

Tract 15: The Conditions for Eucharistic Reception in St. Justin Martyr's Church

Writing his *Apology* to Emperor Antoninus Pius (d. 161), Marcus Aurelius (d. 180), and Lucius Verus (d. 169), St. Justin Martyr (d. ca. 165) explains at the beginning of chapter 66:

And this food is called among us “Eucharist,” which no one may partake except one: who believes these things taught by us to be true, who has been washed for the forgiveness of sins and the washing unto rebirth, and thus who lives just as Christ handed on.¹

Many theologians and scholars of early Christian practices have studied Justin's witness to the Eucharist in Rome. Given the needs of our times, we would do well to return in meditation to this single sentence of Justin. Close attention to this teaching of an early holy layman renowned as a philosopher and martyr can be fruitful for us. Here we do so by meditating on the sentence's four parts.

**And this food is called among us “Eucharist,”
which no one may partake except one . . .**

Justin indicates that “this food” has a special name: Eucharist. The word was in circulation before Christianity, and Greek specialists understand that it usually has the senses of gratitude and the giving of thanks. After the

¹ Justin Martyr, *Apol.* 66.1: Καὶ ἡ τροφή αὕτη καλεῖται παρ' ἡμῖν εὐχαριστία, ἥς οὐδενὶ ἄλλῳ μετασχεῖν ἐξόν ἐστιν ἢ τῷ πιστεύοντι ἀληθῆ εἶναι τὰ διδασκόμενα ὑφ' ἡμῶν καὶ λουσαμένῳ τὸ ὑπὲρ ἀφέσεως ἁμαρτιῶν καὶ εἰς ἀναγέννησιν λουτρὸν καὶ οὕτως βιοῦντι ὡς ὁ Χριστὸς παρέδωκεν.

prefix, the stem of the word is *χαρις*, a word that is often translated in Latin as *gratia* and in English as “grace” or “thanks.” St. Paul uses the verbal form of Eucharist in 1 Cor 11:24 to speak of Christ having giving thanks on the night on which he was betrayed. To the Corinthians, Paul explains that he hands on to them what he received from the Lord. Rather than betraying Christ, delivering him over to enemies, Paul delivers the mystery of Christ over to the faithful. For, Paul makes present the mystery where, taking bread and wine, Christ gave his own Body and Blood and said to do this in remembrance of him. The thanksgiving that accompanies this most solemn act thus lends its name to “this food,” so that the food is the Eucharist.

The Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca, Paul’s contemporary, determines that “it is an ungrateful person who gives thanks (*agit gratias*) without witnesses present” (*On Benefits* 2.23). Jesus Christ gave thanks to the Father in the presence of his apostles on the night before he died. He wanted his disciples to witness his thanksgiving. In the following century, Justin Martyr offered in his *Apology* a literary thanksgiving for this food before Rome, in some way symbolizing the whole world.

There is the danger that a public act, before many witnesses, might hand Christ over to his enemies. The Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom has this prayer at the time of Communion: “O Son of God, receive me today as a partaker of your Mystical Supper. For I will not speak of the mystery to your enemies, nor will I give you a kiss, as did Judas. But like the thief, I confess to you: *Remember me, Lord, in your kingdom.*” In some places and times in early Christianity, the Eucharistic mystery was guarded by the discipline of secrecy so that only the faithful would hear of what is being celebrated.

Today our situation may be more like the Church of Rome during Justin’s time. Justin publicly explains in detail aspects of the Eucharistic mystery, and anyone presently can read about the Mass of the Roman Rite or any Eucharistic liturgy in books and online. Yet, we should not forget the fundamental difference between the great accessibility of reading and hearing about the Eucharist and what Justin identifies as the prohibition of receiving “this food.” He does not welcome just anyone to receive the food. In fact, he says “no one may partake except one . . .” His inclusiveness of making known the thanks that the Church gives requires an exclusiveness.

“No one.” Is Justin unusual in this prohibition? The *Didache* [or *Teaching*] of the Twelve Apostles, one of the most ancient non-canonical witnesses to the practices of the Church, explains the Eucharistic rite, providing some of its words of thanks, and then cautions: “But let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist . . .” (9.5). Its author imposes the condition, and then quotes the Lord’s words, “Do not give what is holy to dogs” (Matt 7:6).

We can recall that the apostle Paul instructs the Corinthians: “Anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself” (1 Cor 11:29). Paul shows that this is the reason for Christians’ being punished: “That is why many among you are ill and infirm, and a considerable number are dying. If we discerned ourselves, we would not be under judgment” (1 Cor 11:30–31). While the Roman lectionary features 1 Cor 11:23–26 in several places and includes verses 17–26 and 33 in the weekday cycle of readings for Mass, never are verses 27–32 proclaimed in the Mass’s Liturgy of the Word. This omission can draw our attention to that teaching on the Eucharist. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* quotes 1 Cor 11:27–29, and continues: “Anyone conscious of a grave sin must receive the sacrament of Reconciliation before coming to communion” (§1385).

Do we want to hear Paul’s words about the dangers of receiving the Eucharist unworthily? Do we want to continue the way of thinking of the *Didache* and Justin Martyr, where the first consideration is that no one should receive the Eucharist unless certain conditions are met? The three conditions that St. Justin gives for receiving Holy Communion are still conditions today. All are welcome to abide by these three conditions and so receive the Eucharist. We will now look at each condition singly, with assistance from Justin’s other teachings so important for his time and ours.

