

A DIALOGUE BETWEEN AN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN AND A RATIONALIST ON THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

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Orthodox. My friend, I would like to ask you a question: what do you understand by the words: “We are saved by the Blood of Christ”?

Rationalist. That we are saved by the Sacrifice of Christ Crucified, whereby He washed away our sins in His Blood shed on the Cross.

Orthodox. I agree. And how precisely are our sins washed away?

Rationalist. By true faith, and by partaking of the Holy Mysteries of the Church with faith and love, and especially the Mystery of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist.

Orthodox. Excellent! So you agree that in the Mystery of the Body and Blood of Christ we partake of the very same Body that was nailed to the Cross and the very same Blood that was shed from the side of the Saviour?

Rationalist. Er, yes...

Orthodox. I see that you hesitate, my friend. Is there something wrong in what I have said.

Rationalist. Not exactly... However, you must be careful not to understand the Mystery in a cannibalistic sense.

Orthodox. Cannibalistic? What do you mean, my friend? What is cannibalistic here?

Rationalist. Well, I mean that we must not understand the Body of Christ in the Eucharist to be a hunk of meat. That would be close to cannibalism – to paganism.

Orthodox. You know, the early Christians were accused of being cannibals by their enemies. However, cannibals eat *dead* meat. In the Mystery we do not partake of dead meat, but of *living* flesh, the Flesh of the God-Man. It is alive not only through Its union with His human Soul, but also through Its union with the Divine Spirit. And that makes It not only alive, but *Life-giving*.

Rationalist. Still, you mustn't understand this in too literal a way. Did not the Lord say: “The flesh is of little use; it is the spirit that gives life” (John 6.63)?

Orthodox. Yes indeed, but you must understand this passage as the Holy Fathers understand it. St. John Chrysostom says that in these words the Lord was not referring to His own Flesh (God forbid!), but to a carnal understanding of His words. And “this is what carnal understanding means – looking on things in a simple manner without representing anything more. We should not judge in this manner about the visible, but we must look into all its mysteries with internal eyes.”¹ If you think about the Flesh of Christ

¹ St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 47 on John*, 2.

carnally, you are thinking about It as if it were *just* flesh, separate from the Divine Spirit. But we must have spiritual eyes to look beyond – to the invisible reality.

Rationalist. But this is just what I mean! You are reducing a spiritual Mystery to something carnal, material. But we are not saved by matter!

Orthodox. St. John of Damascus did not agree with you. “I do not worship matter,” he said, “but I worship the Creator of matter Who became matter for my sake and Who, through matter, accomplished my salvation!”²

Rationalist. But “flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God” (I Cor. 15.50).

Orthodox. *Fallen* flesh and blood is what the Apostle means. But if our fallen flesh and blood is purified and transfigured by the incorrupt Body and Blood of Christ, then our bodies will be raised in glory at the Second Coming and we will be able to enter the Kingdom – *in our bodies*. Indeed, the Lord makes precisely this link between eating His Flesh and the resurrection of the body: “He who eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6.54).

Rationalist. Nevertheless, the Lord’s Body in the Sacrament is different from ours...

Orthodox. In purity – yes, in essence – no. For, as St. John of the Ladder says, “The blood of God and the blood of His servants are quite different – but I am thinking here of the dignity and not of the actual physical substance.”³... But let me understand precisely what you mean. Are you saying that when we speak of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist, we are speaking not literally, but metaphorically or symbolically?

Rationalist. No, of course not! I believe that the Consecrated Gifts are the True Body and Blood of Christ!

Orthodox. I am glad to hear that. For you know, of course, that the metaphorical or symbolical understanding of the Mystery is a Protestant doctrine that has been condemned by the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. Thus St. John of Damascus writes that “the Lord has said, ‘This is My Body’, not ‘this is a figure of My Body’; and ‘My Blood’, not ‘a figure of My Blood’.”⁴... So are you saying that the bread and wine are in some sense transfigured or “spiritualized” at the consecration through their union with the Divine Spirit of Christ, “penetrated” by the Spirit, as it were, so that we can then call them the Body and Blood of Christ, although they do not cease to be bread and wine?...

Rationalist. Er, let me think about that...

² St. John of Damascus, *First Apology against those who Attack the Divine Images*, 16.

³ St. John of the Ladder, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 23.20.

