

The Eucharist: Two Become One Flesh

By Greg Witherow

In the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches the Eucharist is both a Sacrifice and a meal. The partaker receives Christ's body, blood, soul and divinity. The result of receiving is twofold. First, the person receives sacramental graces or alternatively, judgment¹. Second, the recipient's marital bond with Christ is strengthened and reaffirmed. Yes, it is baptism that initiates our unity to Christ and the Church. But the Eucharist sustains the union that baptism began². In the book of Ephesians Saint Paul ups the ante. There he declares our union with Christ as "the two become one flesh". This is the language of marital intimacy. In effect, such intimacy is analogous to the Sacramental union we have with Christ. How does this one flesh union happen? Christ answers the question in John 6. There he says, "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him."³ Read that again slowly. Does not Christ make the same point as Paul in Ephesians, where the two flesh mingle to become one? These are the only two times in the New Testament our relationship with Christ is described as a flesh-to-flesh oneness. This union complements our spiritual bond to Christ where Paul states elsewhere, "He who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him"⁴. The intimacy of two becoming one flesh should give the Catholic pause when approaching the Altar. Receiving communion is not a time to be distracted, a moment to stretch the legs, to get a visual of who else is at Mass, or take part in a Group Snack. Instead it is an intimate Marriage Moment with our spouse, Jesus Christ. This essay will explore the topic further⁵.

The Two Shall Become One Flesh

To begin, let us examine what the term "one flesh" means. In the book of Genesis God establishes marriage between a man and a woman and states, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and **they shall become one flesh**" (Genesis 2:24). While retaining their identity, the newly married husband and wife form a union and are said to be one. But what does the term "one flesh" refer to? Certainly love, fidelity and lifelong commitment are part of this oneness.

But lacking these, it is still possible for a man and woman to be one flesh. We know this because Saint Paul says so in his first epistle to the Corinthian church. There Paul implores the Christians to abstain from sexual immorality. In doing so he states sexual immorality violates the integrity of the Christian's union with Christ. In doing so, he says something surprising.

¹ 1 Corinthians 11:27-32 states, "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we should not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are chastened so that we may not be condemned along with the world." All quotes from the Revised Standard Version

² 1 Corinthians 12:13 states, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and were all made to drink one drink." The Protestant Reformation Study Bible comments on the "one drink" in this verse and stating "*partaking of the Lord's Supper* signifies our continued communion with Christ and his church." Here it is acknowledged that the one drink is the Eucharistic Cup. But as true Protestants they only admit to a sign (it signifies), not an actual grace. Also see 1 Corinthians 10:17 where it states we are united to Christ and his Church because we eat of the one bread.

³ John 6:56. The flesh of Christ is mingled with the that of the person eating. The result is a union where the two are one.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 6:17

⁵The conjugal act between a husband and wife has been so degraded in our society it is hard to even broach the point Paul makes. Especially with non-believers it opens the door for the discussion to become a vile mess. I can well imagine the rancid jokes. As with the earthly marriage bed, this topic should be discussed in hushed tones, dignity and veiled from excessive scrutiny. Paul hints at this when he calls it a mystery. So we should acknowledge it and leave it at that. Yet, if one cannot grasp the sacredness of the marriage bed it is difficult to grasp Paul's point. In the same way earthly fatherhood has been destroyed, making it very difficult to understand God's Fatherhood so it is with our topic. Satan and his minions have been busy.

“Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? Certainly not! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a harlot is one body with her? **For ‘the two’ he says ‘shall become one flesh’**. But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with him.” (1 Corinthians 6:15-17)

Minus love, fidelity and a lifelong commitment a man and a harlot can still be one flesh. Therefore the Biblical term “one flesh” at its core is referring to the sexual union. But in God’s plan it is meant to be a uniquely veiled and intimate giving of oneself, cordoned off for the Bride and Groom; no other. Additionally, it is open to life.

The Intimate Union of the Eucharist

Paul uses marital language in describing Christ’s union to the Church. In Ephesians he presents earthly marriage as a type, meant to mirror the marriage between Christ and his Church. Speaking of earthly marriage he concludes with this sentence. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and **the two shall become one flesh**. This is a great mystery, **but I speak concerning Christ and the Church**.” (Ephesians 5:31, 32).

