

The Divine Eucharist in the Seven Epistles of St. Ignatius of Antioch



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The Divine Eucharist—A Brief Introduction

“The Lord Jesus on the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks He broke it and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My Body which is broken for you: do this in remembrance of Me.’ And likewise, after supper, He took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My Blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes” (1 Cor. 11:23-26).

St. Paul received these sacred words from Christ Himself and in turn “delivered” them (lit. ‘traditioned’; Gk. παραδωσις) to the Corinthian believers. The very words and practice of Holy Communion are part of Holy Tradition and stand at the very center of the Church’s life. To “participate in” (i.e. to have communion in; Gk. κοινωνία) the Body and Blood of Christ by means of the bread and the cup, by means of the grace of the Holy Spirit, is the high calling and privilege of every Orthodox Christian (cf. 1 Cor. 10:16; 2 Cor. 13:14). This very act constitutes the Church as the Church (i.e. it forms us into that which we already are, what we are called to become, the very Body of Christ Himself). Truly this is “a great mystery” (Eph. 5:32). By participating in holy Communion we receive eternal life (Jn. 6:54); by it we abide in Christ and He abides in us (Jn. 6:56); by it we receive the remission of sins (Mt. 26:28). These things the Church has experienced and taught from the very beginning and continues to practice even today.

There are some today who would argue a different understanding of the Divine Eucharist. However, it becomes clear through a systematic study of the writings of the Holy Fathers that indeed all of them have shared and preserved the same essential experience and teaching from the first century to today—the Holy Eucharist is nothing less than the very body and blood of the glorified Christ and through partaking of it we are united to God. The purpose of this paper is to examine the writings of one particular early Church Father, St. Ignatius of Antioch, and to determine his teaching on this holy subject.

St. Ignatius and His Writings

St. Ignatius (d. 107) was the second bishop of Antioch after St. Peter (Eusebius, The History of the Church, p. 97) and “he is accounted an Apostolic Father having been a hearer of the Apostle John...” (Jergens, p. 17). He wrote Seven Epistles while he “was on his way from Antioch to Rome, having been condemned to death and expecting to be thrown to the wild beasts in the amphitheater on his arrival” (Lightfoot, 97). His “letters...give us a glimpse...into the very heart of the great bishop-martyr and breathe forth a profound religious enthusiasm that catches us up and fires us...(Quasten, Vol. 1, pp. 63-64). Polycarp says that “you will find them most helpful, for they contain faith, endurance, and all the edification that concerns our Lord” (Eusebius, p. 99). “All seven [epistles] are veritable treasure houses for the history of dogma” (Jergens, 17). They “are exceedingly important documents in the history of Christian theology. They are vital ‘documents’ of a faith that was not rooted in ‘documents’ or ‘archives,’ but rather rooted in the delivered tradition about the living person of Jesus Christ...The early date of these letters...and their spontaneous, occasional nature cannot be overstressed” (Florovsky, pp. 50-51). Both Polycarp and Origen confirm that his martyrdom took place; Origen tells it occurred in Rome. In his Roman epistle, St. Ignatius begged his readers “not to deprive him of martyrdom by intervention with the Roman authorities” (Oxford Dictionary, p. 817), but rather to let him “imitate the Passion of my God.”

Four of the letters “were sent from Smyrna while Ignatius was staying there and was in personal communication with Polycarp the bishop. The three remaining letters...were written [later] at Alexandria Troas where again he halted for a time, before crossing the sea for Europe” and on to Rome. The first four letters “are addressed to churches which he had not visited, but knew only through their delegates” (Lightfoot, 97).

St. Ignatius's Teaching on the Divine Eucharist

St. Ignatius uses at least five different *explicit* expressions to describe the Divine Eucharist. He calls it: “the bread of God” (Ign. Eph. 5; Ign. Rom. 7); “His blood [which] is love incorruptible” and the means of “union” with the Lord (Ign. Rom. 7; Ign. Phil. 4); “the medicine of immortality” (Ign. Eph. 20); “the Eucharist” (Ign. Phil. 4; Ign. Smyrn. 6, 8; cf. also Ign. Eph. 13); and, “the good gift of God” (Ign. Smyrn. 7). He also implies that it is a sacrifice (Gk. θυσια; Ign. Eph. 5; Ign. Phil. 4; cf. Didache 14:1 and Mal. 1:11). His teaching on the Eucharist is grounded in his Christology. It is also integral to his understanding and teaching on the Church and its hierarchy. We shall examine each of these eucharistic expressions as well as these two related themes.

