

St. Augustine on the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist

By Rev. J. B. Jaggar, S.J., B.A.

“And in the midst of the Church she shall open his mouth, and shall fill him with the spirit of wisdom and shall clothe him with a robe of glory” (Eccli., XV. 5).

Among the Doctors of the Church and the Latin Fathers, St. Augustine (354–430) holds the first place, on account of the greatness of his intellect, his ardent zeal for truth, and the wideness of his human sympathy. *Humani nihil a me alienum puto* is characteristic of this saint. In the West the Fathers and writers who came after him embraced wholeheartedly his tenets in the main, for to them his teaching was authoritative. Whence to know the opinions of St. Augustine is to know also what was held generally in the Western Church, so that the study of his works is of paramount importance to the student of Patristics. This is especially true of his teaching on the Holy Eucharist, since Rationalists and Protestants for the most part assert that he never held the Catholic doctrine of the substantial presence of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. He taught, at most, they allege, a virtual presence only, by which the bread and wine remaining bread and wine after consecration are symbols of Christ’s Body and Blood, and acquire a power before reception or in reception to communicate to those who receive them with faith the fruits of the Passion of Our Lord.

What, then, was the teaching of St. Augustine on this crucial point in Eucharistic doctrine? *There is a presumption* in the first place that it did not differ from that of the Church of his day, from the fact that he held the *Discipline of the Secret* as regards the Eucharist. In his writings he used such expressions as “the faithful know,” “it is not fitting that we call this to mind because of the Catechumens.” (*Sermon 307, n. 3. Cf. Sermon W n. i; Ep. 140, n. 48, etc.*) Surely if to St. Augustine the Eucharist is nothing more than a symbol of Christ’s Body and Blood, it is very difficult to explain this secrecy. Moreover, our saint regarded St. Ambrose who had baptized him, as his teacher in the faith. St. Ambrose most undoubtedly taught in his works on the Holy Spirit and the Mysteries, the substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and transubstantiation; therefore we may suppose that his disciple taught something similar. In all the works of St. Augustin there is not the slightest intimation that he held divergent views from his contemporaries, or was ever accused of holding such views. But it may be said that all this is at most an extrinsic argument, and that it seems to be contradicted by the theories on the Eucharist put forward by the saint in his writings.

We are told that *St. Augustine admitted nothing more than a figurative eating of our Lord’s Body*, or what Protestants call a spiritual eating, opposing it to a real reception of Christ’s Body. Certainly not a few passages can be cited which seem at first sight to bear out this interpretation, e.g. “Why do you make ready your teeth and stomach? Believe, and you have eaten” (In *Joann.*, Tract 25, n. 12). “This is the bread coming down from heaven, so that if anyone eat of it, he may not die. Yes, he who eats what belongs to the virtue of the Sacrament, not to the visible sacrament; he who eats within, not without; he who eats in the heart, not he who presses (the Sacrament) with his teeth” (*Ibid.* Tract 26, n. 12,). “If the words of a precept forbid what is disgraceful or a crime, or order what is

useful and beneficial, they are not by way of figure or metaphor. But if they appear to enjoin what is disgraceful and sinful, or hinder what is useful and beneficial, they are by way of figure. 'Unless you eat,' he says, 'the flesh of the Son of Man, you shall not have life in you.' He seems to enjoin what is disgraceful and a crime, therefore it is a figure, ordering communication with the Lord's Passion and the need of turning over sweetly and usefully in the memory that for us His flesh was crucified and wounded" *De Doctr. Christ* III., 16). "Not this body which you see are you going to eat . . . I have commended to you some Sacrament, spiritually understood it will quicken you. Although it must be visibly celebrated, yet it must be invisibly understood" (*In Psalm 98*, n. 9).

