

On the Mysteries

By Saint Ambrose (340 – 397)

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Introduction.

The writer explains in the commencement of this treatise that his object was to set forth, for the benefit of those about to be [baptized](#), the [rites](#) and meaning of that Sacrament, as well as of Confirmation and the Holy Eucharist. For all these matters were treated with the greatest reserve in the Early Church, for [fear](#) of profanation by the [heathen](#), and it was the custom, as in the case of the well-[known](#) Catechetical Lectures of St. Cyril of Jerusalem, to explain them to the [catechumens](#) during the latter part of Lent.

Treatises of this kind possess therefore a special interest, as in them we find clearly stated the full teaching of the Church at the time when those addresses which have come down to our times were drawn up.

St. Ambrose goes through and explains the greater part, first of the [rites](#) usual at the time of solemn [baptism](#), pointing out the deep truths and [mysteries](#) underlying these outward things. He then treats Confirmation, referring to the seven gifts of the [Holy Spirit](#); and lastly, speaks of the Holy Eucharist, especially setting forth the doctrine of the Real Presence.

Some writers in and since the sixteenth century have endeavoured to prove that this treatise has been [falsely](#) attributed to St. Ambrose, but there can be no real [doubt](#) on the matter, as is conclusively shown by the Benedictine Editors, and now universally admitted. The treatise was composed for use during Lent, but in what year cannot be fixed, possibly, from reference made to the treatise *De Patriarchis*, about a.d. 387.

Chapter 1

St. Ambrose states that after the explanations he has already given of [holy](#) living, he will now explain the Mysteries. Then after giving his reasons for not having done so before, he explains the [mystery](#) of the opening of the ears, and shows how this was of old done by Christ Himself.

1. We have spoken daily upon subjects connected with morals, when the deeds of the Patriarchs or the precepts of the Proverbs were being read, in order that being taught and instructed by these you might grow accustomed to enter the ways of the ancients and to walk in their paths, and [obey](#) the divine commands; in order that being renewed by [baptism](#) you might hold to that manner of life which beseems those who are washed.

2. The season now warns us to speak of the Mysteries, and to set forth the purport of the [sacraments](#), which if we had thought it well to teach before [baptism](#) to those who were not yet initiated, we should be considered rather to have betrayed than to have portrayed the Mysteries. And then, too, another reason is that the light itself of the Mysteries will shed itself with more effect upon those who are expecting they [know](#) not what, than if any discourse had come beforehand.

3. Open, then, your ears, inhale the good savour of [eternal](#) life which has been breathed upon you by the [grace](#) of the [sacraments](#); which was signified to you by us, when, celebrating the [mystery](#) of the opening, we said, "Epphatha, which is, Be opened," [Mark 7:34](#) that whosoever was coming in quest of peace might [know](#) what he was asked, and be bound to remember what he answered.

4. Christ made use of this [mystery](#) in the [Gospel](#), as we read, when He healed him who was deaf and dumb. But He touched the mouth, because he who was healed was dumb and was a [man](#), as regards one point that he might open his mouth with the sound of the voice given to him; as regards the other point because that touch was seemly towards a [man](#), but would have been unseemly towards a [woman](#).

Chapter 2

What those who were to be initiated promised on entering the [Church](#), of the witnesses to these promises, and wherefore they then turned themselves to the East.

5. After this the Holy of holies was opened to you, you entered the sanctuary of regeneration; recall what you were asked, and remember what you answered. You renounced the [devil](#) and his works, the world with its luxury and pleasures. That utterance of yours is preserved not in the tombs of the dead, but in the book of the living.

6. You saw there the [deacon](#), you saw the [priest](#), you saw the chief [priest](#) [i.e. the [bishop](#)]. Consider not the bodily forms, but the [grace](#) of the Mysteries. You spoke in the presence of the [angels](#), as it is written: "For the [priest's](#) lips keep [knowledge](#), and they seek the law at his mouth, for he is the [angel](#) of the Lord Almighty." [Malachi 2:7](#) There is no place for deception nor for denial. He is an [angel](#) who proclaims the kingdom of Christ and [eternal](#) life. He is to be esteemed by you not according to his appearance, but according to his office. Consider what he delivered, reflect upon the rule of life he gave you, recognize his position.

7. You entered, then, that you might discern your adversary, whom you were to renounce as it were to his face, then you turned to the east; for he who renounces the [devil](#) turns to [Christ](#), and beholds Him face to face.

Chapter 3

St. Ambrose points out that we must consider the divine presence and working in the water and the sacred ministers, and then brings forward many [Old Testament](#) figures of [baptism](#).