“The bread of God” The Divine Eucharist is for St. Ignatius true spiritual food and is to be found only in the Church “within the precinct of the Altar” (Ign. Eph. 5). Certainly this image of “the bread of God” is based on the Lord’s own words in His “Bread of Life” discourse in John 6 where the Lord describes Himself as “the true bread which came down from heaven”, “the bread of God”, “the bread of life”, and “the living bread” (Jn. 6:32,33,35,48,50,51,58). In his Roman epistle, Ignatius contrasts corruptible food and “the delights of this life,” with the food of incorruption, the bread of God and the Lord’s blood, “incorruptible love” (Ign. Rom. 7). He states explicitly that this bread is “the flesh of Jesus Christ”, “the flesh which suffered for our sins and which the Father in His goodness raised up” (Ign. Smyrn. 8). “The bread is the flesh of Jesus, the cup His blood (cf. Ign. Rom. 7). Clearly he intends this realism to be taken strictly, for he makes it the basis of his argument against the Docetists’ denial of the reality of Christ’s body” (cf. Ign. Smyrn. 6ff; Kelly, pp. 197-198). He could not be more explicit. The bread of the Eucharist is the glorified flesh of the Incarnate Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ. And this bread nourishes us for

incorruption and eternal life. His eucharistic theology is clearly grounded in his Christology, a theme which we shall now consider briefly.

Fr. Florovsky says that the Seven Epistles of St. Ignatius are “vital ‘documents’ of a faith that was not rooted in ‘documents’ or ‘archives,’ but rather rooted in the delivered tradition about the living Person of Jesus Christ, divine and human, yet One Lord and One Eternally with the Father” (Florovsky, p. 50). Ignatius “insists on the reality both of the Divinity and the Humanity of the Lord” (Oxford Dictionary, pp. 817-18). “If one looks carefully at what he writes about the Eucharist, the hierarchy of the Church, the unity of the Church and the Church’s unity with the unity of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, a deeper and even more vital Christology obtains. Everything...that he writes about the Eucharist becomes meaningless without his belief in the Divinity of Christ” (Florovsky, p. 46). For Ignatius “the life of Christ is continued in the Eucharist” (Oxford, p. 818); “the fullness of Christ is to be found in the Eucharist” (Romanides, p. 65). Thus, his understanding and teaching about the Eucharist is grounded in his living experience of the Person of Christ, at once both God and man, and flows from a living union with his Lord. The true nature of the Eucharist is based on this understanding.

“His blood...is love incorruptible” and the means of “union” with Christ

Not only does St. Ignatius describe the Eucharist as food, “the bread of God”, he also speaks of the spiritual drink which he “desires”, the Lord’s blood received in the “one cup” (Ign. Rom. 7; Ign. Phil. 4). And this is right since the Lord Himself instituted the Eucharist using both bread and wine, spiritual food and spiritual drink (cf. 1 Cor. 10:3,4). Remarkably, he says that the cup (i.e. the Lord’s “blood” in the cup) is the means of union (εἰς ἐνωσιν) with the Lord. St. Paul says that both the bread and the wine are the means to communion (κοινωνία) with the Lord (1 Cor. 10:16). The Eucharist unites us to the Lord who is the source of incorruption. He makes this possible and gives Himself freely to us by His love.

“The medicine of immortality” Not only is the Eucharist true spiritual food and drink which leads to union with the Lord, it is also a medicine for our healing that we may live forever; it is an antidote for death. The Divine Eucharist is “the medicine of immortality.” Medicines are given to people who are sick and need to be healed. As the Lord Himself said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick” (Mt. 9:12). Our sickness is mortality, corruption, and sin. We are afflicted by passions and lies inspired by the devil. Outside the Church we are subject to “the powers of Satan,” says Ignatius (Ign. Eph. 13). But Christ is our “Physician” (Ign. Eph. 7). “Within the precinct of the altar” He gives us His very flesh and blood for our healing (Ign. Rom. 7, Phil. 4, Smyrn. 6). “When [we] meet together frequently [and participate in the Eucharist] the powers of Satan are cast down” (Ign. Eph. 13). “Since [the Eucharist] mediates communion with Christ, it is a medicine which procures immortality (φαρμακον αθανασιαω), an antidote against death which enables us to live in the Lord forever (Ign. Eph. 20)” (Kelly, pp. 197-198). “Since the Holy Eucharist is the medicine of immortality, it follows that unity with those who have been entrusted with the proper liturgy of and teaching concerning the Mysteries is an absolutely necessary condition for salvation” (Romanides, p. 66-67). The relation of the Eucharist to Ecclesiology will be discussed below.