The reply to this difficulty cannot be given in a word, but requires the consideration of several points in the teaching of St. Augustine. He is quite right in rejecting any material eating of Christ's Body in the sense of those at Capharnaum: "They received it (Christ's statement) stupidly . . . and thought that the Lord was going to cut off some particles from His Body" (*In Psalm 98*, n. 9). This is the only error he singles out and rejects. (*In Joann.*, tract 27, n. 12; *De Doctr. Christ*, I c.) The eating with the heart, not with the teeth, is exactly what the Church demands of the communicant today. That is, we must approach the Holy Table with acts of faith, hope, love, etc., if our communions are to be fruitful to us. Though our Lord under the species of bread is really received through the mouth into the breast of the communicant, though there is a real eating of the species, still the Body of Christ cannot be acted upon or altered by the digestive organs, and in that sense it is by the soul alone that Christ is assimilated to us and His Body in this sense may be said to be eaten in figure. Most decidedly this spiritual eating does not exclude the real reception of Christ's Body, for in the very passage from which this objection is drawn St. Augustine insists on the duty of adoring the Body of Christ there present. His one end is to exclude all dismemberment of the Body of Christ, and to explain that "He is not consumed by bites" (*In Joann.*, tract 27, ff - 3). Again: "You think that I am going to make parts of this Body which you see and that I am going to rend my members and give them to you," Christ replies, not by a denial of our reception of His Body, but, while maintaining the integrity of the Body, by a spiritual eating. "And so He shortly solves the great question of His integrity let them eat life-let them drink life . . . and intact is life if what is visibly received in the Sacrament, in its very truth (*in ipsa veritate*) is spiritually eaten and spiritually drunk." "Of His Body and Blood He has given us a healthful refectio" (*Sermon 131*, n. I, etc.).

Against the interpretation of a spiritual eating, as opposed to a real reception of Christ's Body, is the insistence by St. Augustine on Communion for infants. A mere material eating in this case would be useless, and as spiritual eating by faith is impossible, it must be a sacramental eating by the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. In another place (*In Joann.*, tract 27, n. ii) he seems to understand by spiritual eating an *approach in innocence* to the Altar. "See, therefore, brethren, eat spiritually the heavenly bread, *bring innocence to the altar.*" Surely the following passage shows that this eating with the heart in no way excludes in the mind of St. Augustine a real eating of Christ's Body through the mouth. "We receive with a faithful heart *and the mouth (ore)* the Mediator of God and man, the Man Christ Jesus, who gives us His Body to be eaten, and His Blood to be drunk, although it may seem more horrible to eat human flesh than to destroy it, and to

drink human blood than to shed it “ (*Contra advers. leg. et prophet.* 1-2, n. 34).

Some assert that St. Augustine teaches that the *bread and wine are mere signs or figures of Christ's Body and Blood*. To substantiate such an interpretation the following passages are set forth: “For the Lord did not hesitate to say, ‘This is My Body,’ when He gave a sign of His Body” (*Contra Ardmant.*, chap. 17, n. 3). “The figure of His Body and Blood He commended and delivered to the disciples” (*Enarr. in Psalm iii.* n. i). “As therefore in some manner the Sacrament of the Body of Christ is the Body of Christ, the Sacrament of His Blood is the Blood of Christ, so the Sacrament of faith is faith “ (*Ep.* xcvi., n. 9). Let us say at once that this last passage neither affirms nor denies the real presence. A comparison is made between the Eucharist and Baptism, the Sacrament, of Faith, under a special aspect, viz., that just as Baptism gives faith and so may be called faith, so the Sacrament of the Body of Christ may be called the Body of Christ because it incorporates us with Christ, makes us members of His Mystical Body, and is therefore the Body of Christ. Ostensibly the comparison is according to the *res* or *virtus*, i.e. *the effect* of the Sacrament.

To understand in what sense the Eucharist is a sign or figure of the Body and Blood of Christ after the mind of St. Augustine, we must remember that for St. Augustine the word sacrament was the exact synonym of sign. In the fourth century it denoted the visible element in the Eucharist, the bread or species which is visible. We do not touch or break, etc., the Body of Christ, but the species of bread beneath which the Body is present. Hence it is not surprising that St. Augustine should say the Sacrament of the Eucharist is the sign of His Body. Many passages could be quoted to show that St. Augustine understood the word Sacrament in this sense, e.g. “Take away the word, and what is the water but water? The word comes to the element (water) and it becomes a sacrament “ (*In Joann*, tract 83, n. 3)- “ Signs when they pertain to divine things are called Sacraments” (*EP.* 138, n. 79. *De Doctr. Christ.* 111. 13). “The Sacrament is one thing, another is the virtue of the Sacrament” (*In Joann.* tract 26, 11). The visible elements of the Eucharist-the species of bread and wine-are not the Body and Blood of Christ, but signify, denote, and contain them. Therefore, rightly after his mode of speaking, the *Sacrament* of the Eucharist is said by St. Augustine to be a figure or sign of Christ's Body and Blood.

