

that to eat them is not a sin. This was emphasized to St. Peter in a dream, in which all “unclean” foods are declared “clean to eat” by God Himself (Acts 10). What concerns Jesus is not external ritual purity, which came from things like circumcision and ritual hand washing, but internal purity from sin which comes from living a morally upright life in God’s grace (Mt. 23:13-36).

Given the New Law, why is blood prohibited to Gentile converts in Acts 15:28-29, especially after Peter’s dream in Acts 10? Animal blood was prudently prohibited at that time in the Church out of deference to the converts from Israel who found it offensive. Keep in mind, Jews who called themselves Christians still associated with those Jews who were not Christian. Paul says in Romans 14:13-15 that no food is unclean, but that Christians must not scandalize each other with what they eat. To avoid scandal, certain foods were temporarily forbidden. Furthermore, food that contained blood was associated with pagan rituals. To avoid an association of Christianity with pagan rituals, the temporary discipline was maintained. In short, the purpose of the discipline was not theological -- as in the Old Testament -- but social. When the danger of scandal to Christianity ceased, this temporary discipline was abolished.

Jehovah’s Witnesses

The Jehovah’s Witnesses include in their moral code Old Testament ritual laws. They believe that ceremonial laws prohibiting the drinking of blood (Gen. 9:3-4; Lev. 17:14) are continued in the New Testament (Acts 15:28-29). They maintain a theological purpose for this prohibition without recognizing the truth about redemption through the Blood of Jesus. Because of their false theology, they erroneously extend the prohibition to blood transfusions. The consumption of blood and blood transfusions are not forbidden by God. In the words of Jesus, “whatever goes into a man from outside cannot defile him... [sins which proceed from the heart] defile a man,” (Mk. 7:18-23).

Conclusion

The purpose of man and his life on earth is to bring glory to God. All we do must point to Him and draw others to Him. Consequently, all disciplines and rituals of the Church must reflect the fullness of revelation given by Christ. Eating blood is no longer associated with impurity, and there is no prohibition in force to refrain from eating blood. However, insofar as eating blood causes scandal to others, Christians must heed the words of St. Paul and refrain from such acts. Most importantly, we are commanded to drink the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ for our salvation. Living in this way, we do not become slaves of the old, but fulfill the New Covenant in Charity and act as proper stewards of creation.

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Pamphlet 040

Eat, Drink and Be Catholic: The Biblical Prohibition of Eating Blood

ISSUE: How is the prohibition of eating blood found in the Bible (cf.: Gen. 9:3-4, Lev. 17:10-14, and Acts 15:28-29) to be understood?

RESPONSE: The prohibition against eating blood found in the Old Testament was a discipline associated with the covenant between God and Noah, and incorporated into the Mosaic Covenant. When Jesus established the New Covenant through His death and resurrection, the disciplines of the Old Covenant became unnecessary. The discipline was maintained for a brief time in the early Church to protect new converts from scandal, but was not associated with the theological understanding of grace. When taken in context, we find that the consumption of blood is not forbidden and, moreover, it is necessary in the Eucharist.

DISCUSSION: When Adam sinned, he chose his own desires over the will of God. He desired knowledge over faith, and focused on his own person rather than that of God. In contrast, God calls us to turn our minds and hearts to something greater than ourselves. He calls us to know Him, to union with Him (Jn. 17:11, 20-21). This union with God is achieved through faith in Jesus Christ, Who is the perfect and full revelation of God (Jn. 1:14-18). This full revelation given by Christ is more than mere knowledge. It is a mystery that can only be grasped through faith.

The prohibition against eating blood was a discipline that reflected the mysteries of God’s revelation to the Jewish people at that point in history. This prohibition foreshadowed the complete revelation of Jesus Christ, and helped prepare the mind and heart of Israel to embrace the New Covenant in His Blood.

Old Testament

When God created Adam and Eve, He gave them “every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of the

earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit” as food, except the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 1:29, 2:16-17). Though they had dominion over the animals, God did not give them the animals to eat.

