



NOTRE DAME CENTER FOR LITURGY

DEDICATED TO LITURGICAL RESEARCH AND PASTORAL LITURGY

INSTITUTE FOR CHURCH LIFE ■ UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME



Your Own Mystery

A Homily by St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo (+430 CE)

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What you see on God's altar,
you've already observed during the night that has now ended.
But you've heard nothing about just what it might be,
or what it might mean,
or what great thing it might be said to symbolize.
For what you see is simply bread and a cup
this is the information your eyes report.
But your faith demands far subtler insight
the bread is Christ's body, the cup is Christ's blood.
Faith can grasp the fundamentals quickly, succinctly,
yet it hungers for a fuller account of the matter.
As the prophet says,
"Unless you believe, you will not understand." [Is 7.9; Septuagint]
So you can say to me,
"You urged us to believe now explain, so we can understand."
Inside each of you, thoughts like these are rising:
*"Our Lord Jesus Christ we know the source of his flesh;
he took it from the virgin Mary.
"Like any infant, he was nursed and nourished;
he grew; became a youngster;
suffered persecution from his own people.
To the wood he was nailed; on the wood he died;
from the wood, his body was taken down and buried.
"On the third day (as he willed) he rose;
he ascended bodily into heaven
whence he will come to judge the living and the dead.
There he dwells even now, seated at God's right.
"So how can bread be his body? And what about the cup
how can it (or what it contains) be his blood?"*
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!

But what role does the bread play?

We have no theory of our own to propose here;

listen, instead, to what Paul says about this sacrament:

"The bread is one, and we, though many, are one body." [1 Cor 10.17]

Understand and rejoice unity, truth, faithfulness, love.

"One bread," he says. What is this one bread?

Is it not the "one body," formed from many?

Remember: bread doesn't come from a single grain, but from many.

When you received exorcism, you were "ground."

When you were baptized, you were "leavened."

When you received the fire of the Holy Spirit, you were "baked."

Be what you see; *receive* what you are.

This is what Paul is saying about the bread.

So too, what we are to understand about the cup

is similar and requires little explanation.

In the visible object of bread, many grains are gathered into one

just as the faithful (so Scripture says)

form "a single heart and mind in God" [Acts 4.32].

And thus it is with the wine.

Remember, friends, how wine is made

individual grapes hang together in a bunch,

but the juice from them all is mingled to become a single brew.

This is the image chosen by Christ our Lord

to show how, at his own table,

the mystery of our unity and peace is solemnly consecrated.

All who fail to keep the bond of peace after entering this mystery

receive not a sacrament that benefits them,

but an indictment that condemns them.

So let us give God our sincere and deepest gratitude

and, as far as human weakness will permit,

let us turn to the Lord with pure hearts.

With all our strength, let us seek God's singular mercy,

for then the Divine Goodness will surely hear our prayers.

God's power will drive the Evil One from our acts and thoughts;

it will deepen our faith, govern our minds, grant us holy thoughts,

and lead us, finally, to share the divine happiness

through God's own son Jesus Christ.
Amen!

St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo (354-430)

St. Augustine was bishop of Hippo (North Africa) from 395 and Doctor of the Church. No other single theologian has exercised as decisive an influence on the shape and character of Western theology, both Catholic and Protestant, as Augustine.

Latin text in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 38:1246-1248; translated by Nathan D. Mitchell