A leading idea in the theology of St. Augustine is that the *Eucharist signifies the Mystical Body of Christ, which is His Church*, so that according to him the Eucharist is the Sacrament of perfect incorporation with Christ. St. Augustine and St. Paul see in the Eucharist a twofold mystery: (i) that of the real Body and Blood of Christ and incorporation through the species of bread and wine with Christ Himself, Who by virtue of the Sacrament becomes the principle of the divine life of the soul ; and (2) the Mystery of the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church, and the, incorporation of the faithful in this unity. The bread formed from many grains, and the wine from many clusters of grapes, are symbolic of this unity of the mystical body. This symbolism he has taken over from St. Cyprian, and it is found also in the *Didache*. This second mystery, so far from excluding the first, supposes it, is derived from it, and stands or falls with it. Hence in the sermons to the Neophytes, St. Augustine always begins by affirming the reality of the Body and Blood of Christ in the sacrament, and then without further explanations passes

on straightway to the second. “ You ought to know what you have received, what you are going to receive, what you ought to receive daily. That bread which you see on the altar, hallowed by the word of God, is the Body of Christ. That Chalice, rather what the Chalice contains, hallowed by the word of God, is the Blood of Christ. By these the Lord Christ wished to hand over to us His Body and Blood, which He has shed for remission of sins.” Certainly so far this Body and this Blood shed for us is not the Church, but the real Body of our Lord. Here is the first and literal sense of the Holy Eucharist. Immediately afterwards He gives the figurative sense, which is the unity of the Church: “If you have well received, you are what you have received. For the Apostle says: ‘One bread, one body are we many’ (i Cor. x. 17). Thus he set forth the Sacrament of the Lord’s Table: ‘One bread,’ etc. In that bread commendation is made to you how you should love unity. Is that bread made of one grain? Were there not many grains of wheat? But before they came to be bread they were separated; they are joined by water and after a certain bruising” (Sermon 227). In this same sermon we have the same symbolism of the Church in two Sacraments-Baptism and Confirmation. Would any one maintain that Baptism and Confirmation are only the symbols of the unity of the Church?

For Dorner and Loofs and others the Eucharistic Body and Blood are not the real Body and Blood of Christ, but His Mystical Body, the Church only. Hence, according to them, “This is my Body,” and all the Eucharistic passages signify only the Church. If this were so, they would make St. Augustine say that the Flesh born of Mary, which we adore in the Eucharist, the Body He carried in His hands at the Last Supper, is the Church. Such an interpretation is refuted in its very statement.

Having shown that the teaching of St. Augustine on the Eucharist, brought forward by those who maintain he ‘held only a virtual presence, does not vindicate their assertion, we pass on to other passages in his writings, which demonstrate clearly his belief in the presence of the real Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist.

When speaking of the *Sacrifice of the New Law* which succeeds all the ancient sacrifices, *he tells us that it is offered by Jesus Christ Himself, and what is offered is His Body and Blood.* “The Priest Himself, the Mediator of the New Testament, offers according to the order of Melchizedek His Body and Blood. Wherefore we acknowledge also that voice of the Psalm xxxix., of the same Mediator speaking by prophecy: ‘Sacrifice and oblation Thou wouldest not, but a body Thou hast fitted to me’; because for all those sacrifices and oblations, His Body is offered and ministered to those who participate (in the Sacrifice) “ (*De Civil. Dei*, Book xvii. chap. 20, n. 2). So the Body which is offered and distributed is that to which He was united at the Incarnation and assumed for this end (cf. *Enarr. in Ps. xxxiii.* 6). Even here Dorner maintains the Body is the Church, which would mean that it was the Church which was formed in the womb of His Mother, offered to the Father, and distributed. A truly impossible interpretation.