8. What did you see? Water, certainly, but not water alone; you saw the [deacons](#) ministering there, and the [bishop](#) asking questions and hallowing. First of all, the Apostle taught you that those things are not to be considered "which we see, but the things which are not seen, for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are [eternal](#)." [1 Corinthians 5:18](#) For you read elsewhere: "That the invisible things of [God](#), since the creation of the world, are understood through those things which have been made; His [eternal](#) power also and Godhead are estimated by His works." [Romans 1:20](#) Wherefore also the Lord Himself says: "If you [believe](#) not Me, [believe](#) at least the works." [John 10:38](#) Believe, then, that the presence of the Godhead is there. Do you [believe](#) the working, and not [believe](#) the presence? Whence should the working proceed unless the presence went before?

9. Consider, however, how ancient is the [mystery](#) prefigured even in the origin of the world itself. In the very beginning, when God made the heaven and the earth, "the [Spirit](#)," it is said, "moved upon the waters." [Genesis 1:2](#) He Who was moving upon the waters, was He not working upon the waters? But why should I say, "working"? As regards His presence He was moving. Was He not working Who was moving? Recognize that He was working in that making of the world, when the [prophet](#) says: "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, and all their strength by the spirit of His mouth." Each statement rests upon the testimony of the [prophet](#), both that He was moving and that He was working. [Moses](#) says that He was moving, David testifies that he was working.

10. Take another testimony. All flesh was corrupt by its iniquities. "My Spirit," says [God](#), "shall not remain among [men](#), because they are flesh." [Genesis 6:3](#) Whereby God shows that the [grace](#) of the Spirit is turned away by carnal impurity and the pollution of grave [sin](#). Upon which, [God](#), willing to restore what was lacking, sent the flood and bade just [Noah](#) go up into the ark. And he, after having, as the flood was passing off, sent forth first a raven which did not return, sent forth a dove which is said to have returned with an olive twig. You see the water, you see the wood [of the ark], you see the dove, and do you hesitate as to the [mystery](#)?

11. The water, then, is that in which the flesh is dipped, that all carnal [sin](#) may be washed away. All [wickedness](#) is there buried. The wood is that on which the Lord Jesus was fastened when He suffered for us. The dove is that in the form of which the [Holy Spirit](#) descended, as you have read in the [New Testament](#), Who inspires in you peace of [soul](#) and tranquillity of mind. The raven is the figure of [sin](#), which goes forth and does not return, if, in you, too, inwardly and outwardly righteousness be preserved.

12. There is also a third testimony, as the Apostle teaches us: "For all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and were all [baptized](#) to [Moses](#) in the cloud and in the sea." [1 Corinthians 10:1-2](#) And further, [Moses](#) himself says in his song: "Thou sentest Your Spirit, and the sea covered them." [Exodus 15:10](#) You observe that

even then [holy baptism](#) was prefigured in that passage of the Hebrews, wherein the [Egyptian](#) perished, the Hebrew escaped. For what else are we daily taught in this sacrament but that guilt is swallowed up and [error](#) done away, but that [virtue](#) and innocence remain unharmed?

13. You hear that our fathers were under the cloud, and that a kindly cloud, which cooled the heat of carnal [passions](#). That kindly cloud overshadows those whom the [Holy Spirit](#) visits. At last it came upon the [Virgin Mary](#), and the Power of the Highest overshadowed her, [Luke 1:35](#) when she conceived Redemption for the race of men. And that [miracle](#) was wrought in a figure through [Moses](#). If, then, the Spirit was in the figure, is He not present in the reality, since Scripture says to us: "For the law was given by [Moses](#), but [grace](#) and [truth](#) came by Jesus Christ." [John 1:17](#)

14. Marah was a fountain of most bitter water: [Moses](#) cast wood into it and it became sweet. For water without the preaching of the Cross of the Lord is of no avail for future [salvation](#), but, after it has been [consecrated](#) by the [mystery](#) of the saving cross, it is made suitable for the use of the spiritual laver and of the cup of [salvation](#). As, then, [Moses](#), that is, the [prophet](#), cast wood into that fountain, so, too, the [priest](#) utters over this font the proclamation of the Lord's cross, and the water is made sweet for the purpose of [grace](#).

15. You must not trust, then, wholly to your bodily eyes; that which is not seen is more really seen, for the object of sight is temporal, but that other [eternal](#), which is not apprehended by the eye, but is discerned by the mind and spirit.

