

Covenant Words
Corpus Christi B
(Ex 24:3-8; Hb 9:11-15; Mk 14)

The words Jesus spoke at the Last Supper are among the most important and special words he ever spoke. They are repeated at every Mass at the consecration, during its most solemn moment. The entire Mass, and even Holy Orders, is set up to lead to this moment when Jesus may speak again the words he spoke at the Last Supper over the bread and wine: “*This is my body... This is my blood...*”

Without any other context, they are unusual and strange words, since Jesus *seems* to be saying that the bread is *actually* his body, and the wine is *actually* his blood. Yet with more context and background, given in the life and teachings of Jesus, as well as the Old Testament, it is clear that this is exactly what Jesus is saying, and what he means.

When Christ speaks again these words through a validly ordained priest at the consecration of the Mass, a “transubstantiation” takes place: what was up until that moment the substance of bread and wine ceases to be bread and wine and becomes through the power of the Holy Spirit the entirely different substance of Jesus’ flesh and blood. And while the substance changes, the “accidents” (observable qualities and characteristics) of bread and wine remain.

This is truly a strange and unusual teaching, and yet it has been firmly held and explicitly taught in the Church since the days of the apostles.¹ It is a fundamental Christian belief, and those Christians who deny it are *rejecting* the clear and obvious words of the Savior.

Two important “contexts” reinforce that the Catholic belief is exactly what Jesus intended by these words. The first is Passover. Jesus speaks these words in the context of the Passover, during which a lamb is sacrificed and its flesh consumed (and in the original Passover, its blood was put on the lintels of the doors, so that the angel of death would “pass over” the house). The original Passover was the signal of the Israelites’ delivery from slavery in Egypt, and its annual commemoration served as a renewal of the covenant God subsequently established with the people at Mt. Sinai through Moses. It is clear from this Passover context, that at the Last Supper Jesus is *identifying himself* with the lamb whose flesh is consumed, and by whose blood deliverance (salvation) is achieved, deliverance from the eternal death resulting from sin. By the sacrifice of Jesus’ blood, sin is forgiven.

¹ Cf. Didache; Letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch; Apologies of St. Justin Martyr

The second important context for these solemn words is the discourse which took place the previous year following the miracle of loaves and fish (cf. John 6). Jesus explained to his followers that he himself, in his person, is the true and living “bread” come down from heaven which those who desire salvation must “eat” by believing in him (Jn 6:34-51a). But then he takes it a step further and insists, by means of a solemn seven-fold repetition, that they will actually eat his flesh and blood, as real food and drink (Jn 6:51b-58).

The pivotal verse is John 6:51. Jesus *insists* that he be taken literally, realizing that this will scandalize (6:52), confuse (6:60), and drive away (6:66) most of his followers. Without explaining how he intends to accomplish these strange words, he insists that his inner circle of apostles accept their truth with total submission and trust (Jn 6:67-71). Thus, by the time Jesus speaks the solemn words of the Last Supper a year later, the apostles have been prepared for them.

There is another third context that helps to reveal the power and beauty of what it is Jesus is accomplishing by these words. This is the recognition that they are “covenant words.” Jesus makes clear they are covenant words because he says as much: “*This is my blood of the covenant*” (Mk 14:24).

A covenant is a special bond, agreement, or treaty established between two parties by solemn oath. Much more than a mere human promise to do something, or a legal/business contract, a covenant brings into being a new reality – some kind of bond – between the two parties, such that they even become “family” to each other, able to *sit down at the same table and eat together*. A covenant is always expressed or celebrated by some kind of great banquet, for which a sacrifice has taken place. A covenant is always expressed through some oath. And a covenant always specifies terms defining the bond and mutual commitments that pertain to it. In today’s first reading (Ex 24) Moses reads out the terms God establishes for the great Covenant He establishes with His chosen people Israel at Mt. Sinai. These terms are known as the “Law of Moses.”

One way or another, a covenant oath will consist of words or actions that signify one’s *life*. Another way to say it, is that a covenant is “sealed in blood.” To violate or break a covenant oath incurs death, the forfeiture of life, a severe curse and punishment, the destruction of war. In the covenant oath, one is saying, “by my life I swear...”

The clearest human example of a covenant is marriage. The sacred oath by which the terms of this covenant are accepted are expressed in the marriage vows. They outline the obligations to love and serve, in good times or bad, “*until death do us part*.” The marriage covenant establishes a new reality and a new bond in the lives of the parties. And moreover, it is celebrated in the “banquet” of conjugal

love, by which the couple says to each other, “this is my body which is given for you.”

Understood in the context of a covenant being entered into, on the level of one’s blood, by means of sacred oath, the words of the Lord at the Last Supper begin to be revealed in their depth and beauty. Jesus establishes a new Covenant between God and His people that succeeds and fulfills the old. Whereas the old included the *promise* of salvation and forgiveness of sin, the new *accomplishes* salvation in actuality, and the forgiveness of sin. As the Letter to the Hebrews makes clear (Hb 9:13), the blood of bulls and goats cannot actually cleanse from sin, but the blood of Christ, the true Lamb of God, is efficacious for cleansing the conscience. In this new covenant established by Christ, we are blessed with eternal life itself, since God is actually giving Himself to be our bread (“*He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life in him*” – Jn 6:54).

Eternal life, salvation, forgiveness of sin – all the blessings of the new covenant, are not symbolic, not given symbolically or externally but truly, actually, really, and *literally*. Therefore, the words Christ speaks at the Last Supper are in no way symbolic or metaphorical. Christ speaks the words “This is my body” as really and literally as a husband gives himself to his wife literally, in marriage.

Corresponding to God’s self-gift is our human response. A covenant is a bond established between two parties. In the old covenant, after hearing the terms outlined by Moses in the law, the people consent: “*All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient*” (Ex 24:7). At which point Moses seals in the covenant in blood. Likewise, after hearing the terms of the covenant in the new law of Christ, Christians also assent with a profound “Amen.” This “Amen” is expressed in the baptismal profession of faith, and it is sealed in the Blood of the Eucharist. But instead of sprinkling the congregation with the blood of a bull to seal the deal,² we take the blood of the Lamb upon our lips in Holy Communion.

Throughout our lives, we seek to live according to the terms of this covenant. As a husband and wife renew and express the covenant of marriage in their celebration of conjugal love, the Church constantly renews and celebrates the covenant bond of Christ in the Mass, striving as much as possible to give an “Amen” that corresponds in depth and truth to the words of Christ, “This is my Body.”

The problem of speaking symbolically is not on the part of Christ. He spoke literally and truly when he said “*This is my Body... This is my Blood...*” The problem of speaking symbolically is rather on our part when we *say* “Amen,” but

² We sprinkle the congregation with the water of baptism

do not mean it, literally. That is to say, when we do not give ourselves back to Christ in total reciprocity. We hold back, we remain unfaithful and uncommitted in various aspects of our lives; we commit adultery in various ways with the world. The moral state of our lives is *not* in conformity with the “Amen” of our Holy Communion. Jesus gives himself to the Church wholly and entirely, body and blood, soul and substance. Do we give ourselves that way in return?