

Why I Believe Jesus Is Really Present in the Eucharist

A note to Jerimiah

1. Why I Wanted to Write This Down

You said something that stuck with me: “Yea I have a couple things that bother me... but it’s based on my indoctrination growing up... the bread being actual the body is hard for me to go with because I know it’s bread and you eat it.” I get why that is the hang-up. You look at Communion and it looks like bread. It tastes like bread. You eat it like food. So when Catholics say, “That is really the Body of Christ,” it can sound like they are asking you to ignore what is right in front of you.

That was one of the reasons I kept digging into this. What surprised me was finding Christians wrestling with almost the exact same question a very long time ago. Around A.D. 390, Ambrose is teaching new Christians about Communion and has one of them ask, “I see something else; how is it that you assert that I receive the Body of Christ?” That is pretty close to the question you asked me. He knew it still looked like bread. His answer was not that people should pretend otherwise. His answer was that Christ’s word can do more than our senses can see (Ambrose, *On the Mysteries* 9.50-54 <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3405.htm>).

I do not want to start with a bunch of Catholic vocabulary and ask you to accept it. I would rather start where I started: with Jesus, Paul, and then the Christians who were closest to the apostles. The question I kept coming back to was pretty simple: if Catholics came up with this later, do the earliest Christians sound Catholic on the Eucharist, or do they sound like Communion is only bread and wine used as reminders?

I also do not want to cherry-pick the Fathers. They did not all explain the Eucharist in exactly the same words, and they sometimes call it a sign, figure, symbol, or mystery. That is real, and it has to be dealt with. But when I read the whole passages instead of one line at a time, I kept running into the same thing. They did not treat the Eucharist as ordinary bread with a religious meaning attached to it. They believed something real was happening in the sacrament and that Christians were truly receiving Christ.

2. What Catholics Are Actually Saying

The first thing I had to get straight in my own head was what the Church is actually claiming. Catholics are not saying that after consecration the Host should suddenly look like muscle or taste like flesh. If that were the claim, it would be easy to disprove. The claim is that the outward properties stay the same while what the Eucharist is has been changed by Christ. The Church later used the word transubstantiation to describe that.

So “it still looks and tastes like bread” is not really a counterargument to the Catholic view. Catholics expect it to look and taste like bread. Your senses can tell you its color, texture, weight, taste, and shape. What they cannot tell you is whether Christ has made himself sacramentally present there. That has to be worked out from what Christ said and how the Church understood him.

Catholics are also not saying that people are chewing up pieces of Jesus in a normal biological way. Christ is not cut apart or killed again every time someone receives Communion. The claim is that the risen Christ gives himself whole and undivided under the appearances of bread and wine. I know that still sounds strange. I just think it matters that we argue against what Catholics actually mean, not a version of it they do not believe.

And when you said, “but you eat it,” I actually think that matters. Jesus chose food. He took bread, gave it to the disciples, and told them to eat. The question is not whether it is eaten. Of course it is. The question is what Jesus says we are eating and what the first Christians thought he meant.

3. What I Keep Coming Back To in Scripture

3.1. The Last Supper

At the Last Supper Jesus takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and says, “This is my body.” Then he takes the cup and identifies it with his blood and the new covenant in his blood (Matt. 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-25). I know the immediate response is that Jesus sometimes speaks figuratively. He calls himself a door and a vine. So I do not think the words “this is my body” by themselves end the whole debate.

What keeps me from brushing those words off as figurative is everything around them. This is not just a sermon illustration. Jesus is doing something he commands the apostles to keep doing, and Paul later says that receiving it wrongly can make someone guilty of the Body and Blood of the Lord. Once I put those passages together, “it is just a metaphor” started feeling too easy to me.

The cup also matters because Jesus uses covenant language. “My blood of the covenant” reaches back to Exodus 24, where the covenant is sealed with sacrificial blood. Luke and Paul call it the “new covenant” in his blood. So the meal is tied directly to sacrifice, covenant, and what Jesus is about to do on the cross. It is already more than a visual aid for remembering him.

