

Augustine of Hippo (354-430), *Sermons on the Gospel of John 6*

“Jesus answered and said unto them, ‘This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He has sent.’” This is then to eat the meat, not that which perishes, but that which endures unto eternal life. To what purpose dost thou make ready teeth and stomach? Believe, and thou hast eaten already.

Wherefore, the Lord, about to give the Holy Spirit, said that He Himself was the bread that came down from heaven, exhorting us to believe on Him. For to believe on Him is to eat the living bread. He that believes eats; he is sated invisibly, because invisibly is he born again. A babe within, a new man within. Where he is made new, there he is satisfied with food.

The Lord gives us His flesh to eat, and yet to understand it according to the flesh is death; while yet He says of His flesh, that therein is eternal life. Therefore we ought not to understand the flesh carnally.

“This offends you;” because I said, I give you my flesh to eat, and my blood to drink, this forsooth offends you. “Then what if ye shall see the Son of man ascending where He was before?” What is this? Did He hereby solve the question that perplexed them? Did He hereby uncover the source of their offense? He did clearly, if only they understood. For they supposed that He was going to deal out His body to them; but He said that He was to ascend into heaven, of course, whole: “When ye shall see the Son of man ascending where He was before;” certainly then, at least, you will see that not in the manner you suppose does He dispense His body; certainly then, at least, you will understand that His grace is not consumed by tooth-biting.

What is it, then, that He adds? “It is the Spirit that quickens; the flesh profits nothing.” Let us say to Him (for He permits us, not contradicting Him, but desiring to know), O Lord, good Master, in what way does the flesh profit nothing, whilst Thou hast said, “Except a man eat my flesh, and drink my blood, he shall not have life in him?” It profits nothing, but only in the manner in which they understood it. They indeed understood the flesh, just as when cut to pieces in a carcass, or sold in the shambles; not as when it is quickened by the Spirit.

For even we at this day receive visible food: but the sacrament is one thing, the virtue of the sacrament another. How many do receive at the altar and die, and die indeed by receiving? Whence the apostle says, “Eats and drinks judgment to himself.” See ye then, brethren, that ye eat the heavenly bread in a spiritual sense; bring innocence to the altar. Though your sins are daily, at least let them not be deadly. Before ye approach the altar, consider well what ye are to say: “Forgive us our debts, even as we forgive our debtors.” Thou forgive, it shall be forgiven thee: approach in peace, it is bread, not poison.

“This, then, is the bread that cometh down from heaven, that if any man eats thereof, he shall not die.” But this is what belongs to the virtue of the sacrament, not to the visible sacrament; he that eats within, not without; who eats in his heart, not who presses with his teeth.

In a word, He now explains how that which He speaks of comes to pass, and what it is to eat His body and to drink His blood. "He that eats my flesh, and drinks my blood, dwells in me, and I in him." This it is, therefore, for a man to eat that meat and to drink that drink, to dwell in Christ, and to have Christ dwelling in him. Consequently, he that dwells not in Christ, and in whom Christ dwells not, doubtless neither eats His flesh [spiritually] nor drinks His blood [although he may press the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ carnally and visibly with his teeth], but rather doth he eat and drink the sacrament of so great a thing to his own judgment, because he, being unclean, has presumed to come to the sacraments of Christ, which no man taketh worthily except he that is pure: of such it is said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

Believers know the body of Christ, if they neglect not to be the body of Christ. Let them become the body of Christ, if they wish to live by the Spirit of Christ. None lives by the Spirit of Christ but the body of Christ.

And thus He would have this meat and drink to be understood as meaning the fellowship of His own body and members, which is the holy Church in his predestinated, and called, and justified, and glorified saints and believers. The sacrament of this thing, namely, of the unity of the body and blood of Christ, is prepared on the Lord's table in some places daily, in some places at certain intervals of days, and from the Lord's table it is taken, by some to life, by some to destruction: but the thing itself, of which it is the sacrament, is for every man to life, for no man to destruction, whosoever shall have been a partaker thereof.

Hence "the words," says He, "which I have spoken to you are Spirit and life." For we have said, brethren, that this is what the Lord had taught us by the eating of His flesh and drinking of His blood, that we should abide in Him and He in us. But we abide in Him when we are His members, and He abides in us when we are His temple. But that we may be His members, unity joins us together. And what but love can effect that unity should join us together? And the love of God, whence is it? Ask the apostle: "The love of God," says he, "is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given to us." Therefore "it is the Spirit that quickens," for it is the Spirit that makes living members. Nor does the Spirit make any members to be living except such as it finds in the body, which also the Spirit itself quickens.

Wouldst thou then also live by the Spirit of Christ? Be in the body of Christ. The body of Christ cannot live but by the Spirit of Christ. It is for this that the Apostle Paul, expounding this bread, says: "One bread," says he, "we being many are one body." O mystery of piety! O sign of unity! O bond of charity! He that would live has where to live, has whence to live. Let him draw near, let him believe; let him be embodied, that he may be made to live.

My friends, these realities are called sacraments because in them one thing is seen, while another is grasped. What is seen is a mere physical likeness; what is grasped bears spiritual fruit. So now, if you want to understand the body of Christ, listen to the Apostle Paul speaking to the faithful: "You are the body of Christ, member for member." [1 Cor. 12.27] If you, therefore, are Christ's body and members, it is your own mystery that is placed on the Lord's table! It is your own mystery that you are receiving! You are saying "Amen" to what you are: your response is a personal signature, affirming your faith. When you hear "The body of Christ", you reply "Amen." Be a member of Christ's body, then, so that your "Amen" may ring true!