16. Lastly, let the lessons lately gone through from the Kings teach you. Naaman was a Syrian, and suffered from [leprosy](#), nor could he be cleansed by any. Then a maiden from among the captives said that there was a [prophet](#) in [Israel](#), who could cleanse him from the defilement of the [leprosy](#). And it is said that, having taken silver and gold, he went to the king of [Israel](#). And he, when he heard the [cause](#) of his coming, rent his clothes, saying, that occasion was rather being sought against him, since things were asked of him which pertained not to the power of kings. Elisha, however, sent word to the king, that he should send the Syrian to him, that he might [know](#) there was a God in [Israel](#). And when he had come, he bade him dip himself seven times in the river Jordan.

17. Then he began to reason with himself that he had better waters in his own country, in which he had often bathed and never been cleansed of his [leprosy](#); and so remembering this, he did not [obey](#) the command of the [prophet](#), yet on the advice and persuasion of his servants he yielded and dipped himself. And being forthwith cleansed, he understood that it is not of the waters but of [grace](#) that a man is cleansed.

18. Understand now who is that young maid among the captives. She is the congregation gathered out of the [Gentiles](#), that is, the Church of God held down of old by the captivity of [sin](#), when as yet it possessed not the liberty of [grace](#), by whose counsel that foolish people of the [Gentiles](#) heard the word of [prophecy](#) as to which it had before been in [doubt](#). Afterwards, however, when they [believed](#) that it ought to be [obeyed](#), they were

washed from every defilement of [sin](#). And he indeed [doubted](#) before he was healed; you are already healed, and therefore ought not to [doubt](#).

Chapter 4

That water does not cleanse without the Spirit is shown by the [witness](#) of John and by the very form of the administration of the sacrament. And this is also declared to be signified by the pool in the [Gospel](#) and the man who was there healed. In the same passage, too, is shown that the [Holy Spirit truly](#) descended on Christ at His [baptism](#), and the meaning of this [mystery](#) is explained.

19. The reason why you were told before not to [believe](#) only what you saw was that you might not say perchance, This is that great [mystery](#) "which eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has it entered into the heart of man." [1 Corinthians 2:9](#) I see water, which I have been used to see every day. Is that water to cleanse me now in which I have so often bathed without ever being cleansed? By this you may recognize that water does not cleanse without the Spirit.

20. Therefore read that the three witnesses in [baptism](#), the water, the blood, and the [Spirit](#), [1 John 5:7](#) are one, for if you take away one of these, the Sacrament of Baptism does not exist. For what is water without the [cross](#) of [Christ](#)? A common element, without any sacramental effect. Nor, again, is there the Sacrament of Regeneration without water: "For except a man be born again of water and of the [Spirit](#), he cannot enter into the [kingdom of God](#)." [John 3:5](#) Now, even the catechumen believes in the cross of the [Lord Jesus](#), wherewith he too is signed; but unless he be [baptized](#) in the Name of the [Father](#), and of the [Son](#), and of the [Holy Spirit](#), he cannot receive remission of [sins](#) nor gain the gift of spiritual [grace](#).

21. So that Syrian dipped himself seven times under the law, but you were [baptized](#) in the Name of the Trinity, you confessed the Father. Call to mind what you did: you confessed the [Son](#), you confessed the [Holy Spirit](#). Mark well the order of things in this [faith](#): you died to the world, and rose again to [God](#). And as though buried to the world in that element, being dead to [sin](#), you rose again to [eternal](#) life. Believe, therefore, that these waters are not void of power.

22. Therefore it is said: "An [angel](#) of the Lord went down according to the season into the pool, and the water was troubled; and he who first after the troubling of the water went down into the pool was healed of whatsoever disease he was holden." [John 5:4](#) This pool was at Jerusalem, in which one was healed every year, but no one was healed before the [angel](#) had descended. Because of those who [believed](#) not the water was troubled as a sign that the [angel](#) had descended. They had a sign, you have [faith](#); for them an [angel](#) descended, for you the [Holy Spirit](#); for them the creature was troubled, for you Christ Himself, the Lord of the creature, works.

23. Then one was healed, now all are made whole; or more exactly, the [Christian](#) people alone, for in some even the water is deceitful. [The baptism](#) of unbelievers heals not but

pollutes. The Jew washes pots and cups, as though things without sense were capable of guilt or [grace](#). But do you wash this living cup of yours, that in it your good works may shine and the [glory](#) of your [grace](#) be bright. For that pool was as a type, that you might [believe](#) that the power of God descends upon this font.

