



**Staple Food for the Christians**  
**Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51**  
**Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (August 8, 2021)**

When we look at the state of the Church today, with all the fragmentation occurred in the last 1000 years, the historical corruption of many of its leaders, the decline of faith, the internal power games and inner fights, it would not come as a surprise if people were to romanticize the early church as an age of purity to which we should seek to return. Truth is, the various local churches, separated geographically, socially, and culturally, always had their problems and internal struggles. Some of those struggles were highlighted in apostolic letters that slowly made their way into the canon of the Bible. Nevertheless, the early churches, as a whole, did represent something different in their world. It attracted both devoted followers and brutal persecutors.

Many documents were written in favor of the Church, called “apologies” or written accounts in defense of the faith. The writers were not seeking forgiveness for the faith but were explaining it.

The second century Epistle to Diognetus is a gem we are most fortunate to have as only one copy survived the centuries. We do not know who wrote it. It was, like the New Testament, originally written in Greek. In this brief excerpt we have preserved a magnificent description of Christian living in what was expected in the early church community:

"They [the Christians] dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all others; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all people and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death and restored to life. They are poor yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things and yet abound in all; they are dishonored and yet in their very dishonor are glorified. They are evil spoken of and yet are justified; they are reviled and bless; they are insulted and repay the insult with honor; they do good yet are punished as evildoers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred. To sum it all up in one word -- what the soul is to the body, that are Christians in the world."<sup>1</sup>

Many other historical documents, speak of Christianity as a mumbo jumbo of superstition and immorality that needed to be uprooted from society even by force if it needed be. In fact, Christians were persecuted vigorously by the Roman Empire. The Romans made all sorts of charges against the Christian community. We learn from the second-century Christian apologists

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<sup>1</sup> [Diognetus. The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus \(translation J.B. Lightfoot\). \(earlychristianwritings.com\)](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com)



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Justin Martyr and Athenagoras that the three main accusations levied against Christians were atheism, incest, and cannibalism. The charge of atheism came from their refusal to worship the Roman pantheon of “gods”.<sup>2</sup> We also know the charge of incest originated from the Christian concept of being “brothers and sisters in Christ” united as “one Body.” To an outsider, this could easily come off the wrong way. The third charge was that of cannibalism because of the Christians’ belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. As Romans overheard Christians talking about consuming the flesh and blood of Christ, it would have been incredibly easy to misinterpret the act as cannibalism.<sup>3</sup>

But Jesus speaks metaphorically of people eating his flesh, obviously. Paul and the synoptic gospels report about the Last Supper where Jesus offers bread and wine as his body and blood.<sup>4</sup> He was a Jew, and Jews had very strict regulations about eating and drinking blood. The main message comes from the book of Leviticus (17:10-14):

If anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens who reside among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut that person off from the people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood [...]. For the life of every creature—its blood is its life; therefore I have said to the people of Israel: You shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood; whoever eats it shall be cut off.

How do you like your stake: rare, medium, or well done?

What Jesus seems to imply is, “If you want to profit from what I am doing, you must eat my flesh and drink my blood.” We must chew on him, ruminate on his teachings, contemplate his life, follow him in his footsteps.

In the opening statement of his account, the evangelist John declared, in poetic form, that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (v. 1) and that “the Word became flesh and lived among us.” (v.14) The gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem, which meant “House of Bread” in Hebrew.

Jesus promises that he is the living bread come from heaven offering eternal life for those who believe. Christ took on the form of humanity, giving his flesh for the life of the world. It’s in his flesh that he did the will of the heavenly Father. In his flesh we can recognize the compassion and care of God. In his flesh we have forgiveness and peace. In him we have unity with God and one another. As those baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection, we believe that such death

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<sup>2</sup> Justin Martyr’s First Apology [Chapter 5 & 6]

<sup>3</sup> [Why Were the Early Christians Accused of Cannibalism? – Clarifying Catholicism](#)

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; Luke 22:14-20; Mark 14:22-25; Matthew 26:26-29



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renews us for life. Yet this life is more than a restoration of what was lost. As Paul wrote, “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

For John, eternal life, which is promised to all who eat the bread of life, is both manifest in the resurrection at the last day (v. 44) and is experienced already (v. 47). Believers will never hunger again; they will never die. Obviously, we are talking more than physical death here. Resurrection will happen on the last day, Jesus tells us. But the first resurrection is when our spirit opens to eternal life, which is life in Jesus, and our last day is the last day we live our old life. It is a blessing when our last day arrives.

Then we have the second resurrection, that is, when we are face-to-face with God and we contemplate pure Love, infinite Goodness, total Mercy, and splendid Beauty. Then, we will also see the outcome of our stubborn selfishness and will have our final opportunity to take responsibility, repent and experience deep sorrow for what we have done to others and to God’s creation. That will be the time to also say a celebratory “Yes” to God allowing warm tears of joy to wash over us. God’s tears. Our tears. No more sorrow but complete shalom.

The journey of faith starts with God “drawing” us. It may be that we were baptized as babies and have grown in the Church and our faith has been nurtured gradually by the modeling of the saints around us. But the day does arrive when we feel that strong compulsion to take the personal decision to follow the Lord.