In *C. Faust. xx. 18* we read: “Christians celebrate the memorial of the same accomplished Sacrifice by the most holy oblation and participation in the Body and Blood of Christ.” Speaking of the fatted calf slain at the return of the prodigal, he says: “That calf is offered to the Father, in the Lord’s Body and Blood, and feeds the whole house “ (*Quaed.*

Evangel. Book ii. chap. 23, n. 5). Harnack protested that St. Augustine never spoke of our Lord's Body being offered anew to the Father. Do not the words just cited contradict this assertion? (Harnack, *Hist. of Dogma, Vol. V. p. 159, n.*) "This is the Priest, Himself offering, Himself also that which is offered. Of this thing He willed the Sacrifice of the Church to be the daily Sacrament; and the Church, since she is the body of the Head Himself, learns to offer herself through Him" (*De Civil. Dei, X. 20*).

Again, could one who denied the substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist compare the Blood of Christ received in Holy Communion with that of Abel in the following, manner? "The Blood of Christ on earth hath a loud voice, when on its reception is answered by all nations *Amen*. This is the clear voice of the Blood which (voice) the Blood itself *expresses from the mouth of the faithful* redeemed by *the same Blood* " (*Contra Faust. Man., Book xii chap. 10*). Or in these terms urge on the impure the obligation of chastity because of the Eucharist? "*Now you know your price, now you know whither you approach, what you eat, what you drink, rather whom you eat, whom you drink, restrain yourself from fornications*" (*Sermon 9, n. 14*).

Harnack (*ibid.* Vol. V. p. 159, n.) and Dorner (*Augustinus, p. 9-72*) say that St. Augustine never speaks of transubstantiation. In so many words this of course is true. Nowhere has he set down any precise opinion on the change of the elements, and we cannot prove transubstantiation from St. Augustine; but he has passages which easily fall in with this doctrine, e.g., "Not all bread, but bread receiving the benediction of, Christ *becomes the Body of Christ*" (*Sermon 234, n. 2*). "By a certain Consecration the bread is made to us mystical, it is not born so" (*Contra Faust. Man., Book xx. chap. 13*). It does not suffice to say that this is only a moral change such as takes place in the other Sacraments. For in the *De Trinitate* III. 4. 10, he represents the mysterious Consecration of the Eucharist as a transcendent miracle, beside which the other miracles of God have nothing astonishing in them. Man can make bread, and wine, but to change them into so great a Sacrament the Holy Spirit must operate: "When (the bread) by the hands of man is brought to that visible species, it is not sanctified that it be so great a Sacrament save the Holy Ghost operate invisibly." If it is only a question of a figurative presence, why require this very special intervention of the Holy Spirit, why count it among the great works and marvels of God, why insist on it with so much emphasis (n. 21) and point to it as a marvel of which the Catechumens are ignorant?

Again *he calls on us to adore the Eucharist because it is the Flesh of Christ* : "Being in doubt, I turn to Christ and I find how without impiety the earth may be adored . . . flesh is from the earth and from the flesh of Mary He has received flesh, and because *in flesh itself He has walked here*, and has given *flesh itself* to us to be eaten unto salvation; but no one *eats that flesh unless he shall first have adored*; we have found how the footstool of the Lord may be adored, and not only how we do not sin in adoring it, but sin in not adoring it" (In Ps. xcvi. n. 9). Compare this passage with the following in St. Ambrose, *De Spiritu Sancto, III. 11. 79*. "Therefore by the footstool the earth is understood, but by earth the flesh of *Christ which today also in the Mysteries we adore* and which the Apostles in the Lord Jesus adored."