After the Original Sin, sin was multiplied on the earth to the point that God saw need to destroy all men by sending a great flood. Only Noah, his household and the animals on the ark survived (Gen. 6-9). When the flood subsided, Noah offered a sacrifice to God. He “took of every clean animal and every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar” (Gen. 8:20). The sacrifice pleased God and He promised to never destroy the earth by flood again (Gen. 8:21-22). It was at that time that God placed a fear of man in every animal and gave the animals to Noah as food (Gen. 9:2-3). The only restriction God gave Noah regarding the eating of animals is that he was not to also eat their blood, for the life of the animal is in the blood (Gen. 9:4).

This prohibition is repeated three times in Leviticus 17:10-14, and was binding on both Israel and those people who lived among the sons of Israel. The entire text provides insight as to why God intended this discipline under the Old Law:

If any man of the house of Israel or of the strangers that sojourn among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, no person among you shall eat blood, neither shall any stranger who sojourns among you eat blood. Any man also of the people of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn among them, who takes in hunting any beast or bird that may be eaten shall pour out its blood and cover it with dust.

For the life of every creature is the blood of it; 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.

Because man has dominion over the creatures of the earth, and because blood signified life, the animal’s

blood was reserved for sacrifice to God alone, Who is the Author of Life. Originally, animals were not meant for food. They were meant to be companions of man and for his delight. After sin, when atonement was necessary for the salvation of man, the life of the animal was given for the life of man. Its life signified the life of the men who offered it. If a man raised animals or was a hunter, he could eat them, but their blood must be spilled upon the ground and covered with dust. This spilling of the blood was a type of sacrifice in that it reminded man that the animal’s life was given for him. If he offered the animal as a sacrifice to God, portions of the animal may have been eaten by the priests, or the entire animal burnt on the altar, depending on the type of sacrifice (Lev. 7). In all circumstances, the blood was spilled upon the altar and offered to God. In this way, the taking of an animal’s life always signified a turning from self to God, and God’s providence and mercy in caring for man.

In contrast, eating the blood signified a turning to self; a partaking in worldliness and sin; a rejection of the life given by God. The pagans did such things, and remained pagan. Their sacrifices were not pleasing to God. Those who violated the prohibition among the Israelites and ate the blood of animals were cut off from the people (Lev. 7:27, 17:10). They were not merely made impure by their act, they became outcasts from the people. This is the reason the Jews were reluctant to accept Jesus’ teaching on the Eucharist, because to embrace this truth would seem contradictory to the Old Law they followed (Jn. 6:60-71).

Unlike the permanent, divine laws given on Mount Sinai (The 10 Commandments), the disciplinary laws of the Old Testament were temporary in nature, awaiting their fulfillment through the revelation of Christ. Having in view the New Covenant of Jesus’ Blood, these old disciplines were designed by God to prepare Israel for the New Covenant (Gal. 3:26-29). This prohibition was a disciplinary law abolished by Christ when He initiated the new and everlasting covenant in His Blood.

New Testament

Hebrews 9 offers a clear explanation of this New Covenant in relation to the Old, particularly in regard to the blood of animals:

According [to the Old Covenant], gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, but deal only with food and drink and various ablutions, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation....Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.

Bringing the fullness of revelation to man, Jesus completes the Old Law and brings in the New. No longer does the blood of animals signify life for man, but rather the Blood of Jesus Himself, poured out in the New Covenant, gives us new life. What the blood of animals signified, the Blood of Christ provides. Because His Blood provides redemption, He commands us to drink it (Jn. 6:54).

God gave Noah the animals of the earth for food. This food was perishable and only provided for man’s bodily needs. Under the New Covenant, God gives us Jesus as our imperishable food (Jn. 6:27), and commands that we eat His flesh and drink His Precious Blood. Those who do so partake in eternal life (Jn. 6:54). Furthermore, this commandment to drink His blood proves the completion of the Old Law. As those who ate blood under the Old Law were cut off, so now those who drink the Blood of Christ are cut off from the Old Law and incorporated into the New.

New Law, New Discipline

Because of the New Law, the blood of an animal has no significance, for life is in the Blood of Christ. In Mark 7:18-23 (see also Mt. 15:17-20), Jesus declares that all foods, including animal blood, are “clean” and