox Catholic teaching on the Eucharist.

Paragraph 1374 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* provides: “In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained.” Similarly, Pope John Paul II wrote, “The Church and the world have a great need for Eucharistic worship. Jesus awaits us in this sacrament of love. Let us not refuse the time to go to meet him in adoration, in contemplation full of faith, and open to making amends for the serious offenses and crimes of the world. Let our adoration never cease.”

Put more simply, the doctrine of the Real Presence asserts that in the Holy Eucharist, Jesus Christ Himself is literally and wholly present - body and blood, soul and divinity - under the appearances of bread and wine.

Thus, for a Catholic, the Eucharist, by definition, is not an “idol.” The Eucharist “represents” or “symbolizes” nothing – it is, in fact and indeed, Jesus Christ Himself. Thus, to call the Eucharist a violation of the command in Exodus 20:4 not to worship

idols is to accuse a Catholic of doing something he is not doing. Thus, it is impossible for me to agree with your interpretation of Exodus 20:4.

E. Is the Eucharist, in fact, Jesus Christ, or just an idol?

Most certainly, you do not agree with me at this point.

The question, then, becomes whether the Catholic's belief in the Eucharist is true. That is, whether the Eucharist is, in fact and indeed, the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus Christ Himself, OR, whether the wafer is just an inanimate thing that merely *represents* or *symbolizes* Jesus (making it an idol) and that Catholics worship this wafer (an idol) INSTEAD of worshipping Jesus Himself, which action would constitute the grave sin of idol worship. Until we can determine whether the Catholic's belief is true, we cannot determine whether that belief violates Exodus 20:4.

G. What does the Bible say about whether the Eucharist is Jesus?

John 6:30 begins a colloquy that took place in the synagogue at Capernaum. The Jews asked Jesus what sign he could perform so that they might believe in him. As a challenge, they noted, "our ancestors ate manna in the desert." Could Jesus top that? He told them the real bread from heaven comes from the Father. "Give us this bread always," they said. Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst."

Jesus repeated what he said, then summarized: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.' The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat'" (John 6:51–52).

Jesus' listeners were stupefied because now they understood Jesus *literally*—and correctly. He again repeated his words, but with even greater emphasis, and introduced the statement about drinking his blood: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh

of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him” (John 6:53–56).

Notice that Jesus made no attempt to soften what he said, and no attempt to correct “misunderstandings,” for there were none. Our Lord’s listeners understood him perfectly well. They no longer thought he was speaking metaphorically. If they *had*, if they mistook what he said, why no correction?

On other occasions when there was confusion, Christ explained just what he meant (cf. Matt. 16:5–12). Here, where any misunderstanding would be fatal, there was no effort by Jesus to correct. Instead, he repeated himself for greater emphasis.

In John 6:60 we read: “Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, ‘This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?’” These were his disciples, people used to his remarkable ways. He warned them not to think carnally, but spiritually: “It is the Spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (John 6:63; cf. 1 Cor. 2:12–14).

But he knew some did not believe. (It is here, in the rejection of the Eucharist, that Judas fell away; look at John 6:64.) “After this, many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him” (John 6:66).

This is the only record we have of any of Christ’s followers forsaking him for purely doctrinal reasons. If it had all been a misunderstanding, if they erred in taking a metaphor in a literal sense, why didn’t Jesus call them back and straighten things out? Both the Jews, who were suspicious of him, and his disciples, who had accepted everything up to this point, would have remained with him had he said he was speaking only symbolically.

But he did not correct these protesters. Twelve times he said he was the bread that came down from heaven; four times he said they would have “to eat my flesh and drink my

blood.” John 6 was an extended promise of what would be instituted at the Last Supper—and it was a promise that could not be more explicit. Or so it would seem to a Catholic. But what do Fundamentalists say?

They say that in John 6 Jesus was not talking about physical food and drink, but about spiritual food and drink. They quote John 6:35: “Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.’” They claim that coming to him is bread, having faith in him is drink. Thus, eating his flesh and blood merely means believing in Christ.

But there is a problem with that interpretation. As Fr. John A. O’Brien explains, “The phrase ‘to eat the flesh and drink the blood,’ when used figuratively among the Jews, as among the Arabs of today, meant to inflict upon a person some serious injury, especially by calumny or by false accusation. To interpret the phrase figuratively then would be to make our Lord promise life everlasting to the culprit for slandering and hating him, which would reduce the whole passage to utter nonsense” (O’Brien, *The Faith of Millions*, p. 215). For an example of this use, see Micah 3:3.

