

Jesus, Radical Jew, on the Eucharist

By all definitions of being Jewish, Jesus was a Jew. He was born to a Jewish mother. He grew up in Galilee, a Jewish community. He went to the temple in Jerusalem at around age 12 (was this an early form of bar mitzvah?). He was called Rabbi, which meant He was an acknowledged scholar of the Torah (the first five books of the Bible). He preached in synagogues from the Jewish scriptures. He paid the Temple tax. It is recorded that He celebrated the Jewish Passover meal. The Jewish Sanhedrin tried Him. The Romans crucified Him with a sign over His head, "King of the Jews."

There are numerous accounts that He confronted or challenged Jewish leadership, mostly about not following or understanding the teachings of Moses.

Jesus said that His mission was to the Jews, but there was one issue with which even His most devoted followers had difficulty. As John (6:60) notes, "Then many of His disciples who were listening said, 'This saying is hard; who can accept it?'" This saying caused division in His followers: "As a result of this, many [of] His disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied Him." This saying was preached in a synagogue. Earlier in John (6:53-54,59) Jesus gave this "hard teaching": "Jesus said to them, 'Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day'....These things He said while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum."

Again, He reiterates this point as found in Matthew (26:26-28): While they were eating, Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and giving it to His disciples said, "Take and eat; this is My body." Then He took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you, for this is My blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins."

Why was this statement so difficult? "The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us [His] flesh to eat?'" Was He speaking of cannibalism? There is no commandment against it in Scripture, but in Jewish tradition, it is taboo. The drinking of blood was a pagan religious practice forbidden to Jews in Genesis (9:3-4) "Any living creature that moves about shall be yours to eat; I give them all to you as I did the green plants. Only meat with its lifeblood still in it you shall not eat." Leviticus (17:10-12) has a law against eating (consuming or drinking) blood. A person who does so would be cut off from the Jewish community, which meant that they would be separated from God. This is because blood is life and life is from God. In some Jewish understandings, blood is where the soul dwelt.

How could Jesus tell His followers to do something that separated them from God? Jesus tells them that the drinking of His blood is necessary to be in union with God (John 6:53). Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you do not have life within you."

For the Jews at the time of Jesus, eating and drinking the body and blood of a person, even symbolically, was abhorrent. (This is probably why the heretical idea that Christ is present only symbolically in the Eucharist developed much later.)

By partaking in the Body and Blood of Christ, we share His body, blood, soul, and divinity. Jesus literally becomes one with us (*Henosis*). This is then how we can be "partakers of the divine nature. (2 Peter 1:4)."

Our Church's teaching that in communion, we receive the real Body and Blood of Christ, not in the appearance of human flesh and blood, but in the appearance of bread and wine, is based in Scripture, literally. If it were not really Jesus, then we would not be sharing in His life (not an absolute statement since the Church cannot limit God's activity).

It is why, in the reception of the Eucharist, we open our mouths widely, showing that we are opening ourselves to God being literally part of our lives. We cross our arms and hands over our hearts in the gesture of an embrace. As Christ enters us, we hug Him close to our hearts allowing His divine energies to flow throughout our entire body impacting upon our whole selves. If we were truly open to divine action, we would, little by little, be transformed. Indeed, our goal is literally to become what we eat.

Too many members of our Church have slid away from this understanding and into it's "just a piece of bread soaked in wine that allows us to remember Jesus". Yes, the command of Jesus is to "remember Me." This is why we have the Divine Liturgy, where we hear Him speak to us in the Gospel. We have His icon in the church and in our homes so that we can remember Him. Because if we remember Him, we remember all that He commanded us to do.

He commanded that if we want to have life, we must eat His body and drink His blood. Even a converted Jew accepted this radical teaching as St Paul writes: "I am speaking as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I am saying. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the Blood of Christ. The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the Body of Christ? (1 Corinthians 10:15:16). Let us partake of this life-giving most precious Body and Blood of Christ in order to share in His life.

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