

# The Lord's Supper of 1 Corinthians 11 in Saint Francis' Letter to the Entire Order

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In 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, Paul presents the oldest account of the Last Supper and the institution of the Eucharist. Written in Ephesus in 57 AD, 1 Corinthians is older than the Synoptic Gospels, and therefore provides us with the first historical account of what Paul calls "the Lord's supper."

This Pauline text has been used many a time with reference to Christian morals and the celebration of the Eucharist. After the publication of session 13, chapter 7 of the Council of Trent (on the Eucharist), 1 Corinthians 11:28-29 has been quoted with reference to the need to approach sacramental Communion in a state of grace, and after having ordinarily received the sacrament of Penance when in a state of mortal sin:

"If it is unbecoming for any one to approach to any of the sacred functions, unless he approach holily; assuredly, the more the holiness and divinity of this heavenly sacrament are understood by a Christian, the more diligently ought he to give heed that he approach not to receive it but with great reverence and holiness, especially as we read in the Apostle those words full of terror: 'He that eats and drinks unworthily, eats and drinks judgment to himself.' Wherefore, he who would communicate, ought to recall to mind the precept of the Apostle: 'Let a man prove himself.' Now ecclesiastical usage declares that necessary proof to be, that no one, conscious to himself of mortal sin, how contrite soever he may seem to himself, ought to approach to the sacred Eucharist without previous sacramental confession. This the holy Synod hath decreed is to be invariably observed by all Christians, even by those priests on whom it may be incumbent by their office to celebrate, provided the opportunity of a confessor do not fail them; but if, in an urgent necessity, a priest should celebrate without previous confession, let him confess as soon as possible" (Council of Trent, Session 13, Chapter 7).

This sacramental practice of communion following upon confession, however, is the fruit of an older tradition in the Church. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 had already enacted laws regarding the annual sacramental Confession and Communion. In the writings of Saint Francis we find references to the Church doctrine regarding the sacraments, as a result of the canons of the Lateran Council.

Canon 21 of the Fourth Lateran Council prescribed: "All the faithful of both sexes, after they have reached the age of discerning, shall faithfully confess all their sins to their own priest at least once a year and perform the penance imposed to the best of their abilities, receiving reverently at least at Easter the sacrament of the Eucharist" (text taken from FAED 1, 77).

The aim of our paper is that of looking at the use that Saint Francis makes of the text of 1 Corinthians 11: 17-34 in his Letter to the Entire Order. First, however, we must try to understand the biblical significance of the Pauline text. Our analysis will be purely descriptive and based on the English translation of the biblical text.

## **Brief analysis of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34**

The context and background of this reference to the Last Supper was the community celebration of the Eucharist in the church of Corinth. Paul was aware of

serious abuses taking place in Corinth, to the point that the Christians were creating a situation of injustice even during the Eucharistic meal. Paul himself describes these abuses:

“I hear that when you all come together as a community, there are separate factions among you, and I half believe it – since there must no doubt be separate groups among you, to distinguish those who are to be trusted. The point is, when you hold these meetings, it is not the Lord’s Supper that you are eating, since when the time comes to eat, everyone is in such a hurry to start his own supper that one person goes hungry while another is getting drunk. Surely you have homes for eating and drinking in? Surely you have enough respect for the community of God not to make poor people embarrassed?” (1Cor 11:18-22).

Paul is speaking about the “coming together” of the Christian community, and therefore about the weekly meeting of the Eucharistic banquet. Now the distinguishing feature of the Eucharistic meal in the early Christian Church was that of bringing together all believers into a concrete expression of unity and love (*agape*). It seems, from what Paul states, that the opposite was happening in Corinth. Instead of being a guarantee of Church unity, the Eucharistic banquet was an occasion for factions and divisions within the same community. In fact, Paul uses the Greek term *schismata*, which literally means schisms, divisions. The apostle also uses the term *haireisis*, which has a similar connotation of division in doctrine and dissension. Already in 1 Corinthians 1:12 Paul had alluded to dissensions within the community regarding the authority of the evangelisers (Paul, Apollo, Peter, Christ). Now it seemed that the same divisions were being felt even with regards to the social status of the ones who participated in the Eucharistic banquet.

The context of these divisions, as we have said, is the Eucharistic banquet. In the primitive Church the Lord’s Supper took place in the course of a communal meal. All brought what food they could, and it was shared together. Patterned after Christ’s last meal with his disciples on the night before he died, the institution which Paul calls “the Lord’s Supper” was originally a frequent fellowship meal shared among the brethren, followed by participation in the symbolic bread and wine. This fellowship meal was also known by the name of *agape*.

