

THE EUCHARIST

Metropolitan Church of Pittsburgh Assembly November 6, 2021

“O Lord, I also believe and profess that this which I am about to receive is truly your most Precious Body and your Life Giving Blood.” With these words we prepare ourselves for communion and profess our profound yet simple faith—a faith so profound that not even the archangels can understand it—a faith so simple that children understand it better than adults.

But as adults, our quest for knowledge and depth spurs us on to ask questions. In the case of the Eucharist, it is not idle curiosity. After a glimpse of the divine beauty, we forge ahead eager to see more of God’s astonishing beauty, his fathomless generosity, and his warm love.

The prayer says “I believe and profess”, but this prayer is not a doctrinal statement, because we say, “your most Precious Body and your life giving Blood”. We are not telling the world what we believe, but we are speaking directly to our friend Jesus. In Iceland there is a hymn, my sweet brother Jesus. That lovely title sums up our relationship with Jesus, a brother and a sweet brother. We are affirming directly to Jesus, what we believe about this gift, a gift that is beyond anything we can say in words.

Who and what do we receive? The traditional doctrine says we receive his body and blood, soul and divinity. We receive everything. We receive both his body and blood. The ancient formula for a sacrifice is that the body and blood are separated. When the blood is taken from the body, the sacrifice is complete, and death is a consequence. The scriptures say, the life is in the blood. St. John Chrysostom says that the tongue of the priest is like a lance that performs the sacrifice. When the priest says, this is my body and this is my blood, the body and blood are separated, and the sacrifice is accomplished. So the body we receive is the sacrificed body of Christ.

In our Liturgy the priest says, “You have redeemed us from the curse of the law with your precious blood; nailed to the cross and pierced with a lance, you have gushed forth immortality for us. Glory to you oh Savior.” As St. Gregory of Nazianzus calls it, “the royal blood, as though a stream from a great river”—the royal blood of King David, the blood of David that flowed between Mary the mother, and her Divine Son in her womb.

What kind of blood is this Divine Blood that we receive, this royal blood? The scriptures tell us that when Cain murdered his brother, our first homicide, that the blood of Abel spilled on the ground called out to God for revenge. The Lord said to Cain, “The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground.” Then we shed the blood of the Son of God on the cross, the Son of the owner of the vineyard. The letter to the Hebrews calls this blood a more forgiving blood than the blood of Abel. For the blood of Christ spilled on the ground also called out to God, but the blood of Jesus called out to God, forgive them Father! So the blood we receive is the forgiving blood of Jesus.

The Church taught in the early councils that Jesus also has a soul, just as we do, in order to be a complete man. He is truly God and truly Man. When he sacrificed his life on the cross, he poured out his blood, and when he died his soul separated from his body. We know from the scriptures that while his earthly body was dead, he journeyed into the underworld to preach the Good News to the Just ones of bygone eras. He brought joy to all of our ancestors who were waiting for the coming of the Messiah, the deliverance from sin and death, and the establishment of God’s righteousness in our fallen world. In the Eucharist we receive this same soul that proclaimed good news to the underworld and freedom to the spirits in prison there.

Before communion, the priest puts the precious body into the chalice, reuniting the body and blood. He says, "The fullness of the Holy Spirit" because the Spirit is the breath of God. It is as though the Resurrection itself, that no human eye beheld, the Resurrection that stupefied the Roman soldiers, is made present for us on the altar.

In the Eucharist then we receive his precious body, his blood shed for our purification, and his soul that visited Hades. We receive the risen flesh and blood of Jesus, a promise of our own resurrection on the last day, for how could God fail to raise us up when we have the risen Christ in our flesh?

From the beginning there have been those who deny Christ. In his concern for his sheep, the early bishop and martyr Ignatius writes about these heretics, "They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, flesh which suffered for our sins and which that Father, in his goodness, raised up again." Well there is something to put us in awe! When we receive the precious flesh of Jesus, we receive the flesh that suffered as a consequence of our sins and for the forgiveness of our sins. We receive the flesh that walked on foot all over the Holy Land to bring light into darkness. We receive the flesh that healed lepers, and the blind, and the deaf, and raised the dead, and freed souls in bondage to demons, and made joyful wine at the wedding feast. We receive the flesh that calmed the storm at sea and commanded the weather, and that same flesh calms the storm inside of our own souls. We receive the flesh that was transfigured on the mountain between Moses and Elijah revealing as much of his glory as his disciples could bear to behold. We receive the flesh that traveled to Jerusalem carrying in secret the terrible knowledge of the impending passion, and that entered the Holy City on the foal of a donkey in fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah. We receive the flesh that knelt in prayer in the garden for you and for me, and said, Father, let this cup pass from my lips, but not my will, but thine be done. We receive the flesh that was betrayed, and laughed at, and spat upon, and insulted, and beaten, as foretold by the Holy Prophet Isaiah. We receive the flesh that was scourged at the pillar for our very own sins. We receive the wearied flesh that carried its own cross, its own instrument of execution to Golgotha. We receive the flesh that was nailed between two thieves, that endured the insults of one thief, and that promised Paradise to the repentant thief. We receive the flesh that was pierced with a lance. We receive the flesh that in its final agony cried out, forgive them Father. According to St. Ignatius, this is the body of Jesus that we receive in the Holy Eucharist.