“The Eucharist” St. Ignatius describes the bread and the wine as “the Eucharist” (τον ευχαριστιαν Ign. Smyrn. 6). Christians are to be diligent to “meet together more frequently for thanksgiving to God (εις ευχαριστιαν Θεου) and for His glory” (Ign. Eph. 13; cf. Heb. 10:25). He warns the Smyrnaeans not to abstain from “thanksgiving and prayer” as is the habit of some who deny the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist (Ign. Smyrn. 6). Whoever avoids the assembly of believers, and the bishop, is full of pride (Ign. Eph. 5). Although these references to thanksgiving may be referring to prayer, it is clear from the context that Holy Communion is also in view (esp. Ign. Smyrn. 6). And, of course, prayer as

thanksgiving is integral to the celebration of the Eucharist (cf. the Anaphora of the Divine Liturgy: “Let us give thanks to the Lord! It is meet and right!”). This is the true vocation of man. Man falls away from God because he refuses to give Him thanks (Rom. 1:21).

“The good gift of God” Some people were denying that the Eucharist is “the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ” [even in those days!] (Ign. Smyrn. 6). St. Ignatius says that such persons are gainsaying “the good gift of God” and will thereby “perish” (Ign. Smyrn. 7; cf. Jn. 6:53). It is clear from the context that this “good gift” is the Divine Eucharist. Since it is a gift it should be received with thanksgiving and “love.” Those who reject this will perish, and those who receive it properly will enjoy eternal life (cf. Jn. 3:16). He warns these gainsayers to take heed to the Prophets & the Gospel “wherein the Passion is shown to us.”

A sacrifice (θυσια) St. Ignatius speaks explicitly of the “one Altar (θυσιαστηριον)” in the same context as speaks of the “one Eucharist” (Ign. Phil. 4). He also speaks of the “precinct of the Altar (θυσιαστηριου)” inside which one may find “the bread of God” (Ign. Eph. 5). This term for altar includes the term (θυσια) which is the Greek word for sacrifice (a term used explicitly in the Didache 14:1 in reference to the Eucharist). “The Church is the ‘place of sacrifice’ and the Eucharist is θυσιαν (Florovsky, p. 46).

The New Testament also uses this term, altar (θυσιαστηριον), in Hebrews 13:10 where St. Paul says, “We have an Altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat.” Christians “eat” from “the Altar.” It is clear from St. Ignatius that what is “eaten” from the Altar is the Divine Eucharist, the bread and the blood of God (Ign. Phil. 4). Christ Himself is that sacrifice offered once for the salvation of all. He has offered one eternal sacrifice, Himself, of which we partake in the Church in the Divine Eucharist (cf. Heb. 7:27; 9:11-15, 23-28; 10:11-14). St. Ignatius stands squarely within the New Apostolic Tradition when he speaks of the Eucharist in sacrificial terms. Also, St. Ignatius says that one inside

the sanctuary (Gk. θυσιαστηριου) is “clean” (καθαρω); one outside the sanctuary (Gk. θυσιαστηριου) is unclean (Trallians 7). Thus, the Eucharist, the divine sacrifice, is found in the Church and is the means by which one is cleansed (i.e. purified from corruption and sin).

The Relationship to Ecclesiology¹

The Divine Eucharist may only be found within the Catholic Church under the authority of and in communion with the bishop and those appointed by him (Ign. Smyrn. 8). “There exists an inseparable relationship between the bishop and the Eucharist...There is one flesh of the Lord, one cup, one altar, and there is one bishop” (Romanides, p. 67). “The best safeguard of the unity of the Christian faith is the bishop, who is pre-eminent because he is ‘as the Lord’, and without whose authority neither the Eucharist nor marriage may be celebrated” (Oxford, p. 818). “The bishop is according to Ignatius also the high priest of the liturgy and the dispenser of the mysteries of God. Neither [marriage], baptism, nor agape, nor Eucharist may be celebrated without him (Ign. Smyrn. 8; Ign. Poly. 5)” (Quasten, p. 68). In the words of St. Ignatius, “Let no man do anything pertaining to the Church apart from the bishop. Let that be held a valid Eucharist which is under the bishop or one to whom he shall have committed it” (Ign. Smyrn. 8)...“that whatsoever you do, you may do it after God” (Ign. Phil. 4)...“that everything which you do may be sure and valid” (Ign. Smyrn. 8).