We have abundant New Testament evidence for the *agape*. In the opinion of the majority of scholars the *agape* was a meal at which various kinds of food were consumed and shared together, with the explicit intention of giving an expression of Christian brotherhood. At the end of the meal, bread and wine were taken according to the Lord’s command, and after thanksgiving to God were consumed in remembrance of Christ as a special means of communion with the Lord and with the other members of the community.

The basic problem in Corinth appears to have arisen out of tensions in the Church between the poor and rich. Since there were no church buildings, the Lord’s Supper was held in the houses of the Church members, particularly in those of the rich, where a maximum number of participants could be accommodated. These occasions were full meals with plenty of food and drink. The rich brought plentiful food for themselves, whereas the poor had to make do with what they could provide. Thus the scandal was that there was no brotherly sharing of food among the members. There was over-indulgence on the part of the rich and feelings of envy on the part of the poor, who were made to feel inferior to them. For Paul this attitude contradicted the explicit meaning of *agape*.

It seems that Paul is laying down that the rich should eat privately in their own homes and not scandalise the poorer members of the community, and thus avoid

creating tensions in the Church. In a certain way, this praxis was to place the Eucharistic banquet at the level it assumed later on, namely that of a celebration of the community in which the Lord's Supper was commemorated and bread and wine alone were consumed.

In verses 23-29 we find the oldest institution narrative of the Eucharist and the moral dispositions of the Church members who participate in the Eucharistic banquet: "For this is what I received from the Lord, and in turn passed on to you; that on the same night that he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread, and thanked God for it and broke it, and he said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this as a memorial of me.' In the same way he took the cup after supper, and said, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Whenever you drink of it, do this as a memorial of me.' Until the Lord comes, therefore, every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are proclaiming his death, and so anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will be behaving unworthily towards the body and blood of the Lord. Everyone is to recollect himself before eating this bread and drinking this cup; because a person who eats and drinks without recognising the Body is eating and drinking his own condemnation" (1 Corinthians 11:23-29).

Paul uses the verb *parelambano*, which means "to receive from another". He is thus alluding to a genuine Christian tradition, which the Church has always cherished all along its long history, as having come directly from the Lord Jesus. Paul declares that Christ personally revealed to him the information he is about to explain. By stating that this event happened on the night the Lord was betrayed, he definitely identifies it with the Last Supper.

The breaking of the bread and the drinking of the chalice is described as an *anamnesis*, a remembrance, a commemoration, a memorial. The observance of this memorial was intended to constantly remind the disciples that Christ offered himself as a sacrifice and died for them on the cross. In fact, the Eucharist, according to Paul, becomes the proclamation of the Lord's death until He comes in glory.

The Greek term *anamnesis* implies "an action whereby the object is represented in memory." In 1 Corinthians 11:24, "Christians are to enact the whole action of the Lord's Supper in recollection of Jesus, and this not merely in such sort that they simply remember, but rather, in accordance with the active sense of *anamnesis* and the explanation in v. 26, in such a way that they actively fulfil the *anamnesis*. The making present by the later community of the Lord who instituted the Supper, and who put the new covenant (*diatheke*) into effect by His death, is the goal and content of their action in which they repeat what was done by Jesus and His disciples on the eve of His crucifixion" (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Edited by G. KITTEL, Translated by G.W. Bromiley, Vol. I, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1991, 348-349).

Our attention is directed particularly on the adverb "unworthily". Paul says that whoever partakes of the Lord's Supper unworthily (*anaxios*) will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. Now the term *anaxios* would refer to the fact that the Christians treated the Lord's Supper as a common meal, and did not understand the intrinsic difference between a common supper and the supper which commemorated the paschal mystery of Christ. Therefore, the sin of the Corinthian community was that of a lack of respect to the Body and Blood of the Lord because of a mistaken idea of what the Eucharist is all about. Originally it does not seem to have had any moral connotations regarding ritual purity from individual sins, which it later assumed in the history of the Church. However, one cannot fail to notice the underlying notion of unworthiness to receive the Body and Blood of Christ whenever the disciple fails to

believe in the true meaning of the Eucharistic sacrifice, and therefore to live a life which is in direct agreement with its intrinsic meaning. Hence, the moral disposition necessary to receive communion flows in a logical way from this initial notion of discerning, distinguishing, the Body and Blood of Christ from other common food.

This argument is further strengthened by what we read in Hebrews 10:29, which Saint Francis also quotes in the *Letter to the Entire Order*: “You may be sure that anyone who tramples on the Son of God, and who treats the blood of the covenant which sanctified him as if it were not holy, and who insults the Spirit of grace, will be condemned to a far severer punishment.”

