

This is My Body ... This is My Blood by Dr Joseph Mizzi

What did our Lord mean when he said, 'This is my body ... this is my blood'? Was he speaking literally or figuratively?

It is not my intention to prove conclusively that the figurative interpretation is correct. The issue is complex and it deserves serious consideration of the relevant biblical texts. I hope that this short letter will shed some light on this question and encourage you to study the subject further.

It is quite obvious, one may argue, that Jesus is not speaking figuratively. He emphatically said, 'This is my body.' He did not say, 'This represents my body,' or 'This is a sign of my body.' Similarly he said, 'This is my blood', and not, 'This is a symbol of my blood'.

A Catholic website states, 'The grammatical construction of the phrases, This is My Body, and This is My Blood, does not admit of a figurative or symbolic meaning. When the verb to be is used, the antecedent must always be identical with the consequent, i.e., This must be identical with My Body.'

Is it true that the verb 'to be' must always be so understood?

I don't think so. At least not in our ordinary speech. We often use the verb 'to be' in a plain and literal sense. I can introduce my wife to a friend by saying, 'This is my wife.' The context demands a literal meaning. But if I show him a photograph, I can say exactly the same words, 'This is my wife,' but now the context demands a figurative meaning, namely, 'This is a representation of my wife.'

This is also the language of Scripture. There are many instances where the context demands a figurative meaning. For instance, when Joseph explains Pharaoh's dreams, he says, 'The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good ears are seven years' (Gen 41:26-27). He simply means that the cows and the ears of wheat symbolize years, even though he actually said that the cows and ears are years.

Similarly, when Jesus explained the meaning of the parable of the sower, he said, 'The seed is the word of God' (Luke 8:11). Jesus said that the seed is the word, but we know that he means that the seed represents the word of God.

Again, the apostle John explains his vision by saying that, 'the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches' (Rev 1:20). Stars are not literally angels, and lampstands are not literally churches, but the stars correspond to angels and the lampstands symbolize the churches.

Finally the apostle Paul compares the old and new covenant to Hagar and Sarah, 'These women are two covenants' (Gal 4:24), he wrote, though of course we understand that the two women represent the covenants.

The grammatical construction of these verses is similar to Jesus' words in the Eucharist. We have not proven that they must be understood figuratively, but at least we have shown that such an interpretation is possible. So, if Jesus meant to say that the bread and wine are signs of his body and his blood, he could have expressed that truth by saying, 'This is my body ... this is my blood.'

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