

Eucharistic Assimilation

into Christ's Body

Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Jesus
[*Corpus Christi*]

Year B

Exodus 24:3-8
Psalm 116:12-13, 15-16, 17-18

Hebrews 9:11-15
Mark 14:12-16, 22-26

In the early centuries of Church history, rumors from outside the community of Christians fueled misunderstanding regarding the true meaning of the celebration of the Body and Blood of Christ. Accusations of improprieties gave way to apologetic writings that clarified the meaning for those who misconstrued. These writings continue to have an influence on how we understand this central celebration of our lives as Catholics. One such writer is St. Justin Martyr, from the third century, whose First Apology (understood in terms of “explanation” rather than an expression of remorse) gives a blueprint that is still followed today for the celebration of the Mass.

In describing the liturgical celebration, St. Justin also articulates our understanding of the Eucharist itself: “Not as ordinary bread or as ordinary drink do we partake of them, but just as, through the word of God, our Savior Jesus Christ became Incarnate and took upon Himself flesh and blood for our salvation, so, we have been taught, the food which has been made the Eucharist by the prayer of His word, and which nourishes our flesh and blood by assimilation, is both the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh”



(First Apology, Chapter 66). St. Justin continues to speak to us today as he reminds us of the effects and ramifications – both physical and spiritual, collective and individual – of the presence of Christ’s Body and Blood in our midst.

An important point for reflection in St. Justin’s First Apology, regarding the Eucharist, is that this communion “nourishes our flesh and blood by *assimilation*.” Considering the word “assimilation”, have we ever reflected on the physical effects of the Holy Eucharist, received in Communion during the celebration of the Mass? While the first synonym for “assimilation” to come to mind, as we are talking about physical food and drink, would be “digestion,” other meanings include “incorporation” and

The Holy Eucharist

“absorption.”

When we think of food and the function it serves for nourishment, we can further reflect on the Eucharist as physical food, as well as spiritual sustenance. When we eat, food is digested and nutrients are broken down for nourishment; the food is “absorbed” and “incorporated” into our bodies, becoming part of us physically. Like any food, the Body and Blood of Christ, in the sign and form of bread and wine, is absorbed into our physical bodies. This results not only in spiritual nourishment, but also a physical union with Christ. Christ is physically and materially “absorbed” and “incorporated” in and through our consumption of His Body and Blood.

Since our reception of Christ’s Body and Blood is one thing we all have in common, as Catholics who receive Communion, we are, therefore, united to one another in and through our unity with Christ, in and through our sharing in the Eucharist. Ergo, in receiving His Body and Blood, we are more and more transformed and strengthened into the Body of Christ that is the Church.

In light of this, what are the ramifications for us, called to receive this sacrament in Holy Communion? How long have any one of us participated in this sacrifice in which Christ is Eucharistically consumed – from the oldest cradle Catholics, to the most recent First

Communicant? Given the amount of time many of us have been receiving Communion, how much of our physical being is a product of this meal? What have our children who have just recently received their First Communion begun in their spiritual and physical lives? What are those, especially parents, depriving themselves and their children of by the cavalier manner in which so many excuse themselves from the regular celebration of the Eucharist, and regular reception of Communion?

How adequately do we prepare for this act of union with Christ, and celebrate it in the context of the Mass? Have we come to take this great action for granted as evidenced in the manner in which we receive Communion – both in how we prepare spiritually, as well as the posture, gesture and form in which we are given the Body and Blood of Christ

– and exhibited in the attitudes we bring to the celebration of the Mass, particularly regarding time, duration, punctuality and participation? How much more are we called to live as Christ calls us to live and worship, indeed as Christ Himself did, now that we are physically united to Him, and through Him to each other, through His Body and Blood?

Fr. William Nicholas
Catholic San Francisco
June 12, 2009