### **The interpretation of 1Corinthians 11 in the Letter to the Entire Order**

The *Letter to the Entire Order* (*EpOrd*) was written towards the end of Francis’ life, roughly in 1225. It is the direct response to the promulgation of the post Lateran IV document *Quia populares tumultus* (3<sup>rd</sup> December 1224), which gave the friars permission to celebrate the Eucharist on a portable altar in their own churches and oratories. The section we shall analyse and which regards the sacramental practice of the friars regarding the celebration and reception of the Eucharist is found in verses 14-25:

“I also beg in the Lord all my brothers who are priests, or who will be, or who wish to be priests of the Most High that whenever they wish to celebrate Mass, being pure, they offer the true Sacrifice of the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ with purity and reverence, with a holy and unblemished intention, not for any worldly reason or out of fear or love of anyone, as if they were pleasing people. But let all their will, as much as grace helps, be directed to God, desiring, thereby, to please only the Most High Lord Himself because He alone acts there as He pleases, for He Himself says: *Do this in memory of me* (Lk 22:19; 1Cor 11:24). If anyone acts differently, he becomes Judas the traitor and *guilty of the Body and Blood of the Lord* (1Cor 11:27).

My priest brothers, remember what is written in the law of Moses: whoever committed a transgression against even externals died without mercy by a decree of the Lord. *How much greater and more severe will the punishment be of the one who tramples on the Son of God, and who treats the Blood of the Covenant in which he was sanctified as unclean and who insults the Spirit of grace?* (Heb 10:29) For a person looks down upon, defiles and tramples upon the Lamb of God when, as the Apostle says, not distinguishing and discerning the holy bread of Christ from other foods or actions, he either unworthily or, even if he is worthy, eats It in vain and unworthily since the Lord says through the prophet: The person is *cursed who does the work of the Lord deceitfully* (Jer 48:10). He will, in truth, condemn priests who do not wish to take this to heart, saying: *I will curse your blessings* (Mal 2:2).

Listen, my brothers: if the Blessed Virgin is so honoured, as is becoming because she carried Him in her most holy womb; if the Baptist trembled and did not dare to touch the holy head of God; if the tomb in which He lay for some time is held in veneration, how holy, just and fitting must he be who touches with his hands, receives in his heart and mouth, and offers to others to be received the One Who is not about to die but Who is to conquer and be glorified, upon Whom *the angels longed to gaze* (1Pt 1:12).

See your dignity, my priest *brothers* (1Cor 1:26), and be holy because He is holy. As the Lord God has honoured you above all others because of this ministry, for your part love, revere and honour Him above all others. It is a great misery and a

miserable weakness that when you have Him present in this way, you are concerned with anything else in the whole world!” (*EpOrd* 14-25, FAED 1, 117-118).

The context of the *EpOrd* was probably the occasion of a general chapter during which Francis addressed the brother priests of the Order. In 1225 the number of priests was still very limited, but at that time it was evident that many more priests would enter the Order in the future. Anthony of Padua, who was a priest, was by this time Custos at Limoges in France, and had lectured theology to the brothers in Bologna. The fact that Pope Honorius III had addressed the *Quia populares* to the Order in 1224 shows that there was a discreet number of priest brothers, who ministered to the other brothers by celebrating the Eucharist in the oratories and chapels of the hermitages in which the brothers lived.

The text we have just quoted shows that Francis was preoccupied not with the external form of the celebration of the Eucharist, although he would certainly have insisted that it was to be similar to that of the Church of Rome, but rather with the inner disposition of the priest who celebrates the Eucharist. From the brother priests Francis requests purity of heart and intention as a prerequisite for celebrating the Eucharistic sacrifice. Any act of unfaithfulness to this moral precondition was considered by Francis an act of high treason against the Lord, comparable to the same act of Judas the traitor. It is interesting how Francis explains the words of 1 Corinthians 11:27 as a reference to the sin of Judas. Judas consigned the body of the Lord to the Jews who paid him thirty shekels of silver for the blood of the immaculate Lamb of God. In the same way the unfaithful priest would be a minister of iniquity if he were to celebrate the Eucharistic sacrifice unworthily.

To further strengthen his argument Francis refers to the text of Hebrews 10:29. If any transgression against the Law of Moses in the Old Testament was seen as an act of high treason, since it defiled the covenant sealed with the blood of lambs, how greater would be the sin of the priest who defiles the blood of the innocent Lamb of the New Testament, shed on the cross for our salvation, and perpetuated in the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice!