Again he writes: “*And he was carried in His own hands* (i Kings xxi. 13). Who understands how this could come to pass in a man? For who is carried in his own hands? A man can be carried in the hands of others, no one is carried in his own hands. We have not understood how this may be understood literally of David himself; but we have discovered (how it is fulfilled) in Christ. For Christ was carried in His own hands when delivering His very Body He says: ‘This is My Body’ (Matt. xxvi. 22; Mark xiv. 22; Luke xxii. 19). For *He was carrying that Body in His own hands* “ (*Enarr. in Ps. xxxiii. i, 10*). It is alleged that He was carrying a sign or figure of His Body, the sign receiving the name of the thing signified. But if this is so, where is the wonder and portent. “No one is carried in His own hands.” He returns to this theme again in *Enarr. in Ps. xxxiii. ii. 2*: ‘How was He carried in His hands? Because when He gave His own Body and His own Blood, He took in His hands what the faithful know; and in a certain manner (*quodam modo*) He carried Himself when He said, ‘This is My Body’.’”

The presence of the Lord’s Body in His hands is qualified by the words “in a certain manner.” For it was present, as St. Thomas would say, not “after the manner of quantity,” but “of substance,” *i.e.* after the manner of a spirit, as some modern theologians say. In other words, the Body is present wholly and entire in every part of the species of bread, and is not extended in space. St. Augustine, to some extent, has discussed the mode in which the real Body of Christ is present in the following passage: “ (The flesh) profiteth nothing, but as they understood (the people of Capharnaum); they forsooth so understood the flesh as it is cut up in a corpse or sold in the market, not as it is given life by the Spirit. . . The flesh profiteth nothing, but that is the flesh alone; let the Spirit be added to the flesh, and it profiteth much . . . as they understood the flesh, not so do I give my flesh to be eaten “ (*In Joann., Tract 27-5*).

The identification of the elements is so complete with the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist that *even the wicked and unworthy recipients receive the Body and Blood of Christ* really, though with different effects. Thus he writes: “For as Judas, to whom the Lord gave the sop, not by receiving what was evil, but receiving in an evil manner, afforded a place in himself to the devil, so each one who receives the Sacrament of the Lord unworthily does not bring it to pass that it is evil, because he is evil, or that he has received nothing because He has not received unto salvation. For it is the Body and Blood of the Lord no less even to those of whom the Apostle said, ‘Who eats and drinks unworthily, eats and drinks judgment to himself’.” (*De Baptismo, V. 9*). No Sacramentarian, no one who holds the Calvinistic doctrine of a virtual presence only, could use such language as this. For to approach without faith, is, according to such, to come unworthily, and to receive only the symbols, but in no sense the Body and Blood of Christ.

This doctrine, and the teaching that the Eucharist is profitable to infants, peremptorily establish, according to Tixeront (*History of Dogmas, Vol. 11, p. 417*), that, St. Augustine held that the real Body and Blood of Christ are present in the Eucharist. “They axe infants, but they become sharers in His table, that, they may have life in themselves” (*Sermon 1747*). What life can they, being infants, have in themselves, unless our Lord’s Body and Blood are substantially present in the Sacrament.

Lastly, though the Eucharistic teaching of St. Augustine shows that he taught that the real Body and Blood are present in the Eucharist, and that it is a sacrifice in which Christ Himself is the priest or offerer, and that what is offered is His real Body and Blood; yet he does not give us any clear and definite statement of the nature of the operation by which the consecrated elements become the Body and Blood of Christ. How the real Body of Christ is present under, conditions which are not those of a material extended body, he thought, as we have seen, was explained by our Lord's words: "It is the spirit that quickeneth, the flesh profiteth nothing." But above all he is most anxious to set forth *the spiritual fruit* which the communicant should obtain from the divine reality he receives, and he is ever insisting on the moral practical effect of the Holy Eucharist, rather than on its speculative aspect.

Catholics today hold that Christ is present in the Eucharist, not merely as in a sign or figure or by virtue and power, but that His very Body and Blood are substantially present, though not extended in space, under the species of bread and wine, to sanctify the recipients of this august Sacrament. They hold also that Christ is the principal priest or offerer; and that what is offered in the Eucharistic Sacrifice is the real Body and Blood of Christ. St. Augustine held exactly the same, and among all the Fathers he is a witness *omni exceptione maior* and the most illustrious spokesman of the Western Church.