24. Lastly, that paralytic was waiting for a [man](#). And what man save the [Lord Jesus](#), born of the Virgin, at Whose coming no longer the shadow should heal men one by one, but the [truth](#) should heal the whole. He it is, then, Whose coming down was being waited for, of Whom the Father said to John the Baptist: "Upon Whom you shall see the Spirit descending and abiding upon Him, this is He Who baptizes with the [Holy Spirit](#)." [John 1:33](#) And John bore witness of Him, and said: "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove and abiding upon Him." [John 1:32](#) And why did the Spirit descend like a dove, but in order that you might see, that you might acknowledge, that that dove also which just [Noah](#) sent forth from the ark was a likeness of this dove, that you might recognize the type of the sacrament?

25. Perhaps you may object: Since that was a real dove which was sent forth, and the Spirit descended like a dove, how is it that we say that the likeness was there and the reality here, whereas in the Greek it is written that the Spirit descended in the likeness of a dove? But what is so real as the Godhead which abides for ever? Now the creature cannot be the reality, but only a likeness, which is easily destroyed and changed. So, again, because the simplicity of those who are [baptized](#) ought to be not in appearance but in reality, and the Lord says: "Be wise as serpents and simple as doves." [Matthew 10:16](#) Rightly, then, did He descend like a dove, in order to admonish us that we ought to have the simplicity of the dove. And further we read of the likeness being put for the reality, both as regards Christ: "And was found in likeness as a man;" [Philippians 2:8](#) and as regards [God](#) the Father: "Nor have ye seen His likeness." [John 5:37](#)

Chapter 5

Christ is Himself present in Baptism, so that we need not consider the person of His ministers. A brief explanation of the confession of the Trinity as usually uttered by those about to be [baptized](#).

26. Is there, then, here any room left for [doubt](#), when the Father clearly calls from heaven in the [Gospel](#) narrative, and says: "This is My beloved [Son](#), in Whom I am well pleased"? [Matthew 3:17](#) When the Son also speaks, upon Whom the [Holy Spirit](#) showed Himself in the likeness of a dove? When the [Holy Spirit](#) also speaks, Who came down in the likeness of a dove? When David, too, speaks: "The voice of the Lord is above the waters, the [God](#) of [glory](#) thundered, the Lord above many waters"? When Scripture testifies that at the [prayer](#) of Jerubbaal, fire came down from heaven, [Judges 6:21](#) and again, when Elijah [prayed](#), fire was sent forth and [consecrated](#) the [sacrifice](#).

27. Do not consider the merits of individuals, but the office of the [priests](#). Or, if you look at the merits, consider the [priest](#) as Elijah. Look upon the merits of Peter also, or of [Paul](#), who handed down to us this [mystery](#) which they had received of the [Lord Jesus](#). To those

[of old] a visible fire was sent that they might [believe](#); for us who [believe](#), the Lord works invisibly; for them that happened for a figure, for us for warning. Believe, then, that the Lord Jesus is present at the invocation of the [priest](#), Who said: "Where two or three are, there am I also." [Matthew 18:20](#) How much where the [Church](#) is, and where His Mysteries are, does He vouchsafe to impart His presence!

28. You went down, then (into the water), remember what you replied to the questions, that you [believe](#) in the [Father](#), that you [believe](#) in the [Son](#), that you [believe](#) in the [Holy Spirit](#). The statement there is not: I [believe](#) in a greater and in a less and in a lowest person, but you are bound by the same guarantee of your own voice, to [believe](#) in the Son in like manner as you [believe](#) in the Father; and to [believe](#) in the [Holy Spirit](#) in like manner as you [believe](#) in the [Son](#), with this one exception, that you confess that you must [believe](#) in the cross of the Lord Jesus alone.

Chapter 6

Why they who come forth from the laver of [baptism](#) are anointed on the head; why, too, after [baptism](#), their feet are washed, and what [sins](#) are remitted in each case.

29. After this, you went up to the [priest](#), consider what followed. Was it not that of which David speaks: "Like the ointment upon the head, which went down to the beard, even [Aaron's](#) beard"? This is the ointment of which Solomon, too, says: "Your Name is ointment poured out, therefore have the maidens loved You and drawn You." [Song of Songs 1:2](#) How many [souls](#) regenerated this day have loved You, Lord Jesus, and have said: "Draw us after You, we are running after the odour of Your garments," [Song of Songs 1:3](#) that they might drink in the odour of Your resurrection.

30. Consider now why this is done, for "the eyes of a wise man are in his head;" [Ecclesiastes 2:14](#) therefore the ointment flows down to the beard, that is to say, to the beauty of youth; and therefore, [Aaron's](#) beard, that we, too, may become a chosen race, [priestly](#) and precious, for we are all anointed with spiritual [grace](#) for a share in the kingdom of [God](#) and in the [priesthood](#).