⁴ St. John of Damascus, *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, IV, 13.

Orthodox. Well, while you're thinking let me remind you that the Eastern Patriarchs in their Encyclical of 1848 also condemned this teaching, which is essentially that of the Lutherans. It is also very close to the Anglican idea of the "Real Presence" of Christ in the Eucharist – although it is notoriously difficult to say precisely what the Anglicans believe. And you will remember that the Anglicans and Catholics killed each other during the Anglican Reformation precisely because the Catholics had a realistic understanding of the sacrament, whereas the Anglicans, being Protestants, did not. A recent Anglican biography of the first Anglican archbishop, Cranmer, has demonstrated that he was a Zwinglian in his eucharistic theology.

Rationalist. You know, I think that you are misrepresenting the Anglican position. Fr. X of the Moscow Theological Academy has told me that the Orthodox teaching coincides with that of the Anglicans, but not with that of the Catholics.

Orthodox. Really, you do surprise me! I knew that your Moscow theologians were close to the Anglicans, the spiritual fathers of the ecumenical movement and masters of doctrinal double-think, but I did not know that they had actually embraced their doctrines! As for the Catholics – what do you find wrong with their eucharistic theology?

Rationalist. Don't you know? The Orthodox reject the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation!

Orthodox. I do not believe that the Orthodox reject transubstantiation. We dislike the *word* "transubstantiation" because of its connotations of Aristotlean philosophy and medieval scholasticism, but very few people today – even Catholics – use the word in the technically Aristotlean sense. Most people mean by "transubstantiation" simply the doctrine that the substances of bread and wine are changed into the substances of Body and Blood in the Eucharist, which is Orthodox. The Eastern Patriarchs in their Encyclical write that "the bread is changed, *transubstantiated*, converted, transformed, into the actual Body of the Lord." They use four words here, including "transubstantiated", to show that they are equivalent in meaning. In any case, is not the Russian word "presuschestvlenie" a translation of "transubstantiation"? It is important not to quarrel over words if the doctrine the words express is the same.

Rationalist. Nevertheless, the doctrine of transubstantiation is Catholic and heretical.

Orthodox. If that is so, why has the Orthodox Church never condemned it as heretical? The Orthodox Church has on many occasions condemned the Catholic heresies of the Filioque, papal infallibility, created grace, etc., but never the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist.

Rationalist. It's still heretical. And I have to say that I find your thinking very western, scholastic, primitive and materialist!

Orthodox. Perhaps you'll find these words of the Lord also "primitive and materialist": "Unless you eat of My Flesh and drink of My Blood, you have no life in you" ([John 6.53](#)). And these words of St. John Chrysostom written in his commentary on the Lord's words: "He hath given to those who desire Him not only to see Him, but even to touch, and eat Him, and fix their teeth in His Flesh, and to embrace Him, and satisfy their love..."⁵ Was St. John Chrysostom, the composer of our Liturgy, a western Catholic in his thinking?

Rationalist. Don't be absurd!

Orthodox. Well then... Let's leave the Catholics and Protestants and get back to the Orthodox position. And let me put my understanding of the Orthodox doctrine as concisely as possible: at the moment of consecration the bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ in such a way that there is no longer the substances of bread and wine, but only of Body and Blood.

Rationalist. I accept that so long as you do not mean that there is a physico-chemical change in the constitution of the bread and wine?

Orthodox. But can there not be a physico-chemical change?! Are not bread and wine physical substances?

Rationalist. Yes.

Orthodox. And are not human flesh and blood physico-chemical substances?

Rationalist. Yes...

Orthodox. And is not a change from one physico-chemical substance into another physico-chemical substance a physico-chemical change?

Rationalist. Here you are demonstrating your western, legalistic, primitive mentality! All Aristotlean syllogisms and empty logic! The Orthodox mind is quite different: it is mystical. You forget that we are talking about a Mystery!

Orthodox. Forgive me for offending you. I quite accept that we are talking about a Mystery. But there is a difference between mystery and mystification. If we are going to speak at all, we must speak clearly, with as precise a definition of terms as human speech will allow. The Fathers were not opposed to logic or clarity. Illogicality is no virtue!

Rationalist. Alright... But the fact remains that the change is not a physico-chemical one, but a supernatural one. It says so in the Liturgy itself!