3.2. John 6: Manna and the Bread of Life

John 6 made a lot more sense to me once I stopped starting in the middle of the chapter. The whole discussion about eating Christ’s flesh grows out of the story of the manna. John tells us that Passover was near, Jesus feeds the five thousand, and then the crowd starts talking about Moses and the bread their fathers ate in the wilderness (John 6:4, 30-31). That is not random background. They are thinking about the Exodus.

In Exodus 16, Israel is in the wilderness after being brought out of Egypt, and God feeds them with manna, bread from heaven. Exodus says Israel ate that manna for forty years, until they came to the border of the Promised Land (Ex. 16:4, 35). So when the crowd tells Jesus, “Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness,” they are pointing back to one of the great saving events in Israel’s history.

Jesus corrects them on an important point. Moses was not the real giver of the manna; God was. Then Jesus says that his Father now gives the “true bread from heaven” and identifies himself as that bread: “I am the bread of life” (John 6:32-35). A little later he makes the comparison even sharper. Their fathers ate the manna and still died, but the bread Jesus gives leads to eternal life (John 6:48-51).

This is where the passage gets hard. Jesus does not stop at saying that he is bread in a general spiritual sense. He says, “the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” Then he says that unless people eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood they have no life in them, and that whoever eats his flesh and drinks his blood abides in him (John 6:51-56). The manna was real food God gave Israel for the journey through the wilderness. Jesus presents himself as something greater: the true Bread from Heaven that gives eternal life.

I know the Protestant reading because it is the reading I was used to: eating means believing. Faith is definitely part of John 6. Earlier in the chapter Jesus talks about coming to him

and believing in him, so I do not think Catholics should act like faith has nothing to do with the passage. Where I get stuck is saying that eating means nothing more than believing. The language gets more concrete after verse 51, the people argue about how he can give them his flesh to eat, and Jesus keeps going instead of backing away from it.

The reaction of the disciples matters to me too. They call it a “hard saying,” and many of them stop following him (John 6:60, 66). Jesus does not call them back and say, “You misunderstood me. I was only using bread as a picture for believing.” That does not prove every detail of later Catholic theology by itself, but it makes it hard for me to reduce the whole passage to a simple metaphor.

Verse 63 gets brought up a lot: “the flesh is of no avail; the words I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” Some people use this verse to argue that Jesus was only speaking symbolically about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. But I do not think that fits the rest of John 6. Just a few verses earlier, Jesus says, “the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (John 6:51). So when he later says that “the flesh is of no avail,” he cannot be saying that his own flesh is useless. John Chrysostom addressed this directly in Homily 47 on John: “What then, is not His flesh, flesh? Most certainly. How then says He, that the flesh profits nothing? He speaks not of His own flesh, (God forbid!) but of those who received His words in a carnal manner.” Chrysostom understood Jesus to be talking about the way the people were hearing him. They were trying to understand everything in an ordinary, physical way instead of recognizing that Jesus was speaking about a divine mystery. He says: “You must hear spiritually what relates to Me, for he who hears carnally is not profited, nor gathers any advantage.”

Chrysostom even brings up the exact objection that comes from verse 63: “He that eats not His flesh, and drinks not His blood, has no life in him. How then does the flesh profit nothing, if without it we cannot live?” His answer is that Jesus is not rejecting his own flesh at all. He is rejecting a carnal way of understanding his words.

So John 6:63 does not undo everything Jesus had just taught. Jesus had already said that his flesh would be given “for the life of the world,” and Chrysostom understood “the flesh profits nothing” to mean that hearing Christ only according to ordinary human reasoning profits nothing. The problem was not Christ’s flesh. The problem was the way they were hearing him.

That is also why your point that “it is bread and you eat it” does not feel like a side issue to me. God had already fed Israel with bread from heaven, and Jesus deliberately brings that history into the conversation. The Catholic claim is not that Communion stops looking and tasting like bread or that we are eating Christ in an ordinary biological way. The claim is that Jesus gives himself as the greater manna, true food for the new covenant journey. Once I saw the Exodus and manna connection, John 6 stopped feeling like a strange isolated speech and started fitting into the whole biblical story.

