

WHAT WE HAVE RECEIVED

“For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you.”

1 Corinthians 11: 23



[Editor’s note: The inspiration for much of this article comes from Dr. William Marshner, retired professor of apologetics from Christendom University and the Servants of God Archbishop Fulton Sheen and Fr. John Hardon S.J.]

On September 3, 1965 Pope Blessed Paul VI promulgated the encyclical *Mysterium Fidei* (On the Holy Eucharist) which is probably one of the greatest teachings on the Holy Eucharist in the Church’s history. This encyclical should be “must reading” for all Catholics. What’s unique about this encyclical is that Pope Paul VI wrote it while the Second Vatican Council was taking place. Popes never write encyclicals while ecumenical councils are taking place. So why did he write one while an ecumenical council was in session? Because he saw an ominous development taking place in the Catholic Church: the loss of belief in the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist by many of the faithful and the spreading of error in this regard in many

Catholic institutions. This concern prompted him to write this encyclical.

Recently a Gallup poll for Catholics surveyed Catholics on their belief in the real presence or what is known as the doctrine of “Transubstantiation.” The results: only 30% of **practicing** Catholics believed in the teaching. The vast majority believed that the bread and wine remained just that — bread and wine — and they symbolized a sentimental attachment to the “good man” (not the divine Son of God) Jesus who had some nice things to say about a few things. That’s it. It should be noted that the Servants of God Archbishop Fulton Sheen and Fr. John Hardon S.J. believed very firmly that when a Catholic lost his or her faith, it almost always began with a loss of belief in the real presence.

One of the errors being taught in many Catholic institutions, including seminaries, was the one which stated that the doctrine of Transubstantiation was a “medieval creation” invented during that time period and not part of the Scriptures or the Church’s Fathers. So is Transubstantiation a medieval scholastic invention or was it present in the Church from her very beginnings? So as Judge Wapner of the Peoples’ Court would say, “Let’s look at the preponderance of evidence.”

We begin with the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. *And as they were eating, he took bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them, and said: ‘Take; this is my body.’ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly, I say to you, I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God’* (Mk 14: 22-25).

Note that our Lord said “this **IS** my body” meaning that a change has taken place. The bread no longer remains bread but has now become His Body. Some Christians will claim that Jesus meant that the bread would symbolize his body or his teachings and that it still remained bread. If that were the case, then Jesus would have said “This **BREAD** is my body” meaning that the bread remained bread. But he didn’t say that. He said “this **IS** my body.” The substance of bread has now changed into the substance of His Body. This is a substantial **CHANGE** not an addition or enhancement like putting butter on bread or where Christ’s presence exists alongside the bread. We know this from the words the Church Fathers (who lived over a thousand years before the medieval period) used. The Latin Fathers used the word “mutatio” or “transfiguratio” while the Greek Fathers used the word “metabole” or

“metapoiesis” which meant a **change, not an addition or enhancement.**”

St. Ignatius of Antioch (died 107 — WAY BEFORE the Middle Ages) was a successor of St. Peter as bishop of Antioch and wrote in his Letter to the Smyrnaeans: *[Heretics] abstain from the Eucharist because they do not recognize that it is the flesh of our savior Jesus Christ, the flesh which suffered for our sins, and which the Father raised up.* The heretics he refers to were the Gnostics who believed that our Lord didn’t have a real human body of flesh and blood because matter was evil and therefore God would not assume it. If the bread and wine were only symbols they would have had no problem in receiving the Eucharist. But the orthodox Christians believed that the bread and wine were changed into Christ’s **REAL** Body and Blood, hence they refused to receive it. The Gnostic heretics refused to receive Holy Communion precisely because they knew that orthodox Christians believed it to be the **REAL** Body and Blood of Christ.

Next on the evidence sheet comes St. Justin Martyr. He wrote the following in 120: *We call this food ‘eucharist’. No one may share in it unless he believed in the truth of our doctrines, and unless he has been already purified and born again by the water of baptism, and unless he lives according to the precepts of Jesus Christ. For we do not look upon this food as an ordinary bread and an ordinary drink. Rather, just as our Savior Jesus Christ was made flesh by the word of God — truly took flesh and blood for our salvation — so also, according to the teaching we have received, this thanked-over food is His flesh and blood, which nourishes our flesh and blood.*

This necessitates a pause. Notice that St. Justin Martyr stipulates that not just anyone can come up to receive Holy Communion. You must fulfill certain conditions in order to receive. First, you must be baptized. Note that he says “born

again by the **water of baptism**” — the sacrament of baptism and not just making an act of accepting Jesus Christ as your savior apart from baptism. Secondly, you “**must live** according to the precepts of Jesus Christ.” If someone was in a state of grave or mortal sin, that person was **not** to receive Holy Communion. The recent Synod on the Family (and you can add the issue of abortion to this) points to a great division which currently exists in the Church as regards the reception of Holy Communion. Many (clerics and laity) see the Eucharist primarily in sociological terms whereby it functions as a sort of community “happy meal” for the purpose of community building and human solidarity. So in this mentality no one, even someone in persistent public mortal sin (e.g., living in adultery, in a so-called same-sex “marriage,” a public official supporting abortion or the homosexual agenda) should be “excluded” because to do that would be to turn the Eucharist into a “battleground” and it is supposed to be a sign of “unity:” hence no one is to be excluded. Many children preparing for First Communion are taught virtually nothing about the “worthy reception” of Communion. The words of St. Justin Martyr show that the Church Fathers had a completely different take on this. An example involving the Roman emperor Theodosius and St. Ambrose bishop of Milan will illustrate this.

In 390 a riot took place in Thessalonica in Greece, set off by the official imprisonment of a popular charioteer (sports entertainment celebrity); the commander of Theodosius’ troops in the city was stoned to death by the rioting mob. In a passion of anger Theodosius ordered the massacre of everyone who came to the amphitheater when the games were next

held in Thessalonica. Seven thousand people were killed, including women and children. When news came to St. Ambrose he forbade Theodosius to receive the sacraments and told him that if he should try to force his way into the church, he (Ambrose) would not offer Mass. Ambrose’s words: *I dare not offer the sacrifice [of the Mass] if you determine to attend. For, can it possibly be right, after the slaughter of so many, to do that which may not be done after the blood of only one innocent person has been shed?...You shall make your oblation when you have been given liberty to sacrifice, when your offering will be acceptable to God.* In other words, repent of your sin and then come to receive. Any “mercy” that does not include conversion, repentance and radical change of life is a pseudo-mercy, a counterfeit one.

Because the Church Fathers saw the Eucharist not as symbolic bread and wine but as Christ’s **real substantial** Body and Blood you had to be properly disposed to receive it. Christ’s Body and Blood were to nourish and strengthen His divine life of grace in us. You can’t nourish sanctifying grace if it’s not there. Mortal sin kills God’s life (sanctifying grace) in us: that’s why it’s called “mortal sin.” In strengthening God’s life in us it also prepares us for eternal life because as St. Cyril of Jerusalem (died 386) said: *Thus we become Christ-bearers as the body of Christ and his blood spread through our members. And thus, as blessed Peter said, we become sharers in the divine nature.*

So the evidence is in. May we always strive to live the precepts of Jesus Christ and by receiving His Body and Blood worthily become sharers in the divine nature. ✠