“The visible Church...manifest [their] unity and love in the corporate Eucharist, in which their very life and salvation is rooted.” (Romanides, p. 63). “At each gathering *επι το αυτο* (“in the same place”, p. 63), by means of each Eucharist, the body of Christ, the Church this side of death, is in the process of formation—the Word made flesh is being formed in the faithful by the Holy Spirit (1 Jn. 3:23-24), and thus, the Church, although already the body of Christ, is continuously becoming what she is” (Romanides, pp. 64-65). “For Ignatius the Eucharist is the formative and manifest center of corporate love unto

immortality and at the same time the weapon which insures the continuous defeat of the devil...the participation in which is the only sure sign of continuous communion with God and neighbor unto salvation” (Romanides, p. 65). “Each community [has] the fullness of the Eucharistic life” (Romanides, p. 66).

Conclusion

St. Ignatius, that God-bearing martyr-bishop writes with great clarity on the true nature of the Divine Eucharist. The bread and the wine are the Body and Blood of the glorified Christ. It is the medicine of immortality, an antidote for death. It is the means of union with Christ. It is the means of acquiring incorruption. It is the good gift of God for which we are to offer thanks. It is the sacrifice of the Lord. It is found only in the Catholic Church under the authority of the bishop. It is grounded in the divine-human Person of Christ and continues His life in the Church. As with his Christology, so with his Eucharistic theology, St. Ignatius provides invaluable insight into the true understanding and experience of the Early Church. His teaching confirms our own understanding and experience of life in the Church—of Christ, of the Episcopacy, of the Eucharist—for they are one and the same. “To Him be glory in the Church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen” (Eph. 2:21).

¹ See the article by Fr. Romanides, “The Ecclesiology of St. Ignatius of Antioch” which develops this theme.

Selected Quotes on the Divine Eucharist from the Epistles of St. Ignatius

To the Ephesians

5. Let no man be deceived. If any one be not within the precinct of the Altar (θυσιαστηριου), he lacks the bread [of God]. (Whoever avoids the assembly of believers, and the bishop, is full of pride.)
7. There is one Physician, both of flesh and of spirit, generate and ingenerate, God in man, true life in death, both from Mary and from God, first passable and then impassable, Jesus Christ our Lord.
13. Do your diligence therefore to meet together more frequently for thanksgiving (εις ευχαριστιαν Θεου) to God and for His glory. For when you meet together frequently, the powers of Satan are cast down.
20. Assemble yourselves together in common, every one of you severally, man by man, in grace, in one faith and one Jesus Christ...breaking one bread which is the medicine of immortality (φαρμακον αθανασιαω) and the antidote that we should not die but live forever in Jesus Christ”

To the Trallians

7. He that is within the sanctuary (θυσιαστηριου; translated in Eph 5 and Phil. 4 as “Altar”) is clean; the one outside the sanctuary (θυσιαστηριου) is not clean, he who does ought without the bishop and the presbytery and deacons...

To the Romans

7. I have no delight in the food of corruption or in the delights of this life. I desire the bread of God (αρτον Θεου) which is the flesh of Jesus Christ who was of the seed of David; and for a draught I desire His blood, which is love incorruptible.

To the Philadelphians

4. Be careful therefore to observe one Eucharist (for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ and one cup unto union (εις ενωσιν) in His blood; there is one Altar (θυσιαστηριον), as there is one Bishop, together with the presbytery and the deacons my fellow-servants), that whatsoever you do, you may do it after God.

To the Smyrnaeans

6. They abstain from thanksgiving and prayer, because they do not confess that the Eucharist (τον Ευχαριστιαν) is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, which flesh suffered for our sins, and which the Father of His goodness raised up.
7. They therefore that gainsay the good gift of God perish by their questionings.
8. Let no man do anything pertaining to the Church apart from the bishop. Let that be held a valid Eucharist (βεβαια Ευχαριστια) which is under the bishop or one to whom he shall have committed it. Wherever the Bishop shall appear, there let the people be; even as where Jesus may be, there is the Catholic Church. It is not lawful apart from the bishop either to baptize or to hold a love-feast (αγαπην); but whatsoever he shall approve, this is well-pleasing also to God; that everything which you do may be sure and valid.

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