3.3. Paul Is Hard for Me to Get Around

Paul may be the part of the New Testament case I have the hardest time getting around. In 1 Corinthians 10:16 he asks whether the cup is a participation in the Blood of Christ and whether the bread is a participation in the Body of Christ. The word he uses, *koinonia*, is communion, sharing, or participation. Then he compares the Eucharist with sacrificial meals. He sounds like he is talking about actually sharing in the reality connected with the altar, not just thinking about it.

Then 1 Corinthians 11 gets even stronger. Paul says that whoever eats and drinks unworthily can be “guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord” and can eat and drink judgment by failing to discern the body (1 Cor. 11:27-29). I have a hard time making that fit with

ordinary bread whose whole purpose is simply to remind me of Jesus. You can disrespect a symbol, obviously, but Paul's warning sounds like more than that.

Paul does not answer every later question about how Christ is present. But he gives the Lord's Supper a seriousness I did not grow up hearing. It is communion in Christ, and receiving it can be holy or dangerous depending on how it is received. That made the early Christian writings hit me differently when I started reading them.

4. What the First Christians Sounded Like

This is really the part that moved me. Scripture can be argued back and forth, and people can keep saying John 6 means this or "this is my body" means that. So I started asking a historical question instead: what did Christians right after the apostles think they were doing at the Eucharist? I did not expect the answer to be as consistent as it was.

I am not treating the Fathers like another Bible. They are not inspired, and they can be wrong. What they give us is a window into what early Christians believed. If the apostles taught that Communion was just normal bread and wine used as reminders, then I think we should expect at least some clear evidence of that in the earliest Church. Instead, the first writers I could find speak in a much stronger way. If you do not care as much about the early writers, you can skip ahead to section 5. I still wanted to include them because this is the part that surprised me most.

4.1. The Didache

The Didache is very early, usually dated to the late first or early second century. It does not explain the Real Presence the way later writers do, so I would not use it as proof by itself. What it does show is how sacred the Eucharistic gathering already was. Only the baptized were admitted, Christians gathered on the Lord's Day, confessed their sins, broke bread, gave thanks, and spoke of the offering as something that should be pure.

"On the Lord's day, gather together, break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions." (Didache 14)

That does not prove transubstantiation. It does show that we are not looking at a casual meal where the only thing that matters is remembering Jesus in your head. The Eucharist is already tied to worship, holiness, confession, and the life of the Church.

4.2. Ignatius of Antioch, c. A.D. 107

Ignatius is the first writer who really stopped me. He is writing around A.D. 107 while being taken to Rome to be killed for his faith. He is arguing against people who denied that Jesus truly had flesh and truly suffered. In the middle of that argument, he says something very direct about the Eucharist.

"They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they confess not the Eucharist to be the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ." (Ignatius, Smyrnaeans 7)

That is hard for me to read as "just a symbol." Ignatius says these heretics stay away from the Eucharist because they refuse to confess that it is the flesh of Jesus Christ. His point only makes sense because his belief about the Eucharist is tied to his belief that Jesus really became flesh. In another letter he speaks of "one Eucharist," one flesh of Christ, and one cup (Philadelphians 4).

This is around A.D. 107. There is no medieval Catholic theology yet, no Thomas Aquinas, no Council of Trent, and no developed language of substance and accidents. The basic claim is already sitting there in plain language.

4.3. Justin Martyr, c. A.D. 155

Justin writes about fifty years later and gives a surprisingly detailed description of Sunday worship in Rome. He talks about readings from the apostles and prophets, prayers, bread and wine mixed with water, thanksgiving by the presider, the people saying Amen, and deacons taking the Eucharist to those who were absent. Then he explains what Christians believed they were receiving.

