

That BIG, little Word

A college friend used to tell the story about his father's Great Amen. Apparently, his father had a certain disposition toward falling asleep during the Divine Liturgy. Once, his father was startled out of his customary little slumber when the reader came to a doxology in the epistle he was reading (like the doxology we find in Romans 11:36—"For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever. Amen"). On hearing the word "Amen," his father jumped up onto his feet and added his own "AMEN" full-throatedly! The poor man!—so rudely snatched out of his own blissful little world and thrust into the public light of embarrassment. I never did find out if this incident cured him of his chronic somnolence. I suspect, however, he is not the only soul who has voiced an Amen from pure habit alone.

Amen and the Catechism of the Catholic Church

The word "Amen" is so commonplace-we say it over and over again in our life of prayer-that I



Illustration: Maronite Monks

am afraid we may have lost its rich meaning. Maybe this is the reason why the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* dedicates five of its numbered paragraphs to the word "Amen" in its treatise on the *Creed* (#1061-1065) as well as another two in its treatise on the *Our Father* (#2856 & 2865). Let us take a closer look at this little word, "Amen."

Amen-A Hebrew Word

Like Alleluia, Amen is a Hebrew word. It is variously rendered as "I believe" or "so be it" or "truly" or even "yes." Interestingly enough, the same root in Hebrew is used to form the words meaning "to be reliable, trustworthy and faithful" as well as "to trust and believe." The *Catechism* sees great significance in this: "And so we can understand why 'Amen' may express both God's faithfulness towards us and our trust in him" (#1062). Amen is double-faceted. There is, we might say, God's Amen and ours.

God's Amen

The Prophet Isaiah uses a wonderful name for God (Isa 65:16). He calls God in Hebrew, *Elohe*

“The Eucharist, while commemorating the passion and resurrection, is also in continuity with the incarnation. At the Annunciation Mary conceived the Son of God in the physical reality of his body and blood, thus anticipating within herself what to some degree happens sacramentally in every believer who receives, under the signs of bread and wine, the Lord’s body and blood. As a result, there is a profound analogy between the Fiat which Mary said in reply to the angel, and the Amen which every believer says when receiving the body of the Lord. Mary was asked to believe that the One whom she conceived “through the Holy Spirit” was “the Son of God” (Lk 1:30-35). In continuity with the Virgin’s faith, in the Eucharistic mystery we are asked to believe that the same Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Mary, becomes present in his full humanity and divinity under the signs of bread and wine.”

Pope John Paul II
Encyclical :
Ecclesia de Eucharistia
(April 17, 2003) (#55)

Amen, that is, God of the Amen. Sometimes this is translated “the God of truth” or “the true God.” Whatever the best words would be, the basic sense is, as the *Catechism* says, “the God who is faithful to his promises” (#1063). God is true. He is reliable. He is faithful. He will not go back on his Word to us. He is *Elohe Amen*. In this way we can better understand the accustomed phrase of our Lord Jesus Christ, “Amen, Amen I say to you...” (e.g. Jn 5:19). The *Catechism* states that our Lord spoke this way “to emphasize the trustworthiness of his teaching, his authority founded on God’s truth” (#1063).

Our Amen

God’s Amen seeks a response—that response is our Amen. God is faithful and true. We can depend on him completely. We can trust in him. We can believe in him. “To believe,” says the *Catechism*, “is to say ‘Amen’ to God’s words, promises and commandments; to entrust oneself completely to him who is the ‘Amen’ of infinite love and perfect faithfulness” (#1064).

Jesus Christ: God’s Amen and Ours

In the book of *Revelation*, Jesus Christ is called “the Amen, the faithful and true witness” (Rev 3:14). The *Catechism* comments: “He [Jesus Christ] is the definitive ‘Amen’ of the Father’s love for us” (#1065). Jesus Christ is the complete fulfillment of the Father’s promises and the decisive proof of the Father’s faithfulness. He is God’s Amen *par excellence*. Moreover, our Amen, our response to the Father, finds its perfection in Jesus Christ. The *Catechism* says: “He [Jesus Christ] takes up and completes our ‘Amen’ to the Father” (#1065). St. Paul sums up this doctrine of Jesus Christ, God’s Amen and ours, when he writes to the Corinthians: “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why we utter the Amen through him to the glory of God” (2 Cor 1:20).

Our Greatest Amen

All things considered, Amen is truly a big, little word. This is no more true than in the case of the Most Holy Eucharist. Our Amen to the mystery of the Real Presence in the Most Holy Eucharist is the greatest Amen we could ever proclaim. I am referring especially to the Amen which each individual believer says before receiving Holy Communion. In the Roman Rite, the faithful express their belief in the Real Presence by responding Amen to the words, “The body of Christ” and “The blood of Christ.” In the Maronite Rite, the faithful express their belief in the Real Presence and also the promised fruits of Holy Communion by responding Amen

to the words, “The body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ are given to you for the forgiveness of sins and for eternal life.”

Pope John Paul II in his latest Encyclical on the Holy Eucharist offers us a beautiful meditation on this Eucharistic Amen [See *Sidebar Quote, page 2*]. He compares our Amen at the time of receiving Holy Communion to the Fiat of the Blessed Virgin Mary at the time of the Annunciation. As Mary’s Yes opened the way to her conceiving the Son of God within her body “in the physical reality of His body and blood,” so our Yes opens the way to our receiving within us sacramentally, “under the

signs of bread and wine, the Lord’s body and blood.”

Therefore, we should be very attentive in saying Amen whenever we receive Holy Communion. In union with the Fiat of the Blessed Virgin Mary, let us voice our Amen with conviction and with meaning, remembering that we are proclaiming our belief in the Mystery of the Most Holy Eucharist. In saying Amen, we are proclaiming: “Truly this is the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ given to me for the forgiveness of sins and for eternal life! Yes, I believe this! So be it!” ❖