Francis notes that the sin of unfaithfulness to the Lord consists in not distinguishing the Body and Blood of the Lord from ordinary food. In this Francis is totally in line with the teachings of Paul in 1 Corinthians. Francis speaks about discerning the Body of the Lord from other food or actions. In other words, he is insisting upon the absolute holiness of the Eucharistic sacrifice, celebrated by priests who alone administer the sacred mysteries.

The insistence upon the dignity of the priest as a celebrant of the divine liturgy was an important feature in the spirituality of Saint Francis. Indeed, in his *Testament* Francis explicitly notes this fact, even in the case of priests who are public sinners:

“Afterwards the Lord gave me, and gives me still, such faith in priests who live according to the rite of the holy Roman Church because of their orders that, were they to persecute me, I would still want to have recourse to them ... And I do not want to consider any sin in them because I discern the Son of God in them and they are my lords. And I act in this way because, in this world, I seen nothing corporally of the most high Son of God except his most holy Body and Blood which they receive and they alone administer to others” (*Test* 6-9: FAED 1, 125).

In his *Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful*, Francis echoes the same teaching regarding the respect towards the Eucharist when receiving holy communion, this time by addressing the common faithful, maybe also as a result of the provisions of the Fourth Lateran Council outlined above:

“We must, of course, confess all our sins to a priest and receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ from him. Whoever does not eat His flesh and drink His blood cannot enter the kingdom of God. But let him eat and drink worthily because anyone who receives *unworthily, not distinguishing*, that is, not discerning, *the Body of the Lord, eats and drinks judgment on himself*” (*EpFid* II,22-24: FAED 1, 47).

One notices that, for Francis, there is no distinction whatsoever between the moral integrity of the lay people and that of the priests. In both instances Francis makes use of the same text from 1Corinthians to emphasize the need for a good and solid spiritual preparation before receiving communion, and is very exact in his interpretation of the genuine meaning of the Pauline expression.

Now if we consider that, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Church had to invite Christians to go to communion at least once a year, we would understand why Francis is encouraging priests and lay people alike to approach the Eucharistic banquet with a clear conscience. Indeed, it was not common for Christians to receive communion frequently, and we are surprised that Saint Clare, in her Rule, mentions seven feasts on which the sisters were to receive communion, but also states that they were to approach the sacrament of Penance twelve times:

“Let them go to confession, with the permission of the abbess, at least twelve times a year ... Let them receive Communion seven times, namely, on the Nativity of the Lord, Thursday of Holy Week, the Resurrection of the Lord, Pentecost, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, the Feast of Saint Francis, and the Feast of All Saints” (*RegCl* 3,12-14: CAED 113).

## **Conclusion**

The studies regarding Francis’ devotion towards the holy Eucharist all indicate his great respect to the Body and Blood of the Lord, in perfect agreement with his great love for the mystery of the Incarnation. Paul Sabatier writes: “For Francis the Church, the priests, the Eucharist, the Bible are various aspects of the power of God. The Bible is the history of the Eucharist, and the Eucharist the symbol of the realisation of God’s work in humanity” (*Etudes inédites sur saint François d’Assise*, Paris 1932, 49).

Francis insists that one should approach the sacrament of the Eucharist with good moral dispositions. In this he is echoing genuine Church teaching, which was already present in the Fourth Lateran Council and which became much more clear in the sacramental practice introduced by the Council of Trent, and still valid in the Church today.

Francis bases his arguments on the teaching of Paul in 1Corinthians 11:17-34, again in perfect agreement with the traditional teachings of the Church. Furthermore he shows a very clear understanding of the Pauline expression in 1Corinthians 11:28-29, namely that of discerning the Body of the Lord from common food. In practice this would amount to evaluating the Eucharistic banquet as a special moment of communion with the Lord, separating it from all other actions. Indeed, the original interpretation of Paul was limited to the rules governing the celebration of the Lord’s Supper within the context of the *agape* meal. Later on, it came to be widened to the moral attitude of Christians when approaching holy communion. In Francis’ case we could conclude that both elements are present. Francis is certainly more interested in the inner dispositions and spiritual preparation of the lay people who approach holy communion, as well as of the priest who celebrates the Eucharist.

Francis' respect towards the brother priests, expressed so clearly in the *Letter to the Entire Order*, has to be interpreted in the light of his interpretation of the narrative of the Eucharistic institution in 1Corinthians 11. During this Pauline year it would be interesting to delve much deeper into this aspect present in the Writings of the saint, from the scriptural, dogmatic and spiritual viewpoints.