“For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these.” (Justin Martyr, First Apology 66)

What gets me is what Justin says right after that. He ties the Eucharistic food to the flesh and blood of Jesus who became incarnate, and he connects it to Jesus’ own words, “This is my body” and “This is my blood.” He is not just saying it is special bread because Christians prayed over it.

That is Rome in the middle of the second century. Christians are already restricting Communion to baptized believers and saying the food is not common bread. Whatever else we debate, that is far too early for me to write off as a medieval Catholic invention.

4.4. Irenaeus of Lyons, c. A.D. 180

Irenaeus is helpful because he is fighting people who thought matter was basically beneath God and that the body was not part of salvation. He answers them with the Eucharist. God takes created bread and wine and gives us Christ through them. For Irenaeus, the Eucharist is evidence that God really does sanctify matter and really will raise our bodies.

“The bread...when it receives the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist.” (Irenaeus, Against Heresies 4.18.5)

He goes on to say that the Eucharist has an earthly and a heavenly reality and connects receiving Christ’s Body and Blood with the future resurrection of our bodies. That sounds much stronger to me than “this bread reminds us of Jesus.” He is using the Eucharist as part of his argument that created matter can truly carry God’s gift.

Irenaeus also matters historically because he grew up in Asia Minor and later became bishop in Gaul. So now we are not talking about one local Roman tradition. This kind of language is showing up across different parts of the Christian world before A.D. 200.

4.5. Tertullian, early third century

Tertullian is writing in North Africa in the early third century. While defending the resurrection of the body, he talks about all the physical ways our bodies are involved in the Christian life: baptism, anointing, the laying on of hands, and the Eucharist. Then he says:

“The flesh feeds on the body and blood of Christ, that the soul likewise may fatten on its God.” (Tertullian, On the Resurrection of the Flesh 8)

Again, he is using this as part of an argument for why the body matters to God. The flesh is not just watching a symbol. Tertullian says the flesh itself is fed with the Body and Blood of Christ.

4.6. Cyprian of Carthage, c. A.D. 250

Cyprian is another North African witness a generation later. He talks about the Eucharist as heavenly bread and as “food of salvation.” When he explains “give us this day our daily bread,” he connects it with Christ, the Bread of Life, and with Christians receiving the Eucharist.

“We...daily receive the Eucharist for the food of salvation.” (Cyprian, On the Lord’s Prayer 18)

By now the same kind of language has shown up in Antioch, Rome, Gaul, and North Africa. The writers are not all repeating the same sentence, but none of them sound like the Eucharist is simply ordinary bread with a mental reminder attached.

4.7. Cyril of Jerusalem, c. A.D. 350

Cyril is especially important for your question because he talks directly about what the senses are telling you. He knows the bread still looks like bread and the wine still tastes like wine. He tells the newly baptized not to stop at what their senses report.

“Consider therefore the Bread and the Wine not as bare elements...they are... the Body and Blood of Christ.” (Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lecture 22.6)

In the same teaching, Cyril says that even though the senses suggest bread and wine, faith receives the Body and Blood Christ promised. He also describes the prayer asking the Holy Spirit to make the bread Christ’s Body and the wine Christ’s Blood (Catechetical Lecture 23.7).

That is why Cyril stands out to me. He does not dodge the obvious problem. He knows exactly what the person receiving Communion sees. His claim is that the sacrament is more than what the eyes and tongue can tell you.

4.8. Ambrose of Milan, c. A.D. 390

Ambrose is the one I most want you to read because he almost answers you word for word. He imagines a new Christian objecting that what he sees looks like one thing while the Church says he is receiving the Body of Christ.

“Perhaps you will say, ‘I see something else, how is it that you assert that I receive the Body of Christ?’” (Ambrose, On the Mysteries 9.50)

Ambrose’s answer is basically this: look at what Christians already believe about God’s word. God speaks and creates. Christ changes water into wine. God acts in ways nature cannot produce on its own. So why assume Christ’s words over the Eucharist are only descriptions with no power to do anything?

