

The Eucharist
Makes the Church:
A Look at St. Augustine
And the Unity of the Church

by

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TRS 641B – Eucharist and Ordained Ministries

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October 12, 2006

I. Introduction

In the years following Jesus' Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection, theological discussion has occurred on many issues. Central to many of these discussions is the place of the Eucharist in the Church. From the early Apostles, the Church has understood that coming together to celebrate the Eucharistic meal is central to our faith. The New Testament contains four institution narratives describing how Jesus himself called us to celebrate the Eucharist in memory of him. From the beginning Catholics, despite heresies to the contrary, have always understood the Eucharist as the Real Presence of Jesus. What has changed over time is how the Church expresses the Real Presence and its relationship to the Church.

From 100 A.D. to 1200 A.D. the Church was in what is commonly referred to as the Patristic Period. This was the Age of the Church Fathers, including St. Augustine who we will discuss shortly. During this period, the common eucharistic understanding is most commonly and properly understood as "The Eucharist Makes the Church."

During the Scholastic Period from around 1200 A.D. to 1900 A.D. the common Eucharistic understanding somehow became "The Church Makes the Eucharist." Today, with the renewal of Vatican II, we are properly returning to an understanding of "The Eucharist Makes the Church."

II. St. Augustine on Eucharist & Unity

St. Augustine certainly believed in the Real Presence in the Eucharist. Augustine sees the Eucharist as one sacrifice. It transcends time.¹ Our celebration of the Eucharist is not just a re-telling. Rather, it makes present the sacrifice of Jesus. It transcends

¹ William R. Crockett, *Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation*. New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 95.

place.² As Augustine says, “however many loaves there may be on Christ’s altars throughout the world, it’s one loaf.”³ Thus it is unity.

Prior to the Fourth Century, there was not much discussion on how the ordinary bread and wine became the body and bread of Jesus. It was accepted solely on the words of Jesus without an explanation as to how the change happened. St. Ambrose, mentor of St. Augustine, was the first to discuss the change that occurred in the elements.⁴ St. Augustine preferred the language of symbolism.⁵ However, St. Augustine addresses “the change” in the opening of his “Sermon 229A.”⁶ There he speaks of the appearance of bread and wine on the Lord’s table as having the same appearance as bread and wine on the table at home. He says, “They have the same aspect, but not the same value.”⁷ He then compares this to baptism. We look the same after our baptism as we did before. However, we know we have changed. So too do we know that the bread and wine on the Lord’s Table have changed to the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. It is from the Real Presence that the Eucharist makes the Church.

Augustine continues to use a comparison between our own transformation in baptism and the transformation of the bread and wine into the Eucharist in “Sermon 272.”

So why in bread? Let’s not bring anything of our own to bear here, let’s go on listening to the apostle himself, who said, when speaking of this sacrament, *One bread, one body, we being many are* (1 Cor 10:17). Understand and rejoice. Unity, truth, piety, love. *One bread*; what is this one bread? The one body which we, being many, are. Remember that bread is not made from one grain, but from many. When you were being exorcised, it’s as though you were being ground. When you were baptized it’s as though you were mixed into dough. When you

² Augustine, “Sermon 229A,” paragraph 1.

³ Ibid.

⁴ St. Ambrose, *Sermons on the Sacraments IV*, “The Symbolism of the Approach to the Altar,” paragraphs 14-16.

⁵ R. Moloney, *The Eucharist*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995, 106-7. William R. Crockett, *The Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation*. New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1989, 96.

⁶ For Augustine, the bread is taken up to heaven to be transformed by Jesus who is localized in heaven. The Eucharist then returns to us.

⁷ Augustine, “Sermon 229A,” paragraph 1

received in the fire of the Holy Spirit, it's as though you were baked. Be what you can see, and receive what you are.⁸

Here, Augustine speaks of the unity in the Church. As bread is made from many grains mixed together in water, so too are we made one in baptism through the water. When the Chrism is placed on our heads, we receive the Holy Spirit as the fire that bakes us. The bread we receive is one body. Through the one bread, we are *continually* brought together as the Body of Christ. The bread is made from many grains. The Church is made up of many people who become one in Jesus.

Likewise, Augustine continues the theme of unity from the wine that becomes the Blood of Christ

Brothers and sisters, just remind yourselves what wine is made from; many grapes hang in the bunch, but the juice of the grapes is poured together in one vessel. That too is how the Lord Christ signified us, how he wished us to belong to him.⁹

When grapes are made into the wine, they clearly become indistinguishable from one another. That is the unity that Jesus calls us to. In Jesus, our unity should be indivisible. Once the grapes become wine, they can never be separated. We are to be as strong a unity.

Augustine uses this bread analogy in other sermons. In “Sermon 227,” the analogy to making bread to baptism was expanded to describe the process of grinding wheat as to the activities of fasting and exorcisms. The grinding breaks apart the grain, getting at what is good. It is the sacrifices, like fasting, that we make that draw us together. It is through sacrifices that we more fully participate in the Eucharist.

