



# Pastor's Column

St. Peter Catholic Church

August 19, 2018, Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

## *The Eucharist and Cannibalism*

We return now to our apologetic series of Pastor Columns, and given that at the Sunday Mass we are in the midst of the Bread of Life Discourse in the Gospel narrative of Saint John, our theme today pertains to the Eucharist and a fairly common objection to the Eucharist: how is the Eucharist not cannibalism?

Question: "The Real Presence [the Eucharist] cannot be true – Jesus would be commanding cannibalism! The Bible also tells us that we are not allowed to consume blood (Gen 9:4; Lev 17:14; Deut 12:23)."

Answer: "The Real Presence does not imply cannibalism."

Cannibalism involves chewing another person's flesh, swallowing it, and extracting nutrients from it by digestion. None of that happens to Jesus' flesh when a person receives the Eucharist. Jesus' Body and Blood remain whole and undigested under the mere appearances of bread and wine.

Only the *appearances* are altered by consumption, and when they cease to have the appearance of bread and wine, the Real Presence ceases. God may make "the Body and Blood of Christ enthroned gloriously in Heaven" (Pope Blessed Paul VI, *Credo of the People of God*) simultaneously present in the Eucharist, but they are in no way damaged. Therefore, no cannibalism occurs.

The Old Testament prohibition on consuming blood forbade its normal consumption – where blood was eaten and digested as a food. Christ's Blood is not digested, and so the Eucharist does not violate the Old Testament prohibition on blood consumption.

This probation was part of the dietary regulations that kept Jews culturally and religiously distinct from their pagan neighbors. Globally, many cultures use blood in cooking (e.g. blood sausages like the "black pudding" eaten today in England), and Jesus removed these dietary restrictions when He "declared all foods clean." (Mk 7:19)

The reason why the Israelites were prohibited from consuming blood was ritual: the blood represented the life of the animal, and so it belonged to God, the Giver of Life. Such ritual requirements are gone today, and now God gives us spiritual life through Jesus and the reception of His Blood. Jesus declared: "Unless you eat the Flesh of the Son of Man and drink His Blood, you do not have life within you." (Jn 6:53)

If consuming the Eucharist were cannibalism, then saying the elements are merely symbolic would not solve the problem. In that case, Jesus would be commanding us to *symbolically* cannibalize Him. This would be as problematic as making the symbolic commission of any intrinsically evil act part of a sacrament.

On the issue of whether or not Jesus was speaking symbolically or metaphorically with regard to the Eucharist, Sacred Scripture makes it abundantly clear that He was speaking literally. Saint Paul, for example, states that the Eucharistic elements are a participation in (not just a representation of) the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. (1 Cor 10:16) He warns that those who profane the Eucharist "will have to answer for the Body and Blood of the Lord." (1 Cor 11:27) He says that "anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the Body eats and drinks judgment on himself." (1 Cor 11:29) And the consequences of this can even be death. (1 Cor 11:30)

And of course, the paramount of the literalism of the Eucharist is Chapter 6 of the Gospel account of Saint John. Jesus repeatedly stresses the need to eat His Flesh and drink His Blood. When He is challenged on

how this can happen (Jn 6:52), He becomes even more emphatic, stating that “unless you eat the Flesh of the Son of Man and drink His Blood, you do not have life within you.” (Jn 6:53)

He says further: “My Flesh is true food, and My Blood is true drink.” (Jn 6:55) After this teaching, many of His followers “returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied Him.” (Jn 6:66) Rather than clarifying the matter for them as He did elsewhere about other matters (cf Mt 16:6; Mt 16:11-2; Mt 17:19, Mt 24:3, Mk 4:34; Lk 10:23), He asked instead if the Twelve also will leave Him (Jn 6:67), because He clearly is willing to lose even the Twelve rather than weaken His teaching on the Eucharist or explain it away as mere metaphor or simply symbolic.

- Fr. Lewis