That hit me because it shows this is not a modern Catholic workaround. Christians in the fourth century already knew the Eucharist still looked like bread. They were already asking how that could be Christ’s Body. Ambrose’s answer was not “your eyes are wrong.” It was that Christ’s word is stronger than what our eyes can tell us.

4.9. Augustine, c. A.D. 400

Augustine is worth slowing down for because people on both sides quote him. He absolutely uses symbolic language. He talks about the one loaf as a sign of the unity of the Church and gives spiritual interpretations of eating and drinking. I do not think Catholics should pretend those passages are not there.

But that is not the whole Augustine. When he speaks to newly baptized Christians about the Eucharist on the altar, he can be very direct:

“That bread which you can see on the altar, sanctified by the word of God, is the body of Christ.” (Augustine, Sermon 227)

Augustine can hold both ideas together: the Eucharist really is Christ’s Body, and it is also a sign that teaches us something about the Church. Once I realized the early Christians did not use “symbol” to mean “nothing real is happening,” a lot of the apparent contradictions made more sense.

That ended up being important for me. In the early Church, a sacrament can be a sign and still actually give what it signifies. So when I see the word symbol in a Father, I do not think the conversation is over. I want to know what else that same writer says about what is on the altar and what Christians are receiving.

5. What I Notice When I Put All of This Together

When I line these writers up, the geography is what gets my attention. Ignatius is connected with Syria and Asia Minor. Justin is in Rome. Irenaeus connects Asia Minor with Gaul. Tertullian and Cyprian are in North Africa. Cyril is in Jerusalem. Ambrose is in Milan. Augustine is back in North Africa. This is not one bishop in one place coming up with a new idea.

It is early too. Ignatius, Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Cyprian all come before Nicaea. Several are more than a century before Constantine. So I have a hard time blaming the basic belief on medieval Catholicism, the Council of Trent, or Christianity becoming the religion of the empire. The language is already there.

None of that means every Catholic teaching automatically follows. I am only making a historical point. If the apostles taught a purely memorial meal, I want to know when the Church changed it. Who introduced the change? Where is the fight over it? Why do the earliest explicit writers I can find already talk like this?

The early Church was not shy about fighting over doctrine. We have arguments over circumcision, Easter, baptism, repentance after persecution, the Trinity, Christ’s nature, and plenty of other things. But I do not see an early controversy where half the Church is accusing the other half of turning ordinary memorial bread into Christ’s Body and Blood. That absence is not proof by itself, but I think it is real evidence that the belief was inherited rather than suddenly invented.

6. But It Still Looks Like Bread

This is where I think your objection deserves to stay on the table instead of being talked around. You are right about what your senses report. The Host looks like bread, tastes like bread, and behaves like bread. Catholicism does not ask you to deny that.

The claim is that the Eucharist is a sacrament, not an ordinary natural change. The appearances remain. That is why the Host does not turn into visible flesh and the chalice does not turn into visible blood. Christ chose to give himself under the appearances of food.

The word transubstantiation came later because Christians needed a more exact way to talk about this. “Substance” here is not a chemical ingredient that scientists are supposed to find under a microscope. It means what the thing is. The “species,” or appearances, are what the senses encounter. The Catholic claim is that Christ changes the first while the second remains.

That is also why a laboratory test would not settle the doctrine one way or the other. Science measures physical properties, and Catholic theology says those properties remain. The

Eucharistic claim is not that consecration starts a hidden chemical reaction. It is that Christ makes himself sacramentally present in a way physical measurement is not designed to test.

What keeps me from thinking that explanation was invented in the Middle Ages is Cyril and Ambrose. Long before the word transubstantiation became standard, both of them already knew the senses were still reporting bread and wine, and both still said the believer receives Christ's Body and Blood. The later vocabulary is more exact, but the problem it is trying to explain is much older.

7. Is This Cannibalism?

I understand why the language can sound that way. If "Body and Blood" meant Catholics were literally tearing off pieces of Jesus' human tissue and chewing them, then it would be grotesque. But that is not what the Church teaches.

