

**SERMON 227: PREACHED ON THE HOLY DAY OF EASTER TO THE *INFANTES*,
ON THE SACRAMENTS**

Date: 414-415†1

You are yourselves what you receive

I haven't forgotten my promise. I had promised those of you who have just been baptized a sermon to explain the sacrament of the Lord's table, which you can see right now, and which you shared in last night. You ought to know what you have received, what you are about to receive, what you ought to receive every day. That bread which you can see on the altar, sanctified by the word of God, is the body of Christ.†2 That cup, or rather what the cup contains, sanctified by the word of God, is the blood of Christ. It was by means of these things that the Lord Christ wished to present us with his body and blood, which he shed for our sake for the forgiveness of sins. If you receive them well, you are yourselves what you receive. You see, the apostle says, *We, being many, are one loaf, one body* (1 Cor 10:17). That's how he explained the sacrament of the Lord's table; one loaf, one body, is what we all are, many though we be.

In this loaf of bread you are given clearly to understand how much you should love unity. I mean, was that loaf made from one grain? Weren't there many grains of wheat? But before they came into the loaf they were all separate; they were joined together by means of water after a certain amount of pounding and crushing. Unless wheat is ground, after all, and moistened with water, it can't possibly get into this shape which is called bread. In the same way you too were being ground and pounded, as it were, by the humiliation of fasting and the sacrament of exorcism. Then came baptism, and you were, in a manner of speaking, moistened with water in order to be shaped into bread. But it's not yet bread without fire to bake it. So what does fire represent? That's the chrism, the anointing. Oil, the fire-feeder, you see, is the sacrament of the Holy Spirit.

Notice it, when the Acts of the Apostles are read; the reading of that book begins now, you see. Today begins the book which is called the Acts of the Apostles. Anybody who wishes to make progress has the means of doing so. When you assemble in church, put aside silly stories†3 and concentrate on the scriptures. We here are your books.†4 So pay attention, and see how the Holy Spirit is going to come at Pentecost. And this is how he will come; he will show himself in tongues of fire. You see, he breathes into us the charity which should set us on fire for God, and have us think lightly of the world, and burn up our straw, and purge and refine our hearts like gold. So the Holy Spirit comes, fire after water, and you are baked into the bread which is the body of Christ. And that's how unity is signified.

Now you have the sacraments in the order they occur.†5 First, after the prayer,†6 you are urged to lift up your hearts; that's only right for the members of Christ. After all, if you have become members of Christ, where is your head?†7 Members have a head. If the head hadn't gone ahead before, the members would never follow. Where has our head gone? What did you give back in the creed? *On the third day he rose again from the dead, he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father.* So our head is in heaven. That's why, after the words *Lift up your hearts*, you reply, *We have lifted them up to the Lord.*

And you mustn't attribute it to your own powers, your own merits, your own efforts, this lifting up of your hearts to the Lord, because it's God's gift that you should have your heart up above. That's why the bishop, or the presbyter who's offering, goes on to say, when the people have answered *We have lifted them up to the Lord*, why he goes on to say, *Let us give thanks to the Lord our God*, because we have lifted up our hearts. Let us give thanks, because unless he had enabled us to lift them up, we would still have our hearts down here on earth. And you signify your agreement by saying, *It is right and just* to give thanks to the one who caused us to lift up our hearts to our head.

Then, after the consecration of the sacrifice of God, because he wanted us to be ourselves his sacrifice, which is indicated by where that sacrifice was first put, that is the sign of the thing that we are;†8 why, then after the consecration is accomplished, we say the Lord's prayer, which you have received and given back. After that comes the greeting, *Peace be with you*, and Christians kiss one another with a holy kiss. It's a sign of peace; what is indicated by the lips should happen in the conscience; that is, just as your lips approach the lips of your brothers or sisters, so your heart should not be withdrawn from theirs.

So they are great sacraments and signs, really serious and important sacraments. Do you want to know how their seriousness is impressed on us? The apostle says, *Whoever eats the body of Christ or drinks the blood of the Lord unworthily is guilty of the body and blood of the Lord* (1 Cor 11:27). What is receiving unworthily? Receiving with contempt, receiving with derision. Don't let yourselves think that what you can see is of no account. What you can see passes away, but the invisible reality signified does not pass away, but remains. Look, it's received, it's eaten, it's consumed. Is the body of Christ consumed, is the Church of Christ consumed, are the members of Christ consumed?†9 Perish the thought! Here they are being purified, there they will be crowned with the victor's laurels. So what is signified will remain eternally, although the thing that signifies it seems to pass away. So receive the sacrament in such a way that you think about yourselves, that you retain unity in your hearts, that you always fix your hearts up above. Don't let your hope be placed on earth, but in heaven. Let your faith be firm in God, let it be acceptable to God. Because what you don't see now, but believe, you are going to see there, where you will have joy without end.

NOTES

†1. This date is my compromise between those proposed by two authorities who are usually in perfect accord: Fischer, who suggests 412-413, and Kunzelmann who favors 416-417. The sermon, though primarily on the eucharist, explains all three “sacraments of initiation”: baptism, confirmation, and eucharist.

†2. Evidently the sermon was preached just before communion, after the great eucharistic prayer, or canon of the Mass.

†3. Presumably he means pagan myths; but possibly also various popular superstitions or naive misconceptions about the sacraments or the Holy Spirit.

†4. When we read the scriptures aloud, the books of the illiterate?

†5. He is going on to talk about the Mass, from the preface onward. So here by “sacraments” he seems to mean the successive stages of the eucharistic prayer, beginning with the exchange

between celebrant and people which opens the preface; here each utterance appears to be a “sacrament.”

†6. What we now call the intercessions, or prayers of the faithful.

†7. We have to remember that *membrum* in Latin still meant primarily a limb or organ of the body, whereas in English it is the metaphorical sense of “member” that has become the ordinary meaning: member of an organization, institute, or society.

†8. The text is overloaded and corrupt here. As far as “because he wanted us to be ourselves his sacrifice” all is plain. Then it continues—I leave out variously suggested punctuations—*quod demonstratum est ubi impositum est primum illud sacrificium Dei et nos id est signum rei quod sumus*. I have simply omitted *Dei et nos* after the second *sacrificium*. I am guessing that “where the sacrifice was first put” refers to the offertory, and that this somehow indicated that the offerings represented the people's offering of themselves.

For the same doctrine that we are also the sacrifice or victim being offered in the Mass, see *The City of God*, X,6.

†9. Notice how his thought does not linger on the real presence of Christ in the eucharistic elements, but passes straight to the ultimate meaning of the eucharist, the ultimate grace signified by Christ's body and blood in the sacrament, namely the unity of the body of Christ which is the Church, and our living incorporation into it. He doesn't deny the real presence, as was later thought by, for example, some of the Protestant reformers. But he knows that it is only, so to say, the middle stage of the sacrament, what Saint Thomas Aquinas calls the *res et sacramentum*, the thing signified by the visible celebration, which is itself also the sacrament, that is the sign, of a further thing. It is this further thing, what Saint Thomas calls the *res tantum*, the ultimate thing or grace signified, that always interests Augustine. And the grace of the eucharist is the unity of the body of Christ and our participation in it. The real presence of Christ under the appearances of bread and wine has the same place in this sacrament as the baptismal character has in baptism: a kind of half-way stage, or middle level, in the sacramental mystery of grace.