31. You went up from the font; remember the [Gospel](#) lesson. For [our Lord Jesus Christ](#) in the [Gospel](#) washed the feet of His [disciples](#). When He came to [Simon Peter](#), Peter said: "You shall never wash my feet." [John 13:8](#) He did not perceive the [mystery](#), and therefore he refused the service, for he thought that the humility of the servant would be injured, if he patiently allowed the Lord to minister to him. And the Lord answered him: "If I wash not your feet, you will have no part with Me." Peter, hearing this, replies: "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head." The Lord answered: "He that is washed needs not save to wash his feet but is clean every whit." [John 13:9-10](#)

32. Peter was clean, but he must wash his feet, for he had [sin](#) by succession from the first man, when the serpent overthrew him and persuaded him to [sin](#). His feet were therefore washed, that hereditary [sins](#) might be done away, for our own [sins](#) are remitted through [baptism](#).

33. Observe at the same time that the [mystery](#) consists in the very office of humility, for Christ says: "If I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; how much more ought you to wash one another's feet." For, since the Author of Salvation Himself redeemed us through His [obedience](#), how much more ought we His servants to offer the service of our humility and [obedience](#).

Chapter 7

The washing away of [sins](#) is indicated by the white robes of the [catechumens](#), whence the Church speaks of herself as black and comely. Angels marvel at her brightness as at that of the flesh of the Lord. Moreover, Christ Himself commended His beauty to His Spouse under many figures. The mutual affection of the one for the other is described.

34. After this white robes were given to you as a sign that you were putting off the covering of [sins](#), and putting on the chaste veil of innocence, of which the [prophet](#) said: "You shall sprinkle me with [hyssop](#) and I shall be cleansed, You shall wash me and I shall be made whiter than snow." For he who is [baptized](#) is seen to be purified both according to the Law and according to the [Gospel](#): according to the Law, because [Moses](#) sprinkled the blood of the lamb with a bunch of [hyssop](#); [Exodus 12:22](#) according to the [Gospel](#), because Christ's garments were white as snow, when in the [Gospel](#) He showed forth the [glory](#) of His Resurrection. He, then, whose guilt is remitted is made whiter than snow. So that God said by Isaiah: "Though your [sins](#) be as scarlet, I will make them white as snow." [Isaiah 1:18](#)

35. The Church, having put on these garments through the laver of regeneration, says in the Song of Songs: "I am black and comely, O daughters of Jerusalem." [Song of Songs 1:4](#) Black through the frailty of her human condition, comely through the sacrament of [faith](#). And the daughters of Jerusalem beholding these garments say in amazement: "Who is this that comes up made white?" [Song of Songs 8:5](#) She was black, how is she now suddenly made white?

36. The [angels](#), too, were in [doubt](#) when Christ arose; the powers of heaven were in [doubt](#) when they saw that flesh was ascending into heaven. Then they said: "Who is this King of [glory](#)?" And while some said "Lift up your gates, O princes, and be lifted up, you everlasting doors, and the King of [glory](#) shall come in." In Isaiah, too, we find that the powers of heaven [doubted](#) and said: "Who is this that comes up from Edom, the redness of His garments is from Bosor, He who is [glorious](#) in white apparel?" [Isaiah 63:1](#)

37. But Christ, beholding His Church, for whom He Himself, as you find in the book of the [prophet](#) Zechariah, had put on filthy garments, now clothed in white raiment, seeing, that is, a [soul](#) pure and washed in the laver of regeneration, says: "Behold, you are fair, My [love](#), behold you are fair, your eyes are like a dove's," [Song of Songs 4:1](#) in the likeness of which the [Holy Spirit](#) descended from heaven. The eyes are beautiful like those of a dove, because in the likeness of a dove the [Holy Spirit](#) descended from heaven.

38. And farther on: "Your teeth are like a flock of sheep that are shorn, which are come up from the pool, which all bear twins, and none is barren among them, your lips are as a cord of scarlet." [Song of Songs 4:2-3](#) This is no slight praise. First by the pleasing comparison to those that are shorn; for we [know](#) that goats both feed in high places without risk, and securely find their food in rugged places, and then when shorn are freed from what is superfluous. The Church is likened to a flock of these, having in itself the many [virtues](#) of those [souls](#) which through the laver lay aside the superfluity of [sins](#), and offer to Christ the mystic [faith](#) and the [grace](#) of good living, which speak of the cross of the [Lord Jesus](#).

