

BOOK REVIEW

Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist: Unlocking the Secrets of the Last Supper. By Brant Pitre. New York: Doubleday, 2011. 228 pp. \$21.99. ISBN 978-0-385-53184-9.

I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world. John 6:51

Jesus' command to eat His flesh and drink His blood is at the heart of the Catholic faith in the Eucharist. God's love is poured out for us in His Son, Jesus Christ on every altar in every Catholic Church, all over the world. For Catholic believers, Christ is truly present, as the simple gifts of bread and wine are transformed into His body and blood. This doctrine of Transubstantiation has been the topic of much debate between Catholics and Evangelical Christians, raising the question, "What did Jesus really mean when He commanded us to eat of his flesh?"

Dr. Brant Pitre, in his illuminating book, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist: Unlocking the Secrets of the Last Supper* defends with passion and conviction the Catholic interpretation of Jesus' words. The impetus for writing his book came from his own experience of being on the theological firing line of one such debate, having been pelted with rapidly-fired questions about what Catholics believe and having little recourse. This impelled Pitre into a life of theological study, which he enthusiastically shares with his readers. Professor of Sacred Scripture at Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans, and with a Ph.D. from the University of Notre Dame in New Testament and Ancient Judaism, Dr. Pitre draws on his wealth of knowledge of Sacred Scripture and ancient Jewish Tradition to unlock the mystery of Jesus' Real Presence in the Eucharist. He employs Jewish sources such as *The Mishnah*, *The Midrashim*, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, and *The Works of Josephus* in order to help explain passages in the New Testament that reflect Jewish practices and beliefs. He also sheds light on books of the Old Testament such as, Deuteronomy, Leviticus, and Numbers, which are often glossed over by many readers of the Bible because of their density. Pitre contends that studying the Jewish roots of Jesus' words is the key to unlocking, what he terms "the secrets" of the Last Supper.

In his book, Dr. Pitre takes us on a journey, one that explores the Jewish understanding of the Last Supper and Jesus' command to partake of his flesh and blood. Throughout this engaging book, the reader journeys with Pitre on a path that is marked out in a clear and organized manner, as he takes the reader

step-by-step through the pages of Sacred Scripture and Rabbinical Literature. His aim, or destination if you will, is that readers gain new insight and a renewed appreciation for the gift that is the Eucharist. His approach is reminiscent of Scott Hahn's in *The Lamb's Supper*, particularly in style and tone. His tone is one of enthusiasm and excitement, as if he has great news to share, life-changing news!

Pitre maintains that in order to gain a real understanding of the Last Supper and Jesus' words of institution, it is essential to see them through an ancient Jewish lens, in light of Jewish worship, beliefs, and hopes for the future. For example, Pitre contends that the ancient Jewish hope was for a Messiah who would be the New Moses who would lead the Jewish people to a New Promised Land. Yet, in order to enter a New Promised Land, there must be a New Exodus, a New Covenant sealed in the Blood of the Lamb, and a New Temple, all of which were expected to be inaugurated by a New Passover, what Christians know as The Last Supper. He proposes three keys for "unlocking" the mystery of the Last Supper: The Passover, the ancient Jewish expectation of New Manna from Heaven and The Bread of the Presence (24) are prototypes for the Eucharistic Meal. As Pitre professes, it is necessary to put Jesus' words and deeds in their historical context in order to truly know who Jesus was and what he said and did (8). In fact, it was precisely the Jewish faith of the first followers of Christ that enabled them to believe that the bread and wine of the Eucharist were really and truly the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist is written for a wide audience, whether Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish. It is a valuable resource for the theologian/scripture scholar, as well as the lay believer who can easily walk this journey with Pitre and not get lost. Pitre, at the risk of sounding redundant, repeats content from chapter to chapter in order to build upon his theories. In order to keep the reader engaged, he often ends each chapter with a poignant question, leading the reader to the answer in the very next chapter. Particularly noteworthy is the whole of Chapter 7, entitled *The Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith*, where Pitre, with all modesty and humility, responds to the question that many people ask him, "Why haven't I heard this before? Is it some Biblical breakthrough (172)? The answer is sure to delight!

The First Sunday of Advent, 2011 marked another advent of sorts, the first occasion for English speaking Catholics from around the world to pray the Third Edition of the *Roman Missal*. With it comes an opportunity for Catholics to belong more deeply to Christ and his Church. The insights garnered from this book will lead believers to a way of doing just that, approaching the Eucharist with gratitude to Christ for this remarkable gift with a deeper appreciation and love.

This is a book you will want to read over and over again. Take it to prayer.

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