In the sixth chapter of Isaiah, we read the astounding vision of the prophet when he is called in the temple. He says, "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his nether regions, and with two he flew. And one called to the other, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of the Sabaoth." And the foundation of the temple shook at the voice of him who called out, and the house was filled with smoke." Isaiah tells us that he was overcome with fear at the sight and said, "Woe is me! I am lost! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the One Who Is, the Lord of Sabaoth." But then he tells us, "One of the seraphim took a burning coal from the altar with tongs, and flew to me, and touched my mouth and said, 'Behold, this has touched your lips, and taken away your guilt, and your sin is forgiven.'"

The fathers tell us that Isaiah saw a prefiguring of the Holy Eucharist. Indeed, we find ourselves in God's Holy Temple, overcome with awe at the beauty of our faith, the grandeur of our liturgy, and the smoke of the temple, and the Eucharist is the burning coal brought to us from the altar. Even the seraph used tongs because he was not worthy to touch the Body and Blood of Jesus, but Jesus gives himself willingly to us, his flesh into our flesh and his blood into our blood, entering through the threshold of our lips, filling us with fear and awe.

The prayer of St. John of Damascus says, “God, my God, all-consuming fire, you make your messengers flaming fire. In your inexpressible love, you have condescended to give me your divine flesh. You have allowed me to partake of your divinity by possessing your most pure body and precious blood. May they penetrate my entire body and spirit and all my bones. May they burn away my sins. God, my God, all-consuming fire.”

Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović, the Serbian saint, writes in one of his “letters by the lake”, “I am taking a journey into my heart to see who is living there. As I move closer to the center, I am more and more full of fear for crowds of strangers have taken up living there. For each time I desired something in this world, something temporary that does not satisfy, I paid for it, paid dearly, oh so dearly, with a piece of my heart. When I arrive at the center it is crowded with those who have no right to live there. Only myself and the Creator of my heart have a right to live there, but there is no room for us.” He then begs God to drive out all these unwelcome visitors. Only the all consuming fire of God, the burning coal of the Holy Eucharist, can clean our hearts of these unwelcome guests. Only the flesh and blood of Jesus can fill our hearts so that only those who have a right to live there are left, that is myself and my Creator.

St. Ignatius of Antioch says on his way to martyrdom, “I have no taste for corruptible food nor for the pleasures of this life. I desire the bread of God, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, who was the seed of David. And for drink I desire his blood, which is love incorruptible.”

In the final prophecy of the Old Testament, the prophet Malachi describes the coming of St. John the Forerunner, “Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me.” Then in the final prophecy of the Messiah he says, “Suddenly, the Lord whom you seek will come to his temple....Behold, he is coming says the Lord of hosts, but who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears.” Indeed, the great stone and timber temple on the holy mountain of Jerusalem was not built for the sacrifice of animals, but rather so that the Son of God, who had kept himself in hidden places, might stand suddenly in the middle of the temple and cry out to the astonished pilgrims, “Before, Abraham was, I AM!” Suddenly, the Lord whom we seek was standing in the temple crying out, I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, I am the God who spoke to Moses from the burning bush and said, “Tell them my name is ‘I am who am’. Tell them ‘I am’ sent you.” He is the awesome God who visited Abraham and Sarah and blessed them with a son, the God who purified the cities of the plain with fire from heaven, the God who parted the Red Sea, the God who went before the Israelites in the desert and in battle—that God stood in the temple and cried out in the flesh, “Before Abraham was, I AM.” For this reason, that temple was built.

How much more precious is the temple of your body, the living flesh, the temple not made by hands, the temple washed clean in Baptism and anointed with the Holy Spirit. In that living temple of your body, the same Lord whom you seek appears suddenly, standing in your temple, and crying out, ‘I am who am’.” The prophet says, “Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like a bleacher’s soap. He will sift as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like silver and gold.” Yes. Come Lord Jesus into our temples of flesh. Sift our souls. Come and refine us like silver and gold. Cleanse us with your Divine unquenchable fire. Purify us in the furnace of your love.

I also believe and profess that this which I am about to receive is truly your most precious body and your life giving blood, which I pray, make me worthy to receive, for the remission of my sins and for life everlasting. O God be merciful to me a sinner. O God cleanse me of my sins and have mercy on me. O Lord, forgive me, for I have sinned without number. Amen.

+ Bishop Kurt Burnette