

# Dear Fr. Kerper

## Is it REALLY Christ's body and blood?



If you would like to ask Father Kerper a question, please e-mail [editor@parablemag.com](mailto:editor@parablemag.com).

►► **Dear Father Kerper:** I was taught that the Eucharist is the body and blood of Christ. This seems really weird and even scary. I don't see why we would want to pretend to be eating flesh and drinking blood when it's obviously just bread and cheap wine. Why do we believe such a thing?

To begin with, I commend you for posing such a blunt question. Questioning like yours is the first step to an understanding of our faith. Such questions, while an affront to some people, actually offer us the occasion to clarify our beliefs that might otherwise remain imprisoned in overly simplistic or erroneous understandings of key Catholic teachings such as the Eucharist.

Through the centuries, many people – unbelievers *and* saints – have raised the exact same question. The Gospel of John even mentions that people who directly heard Jesus speak of himself as the bread of life asked, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (John 6:52) When such questions are not asked simply to assert a contrary position, but asked with an openness to truth, they can serve to engender great understanding.

Let's begin with how bread and wine “become” flesh and blood of Christ and, therefore, rightfully edible and drinkable within the context of the Catholic Mass.

Clearly, when we partake of the Eucharist we do not consume the chemical components of human flesh and blood. A scientific examination of the consecrated bread and wine would reveal these elements do not change in the slightest. From the standpoint of empirical science, nothing happens at all.

However, we believe that at the eucharistic sacrifice, the Risen Christ becomes real to the point of transforming the bread and wine so completely and irrevocably

that they truly become who and what he is, namely, the Word made flesh, the Son of God. To use the language of classical philosophy, the “substance” – the object's deepest reality – changes from bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Since the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Catholic Church has used the word “transubstantiation” to describe this unique action.

Human beings have the capacity to do something similar to what Christ does. Let's consider the elements of the human kiss. If you study a kiss scientifically, you might ask, “How can a pair of wet lips pressed against another set of wet lips be anything other than the exchange of saliva?” From that point of view, it does seem rather ridiculous. Now, just as the bread and wine fully retain their chemical and physical properties when they become the Eucharist, the lips likewise remain exactly what they are when two people kiss. But the love and intention that motivate the kiss transform the action of wet lips into something entirely new: the kiss becomes a powerful sign – a kind of sacramental – of self-giving, interpersonal communion, and matrimonial commitment.

No one observing two spouses kissing would ever mistake the kiss for a meaningless exchange of saliva. Likewise, no one who trusts in the word of Christ would ever dismiss the Eucharist, which Christ himself created and commanded, as “just bread and wine.”

There's one crucial difference, however, between a kiss and the Eucharist: The Risen Christ, unlike other human beings, extends beyond all limits and dimensions. He alone has the capacity of “gifting” himself in his sacrifice on the cross totally and repeatedly to an infinite number of human beings. By contrast, every kiss, though potentially a true gift of one person to another, pales in comparison to the eternal embrace of Christ.

Our beliefs about the Eucharist do not rest on empirical scientific analysis

of bread and wine, or even the careful – and helpful – speculations of great saints like Thomas Aquinas. Rather, we believe the bread and wine truly become the body and blood of Christ because of the remarkably plain and consistent words from Truth itself – Christ. Many scholars agree Jesus had concepts and language available to him that would have allowed him to present and explain the Eucharist as merely symbolic – “just bread and wine.” But, as the evangelists, St. Paul and the earliest believers all attest, Jesus said, “This is my body; this is the cup of my blood.”

Just as it would be rather silly to expect a wife to explain how a kiss works as a sign of love while embracing her husband, it is likewise inappropriate to demand from the Lord an intricate and intellectually satisfying explanation of his ultimate “Kiss,” the eucharistic act of total self-giving of the Son of God. His words, coupled with his continuous sacramental action, should always suffice: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day. For my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” (John 6:54-56)

This powerful invitation to an intimate and transforming encounter with Christ is, like love itself, something we experience without ever fully understanding it. The startling truth that Christ conveys to his disciples and to us is that he longs to abide in us. In humility and in joy, we receive his kiss.

— Father Michael Kerper is the pastor of Corpus Christi Parish in Portsmouth.