Cannibalism destroys or diminishes the body being eaten. The Eucharist does not. Catholics do not believe Jesus dies again at every Mass or that one person gets one piece of him and someone else gets another. The risen Christ is received whole and undivided. His presence is real, but it is sacramental, not the ordinary local presence of a body sitting on a plate.

That distinction also changes how I hear John 6. Jesus is serious about eating his flesh, but the Church has never understood that as ripping flesh from his body. He gives himself in the form he chose: under bread and wine, as sacramental food.

And I think there is a reason he chose food. Food is not something you only look at or think about. You take it into yourself. That makes the language of communion make more sense to me. Christ is not just giving us a reminder of himself from a distance. He is giving himself to be received.

8. What About "Do This in Remembrance of Me"?

I used to hear "do this in remembrance of me" as though the word remembrance settled the whole question. If it is a memorial, then it must be symbolic only. I do not think those are opposites anymore. Catholics call the Eucharist a memorial too. The issue is what kind of memorial Jesus is talking about.

In the Bible, liturgical memorial is more than thinking back to an event. Passover is a memorial, but Israel does not treat it like looking at an old photograph. The people ritually enter into the saving act God performed for them. The Last Supper happens in that kind of Jewish world, not in the modern sense of "this object only helps me remember."

And Paul will not let "remembrance" be the only category anyway. In the same tradition where he repeats Jesus' words "do this in remembrance of me," he calls the cup and bread a participation in Christ's Blood and Body and warns about becoming guilty of the Body and Blood. For Paul, memorial and real participation belong together.

9. What About Fathers Who Say "Symbol" or "Figure"?

This is another place where I think both sides can make the discussion look worse than it is. Catholics sometimes quote the most realist line they can find and act like the Father never used symbolic language. Protestants can do the reverse and quote "symbol" or "figure" as though that automatically means "only a symbol." I do not think either approach is fair.

The early Christians had a much stronger idea of sacrament than that. Baptism can symbolize washing and still actually be the rite by which a person is baptized into Christ. The laying on of hands can signify the Spirit and still be the Church's real prayer for the Spirit's gift.

So the Eucharist can symbolize unity, sacrifice, the Passion, and the heavenly banquet without being reduced to ordinary bread.

Cyril is a good example. He can speak about the Body being given “in the figure of bread,” but in the same teaching he says not to regard the elements as bare bread and wine and says they are Christ’s Body and Blood. Augustine can use the loaf as a symbol of the Church’s unity and still tell newly baptized Christians that the consecrated bread on the altar is the Body of Christ. Those statements only look contradictory if “symbol” has to mean “nothing more than a symbol.”

So I would not want you to ignore the symbolic passages. I would read them alongside the realist passages from the same writers. The fuller picture is what matters.

10. Why the Word Transubstantiation Being Later Does Not Bother Me

Ignatius, Justin, and Irenaeus never use the word transubstantiation. That is just true, and I would not want to pretend otherwise. The Church got more technical about the language centuries later, especially when people started arguing about exactly how the Eucharist could still look like bread and wine while being Christ’s Body and Blood.

That kind of development does not bother me by itself. Christians also needed time to settle exact words for the Trinity and for how Christ is fully God and fully man. A later technical word can protect an older belief. So the question I care about is not “Did Ignatius use the word transubstantiation?” Of course he did not. The question is whether he already believed the Eucharist was really Christ’s flesh. His own words are hard for me to read any other way.

The same underlying belief keeps showing up. Ignatius calls it Christ’s flesh. Justin says it is not common bread. Irenaeus says it is no longer common bread after the invocation. Tertullian says the flesh is fed on Christ’s Body and Blood. Cyril says not to treat the elements as bare bread and wine. Ambrose says Christ’s word changes what is there. Augustine tells the newly baptized that the sanctified bread on the altar is Christ’s Body. The terminology grows, but the belief does not suddenly appear in the Middle Ages.