Fundamentalist writers who comment on John 6 also assert that one can show Christ was speaking only metaphorically by comparing verses like John 10:9 (“I am the door”) and John 15:1 (“I am the true vine”). The problem is that there is not a connection to John 6:35, “I am the bread of life.” “I am the door” and “I am the vine” make sense as metaphors because Christ is like a door—we go to heaven through him—and he is also like a vine—we get our spiritual sap through him. But Christ takes John 6:35 far beyond symbolism by saying, “For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed” (John 6:55).

He continues: “As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me” (John 6:57). The Greek word used for “eats” (*tregon*) is very blunt and has the sense of “chewing” or “gnawing.” This is not the language of metaphor.

For Fundamentalist writers, the scriptural argument is capped by an appeal to John 6:63: “It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” They say this means that eating real flesh is a waste. But does this make sense?

Are we to understand that Christ had just commanded his disciples to eat his flesh, then said their doing so would be pointless? Is that what “the flesh is of no avail” means? “Eat my flesh, but you’ll find it’s a waste of time”—is that what he was saying? Hardly.

The fact is that Christ’s flesh avails much! If it were of no avail, then the Son of God incarnated for no reason, he died for no reason, and he rose from the dead for no reason. Christ’s flesh profits us more than anyone else in the world. If it profits us nothing, so that the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ are of no avail, then “your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished” (1 Cor. 15:17b–18).

In John 6:63 “flesh profits nothing” refers to mankind’s inclination to think using only what their natural human reason would tell them rather than what God would tell them. Thus in John 8:15–16 Jesus tells his opponents: “You judge according to the flesh, I judge no one. Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is true, for it is not I alone that judge, but I and he who sent me.” So natural human judgment, unaided by God’s grace, is unreliable; but God’s judgment is always true.

And were the disciples to understand the line “The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life” as nothing but a circumlocution (and a very clumsy one at that) for “symbolic”? No one can come up with such interpretations unless he first holds to the Fundamentalist position and thinks it necessary to find a rationale, no matter how forced, for evading the Catholic interpretation. In John 6:63 “flesh” does not refer to Christ’s own flesh—the context makes this clear—but to mankind’s inclination to think on a natural, human level. “The words I have spoken to you are spirit” does not mean, “What I have just said is symbolic.” The word “spirit” is *never* used that way in the Bible. The line means that

what Christ has said will be understood only through faith; only by the power of the Spirit and the drawing of the Father (cf. John 6:37, 44–45, 65).

Paul confirms this. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “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”(1 Cor. 10:16)? So when we receive Communion, we actually participate in the body and blood of Christ, not just eat symbols of them. Paul also said, “Therefore whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. . . . For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself” (1 Cor. 11:27, 29). “To answer for the body and blood” of someone meant to be guilty of a crime as serious as homicide. How could eating mere bread and wine “unworthily” be so serious? Paul’s comment makes sense only if the bread and wine became the real body and blood of Christ.

Anti-Catholics also claim the early Church took this chapter symbolically. Is that so? Let’s see what some early Christians thought, keeping in mind that we can learn much about how Scripture should be interpreted by examining the writings of early Christians.

Ignatius of Antioch, who had been a disciple of the apostle John and who wrote a letter to the Smyrnaeans about A.D. 110, said, referring to “those who hold heterodox opinions,” that “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 the Father, in his goodness, raised up again” (6:2, 7:1).

Forty years later, Justin Martyr, wrote, “Not as common bread or 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 nourished, . . . is both the flesh and the blood of that incarnated Jesus” (*First Apology* 66:1–20).

Origen, in a homily written about A.D. 244, attested to belief in the Real Presence. “I wish to admonish you with examples from your religion. You are accustomed to take part in the divine mysteries, so you know how, when you have received the Body of the Lord, you reverently exercise every care lest a particle of it fall and lest anything of the consecrated gift perish. You account yourselves guilty, and rightly do you so believe, if any of it be lost through negligence” (*Homilies on Exodus* 13:3).