Both Sermons 227 & 229A were delivered on Easter Sunday morning to the newly initiated members of the community. The purpose is to do lead them to an

⁸ Augustine, “Sermon 272.”

⁹ Ibid.

understanding of the Eucharist. He continues to use Paul's Body of Christ theology. We are called to be one body. It must be a body unbroken. He says, "For they who eat such bread do not argue with one another, because "we though many, are one bread, one body."¹⁰ Obviously, Augustine relies heavily on 1 Corinthians 10:17. In chapter 11 of 1 Corinthians Paul speaks of how we must receive the Eucharist as a community. Paul speaks against the divisions that separate people before they receive communion. Augustine agrees when he said in Sermon 272 that we must be at peace with one another to receive. The Eucharist is the sacrament that brings us together in unity. It must never divide us.

In "Sermon 227," he goes onto explain the celebration of the Eucharist. It is interesting to take note of the explanatory footnote #9 which points out that Augustine does not focus heavily on the consecration. This would be consistent with his not focusing on the change as Ambrose does. Rather, after a brief mention of the consecration, Augustine focuses on the act of receiving Communion. We must receive it worthily if we are too receive it as the 'Sacrament of Unity.' Augustine speaks of our need for unity to receive the Eucharist, which here he calls the "sacrament of unity." He says we must first hold the "bond of peace"¹¹ for if we do no receive the sacrament in peace, we receive unworthily. The Eucharist makes the Church but we must approach in some semblance of unity. For those who receive Eucharist properly, *are* what they receive.¹²

¹⁰ Augustine, "Tractate 26," paragraph 14.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Augustine, "Sermon 227"

As Crockett says of Augustine, “The sacrificial action is not complete until it is consummated in the act of communion.”¹³ To receive Communion is to participate in the sacrifice of Christ. Augustine expresses a theology of martyrdom from this concept of participation in the Eucharist. He says, “Therefore the martyrs recognized what they were eating and drinking so as repay such gifts.”¹⁴ A martyr participates directly in the suffering of Jesus in persecution. A martyr understands the sacrifice Jesus made for us. We are not all called to be martyrs but we do *share* in what Jesus did for us.

In Tractate 26, Augustine again returns to this idea of we are what we receive. In 13.2, he addresses the link between body and soul. While our bodies do depend on physical food for nourishment, ultimately our body depends on its soul for existence. So too is the Body of Christ dependent on its soul for its existence. What is the soul of the Body of Christ except the Spirit of Christ? We must we receive Jesus to maintain the Body of Christ. Without receiving the mystical body of Christ in the Eucharist the Body of Christ, the Church, cannot survive.

Augustine is found of the passage, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”¹⁵ This verse has roots in John 12:24 but it also parallels the synoptic tradition that calls each of us to lose our life so that we must save it.¹⁶ If we wish to be part of the unity offered by Christ; if we wish to join in his heavenly banquet, we must be willing to give up our lives as we know them and seek to completely give ourselves to Jesus. In receiving Jesus and becoming what he

¹³ Crockett, *Eucharist*, 96.

¹⁴ St. Augustine, *The City of God, Books VIII-XVI*. Trans. G. Walsh and G. Monahan. New York, 1952. Book X, 128.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ cf. Mt 10:39, Mt 16:25, Mk 8:35, Lk 9:24, Lk 17:33.

is, we become one. The reality of the Eucharist, the *res sacramenti* is our unity in Christ through his offering and our reception of the Eucharist.¹⁷ As Moloney says

The basic point is that the sacrament is a great revelation to us of the love, which poured itself out on the cross, and so it is an immediate challenge to us, not just to imitate the historical Christ, but to imitate the Eucharistic Christ.¹⁸

III. Implications for Today

Unfortunately, since the time of Augustine there has been division in the Church. The Eastern Church of the Orthodox split in the 11th Century. The Protestant Reformation in the 16th Century further split the Church. There have been other smaller schisms since then. Yet, there is maintenance of tradition. Certainly, the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox maintain the tradition of the Eucharist as the real presence. We can benefit greatly today from a renewed understanding of the Eucharist as the “Sacrament of Unity.” When we celebrate the Eucharist as Christ commanded, he is present with us. It is he who makes the Eucharist, not the Church as a human institution. It is then the Eucharist that makes the Church. Through the Eucharist we are bound together.

Paragraph 1396 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* uses the phrase, “the Eucharist makes the Church. It states, “those who receive the Eucharist are united more closely to Christ.” It speaks of how Communion renews and strengthens us. It speaks of receiving Communion as a participation in the Body and Blood of Christ. It even quotes Augustine 272nd Sermon as to what we receive in the Eucharist. Today, the Eucharist is still the “Sacrament of Unity” that we need so much.¹⁹

¹⁷ R. Moloney, *The Eucharist*, 106.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 107.

¹⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Second Edition, Libreria Editrice Vaticana. 1997. 1396.

Today, we are in need of real understanding of what it means to receive the Eucharist. It is not a simple receiving we do as individuals. Rather, Augustine offers us a sound theology of how, when we receive Communion, we *participate* in the Eucharistic sacrifice.

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