39. The Church is beautiful in them. So that [God the Word](#) says to her: "You are all fair, My [love](#), and there is no blemish in you," for guilt has been washed away. "Come hither from Lebanon, My spouse, come hither from Lebanon, from the beginning of [faith](#) will you pass through and pass on," [Song of Songs 4:7-8](#) because, renouncing the world, she passed through things temporal and passed on to [Christ](#). And again, [God the Word](#) says to her: "How beautiful and sweet are you made, O [love](#), in your delights! Your stature is become like that of a palm-tree, and your breasts like bunches of grapes." [Song of Songs 7:6-7](#)

40. And the Church answers Him, "Who will give You to me, my Brother, that sucked the breasts of my mother? If I find You without, I will [kiss](#) You, and indeed they will not despise me. I will take You, and bring You into the house of my mother; and into the secret chamber of her that conceived me. You shall teach me." [Song of Songs 8:1-2](#) You see how, delighted with the gifts of [grace](#), she longs to attain to the innermost [mysteries](#), and to consecrate all her affections to [Christ](#). She still seeks, she still stirs up His [love](#), and asks of the daughters of Jerusalem to stir it up for her, and desires that by their beauty, which is that of faithful [souls](#), her spouse may be incited to ever richer [love](#) for her.

41. So that the Lord Jesus Himself, invited by such eager [love](#) and by the beauty of comeliness and [grace](#), since now no offences pollute the [baptized](#), says to the Church: "Place Me as a seal upon your heart, as a signet upon thine arm;" [Song of Songs 8:6](#) that is, you are comely, My beloved, you are all fair, nothing is wanting to you. Place Me as a seal upon your heart, that your [faith](#) may shine forth in the fulness of the sacrament. Let your works also shine and set forth the image of [God](#) in the Whose image you were made. Let no [persecution](#) lessen your [love](#), which many waters cannot quench, nor many rivers drown.

42. And then remember that you received the seal of the [Spirit](#); the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of [knowledge](#) and godliness, and the spirit of [holy fear](#), [Isaiah 11:2](#) and preserved what you received. [God](#) the Father sealed you, Christ the Lord strengthened you, and gave the earnest of the Spirit in your heart, [2 Corinthians 5:5](#) as you have learned in the lesson from the Apostle.

Chapter 8

Of the mystical feast of the altar of the Lord. Lest any should think lightly of it, St. Ambrose shows that it is of higher antiquity than the sacred [rites](#) of the [Jews](#), since it was foreshadowed in the [sacrifice](#) of Melchisedech, and far better than the manna, as being the Body of [Christ](#).

43. The cleansed people, rich with these adornments, hastens to the altar of [Christ](#), saying: "I will go to the altar of [God](#), to God Who makes glad my youth;" for having laid aside the slough of ancient [error](#), renewed with an eagle's youth, it hastens to approach that heavenly feast. It comes, and seeing the [holy](#) altar arranged, cries out: "You have prepared a table in my sight." David introduces the people as speaking, where he says: "The Lord feeds me, and nothing shall be wanting to me, in a place of good pasture has He placed me. He has led me forth by the water of refreshment." And later: "For though I walk in the midst of the shadow of death, I will [fear](#) no [evils](#), for You are with me. Your rod and Your staff have comforted me. You have prepared in my sight a table against them that trouble me. You have anointed my head with oil, and Your inebriating cup, how excellent it is!"

44. We must now pay attention, lest perchance any one seeing that what is visible (for things which are invisible cannot be seen nor comprehended by human eyes), should say, "[God](#) rained down manna and rained down quails upon the [Jews](#)," [Exodus 16:13](#) but for the Church beloved of Him the things which He has prepared are those of which it is said: "That eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has it entered into the heart of [man](#), what things God has prepared for them that [love](#) Him." [1 Corinthians 2:9](#) So, lest any one should say this, we will take great pains to prove that the [sacraments](#) of the Church are both more ancient than those of the [synagogue](#), and more excellent than the manna.

45. The lesson of Genesis just read shows that they are more ancient, for the [synagogue](#) took its origin from the [law of Moses](#). But [Abraham](#) was far earlier, who, after conquering the enemy, and recovering his own nephew, as he was enjoying his victory, was met by Melchisedech, who brought forth those things which [Abraham](#) reverently received. It was not [Abraham](#) who brought them forth, but Melchisedech, who is introduced without father, without mother, having neither beginning of days, nor ending, but like the [Son of God](#), of Whom [Paul](#) says to the Hebrews: "that He remains a [priest](#) for ever," Who in the Latin version is called King of righteousness and King of peace.

46. Do you recognize Who that is? Can a man be king of righteousness, when himself he can hardly be righteous? Can he be king of peace, when he can hardly be peaceable? He it is Who is without mother according to His Godhead, for He was begotten of [God](#) the [Father](#), of one substance with the Father; without a father according to His Incarnation, for He was born of a Virgin; having neither beginning nor end, for He is the beginning and end of all things, the first and the last. The sacrament, then, which you received is the gift not of man but of [God](#), brought forth by Him Who blessed [Abraham](#) the father of [faith](#), whose [grace](#) and deeds we admire.