C. S. Lewis was once interviewed by a Christian journalist who was writing about well-known characters who had converted to Christianity during adult life. He wanted to get Lewis to say how he had made his decision for the Lord. Unfortunately for his project, Lewis refused to put it in those terms. He hadn’t made a “decision,” he said. God had closed in on him and he couldn’t escape. The closest he would get to using the language the reporter was interested in was to say, “I was decided upon.” In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, he describes it in a more evocative phrase: “His compulsion is our liberation.” God is stubborn: once God has laid eyes on you, there is nowhere you can run and hide.<sup>5</sup> Thanks be to God for that. Does God choose some and not others? In my view, God pursues each and everyone of us. How will we respond? Will the joy of having been found transpire through acts of mercy, forgiveness, and compassion?

Speaking to Gentiles, the apostle Paul says “You must no longer live as the Gentiles do.”<sup>6</sup> This is like saying to Americans, “Don’t live like the Americans.” That’s quite brave to say and indeed a bit risky if we do not want to pass as un-American and snobbish. We may certainly love America

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<sup>5</sup> Psalm 139:7-10

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 4:17



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for what America stands for: freedom to choose, to speak, access to democratic representation, to equal justice under the sun, to fair pay for fair employment, to comprehensive healthcare, to shelter. We enjoy the friendliness, generosity, and concern for those who hurt.

However, it is also evident that conversations on hard topics, when they happen, are quite heated. Hearts are hardened and legalism has the upper hand on compassion. We seem to have a hard time balancing individual rights, community rights, and the rights of the ecosystem.

In today's passage from his letter to the Ephesians, Paul is very bold in his warning: "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you." (4:29-32)

He touches here on some of what the Church has always called the 7 Deadly Sins: lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride, which describe not just life in general, but also what people seem to be aiming for! These 7 are not simply

Anger flares up when our party ideology seems to be attacked. It has become our main tool to assert independence of thought and self-righteousness. For some reason, we think that those who shout the loudest or have the last word are right.

Paul writes: "So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another." (v. 25) That is another challenge. Differing news outlets seem to have their own take on truth. So much confusion and misinformation. One ends up doubting whether there can be objective truth anymore or everything can be relativized to personal opinions. We have been fooled into believing that all news is fake, and all thought is prejudice. How can we speak the truth if we are not sure of our reality? What can we base our opinion on if our reality is self-made? We are not showing a picture of reality when we photoshop our selfies.

And what about speaking the truth in love? If we are ever capable of speaking the truth, is it more likely for the purpose of getting things off our chest? Do we speak the truth to edify or to tear down? St. Ephrem, a Syrian theologian of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, pictured truth as one wing of a bird and the other wing being love. Without love, truth can't fly; without truth, love crashes to the ground. One needs to know what truth needs to be spoken, when to speak it and how.

The challenge is that often what we think to be the truth is actually our bias-loaded opinion and whether we speak it or not, it comes out loud and clear like for example the stories which I heard from an African American Lutheran pastor, who shared in a recent book study how when he was called to one of the churches he pastored, a family left the congregation because they did not



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want their children to see a Black person in a position of spiritual leadership; or how in preparation to a wedding members of his church have asked if they could call a Caucasian pastor so the guest family of the fiancé wouldn't feel offended and have him in their wedding photos.

I have heard similar stories with women pastors and pastors from the LGBTQ+ community who have a hard time getting a call to leadership or if they are called, see families leave their congregations. So, we want to speak the truth but what's the truth behind our prejudices and do we believe that truth?

A good advice from the Buddhist tradition states that before speaking one must answer the following questions: Is what you are saying true? Is it necessary to say? And Is it kind? I view this as a mindful and beneficial way of speaking and thinking (to others and to yourself). By passing through these four gates, we filter out the unnecessary, and truly take a moment to stop and observe our thoughts before blurting them out.

People seem to cherish nastiness, bashing the other guy. It's up-close, personal, and political. At the end of the Civil War, with so much resentment in the air, Lincoln urged "malice toward none." Words, as cheap as they seem to be nowadays, are powerful. The test for us is: Do the things I say edify anybody? Is grace imparted? Or shattered by my words?

"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (v. 32). Kindness is more tender and engaged than simply being nice, isn't it? We strive to be nice and to be thought of as nice persons. In the pursuit of "niceness" we tend to forego of truth and honesty. How many times have I agreed to something only to admit later that I was forcing myself in the process? Have I confused niceness with politeness? Is my niceness focused on myself and on what I can get out of an interaction with the other, even if simply their admiration?<sup>7</sup> Nice may be pleasing, agreeable, delightful, while being kind demonstrates benevolence. A shirt can be nice but can't be kind, while a person can be nice but, when kind, she adds more substance to her character.

Paul invites us to be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving (v. 32). Why? Because God is kind and forgiving to you. So, Paul advises: "Be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (5:1-2).

What diet are you on? The Bread of Life is the basic staple of the Christian diet. May our hearts overflow with the joy of life eternal. May we become the creation God intended us to be.

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<sup>7</sup> [Being Nice vs. Being Kind - Markkula Center for Applied Ethics \(scu.edu\)](http://www.scu.edu/MarkkulaCenterforAppliedEthics/being-nice-vs-being-kind)