

## *The Sacrifice of the Mass: A Memorial Service or the Real Presence of Christ*

If you have ever dialogued with Protestants about the comments the Lord makes about Himself in the Gospel of John, Chapter 6, you have probably heard the objection that when Christ says "eat My flesh" – He was only using figurative language. This mere dismissal is both wrong and fails to grasp Jesus' literal inference in the original language He used.

Certainly there are times when our Lord spoke figuratively (by using allegories or stories), but John 6 is certainly not one of them. Fortunately, we do not need to rely solely on our opinions or interpretive traditions. The original Greek of the scriptural text itself gives us interesting insights into what our Lord meant when He said, "My flesh is true food and My blood is true drink."

Let us begin with Christ's words to the Jews in John 6:35-40, who had followed Him over the lake after witnessing the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves:

*"Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst. But I told you that although you have seen (me), you do not believe. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and I will not reject anyone who comes to me, because I came down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me. And this is the will of the one who sent me, that I should not lose anything of what he gave me, but that I should raise it (on) the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have eternal life, and I shall raise him (on) the last day."*

It is this language that arouses murmuring from the Jews about its meaning, and rightfully so; at this point, our Lord is using language that is somewhat symbolic and could be interpreted any number of ways. He has yet to clarify His meaning. However, our Lord will go on to clarify His statement with an even more shocking assertion:

*"I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world."* (John 6:51)

This is the first time our Lord mentions His flesh in this discourse, and the word He uses for "flesh" is *sarx* (σάρξ). This word *sarx* is typically used to denote real, physical flesh. Strong's Concordance (a Protestant book), defines *sarx* as, "flesh (the soft substance of the living body, which covers the bones and is permeated with blood) of both man and beasts." *Sarx* can occasionally mean simply *body* in a generic sort of way, but the Greek has another word for body: *soma*. The word *soma* is used for body in the Synoptic Gospels at the Last Supper, as well as in 1 Corinthians 10. Yet here, when the Jews are looking for our Lord to clarify His meaning on how He is the Bread of Life, He chooses the word *sarx*, which is a more univocal term and denotes **physical flesh**. Our Lord seems to be insisting on a literal interpretation.

But it gets more poignant. Seeing that the Jews still seem to be misunderstanding Him, our Lord insistently declares:

*"Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day." (John 6:54-55)*

If our Lord meant this to be symbolic, He has an odd way of showing it. If someone mistakes your words for literal when you mean them to be symbolic, what you certainly do *not* do is rephrase yourself in a more stringently literal fashion. Yet this is what our Lord does here.

Contrast this with our Lord's behavior in Matthew 16:11, when the disciples take His words about bread literally when He only meant it figuratively ("How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees") or in John 11:13-14 ("Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep. Then therefore Jesus said to them plainly: "Lazarus is dead").

In each case, the disciples think Jesus is speaking literally when He is actually speaking figuratively, and to ensure that He is not misunderstood by His followers, Christ clarifies Himself. Note how differently He behaves in John 6: The people are scandalized by what appears to be a very shocking statement of literal truth, and far from dissuade them from this opinion, our Lord goes out of His way to state the truth even more literally and bluntly!

This is demonstrated more plainly in the verb Jesus choose for the word *eat*. Initially, the verb is *phago* (φάγω), which simply means "to eat", and much like the English word, can have a variety of meanings. I can eat something literally. I can "eat something up" as a way of expressing delight in it. I can say "eat my dust" to express that I am faster than the person I am saying it to. "Eat your heart out" means to suffer from envy or jealousy while to say I could "eat a horse" simply means I am really hungry. *Phago* has all the same shades of meaning. Our Lord uses *phago* in John 6:48-53.

But interestingly enough, in John 6:54 Jesus switches the verb He uses to represent the concept of eating. Instead of the broad, equivocal term *phago*, He changes to the very pointed term *trogon*. *Trogon* (τρώγω), unlike *phago*, has one very, specific, literal meaning: to gnaw, crunch or chew. It is a univocal term with a single meaning. When our Lord begins to use *trogon* for "eat" in John 6:54, He is removing the last kernel of doubt from His listeners as to the proper interpretation of His words.

Even when His own disciples start to desert Him, He does not modify or clarify this teaching in the least. So, while allowing unbelievers to walk away confused is plausible, our Lord never sends the disciples away confused. He always takes care that they at least understand His words in the proper sense, and in John 6 He allows them to believe His words to be literal.

The assertion that the eating of the flesh of the Son of Man in John 6 is symbolic simply doesn't hold weight when examined linguistically and in the context of other statements made by our Lord. Taken with the fact that the Early Church understood these words to be literal as well, as we have a pretty strong case for the Catholic position on our Lord's Real Presence in the Eucharist.