47. We have [proved](#) the [sacraments](#) of the [Church](#) to be the more ancient, now recognize that they are superior. In very [truth](#) it is a marvellous thing that God rained manna on the

fathers, and fed them with daily food from heaven; so that it is said, "So man did eat [angels'](#) food." But yet all those who ate that food died in the wilderness, but that food which you receive, that living Bread which came down from heaven, furnishes the substance of [eternal](#) life; and whosoever shall eat of this Bread shall never die, and it is the Body of [Christ](#).

49. Now consider whether the bread of [angels](#) be more excellent or the Flesh of [Christ](#), which is indeed the body of life. That manna came from heaven, this is above the heavens; that was of heaven, this is of the Lord of the heavens; that was liable to corruption, if kept a second day, this is far from all corruption, for whosoever shall taste it holily shall not be able to feel corruption. For them water flowed from the rock, for you Blood flowed from Christ; water satisfied them for a time, the Blood satiates you for [eternity](#). The Jew drinks and thirsts again, you after drinking will be beyond the power of thirsting; that was in a shadow, this is in [truth](#).

49. If that which you so wonder at is but shadow, how great must that be whose very shadow you wonder at. See now what happened in the case of the fathers was shadow: "They drank, it is said, of that Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. But with many of them God was not well pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things were done in a figure concerning us." [1 Corinthians 10:4](#) You recognize now which are the more excellent, for light is better than shadow, [truth](#) than a figure, the Body of its Giver than the manna from heaven.

Chapter 9

In order that no one through observing the outward part should waver in [faith](#), many instances are brought forward wherein the outward nature has been changed, and so it is [proved](#) that bread is made the [true](#) body of [Christ](#). The treatise then is brought to a termination with certain remarks as to the effects of the sacrament, the disposition of the recipients, and such like.

50. Perhaps you will say, "I see something else, how is it that you assert that I receive the Body of Christ?" And this is the point which remains for us to prove. And what evidence shall we make use of? Let us prove that this is not what nature made, but what the blessing [consecrated](#), and the power of blessing is greater than that of nature, because by blessing nature itself is changed.

51. [Moses](#) was holding a rod, he cast it down and it became a serpent. [Exodus 4:3-4](#) Again, he took hold of the tail of the serpent and it returned to the [nature](#) of a rod. You see that by virtue of the prophetic office there were two changes, of the nature both of the serpent and of the rod. The streams of [Egypt](#) were running with a pure flow of water; of a sudden from the veins of the sources blood began to burst forth, and none could drink of the river. Again, at the [prophet's prayer](#) the blood ceased, and the [nature](#) of water returned. The people of the Hebrews were shut in on every side, hemmed in on the one hand by the Egyptians, on the other by the sea; [Moses](#) lifted up his rod, the water divided and hardened like walls, and a way for the feet appeared between the waves. Jordan being

turned back, returned, contrary to nature, to the source of its stream. [Joshua 3:16](#) Is it not clear that the [nature](#) of the waves of the sea and of the river stream was changed? The people of the fathers thirsted, [Moses](#) touched the rock, and water flowed out of the rock. [Exodus 17:6](#) Did not [grace](#) work a result contrary to nature, so that the rock poured forth water, which by nature it did not contain? Marah was a most bitter stream, so that the thirsting people could not drink. [Moses](#) cast wood into the water, and the water lost its bitterness, which [grace](#) of a sudden tempered. [Exodus 15:25](#) In the time of Elisha the [prophet](#) one of the sons of the [prophets](#) lost the head from his axe, which sank. He who had lost the iron asked Elisha, who cast in a piece of wood and the iron swam. This, too, we clearly recognize as having happened contrary to nature, for iron is of heavier nature than water.

52. We observe, then, that [grace](#) has more power than nature, and yet so far we have only spoken of the [grace](#) of a [prophet's](#) blessing. But if the blessing of man had such power as to change nature, what are we to say of that divine consecration where the very words of the Lord and Saviour operate? For that sacrament which you receive is made what it is by the word of [Christ](#). But if the word of Elijah had such power as to bring down fire from heaven, shall not the word of Christ have power to change the [nature](#) of the elements? You read concerning the making of the whole world: "He spoke and they were made, He commanded and they were created." Shall not the word of [Christ](#), which was able to make out of nothing that which was not, be able to change things which already are into what they were not? For it is not less to give a new nature to things than to change them.