Catholics believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament. We truly eat his flesh and drink his blood⁶ in a veiled, Sacramental way. The Church tells us that for about ten minutes after receiving the Bread and Wine, Christ is physically present within us. **Sacramentally** we strengthen the conjugal union and reaffirm our marital pledge to Christ⁷. Yes, we have a spiritual union with Christ. That is important and cannot be under emphasized. But Catholics and Orthodox also experience a flesh-to-flesh union. Per the Catechism Holy Communion is an intimate, unifying act between Christ and the believer.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church

1329 The Lord's Supper, because of its connection with the supper which the Lord took with his disciples on the eve of his Passion and because it anticipates the wedding feast of the Lamb in the heavenly Jerusalem. The *Breaking of Bread*, because Jesus used this rite, part of a Jewish meal, when as master of the table he blessed and distributed the bread, above all at the Last Supper. It is by this action that his disciples will recognize him after his Resurrection, and it is this expression that the first Christians will use to designate their Eucharistic assemblies; by doing so they signified that all who eat the one broken bread, Christ, **enter into communion with him** and **form but one body in him**.

1331 [We call it] Holy Communion, because by this sacrament we unite ourselves to Christ, who **makes us sharers in his Body and Blood** to **form a single body**.

⁶ In John 6: 51-56 Christ states, “I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.” The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” So Jesus said to them, “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 at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.”

⁷ Dr. Scott Hahn pointed this out to a questioner on his web site dated August 4, 2013 where he says, “Upon discovering the Catholic faith, I came to see how the gift of the Eucharist is more analogous to the intimacy of the marital act, by which Christ, the divine bridegroom, unites Himself to the Church, His beloved bride, for the purpose of consummating and renewing His ‘one-flesh’ covenant as a life-giving mystery with us (Eph 5:31-32)”. The post is found here: <http://goo.gl/W3ZYzL>

1382 The Mass is at the same time, and inseparably, the sacrificial memorial in which the sacrifice of the cross is perpetuated and the sacred banquet of communion with the Lord's body and blood. But the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice is wholly directed toward **the intimate union** of the faithful with Christ through communion. To receive communion is to receive Christ himself who has offered himself for us.

796 The unity of Christ and the Church, head and members of one Body, also implies the distinction of the two within a personal relationship. This aspect is often expressed by the image of bridegroom and bride. The theme of Christ as Bridegroom of the Church was prepared for by the prophets and announced by John the Baptist. The Lord referred to himself as the "bridegroom." The Apostle speaks of the whole Church and of each of the faithful, members of his Body, as a bride "betrothed" to Christ the Lord so as to become but one spirit with him. The Church is the spotless bride of the spotless Lamb. "Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her." He has joined her with himself in an everlasting covenant and never stops caring for her as for his own body:

This is the whole Christ, head and body, one formed from many . . . whether the head or members speak, it is Christ who speaks. He speaks in his role as the head (*ex persona capitis*) and in his role as body (*ex persona corporis*). What does this mean? "The two will become one flesh. This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the Church." And the Lord himself says in the Gospel: "So they are no longer two, but one flesh." They are, in fact, two different persons, **yet they are one in the conjugal union**, . . . as head, he calls himself the bridegroom, as body, he calls himself "bride."

A Final Observation

Both the Eastern Orthodox and the Catholic Church have a valid priesthood and therefore a valid Eucharist. The two communions share a common understanding of the Eucharist and both communities have some semblance of unity. But what happens to Christian communions that reject historical, apostolic teaching on Holy Communion? We have our answer in the Protestant churches. Minus the mystical graces of the Eucharist, unity is shattered.

During the Reformation there were great hopes of keeping the Catholic protesters from splintering into a thousand directions. A meeting between Luther and Zwingli, the two pillars of the Reformation at the time (Calvin came later) met for the purpose of reviewing fifteen different doctrinal issues they hoped to agree on and keep the Reformers united. The meeting is known as the Marburg Conference and it was held October 1-4, 1529 in the German principality of Hesse. Agreement was reached on fourteen issues. The fifteenth item was the Lord's Supper. Zwingli held that the meal was a symbolic ordinance meant to remember Christ. Luther held that Christ's flesh and blood was contained in the bread and wine, a view later known as consubstantiation. With no consensus, the conference ended contentiously. Because of the differences Luther refused to acknowledge Zwingli and his followers as Christian. The Protestant church was to be a "house divided", with over 20,000 Protestant denominations resulting.

It is ironic. What the Scriptures call the Bread of Unity historically served as the Tool of Division amongst Protestants. By extracting the historical Eucharist from their midst, its replacement served as the toxic brew that shattered Protestantism. With no valid and real Eucharist no unity is possible.