THE NEW SHOFAR

This Body, by the indwelling of God the Word, has been made over to divine dignity. Rightly then, do we believe that the bread consecrated by the word of God has been made over into the Body of God the Word. **St Irenaeus 120-140 AD**

Body of Christ

The Eucharist, Our Food for the Journey

Why do we receive the Eucharist? To some, that may seem like a silly question. It is the Body and Blood of Jesus, so why would we not receive it? However, the issue is not quite so simple. Yes, it is great to have God physically present among us, but why would we want to eat and drink that presence? What exactly does consuming Jesus' Body and Blood do for us? That's a much tougher question to answer, and the answer is to be found in what Jesus said about the importance of the Eucharist in our spiritual lives.

For the Life of the World

Bible readers are familiar with the sixth chapter of John's Gospel. In it, Jesus gives a sermon in which he repeatedly tells his followers that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood, words we still use in our Eucharist/Holy Communion today.

However, this sermon teaches us more than just the bare fact of the bread and wine being *My Body and my Blood"*; it also tells us a bit about the role the Eucharist is supposed to play in our spiritual lives. Particularly this verse: *I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh*.

When we read Jesus' words about his flesh being given "for the life of the world," most of us understand him to be referring to his sacrificial death. On the cross, Jesus gave his life, his flesh, to redeem the entire world, which we commemorate in the Eucharist.

The New Manna

If we go back and read this verse in context, we can see there a short dialogue that Jesus had with his audience. In this dialogue, the people ask him what sign he would perform so they could know for sure that he came from God, and they cite the manna, the miraculous bread from heaven that sustained the Israelites as they travelled to the Promised Land after their exodus from Egypt as an example of the kind of sign they're looking for (John 6:30-31). In response, Jesus tells them that the manna foreshadowed the "true bread from heaven" that God would later give his people (John 6:32), and then he begins his Bread of Life Teaching, where he explains that he himself is the *bread which came down from heaven*.

We can see there that when Jesus says that his flesh is given "for the life of the world" in the Eucharist, he means that his flesh is the new manna, the "true bread from heaven" that is intended to sustain all of us on our journey to our heavenly homeland just as the manna in the Old Testament fed the Israelites on their journey to the Promised Land. But how exactly does the Eucharist sustain us spiritually?

Eternal Life

Jesus gives us a few clues to help us answer those questions. First, he tells us: *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up…*

In this passage, Jesus teaches us that the Eucharist quite literally sustains our spiritual lives. Without it, as he says, we "have no [spiritual] life" in us. In other words, it helps to sustain the life of grace within us, the grace that we receive at baptism and that we believe will flower into the life of heaven once we die, just as earthly food sustains our physical lives.

Abiding in Christ

Secondly, Jesus tells us that *He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him*. We would expect Jesus to first say that the Eucharist allows him to abide in us and only secondly to say that it allows us to abide in him, but that's not what he does. He reverses the expected order, implying that our presence within him is more important than his presence within us. But what does that mean? How can we abide in Jesus? He explains it with a further teaching*… I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned*.

Unfortunately, the connection between these two passages is obscured a bit in many English translations. Jesus says that the Eucharist allows us to "abide" in him, and here he's saying that we must "remain" in him. In Greek they're the same word.

And what precisely is that connection? The Eucharist allows us to "abide" or "remain" in Jesus just as branches abide in their vine. Just as a vine gives life to its branches and allows them to grow and flourish, so too does the Eucharist connect us to the source of our spiritual life, Jesus, allowing us to grow and flourish spiritually. It allows us to bear fruit for God, obeying his laws and following his will for our lives, and without it, we can't fulfill our vocations or live faithful Christian lives. This sacrament connects us to the source of all grace and holiness. The more we receive it, the stronger that connection becomes.

Food for the Journey

The next time we gather as believers and receive Communion, remember that we are not just performing some archaic religious ritual that Jesus instituted a couple thousand years ago. No, when we receive the Eucharist, we nourish our souls with the new manna, the new bread from heaven that sustains our spiritual lives just like the manna in the Old Testament sustained the Israelites' physical lives. It strengthens us to live as faithful Christians in a hostile world, making sure that we remain connected to the source of all holiness and spiritual strength, Jesus Christ. At a deeply profound level, the Eucharist is food for our journey home, food that helps us to find hope in the hostile desert of this world and arrive safely at our heavenly homeland. That journey is not something we can ever achieve on our own, under our own strengths and ambitions. It is a gift from God, a divine underserved grace that was won for us by the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross. Each time we gather for our Communion celebration, we gather there, around the cross for that Food for Life. Therein is a Hope no politician can guarantee, no earthly resources provide and which no sin or human failing can negate.