Cyril of Jerusalem, in a catechetical lecture presented in the mid-300s, said, “Do not, therefore, regard the bread and wine as simply that, for they are, according to the Master’s declaration, the body and blood of Christ. Even though the senses suggest to you the other, let faith make you firm. Do not judge in this matter by taste, but be fully assured by faith, not doubting that you have been deemed worthy of the body and blood of Christ” (*Catechetical Discourses: Mystagogic* 4:22:9).

In a fifth-century homily, Theodore of Mopsuestia seemed to be speaking to today’s Evangelicals and Fundamentalists: “When [Christ] gave the bread he did not say, ‘This is the *symbol* of my body,’ but, ‘This *is* my body.’ In the same way, when he gave the cup of his blood he did not say, ‘This is the *symbol* of my blood,’ but, ‘This *is* my blood,’ for he wanted us to look upon the [Eucharistic elements], after their reception of grace and the coming of the Holy Spirit, not according to their nature, but to receive them as they are, the body and blood of our Lord” (*Catechetical Homilies* 5:1).

Whatever else might be said, the early Church took John 6 literally. In fact, there is no record from the early centuries that says or even implies that Christians doubted the constant Catholic interpretation. There exists no document in which the literal interpretation is opposed and only the metaphorical accepted.

Why do Fundamentalists and Evangelicals reject the plain, literal interpretation of John 6? For them, Catholic sacraments are out because they imply a spiritual reality—grace—being conveyed by means of matter. This seems to them to be a violation of the divine plan. For many Protestants, matter is not to be used, but overcome or avoided.

One suspects, had they been asked by the Creator their opinion of how to bring about mankind's salvation, Fundamentalists would have advised him to adopt a different approach. How much cleaner things would be if spirit never dirtied itself with matter! But God approves of matter—he approves of it because he created it—and he approves of it so much that he comes to us under the appearances of bread and wine, just as he does in the physical form of the Incarnate Christ.

Finally, consider the following. In John 6:32-33, Jesus says, “Amen, Amen, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” Question: Who gave life to the world, and when was this life given to the world? (Suggested answer: Jesus gave life to the world on the Cross. Thus, according to John 6:32-33, Jesus himself is God's own “true bread from heaven.”)

CONCLUSION

I agree, as does the Catholic Church, with every word of Exodus 20:4. Idol worship is now, always has been, and always will be, a grave sin. I do not agree, however, and neither does the Catholic Church, with your interpretation of Exodus 20:4 that the Eucharist is an idol, the worship of which is prohibited by Exodus 20:4. To the contrary, the Catholic Church, which I believe is the one true Church that Jesus Christ established on earth, and which is the pillar and foundation of truth (1 Tim 3:15), declares, based on the forthright declarations in the Bible (cf. 1 Cor. 10:16–17, 11:23–29; and, most forcefully, John 6:32–71), that the Eucharist is indeed the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus Christ Himself.

The bottom line is this. You and I agree that Catholics worship the Eucharist. As stated at the outset of this tome, the Eucharist either is or is not the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus Christ Himself. Thus, if the Eucharist is not the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus Christ Himself, then Catholics have a giant problem at Judgment Day, in that all will die with the stain of grave sin. I admit this, and I accept it. Now, the converse is also true. If the Eucharist is, in fact and indeed, the body, blood, soul, and

divinity of Jesus Christ Himself, then non-Catholics have a giant problem at Judgment Day. Are you willing to accept this as true and to make the same admission I am?

There is one very interesting aspect to your question and this ultimate conclusion and dilemma. That is, by merely asking the question, you have, perhaps unwittingly, swerved into the very point of why I contacted you in the first place. This question is just one aspect of the elephant sitting on the ecumenism table. The people sitting around the table wishing and hoping for Christian unity are ignoring significant doctrinal issues that separate us. These issues, in my view, cannot be sloughed off as “non-essential” or “unimportant.” These issues and differences are very real, and I think all of us at the unity table need to continue to strive for truth and seek it with open minds, always being ready to say, “Well, I must admit, I am wrong.” Put another way, when I go before Almighty God on Judgment Day, I surely wish to have the fullness of truth in my pocket, not just partial truth.

Barry, it is possible that I may have offended you with some of the writing above. I assure you that this is not my intention, and, knowing each other as we do, I feel confident that you understand that it is not my intention to offend you, or anyone else. God bless you, my friend.

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