Orthodox. I agree that the change is supernatural in two senses. First, the instantaneous change of one physical substance into another is obviously not something that we find in the ordinary course of nature. Of course, bread and wine are naturally changed into flesh and blood through the process of eating and digestion. But in this case the change is effected, not by eating, but by the word of prayer – and it's instantaneous. For, as St. Gregory of Nyssa points out, "it is not a matter of the bread becoming the Body of the Word through the natural process of eating: rather it is transmuted *immediately* into the Body

⁵ St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 46 on John*, 3.

of the Word.”⁶ Secondly, the change is effected by a supernatural Agent – God. So what we have is the change of one physico-chemical substance into another through a non-physical, supernatural Agent, the Spirit of God.

Rationalist. But if I were to accept your western logic, I should have to believe that the Body of Christ is composed of proteins and enzymes and such things, and that the Blood of Christ contains haemoglobin!

Orthodox. Well, and what is impious about that?

Rationalist. It is the height of impiety! My faith is not based on scientific molecular analysis!

Orthodox. Nor is mine.

Rationalist. But you have just admitted that the Body and Blood of Christ contain proteins and enzymes and haemoglobin!

Orthodox. Well, does not human flesh and blood contain such elements?

Rationalist. Yes, but these words are scientific terms that were unknown to the Fathers. You don’t seriously think that in order to understand the Mystery, you have to have a degree in biology?!

Orthodox. Not at all.

Rationalist. So you accept that the Blood of Christ does not contain haemoglobin...

Orthodox. No I don’t. Your argument is a non-sequitur. I believe *by faith alone* – not by molecular analysis, nor by any evidence of the senses – that the consecrated Gifts are human Flesh and Blood united to the Divine Spirit. Biologists tell me – and no one, as far as I know, disputes this – that human blood contains haemoglobin. So it seems eminently reasonable to believe that the Blood of Christ also contains haemoglobin. Of course, this fact was discovered, not by faith, but by scientific research, so it does not have the certainty – or the importance – attaching to revelations of faith. But *if* we suppose that human blood contains haemoglobin, and if we accept that Christ’s Blood is human, then it follows that Christ’s Blood also contains haemoglobin. Or do you think that Christ is not fully human and does not have fully human flesh and blood like ours?

Rationalist. There you go with your syllogisms and empty logic again! Always trying to catch me out! I never said that Christ’s Blood was not human!

Orthodox. Nevertheless, you seem to have great trouble accepting the consequences of that statement.

Rationalist. They are consequences for you, but not for me. Thus you, but not I, are committed to the consequence that a molecular analysis of the Blood of Christ would reveal haemoglobin.

Orthodox. Not so... I think it was Vladimir Lossky who said that hypothetical situations are not a fitting subject of theological discourse, which deals only in

⁶ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism*, 37.

absolute realities. However, let us follow your thought experiment through for a moment. I do not know, of course, what would happen if anyone – God forbid! – were so blasphemous as to perform such a molecular analysis. Nevertheless, *if* God allowed him to do it, and to analyze the results, I expect that they would indicate that the consecrated Gifts are bread and wine, not flesh and blood, and so contain no haemoglobin.

Rationalist. Now you're the one who's being illogical! One moment you say that Christ's Blood contains haemoglobin, and the next you say that a physico-chemical analysis would reveal no haemoglobin!

Orthodox. Precisely, because the reality revealed by faith is *not* the appearance revealed to the fallen senses, of which science is simply the organized extension. Faith, as St. Paul says, "is the certainty of things unseen" (Heb. 11.1); science is an uncertain apprehension of things seen. In the case of the Mystery we see and taste one thing; but the reality is something quite different. God veils the reality from our senses; and no amount of scientific observation can discern the reality if God chooses to hide it.

Rationalist. Why should he do that?

Orthodox. He does this in order that we should not be repelled by the sight and taste of human flesh and so refrain from partaking of the Saving Mystery. As Blessed Theophylact says, "Since we are weak and could not endure raw meat, much less human flesh, it appears as bread to us although it is in fact flesh".⁷ It is absolutely essential to realize that we cannot understand our senses here – even if aided by a microscope. In fact, when it comes to the Mystery, all sense-perception, of any kind, must be discarded; it can be seen by faith alone.

Rationalist. Of course, I agree with that.

Orthodox. So what's your problem?