The Catechism now says that the substance of the bread and wine is changed into Christ’s Body and Blood while the appearances remain. That is much more precise language than Ignatius had. To me, though, it is trying to explain the same basic tension Cyril and Ambrose were already dealing with: your senses still say bread and wine, while faith takes Christ at his word.

11. The Part I Have the Hardest Time Explaining Away

If all I had was one verse, I could see staying undecided. “This is my body” can be argued about. John 6 can be argued about. “Remembrance” can be argued about. One early writer can always be called an outlier. What changed it for me was having all of it in front of me at the same time.

There is the Last Supper. There is John 6. There is Paul talking about participation in Christ’s Body and Blood and warning that someone can become guilty of the Body and Blood. Then there is Ignatius calling the Eucharist Christ’s flesh around A.D. 107, Justin saying it is not common bread, Irenaeus saying it is no longer common bread, and the same basic belief continuing through Tertullian, Cyprian, Cyril, Ambrose, and Augustine.

At some point I had to ask which history makes more sense. Did the apostles mean ordinary bread as a symbol only, and then almost immediately Christians across different regions started talking as though it were really Christ’s Body and Blood, with no obvious record of that huge change? Or did those early Christians sound that way because they had inherited a strong Eucharistic belief from the apostles? The second explanation makes more sense to me.

That does not mean every later Catholic practice was already there in A.D. 100. It was not. Eucharistic adoration outside Mass, Corpus Christi, medieval philosophical vocabulary, tabernacle customs, and plenty of liturgical details developed later. I just do not think the core belief in the Real Presence began with those later developments.

12. What I Would Actually Ask You to Read

I am not asking you to believe this because I am telling you to. And I know one paper is not going to erase the way we were taught to think about Communion. I just think the question deserves to be looked at from the earliest sources instead of assuming the Catholic claim must be a late invention.

If you only read a few things, I would read Exodus 16 first, then John 6, the Last Supper accounts, and 1 Corinthians 10-11. Reading Exodus 16 before John 6 makes the manna connection much easier to see. Then read Ignatius, Smyrnaeans 7; Justin Martyr, First Apology 65-67; Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lecture 22; and Ambrose, On the Mysteries 9. Ambrose is the one I would especially like you to read because his question is basically your question: “I see something else, so how can this be the Body of Christ?”

I would not start with, “Can I make myself feel like this is not bread?” It still looks like bread. I would start with, “What did Jesus mean to give his Church, and what did the Christians closest to the apostles think they were receiving?” That is the question that changed the way I looked at it.

And just so you know where I am coming from, I am not trying to score a point against you. I would rather both of us be wrong together and find out than have either of us believe something just because it is the side we grew up on. This matters too much for that. If Catholics are wrong, then what Catholics do with the Eucharist is a serious error. If Catholics are right, then Christ has given the Church something far greater than a symbol. That is why I wanted to actually look at the evidence instead of giving you a quick Catholic answer.

13. Where I Ended Up

Your concern still makes sense to me: it looks like bread and you eat it. I do not think the Catholic answer is to deny that. The appearances stay the same. The claim is that Christ makes himself present in a way those appearances do not reveal by themselves.

What moved me was not the word transubstantiation. It was the combination of Scripture and the earliest Christian writers. Jesus says, “This is my body.” Paul talks about participation in the Body and Blood and warns about receiving without discerning the Body. Then Ignatius, very early, calls the Eucharist the flesh of Jesus. Justin says it is not common bread. Irenaeus says it is no longer common bread. Cyril and Ambrose both deal directly with the fact that the senses still report bread and wine.

So when I look at the history, I do not see a simple memorial meal that suddenly became “literal” in the Middle Ages. I see Christians talking about the Eucharist in a very real way from the beginning, and then later Christians getting more exact about how to explain it.

I would not ask you to pretend the Host looks different. I would just ask you to read the earliest sources and decide what explanation fits them best. That is what I did, and it is the biggest reason I now have a hard time seeing the Eucharist as bread and wine that only symbolize Jesus.

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