53. But why make use of arguments? Let us use the examples He gives, and by the example of the Incarnation prove the [truth](#) of the [mystery](#). Did the course of nature proceed as usual when the Lord Jesus was born of Mary? If we look to the usual course, a [woman](#) ordinarily conceives after connection with a [man](#). And this body which we make is that which was born of the Virgin. Why do you seek the order of nature in the Body of [Christ](#), seeing that the Lord Jesus Himself was born of a Virgin, not according to nature? It is the [true](#) Flesh of Christ which crucified and buried, this is then [truly](#) the Sacrament of His Body.

54. The Lord Jesus Himself proclaims: "This is My Body." [Matthew 26:26](#) Before the blessing of the heavenly words another nature is spoken of, after the consecration the Body is signified. He Himself speaks of His Blood. Before the consecration it has another name, after it is called Blood. And you say, [Amen](#), that is, It is [true](#). Let the heart within confess what the mouth utters, let the [soul](#) feel what the voice speaks.

55. Christ, then, feeds His Church with these [sacraments](#), by means of which the substance of the [soul](#) is strengthened, and seeing the continual progress of her [grace](#), He rightly says to her: "How comely are your breasts, my sister, my spouse, how comely they are made by wine, and the smell of your garments is above all spices. A dropping honeycomb are your lips, my spouse, honey and milk are under your tongue, and the smell of your garments is as the smell of Lebanon. A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse, a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed." By which He signifies that the [mystery](#) ought to remain sealed up with you, that it be not violated by the deeds of an [evil](#) life, and

pollution of [chastity](#), that it be not made [known](#) to thou, for whom it is not fitting, nor by garrulous talkativeness it be spread abroad amongst unbelievers. Your guardianship of the [faith](#) ought therefore to be good, that integrity of life and silence may endure unblemished.

56. For which reason, too, the [Church](#), guarding the depth of the heavenly [mysteries](#), repels the furious storms of wind, and calls to her the sweetness of the [grace](#) of spring, and [knowing](#) that her garden cannot displease Christ, invites the Bridegroom, saying: "Arise, O north wind, and come, thou south; blow upon my garden, and let my ointments flow down. Let my Brother come down to His garden, and eat the fruit of His trees." For it has good trees and fruitful, which have dipped their roots in the water of the sacred spring, and with fresh growth have shot forth into good fruits, so as now not to be cut with the axe of the [prophet](#), but to abound with the fruitfulness of the [Gospel](#).

57. Lastly, the Lord also, delighted with their fertility, answers: "I have entered into My garden, My sister, My spouse; I have gathered My myrrh with My spices, I have eaten My meat with My honey, I have drunk My drink with My milk." [Song of Songs 5:1](#) Understand, you faithful, why He spoke of meat and drink. And there is no [doubt](#) that He Himself eats and drinks in us, as you have read that He says that in our [persons](#) He is in prison. [Matthew 25:36](#)

58. Wherefore, too, the [Church](#), beholding so great [grace](#), exhorts her sons and her friends to come together to the [sacraments](#), saying: "Eat, my friends, and drink and be inebriated, my brother." [Song of Songs 5:1](#) What we eat and what we drink the [Holy Spirit](#) has elsewhere made plain by the [prophet](#), saying, "Taste and see that the Lord is [good](#), blessed is the man that hopes in Him." In that sacrament is Christ, because it is the Body of [Christ](#), it is therefore not bodily food but spiritual. Whence the Apostle says of its type: "Our fathers ate spiritual food and drank spiritual drink," [1 Corinthians 10:3](#) for the Body of God is a spiritual body; the Body of Christ is the Body of the Divine Spirit, for the Spirit is Christ, as we read: "The Spirit before our face is Christ the Lord." [Lamentations 4:20](#) And in the Epistle of Peter we read: "Christ died for us." [1 Peter 2:21](#) Lastly, that food strengthens our heart, and that drink "makes glad the heart of [man](#)," as the [prophet](#) has recorded.

59. So, then, having obtained everything, let us [know](#) that we are born again, but let us not say, How are we born again? Have we entered a second time into our mother's womb and been born again? I do not recognize here the course of nature. But here there is no order of nature, where is the excellence of [grace](#). And again, it is not always the course of nature which brings about conception, for we confess that Christ the Lord was conceived of a Virgin, and reject the order of nature. For Mary conceived not of [man](#), but was with child of the [Holy Spirit](#), as Matthew says: "She was found with child of the [Holy Spirit](#)." [Matthew 1:18](#) If, then, the [Holy Spirit](#) coming down upon the Virgin wrought the conception, and effected the work of generation, surely we must not [doubt](#) but that, coming down upon the Font, or upon those who receive Baptism, He effects the reality of the new birth.