Rationalist. I don't have a problem. *You* have a problem, a very serious one.

Orthodox. What's that?

Rationalist. A diseased imagination, what the Greeks call "plani" and the Russians – "prelest". Instead of simply receiving the sacrament in faith, you are imagining that it is composed of all sorts of things – molecules, proteins, haemoglobin, etc. This is western rationalism!

Orthodox. No, I can sincerely assure you that I don't use my imagination in any way when approaching the Mystery. And forgive me, but I think it is you who are infected with rationalism, insofar as you have such difficulty in accepting what the Church plainly teaches.

Rationalist. My advice to you is: when you approach the Mystery, just believe the words of the priest that this is the True Body and Blood of Christ, and don't feel or think or imagine anything else.

⁷ Blessed Theophylact, *On Matthew*, 26.26.

Orthodox. Thank you for your advice. I shall try to follow it in the future, as I have followed it in the past.

Rationalist. You are not being honest. You *do* use your imagination, the intellectual imagination of the scientist; you think of haemoglobin, proteins, molecules, etc.

Orthodox. There's no point arguing about this. How can I convince you? You know, I think the difference between us is not that I use imagination and you don't, but that I rely on faith alone and entirely reject the evidence of my senses while you waver between what the Church teaches and what your senses tell you. I believe, contrary to the evidence of my senses, that the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist is *exactly the same* Body and Blood as that which He received from the Virgin, in which He walked on this earth, and in which He was crucified on the Cross. You, on the other hand, whether you admit it or not, think that it is in some sense the same Body and Blood but in another not the same, because it looks and tastes different.

Rationalist. You'll have difficulty proving that!

Orthodox. Will I? Well, just let me try by putting a few questions to you.

Rationalist. Go ahead.

Orthodox. Now I am going to talk about blood with haemoglobin in it, not because I think that blood having haemoglobin is such an important fact, but simply because it enables me to identify whether you are referring to the same kind of blood as I. Agreed?

Rationalist. Okay.

Orthodox. Right then. First question: Did the Holy Virgin have human blood with haemoglobin in it?

Rationalist. Very likely.

Orthodox. Second question: Did the Blood which the Lord Jesus Christ received from the Virgin blood contain haemoglobin?

Rationalist. If the Virgin had that blood, then the Lord had the same blood.

Orthodox. Good. Now the third question: Did the Lord on the Cross shed human Blood with haemoglobin in it?

Rationalist. I think I see what you're leading to...

Orthodox. Please answer the question: yes or no?

Rationalist. Yes, of course.

Orthodox. Fourth question: Bearing in mind that, as St. John Chrysostom says, "that which is in the chalice is *the same* as that which flowed from Christ's side"⁸, is that which is in the chalice human blood with haemoglobin in it?

Rationalist. You have convinced me! I did see them as different, but now I agree with you!

⁸ St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 24 on I Corinthians*.

Orthodox. Not just with me, brother: with the Church, which *is* the Body of Christ insofar as it is composed of members who have partaken of the Body of Christ. For, as a recently canonized saint of the Church, St. John Maximovich, wrote: "Bread and wine are made into the Body and Blood of Christ during the Divine Liturgy... How is the Body and Blood of Christ at the same time both the Church and the Holy Mystery? Are the faithful both members of the Body of Christ, the Church, and also communicants of the Body of Christ in the Holy Mystery? In neither instance is this name 'Body of Christ' used metaphorically, but rather *in the most basic sense of the word*. We believe that the Holy Mysteries which keep the form of bread and wine are the very Body and the very Blood of Christ... Christ, invisible to the bodily eye, manifests Himself on earth clearly through His Church, just as the unseen human spirit manifests itself through the body. The Church is the Body of Christ both because its parts are united to Christ through His Divine Mysteries and because through her Christ works in the world. *We partake of the Body and Blood of Christ, in the Holy Mysteries, so that we ourselves may be members of Christ's Body, the Church.*"⁹

Rationalist. Yes, I agree with the Body about the Body, I agree with the Church!

Orthodox. Glory to God! "What is so good or so joyous as for brethren to dwell together in unity!" (Psalm 132.1).

(Pentecost, 1998; revised Pentecost, 2004)

⁹ St. John Maximovich, "The Church as the Body of Christ", *Orthodox Life*, vol. 31, № 5, September-October, 1981, pp. 16-17.