Who believes these things taught by us to be true

The first requirement for Justin is faith, and he does not mean a generic ability to trust. Rather, Justin knows that the Church in Rome, where Justin is living, teaches particular doctrines that come from Christ and must be held in faith. In turn, the one permitted to share in the Eucharist must believe these things. This continues what we read in John 6. After teaching on the Bread of Life, Jesus says: “The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe” (John 6:63–64). After he identified that some do not believe, many disciples went away from him. But Simon Peter, speaking for all believers, confessed: “We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:69).

In his *Apology*, Justin adamantly maintains that the reason why he wants his audience to accept what he says is “because we speak the truth” (23.1). Justin teaches certain articles of faith concerning Christ and the resurrection of the body, as well as doctrines about the meaning of life. He loves to contrast what Christians accept as truth with pagan teachings and immoral practices.

In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin argues at length with the Jew Trypho that the Scriptures foretell Jesus Christ. Early in the account, he relates that he himself had turned from a variety of Greek philosophical schools to the truth communicated by a certain old man by the sea who interpreted the prophets for him. After the old man went away, Justin's spirit was immediately set on fire, and he discovered that what the old man told him was "the only sure and beneficial philosophy" (8.1). From recounting his own conversion, Justin sought in dialogue to convert his audience to the truth.

Indeed, truth is of the greatest importance to Justin. He died for the truth. In the acts of his martyrdom, a portion of which appears in the Office of Readings on his memorial of June 1, we read that the Roman prefect said to Justin, "You are called a learned man and think you know what is true teaching." He was trying to persuade Justin to turn from the faith that he had received. Justin's reply includes this confession of faith: "We hope to suffer torment for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ, and so be saved. For this will bring us salvation and confidence as we stand before the more terrible and universal judgment-seat of our Lord and Savior." In this way, Justin followed the example of Christ himself. Shortly before his own death, Jesus Christ gave witness before Pontius Pilate by saying, "For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice" (John 18:37).

At Mass on Sundays and solemnities, we recite the Creed. Yet, every Mass is for the "faithful," that is, those who profess the faith. Some bemoan the fact that we have a crisis of morality. Perhaps there is something deeper than that, a crisis of faith. Christians have a distinctive religion in the world based upon a conviction of truth in the faith that we profess. Do you believe that what the Church teaches is true?

Who has been washed for the forgiveness of sins and the washing unto rebirth

The second condition is baptism, identified with a double water imagery of being washed for the forgiveness of sins and washed unto rebirth. In order to approach the Eucharist, you must not only believe properly; you must also be baptized. There is no Eucharist without the primary sacramental act of baptism. St. Paul says: "We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life" (Rom 6:4).

In his *Apology*, Justin describes the Trinitarian baptism of being washed

in the name of God the Father, and of Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit (ch. 61). Justin sees that this baptism expresses the Lord's words, "Unless you be born again, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (John 3:3). This fulfills Isa 1:16–20, which speaks of being washed from sin so that, even if the sins are scarlet, they will be washed white as snow.

In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin articulates to his purported Jewish audience the hope of salvation through a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of the forgiveness of sin: "There is no other way than this, that you come to know this Christ, be washed for the forgiveness of sins, as Isaiah proclaimed the washing, and so live henceforth without sin" (44.4). Notice that Justin places baptism after coming "to know this Christ," and baptism prefaces a kind of life that rejects sin.

The Church teaches and practices the sacramental life, which begins with baptism. No one is born a Christian. We are reborn Christians in baptism. How do we thank God for our baptism? What kind of life are we to live from this rebirth?

And thus who lives just as Christ handed on.

Justin's third condition for receiving the Eucharist in Rome is a certain kind of life. It is not enough to believe and to be baptized, but one must also live as Christ lived. For this life, Christ was hated and was crucified. But he was raised from the dead and is now seated at the right hand of his Father. With the gift of his Holy Spirit, we can live his life. St. Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me" (Gal 2:19–20). In the deification brought about in us by the sacramental life, we are called to live just as Christ handed on by word and deed.

In his *Apology*, Justin contrasts the life that Christ gave with the life of those who live unreasonably (*ἀλόγως*), which could be understood as living without the Logos (57.1). Justin wants the world to know that Christians live reasonably, according to the Logos of God. Rather than having a life that celebrates the immoralities of pagan myths, Christians can have a new life in the world, a life that prepares for heaven's unending life.

In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin maintains "everyone who repents can, if he wants, obtain God's mercy" (141.2). The whole point of this long dialogue, and arguably of all of Justin's works, is to have people receive God's mercy in Christ and have lives freed from the power of sin.

In receiving the Eucharist, we are to have lives that reject sin and are open to an increase in the life of Christ. Mindful of our sinfulness, we begin Mass with a Penitential Rite, begging for mercy; and we pray, “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you” before receiving Holy Communion. A life that rejects God’s mercy by preferring grave sin is not the life that Christ handed on. He came to give us mercy. Do we want to have that mercy on his terms?

The life that Christ gives us is a cruciform life: “If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). St. Justin Martyr knew that, and he imitated his Savior. He gave up his life, expressing the truthfulness of the Eucharist in the most eloquent way conceivable.

By continuing to meditate on the teaching of St. Justin Martyr regarding the conditions for Eucharistic reception, we can grow in the mystery of life and death at work in the Eucharist and, with his intercession, give witness in our own times. N·V