

Understanding Bread, Wine, Body and Blood a little more

Catechist Supplement: First Holy Communion Preparation

Saint Bridget Catholic Church Winter-Spring 2017

Bread and wine are ancient signs of God's presence. In the Old Covenant (the one struck between God and God's people through creation (Noah), and through the Law (Moses), and the Prophets (Elijah et al), "bread and wine were offered in sacrifice among the first fruits of the earth as a sign of grateful acknowledgment to the Creator." (CCC #1334)

Bread and wine continue to be significant signs of God's presence as the story of the Exodus of the Jewish people unfolds. "The unleavened bread that Israel eats every year at Passover commemorates the haste of the departure that liberated the Jews from Egypt, the remembrance of the manna in the desert will always recall to Israel that it lives by the bread of the Word of God (see Deuteronomy 8:3), their daily bread is the fruit of the promised land, the pledge of God's faithfulness to his promises.

"The 'cup of blessing' at the end of the Jewish Passover meal adds to the festive joy of wine an eschatological dimension (meaning having to do with death and judgment): the messianic expectation of the rebuilding of Jerusalem." (CCC #1334)

It is this understanding of bread and wine that Jesus had, and that the disciples had as they gathered together to celebrate the Passover meal on the night before Jesus died. It was during this meal that "Jesus gave a new and definitive meaning to the blessing of the bread and the cup." (CCC #1334)

To understand this new and definitive meaning starts with the context Jesus placed the blessing within. That context is that of footwashing and the commandment to love...as he has loved. "In order to leave them a pledge of this love, in order to never depart from his own, and to make them sharers in his Passover, he instituted the Eucharist, as the memorial of his death and Resurrection, and commanded his apostles to celebrate it until his return..." (CCC #1337)

Bread and wine now become signs of his love. "The signs of bread and wine become, in a way surpassing understanding, the Body and Blood of Christ; they continue also to signify the goodness of creation." (CCC #1333)

What is happening? Many things. Some of these require adult faith and life experience. Others can be shared with children. And in all of this, what is required is faith in the Living God, in his Son Jesus Christ and in the unending power of the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life. While we can understand intellectually, to a point, and should strive to do so, there is a place where understanding ceases and we consent to be gathered into a mystery of love beyond words, logic, or reasoning.

What is happening when the priest consecrates bread and wine?

1. The priest is acting *in persona Christi capite* or in the person of Christ, the Head of the Body. He is, in that time and place, our outward sign of Jesus' real presence. And so, through his words (breath, ruah), the Holy Spirit is unleashed over bread, wine and the gathered assembly.
2. The same Holy Spirit that God breathed over the chaos of Creation, transforming it into goodness, is unleashed over bread and wine and us. We are participating in a new creation within ourselves that will enable Jesus' image to flourish within us. Since the Holy Spirit is the Lord (as in is God), and is the giver of life, then life is being breathed into the bread and wine, Jesus' life. Remember he said he is the bread of life.
3. What the Holy Spirit is changing is not the actual form of bread, wine or our bodies. The Holy Spirit is transforming substance. Substance is that which makes Jesus, Jesus. It is what makes us, us. And it is what the Holy Spirit changes in the bread and wine. They now hold Jesus' actual Body and Blood, language that intends to help us realize it's his actual substance.
 - a. In philosophical terms, substance differs from accidents. Accidents are defined as the outward image or form of something or someone. So bread and wine have characteristics of bread and wine. Those are not changed in transubstantiation. The taste, feel and scientific properties of wheat, water and fermented grapes remain the same.
 - b. What the Holy Spirit changes is what those accidents actually now hold: Jesus' very life, his substance, his power and promise. And we get hints of what that substance contains when we look at both the Old and the New Covenants.
 - i. Bread:
 1. From the Old Covenant: Bread is a sign of **God's presence**.
 2. In the new covenant: Remember Jesus is called Emmanuel and that means **God-with-us**. So this meaning is still there, but the bread now signifies far more.
 3. From the Old Covenant: The bread is a sign of **God saving his people** from death.
 4. In the New Covenant: **Jesus, whose name means God saves**, gives to the bread a new and everlasting covenantal meaning: Jesus' passing over to his father by his death and Resurrection, the new Passover, what is remembered until he comes again and completes this final Passover of the Church in the glory of the Kingdom of God. (See CCC #1340) This **bread is now Jesus** who has died, Risen, ascended and come to us in Spirit, **a living force now and a power with which to anticipate** what is to come, in faith, hope and love. Jesus explained it this way: I am the bread **of life**. (John 6:35)
 - ii. Wine:
 1. From the Old Covenant comes the Jewish understanding of wine:
 - a. Wine is mentioned in Psalms as something that "**gladdens the heart of man**," and hence it is used to gladden and inspire us at various times - like *kiddush* on Shabbat (sanctification of Shabbat), at a circumcision and a wedding.

- b. Wine symbolizes a **completed and perfected human life**. It starts off as an inferior product (grape juice = childhood, immaturity) but must go through fermentation (struggle = challenge of evil) and only then does it become the superior product, wine. We drink it on occasions where we have passed a certain fermentation process (marriage) or at times, like Shabbat, which represent the final product of human life, the World to Come. http://ohr.edu/ask_db/ask_main.php/243/Q5/
 - c. This is the context in which the “Cup of Blessing” at the end of the Jewish Passover meal is understood.
2. From the Old Covenant also comes the understanding of **blood: life is in the blood**. (See http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Articles/Life_in_the_Blood/life_in_the_blood.html for more on this relationship) We hold this understanding today, even using the phrase “lifeblood”.
 3. Blood is also associated with ritual sacrifice where an animal’s life is given over in order to **enhance or protect human life**. See Leviticus 17:11 and for more on sacrifice see “Sacrifice in Ancient Israel” at https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/TBv2i5_Gilders2.pdf
 4. Blood in Old Covenant thinking also **confirms a relationship**. Moses sprinkles blood over the Israelites (Exodus 24:8).

What should be noted in all of these aspects of the idea of blood in the Old Covenant is that the relationships, the salvation, the freedom and the life represented by the blood (its substance) is all earthly. The Old Covenant is about all of these dimensions as they pertain to life here and now.

2. In the New Covenant wine continues to hold the meanings of the Old Covenant, but in Jesus a new dimension is added to this. The “new and definitive” meaning (CCC #1334) now moves all of the love, the hope, the life and the power understood to be associated with wine and with blood(its substance) from wine and blood on this earth now to Jesus’ blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant, poured out once for many for the forgiveness of sins. Simply stated the new covenant takes all of the Old Covenant substance, truth and promise and shifts it from now, to now and FOREVER. This is what Jesus’ death and resurrection did: created a new and everlasting covenant.