

3 My name is Abercius, the disciple of the holy shepherd
 4 who feeds his flocks of sheep on the mountains and in the plains,
 5 who has great eyes that see everywhere.
 6 This shepherd taught me the Book worthy of belief.
 7 It is he who sent me to Rome to behold the royal majesty
 8 and to see the queen arrayed in golden vestments and golden sandals.
 9 There also I saw the people famous for their zeal.
 10 And I saw the plains of Syria and all its cities, and also Nisibis
 11 when I crossed the Euphrates. Everywhere I met brethren in agreement,
 12 having Paul [as my companion]. Everywhere faith was my guide
 13 and everywhere provided as my food the Fish
 14 of exceeding great size and pure whom the spotless virgin caught from the spring.
 15 And faith ever gives this food to his disciples to eat,
 16 having the choicest wine and administering the mixed drink with bread.
 17 I, Abercius, standing by, ordered these words to be inscribed,
 18 being in the course of my seventy second year.
 19 Let him who understands these words and believes the same pray for Abercius.
 20 No one shall place another tomb over my grave;
 21 but if he do so, he shall pay to the treasury of the Romans two thousand pieces of gold
 22 and to my beloved native city Hieropolis, one thousand pieces of gold. (*The Epitaph of Abercius*, J. Quasten, *Patrology*, I. 172).

St. Hippolytus of Rome, C. 215

In the Agape-Eucharist of the Didache a distinction seems to be made between the bread of which catechumens may eat and the Eucharist which is reserved for Christians. This distinction is clearly stated by Hippolytus. His insistence that the

Eucharist is the “Body of the Lord” will correct any misconception that might arise from his earlier use of the expressions “representation,” as applied to the flesh of Christ and “antitype,” as applied to the blood of Christ. Actually, the eucharistized bread and cup, as the visible elements of the Eucharist, are not the body and blood of Christ, but the figure, symbol, or sacrament of Christ’s body and blood, which are present but invisible.

XXVI. 1. For often someone wishes to bring an offering, and he cannot be denied, and the bishop having broken the bread shall always taste of it, and eat with such of the faithful as are present. 2. And they shall take from the hand of the bishop one piece of a loaf before each takes his own bread, for this is “blessed bread”; but it is not the Eucharist as is the Body of the Lord. 4. But to the catechumen let exorcized bread be given; and they shall each offer a cup. 5. A catechumen shall not sit at the Lord’s Supper.

XXXII. 1. And let everyone of the faithful be careful to partake of the Eucharist before he eats anything else. For if he partakes with faith, even though some deadly thing were given him, after this it cannot hurt him. 2. And let all take care that no unbaptized person taste of the Eucharist nor a mouse or other animal, and that none of it at all fall and be lost. For it is the Body of Christ to be eaten by them that believe, and to be thought not lightly of” (*The Apostolic Tradition*).

Pope John Paul II Society of Evangelists

14818 Ranchero Road
 Hesperia, California, USA
 Telephone: 760-220-6818
 FAX: 760-948-7620
 E-mail: pjpiisoe@earthlink.net
www.pjpiisoe.org

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The Eucharist as a Sacrament

The Eucharist is both a Sacrament and a sacrifice; it is at once God’s gift to man and man’s gift to God. As all God’s sacramental gifts to man, the gift itself is given through the medium of some visible element. Hence, in the Eucharist, as St. Irenaeus teaches, there is an element that is invisible of “heavenly” and an element that is visible of “earthly.” The doctrine of the Eucharist is concerned with both, although the primary concern is the nature of the invisible gift. In the course of time—and quite early—questions will be raised about the visible elements of bread and wine, about what happens to these when the gift is present upon the Christian altar, but for the primitive Church the chief preoccupation was with the gift.

Early Belief in the Real Presence

At the Last Supper “Jesus took bread, and blessed and broke, and gave it to his disciples, and said, ‘Take and eat; this is my body.’ And taking a cup, he gave thanks and gave it to them, saying, ‘All of you drink of this; for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is being shed for many unto the forgiveness of sins’” (Mt. 26:26). On an earlier occasion Christ had promised that “the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world,” and continued with the warning, “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink his blood you shall not have life in you” (Jn. 6:52-54). Promise and fulfillment are starting, if Christ’s words are to be taken literally. The fact is that they were taken literally by those for whom the gospel narrative was immediately written, and by Christians universally for the space of 1500 years.

