

## Did Augustine recognise the Catholic version of Mass?

The early Church's most revered theologian, Augustine of Hippo, near the end of the fourth century, took a look at John 6 where Catholics think they read of Jesus promising to leave his body and blood in the form of bread and wine.

He wrote that when Jesus said we must eat his flesh we must not get our teeth ready for if we believe, we have eaten his body already (Vol 7, Tractates on John, Tractate 25). He held that when Jesus said that the spirit gives life and the flesh is profitless it was not flesh as the Jews understood it for flesh cannot give grace (Vol 7, Tractates on John, Tractate 27). Why then did Jesus say to eat his flesh? Augustine clearly knew that since to eat means to live by food that Jesus was telling us to live by his flesh which can be done without eating the body literally so we need only interpret it as a spiritual eating (Homilies on the Gospels). Augustine said so and used the quote from Jesus that his words were spirit and life meaning food to prove it not to mention Jesus' saying that the flesh cannot profit spiritually but only feeding with the spirit can.

Augustine declared in relation to the same chapter, "Let them then who eat, eat on, and them that drink, drink; let them hunger and thirst; eat Life, drink Life. That eating, is to be refreshed; but you are in such wise refreshed, as that that whereby you are refreshed, does not fail. That drinking, what is it but to live? Eat Life, drink Life; you will have life, and the Life is Entire. But then this shall be, that is, the Body and Blood of Christ shall be each man's Life; if what is taken in the Sacrament visibly is in truth itself eaten spiritually, drunk spiritually. For we have heard the Lord Himself saying, It is the Spirit that gives life, but the flesh profits nothing. The words that I have spoken to you are Spirit and Life." [Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Series 1: Volume VI, Homilies on the Gospels, Sermo 81 (LXXXI), Paragraph 1]. This is a denial that there is any real need for a real change.

Catholic apologist wrote that: If consuming the Eucharist were cannibalism, then Protestants who celebrate "the Lord's Supper" would still be guilty of practicing symbolic cannibalism. But since Christ would never command us to engage in either literal or symbolic evils, it follows that consuming the Eucharist is not cannibalism.

The trouble is that if Jesus is in the bread and wine this is stronger than symbolism so if eating and drinking symbols is immoral then this is worse. This seems to help us understand Augustine.

Augustine said that when Jesus said we must eat his flesh and drink his blood he cannot be taken literally for he wouldn't command something immoral. He said that this talk "is therefore a figure, bidding us communicate in the sufferings of our Lord, and secretly and profitably treasure in our hearts the fact that his flesh was crucified and pierced for us" (Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, 3:16). He said that to believe is to have eaten (Augustine, Homilies on John 26:1). So when he rejected the idea that Jesus is eaten and drunk in any literal form and held that the only alternative was to hold that eat and drink meant believe and trust it is clear he denied the later Roman Catholic dogma that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. Augustine was regarded so highly that his writings reflected the doctrine of the Church of his day. The Church then when it honoured him and preserved and sanctioned and promoted his writings did not believe what the later apostate Church, Roman Catholicism believed. Even in the twelfth century, St Bernard of Clairvaux, denied the current Roman Catholic interpretation of John 6 as referring to the bread and wine turning into Jesus (Bernard of Clairvaux, On the Love of God, 4:11). These issues can be explored in the excellent Hard Sayings, FF Bruce, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1983.

## APPENDIX:

FROM ST AUGUSTINE, CITY OF GOD, If the sentence is one of command, either forbidding a crime or vice, or enjoining an act of prudence or benevolence, it is not figurative. If, however, it seems to enjoin a crime or vice, or to forbid an act of prudence or benevolence, it is figurative. "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man," says Christ, "and drink His blood, ye have no life in you." 1867 This seems to enjoin a crime or a vice; it is therefore a figure, enjoining that we should have a share in the sufferings of our Lord, and that we should retain a sweet and profitable memory of the fact that His flesh was wounded and crucified for us. Scripture says: "If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink;" and this is beyond doubt a command to do a kindness. But in what follows, "for in so doing thou shall heap coals of fire on his head," 1868 one would think a deed of malevolence was enjoined. Do not doubt, then, that the expression is figurative; and, while it is possible to interpret it in two ways, one pointing to the doing of an injury, the other to a display of superiority, let charity on the contrary call you back to benevolence, and interpret the coals of fire as the burning groans of penitence by which a man's pride is cured who bewails that he has been the enemy of one who came to his assistance in distress.

Also, of the sacraments Augustine said, "As soon as any one looks upon these observances he knows to what they refer, and so reveres them not in carnal bondage, but in spiritual freedom. Now, as to follow the letter, and to take signs for the things

that are signified by them, is a mark of weakness and bondage" (Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, Book 3). Not only it is wrong to think communion is the body of Jesus it is a sign of slavery and spiritual ineptitude. That is a very strong condemnation of the Catholic Mass.

Augustine is one of the mega-fathers of the faith. What he says is final - how the bread and wine mark Christ is not important as long as you don't think there is body and blood there.