

## Augustine on the Eucharist

After writing a few sentences about death on my facebook page, someone responded that she did not like what I said. ‘There is nothing to like about it,’ I assured her, ‘except for the glimmer of hope at the end of my entry, namely, that death is not the final word.’ ‘But,’ she replied, ‘that is not what you meant.’ I smiled. Of all people, I should know what I meant.

It is so easy to misunderstand or to misinterpret what others say. This applies to the Bible as well as other writings and speeches. The following quotation from Augustine, and a few similar ones, are often used to prove that the doctrine of transubstantiation was already accepted in the early church.

*That bread which you see on the altar, having been sanctified by the word of God, is the Body of Christ. That chalice, or rather, what is in that chalice, having been sanctified by the word of God, is the Blood of Christ. (Augustine, Sermons, 227).*

Augustine held that the bread and wine are the body and blood of Christ. Does that mean that Augustine believed that the bread and wine are changed in substance to become the actual body and blood of Christ? Or did he perhaps believe that the bread and wine were figures of the body and blood of our Lord?

The best way to answer is to allow Augustine speak for himself. Augustine uses an analogy to explain the meaning of the Eucharist.

*On Easter Sunday, we say, This day the Lord rose from the dead, although so many years have passed since His resurrection. But no one is so foolish as to accuse us of falsehood when we use these phrases, for this reason, that we give such names to these days on the ground of a likeness between them and the days on which the events referred to actually transpired, the day being called the day of that event. (Augustine, Letters, 98).*

This Easter I phoned my bed-ridden mother and told her, Today the Lord is risen! Does that mean that Jesus was risen in April 2012? Of course not. Did I lie? No, not if you take my words in the right sense. Augustine applies the same concept to the Eucharist.

*For if sacraments had not some points of real resemblance to the things of which they are the sacraments, they would not be sacraments at all. In most cases, moreover, they do in virtue of this likeness bear the names of the realities which they resemble. As, therefore, in a certain manner the sacrament of Christ's body is Christ's body, and the sacrament of Christ's blood is Christ's blood. (Augustine, Letters, 98).*

In this ‘certain manner’, therefore, Augustine calls the sacrament ‘Christ’s body’. The bread bears the name of the reality which it resembles, namely, Christ’s body, and the wine is called ‘Christ’s blood’ because it bears the name of the reality it signifies.

Elsewhere Augustine elaborates on the rites of Baptism and the Eucharist,

*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, Bk 3).*

Christians take the bread and wine as signs of the body and blood of Christ. We look at the elements and our hearts are lifted to Christ and his sacrifice for us on the cross. That is the way it should be. However, according to Augustine, it is ‘a mark of weakness and bondage’ if we ‘follow the letter’, and mistake the signs for the realities signified by them - i.e. mistake the bread for the body and the wine for the blood of Christ. I encourage the Catholic reader to take Augustine’s warning seriously.