

St. Augustine's Real Faith in the Real Presence

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ISSUE: Did St. Augustine believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist?

RESPONSE: Yes. St. Augustine did believe that the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ at the time of consecration.

DISCUSSION: Some Protestants, including academically noteworthy ones like F. F. Bruce, wrongfully claim that St. Augustine's view of the Eucharist was more like that of modern Protestants than the faith of Catholics. They use their arguments to discredit the Catholic Church and "prove" the Protestant position on the Real Presence.

A Truly Catholic Bishop

St. Augustine is one of the greatest and most influential Church Fathers of the West. He was also indisputably Catholic. To this fact he gave testimony many times over when defending the Catholic faith:

[The Catholic Church's] authority, inaugurated in miracles, nourished by hope, augmented by love, and confirmed by her age, keeps me here. The succession of priests, from the very see of the Apostle Peter, to whom the Lord, after His resurrection, gave the charge of feeding His sheep, up to the present episcopate, keeps me here. [Even] the very name Catholic, which, not without reason, belongs to this Church alone, in the face of so many heretics [keeps me in the Church] (*Against the Letter of Mani Called 'The Foundation' 4:5*).

We believe in the holy Church, that is, the Catholic Church; for heretics and schismatics call their own congregations churches (*Faith and Creed 10:21*).

Any claim that St. Augustine, a Catholic bishop, was anything but Catholic in his faith and practice has no merit.

Protestant Objections

Given St. Augustine's clearly stated position, how could anyone argue otherwise? The arguments to the contrary are based on two mistakes: selective quotation of St. Augustine (if he is directly quoted at all) and misunderstanding the meaning of his words. There are passages in the writings of many Church Fathers which explain that Christ is present in the Eucharist "spiritually" or "symbolically." Some moderns confuse this with the belief that Christ is present *only* in spirit or symbol *as opposed to* actual flesh and blood presence. This is a misunderstanding of both context and meaning.

When the Fathers say Christ is present "spiritually," they may mean more than one thing. Jesus' *Spirit* is present in the Eucharist, which is why modern Catholics say "body, blood, *soul*, and divinity." The Catholic Church understands the Real Presence is to be "known spiritually," that is, by faith and not by sight (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 1381). By faith we know He is there in "body, blood, soul, and divinity," but we cannot see, taste, feel, or smell Him. This Presence is mysterious and beyond our understanding.

When the Fathers say Christ is present "symbolically," they mean more than just a sign pointing to His presence. They mean His actual Presence.

The Fathers were concerned to resist a grossly sensual conception of the Eucharistic Banquet and to stress the necessity of the spiritual reception in Faith and in Charity (in contradistinction to the external...reception); passages often refer to the symbolical character of the Eucharist as "the sign of unity" (St. Augustine) [I Cor. 10:16-17]; this in no wise excludes the Real Presence.¹

Because sacraments are what they symbolize, “symbolically” means the actual Presence. This was the understanding of the early Christians, and provides the context for the use of the word “symbol.” As God humbled Himself and took the form of a man, becoming man that we might become like God (Phil. 2:1-11), so He takes the form of bread and wine to nourish us on our journey to God (Jn. 6:42-59). In a mysterious way, Jesus looks and tastes like bread and wine, but the Presence is His. The accidents that remain (what the Sacrament looks, feels and tastes like) are symbols of the Real Presence and what we are to do with Him, namely eat and drink Him. Because it is a mystery, we can only grasp this spiritually through faith. To those without this faith in His Real Presence, the sacrament is a stumbling block (Jn. 6:60-69; I Cor. 1:23).

St. Augustine’s Teaching

Catholics believe, and have always believed, that Christ is present spiritually and symbolically. The difference is that neither ancient nor modern Catholics hold that the Presence is *merely* spiritual or symbolic in the Protestant sense. Jesus Christ is present in body, blood, soul, and divinity as the Eucharist—or more simply, the Eucharist is Jesus Christ (c.f. *Catechism* nos. 1373-1381). If the “spiritual” and “symbolic” passages from the writings of the Church Fathers were returned to their larger context,² the misunderstanding would be solved.

Specifically regarding St. Augustine, the previous quotes and those noted below provide the larger context and meaning of his teachings. St. Augustine certainly believed that the Eucharist is the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.³

Christ was carried in His Own hands when, referring to His Own body, He said, “This is My body.” For He carried that body in His hands (*Explanations of the Psalms* 33, 1, 10).

[Jesus] received earth from earth; because flesh is from the earth, and He took flesh from the flesh of Mary. He walked here in the same flesh, and gave us the same flesh to be eaten unto salvation. But no one eats that flesh unless he first adores it... and not only do we not sin by adoring [His flesh], we do sin by not adoring (*Explanations of the Psalms* 98, 9).

I promised you [new Christians], who have now been baptized, a sermon in which I would explain the sacrament of the Lord’s Table, which you now look upon and of which last night were made participants. You ought to know what you have received, what you are going to receive, and what you ought to receive daily. That bread which you see on the altar, having been sanctified by the Word of God, is the body of Christ. That chalice, or rather, what is in that chalice, having been sanctified by the Word of God, is the blood of Christ... What you see is the bread and the chalice; that is what your eyes report to you. But what your faith obliges you to accept is that the bread is the body of Christ and the chalice is the blood of Christ (*Sermons* 227).

The faithful know what I am saying. They know Christ in the breaking of the bread. For not all bread, but only that which receives the blessing of Christ, becomes Christ’s body (*Sermons* 234, 2).⁴

St. Augustine did not endorse idolatry when he taught his readers to adore the Eucharist before eating—which the Church still does today (*Catechism* no. 1378). He really believed and taught that the Eucharist is Jesus Christ. Because of the Real Presence, we must adore Him.

Conclusion

Misunderstandings like this one frequently arise, as implied above, from taking sayings out of their original contexts—the problem of selective quotation. They can also arise from too much dependence on secondary sources. What does that mean? A primary source, in this example, is St. Augustine’s own writing, like St. Augustine’s *Confessions*. A secondary source would be a book by another person about St. Augustine’s writing, like *Augustine on Evil* by G. R. Evans. A tertiary source would be about secondary sources, and so on. While secondary sources can often give the reader valuable insights about the original, primary sources, they may sometimes be erroneous or misleading, even when written by a great scholar. The value of reading primary sources cannot be overestimated, because St. Augustine is the best of all Augustine “experts”! If more people read what St. Augustine actually wrote, instead of taking someone else’s word for it, fewer people would be confused when they read secondary claims about what he wrote.⁵

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¹ Ott, Ludwig, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, Tan, Rockford, IL, 1974, p. 378.

² “Larger context” means two things here. First, quotes like those should not be removed from the context of the writer’s complete works. Second, neither the quotes nor the writings should be removed from the larger context of the Catholic faith, which all the Church Fathers professed.

³ See also *Catechism* no. 1372 for a St. Augustine quote about the Eucharistic sacrifice, and no. 1375 for a St. Ambrose quote about the substantial change which takes place at the consecration. St. Ambrose was St. Augustine’s teacher in the Catholic faith.

⁴ These quotes, and others, may be found in William A. Jurgens’ *The Faith of the Early Fathers vol. 3* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press; 1979).

⁵ For an inspiring defense of old books and primary sources, see the C. S. Lewis essay “On the Reading of Old Books,” which also serves as an introduction to the Christian classic *On the Incarnation* by St. Athanasius (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press).