St. Ignatius of Antioch, c. 104

At Capharnaum, when the promise was made, “the Jews on that account argued with one another, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat,” and “many of his disciples...said, “This is a hard saying, who can listen to it?... From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer went with him” (Jn. 6:53, 61, 67). These men took Christ literally and parted company with Him. The first group to refuse to take Christ literally, and thereby, to forfeit the name “Christian,” were the Docetists. Against them St Ignatius warns the Christians of the major churches of the East and Rome. For the Docetists not only were the words of promise and fulfillment sheer make-believe, but the words of the Prologue of St. John, “And the Word became flesh,” were also make-believe.

7. From Eucharist and prayer they [the Docetists] hold aloof, because *they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ*, which suffered for our sins, and which the Father in His loving-kindness raised from the dead (*To the Smyrneans*).

St. Justin Martyr, c. 150

Once again, it is the Docetists that St. Justin has in mind, when in his *Apology* or defense of Christians against the charges brought forward by pagans, he lifts the veil of secrecy that would ordinarily surround the Christian mysteries.

66. And this food is called among us the Eucharist, of which no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that the things which we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins, and unto regeneration, and who is so living as Christ has enjoined. For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Saviour, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His

word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh (*The First Apology*).

St Irenaeus of Lyon, c. 177

St. Irenaeus does not prove the reality of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist. He simply takes it for granted and uses the doctrine of the Eucharist as a proof of the resurrection of our mortal flesh, quickened as it is by the flesh of Christ. Such was his argument against the Gnostics. Such is his argument against the Docetists.

V. 2. 2. Since we are His members, and because we are nourished by means of the creation, He who makes His sun to rise, and sends rain to fall as He wills holds out to us foods of His creation: this chalice, which is of creation, He has confessed to be His very own blood; which was shed and which nourishes our blood; this bread which is of creation, he has confessed to be His very own body, which nourishes our bodies.

3. When, therefore, the mingled cup and the manufactured bread receives the Word of God, and the Eucharist of the blood and the body of Christ is made, from which things the substance of our flesh is increased and supported, how can they affirm that the flesh is incapable of receiving the gift of God, which is life eternal, which [flesh] is nourished from the body and blood of the Lord, and is a member of Him? -even as the blessed Paul declares in his Epistle to the Ephesians, that "we are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones." He does not speak these words of some spiritual and invisible man, for a spirit has not bones nor flesh; but [he refers to] that dispensation [by which the Lord became] an actual man, consisting of flesh, and nerves, and bones, -that [flesh] which is nourished by the cup which is His blood, and receives increase from the bread which is His body. And just as a cutting from the vine planted in the ground fructifies in its season, or as

a corn of wheat falling into the earth and becoming decomposed, rises with manifold increase by the Spirit of God, who contains all things, and then, through the wisdom of God, serves for the use of men, and having received the Word of God, becomes the Eucharist, which is the body and blood of Christ; so also our bodies, being nourished by it, and deposited in the earth, and suffering decomposition there, shall rise at their appointed time, the Word of God granting them resurrection to the glory of God, even the Father, who freely gives to this mortal immortality, and to this corruptible incorruption, because the strength of God is made perfect in weakness [1 Cor. 15:33] (*Against Heresies*).

The Epitaph of Abercius, c. 200

“The queen of all ancient Christian inscriptions is the epitaph of Abercius... The author of the inscription is Abercius, Bishop of Hieropolis, who composed it at the age of 72 years. The great event of his life was his journey to Rome, of which he gives an account... It is the oldest monument of stone mentioning the Eucharist. The chaste shepherd, of whom Abercius calls himself a disciple, is Christ. He has sent him to Rome to see the Church, ‘the queen with golden robe and golden shoes...’ Everywhere on his trip to Rome, he met coreligionists, who offered him the Eucharist under both species, bread and wine. The fish from the spring, mighty and pure is Christ, according to the acrostic *ICHTHUS*. The spotless Virgin who caught the fish, is according to the language of the time, the Virgin Mary, who conceived the Savior” (From Quasten’s commentary on the inscription, *Patrology*, I, 171-173).

1 The citizen of an eminent city, this monument I made

2 whilst still living, that there I might have in time a resting place for my body.