

19th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (August 8, 2021)

As was the case last weekend, we hear Jesus today again calling himself the bread of life. And had he stopped there, we probably would not have thought too much about it. “Bread of life’—yes, that’s a nice image and metaphor. Just as a body needs bread or food for life and strength, so we need Jesus for our spiritual life and strength. Makes good sense to me.”

But Jesus didn’t stop there, did he? The very last line of today’s passage from chapter six of John’s gospel is: “...and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.” His flesh? Really?? Yes, really...but Jesus goes even further. Normally on the next Sunday in this Year B of our three-year Sunday reading cycle we would hear the verses immediately following what we hear today. Because next Sunday is August 15, however, we will celebrate the Assumption of Mary into heaven. So allow me to share with you just a few verses from John 6 that we would have otherwise heard. John first tells us that the Jews quarreled among themselves, saying ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’ Jesus’ response:

“Amen, amen, I say to you [by the way, whenever Jesus says ‘amen, amen, I say to you’, he means ‘listen up, folks—this is really important!’]: unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life...For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink...the one who feeds on me will have life because of me.”

No wonder there was quarreling here—these were astonishing words! But Jesus didn’t back down or water down his words in any way; in fact, we might say that he doubled down on what he said. He repeated himself over and over again about eating his flesh and drinking his blood as if to say: “I know this must sound strange, but I really, really mean what I’m saying here.”

There can be no doubt here that Jesus is talking about the Eucharist—what he instituted at the Last Supper. When we receive Holy Communion, we are really receiving and consuming the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God—the real thing and not merely a symbol. Many have argued that Jesus could not have intended his words to be taken literally, that he was simply using a figure of speech. But the clear testimony of the gospels does not allow for such an interpretation:

- the Greek word translated as ‘flesh’ means the physical body, our ‘flesh-and-blood’ body;
- the Greek word translated as ‘feeds’ (“...the one who feeds on me...”) refers to the very physical, bodily act of using the teeth and tongue for eating;
- further, recall the accounts of the Last Supper from the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke: after Jesus blessed the bread and wine, he said to the apostles “Take this and eat and drink—this is my Body...this is my Blood”. He did not say ‘this represents or symbolizes my body and blood’; no, he said ‘this is.’ He could not have made his meaning any clearer.

What’s more: what Jesus did at the Last Supper, he told the apostles to do the same. “Do this in remembrance of me”. And the Church has been ‘doing this’ ever since. Just as Jesus changed bread and wine into his Body and Blood at the Last Supper, so the bread and wine consecrated by the priest at Holy Mass are changed into that same Body and Blood of Jesus. This has been

the faith and the belief of the Catholic Church from the time of the apostles to our own time. To give just one example: St. Ignatius of Antioch was a bishop in the very early Church; he knew the apostle John and so lived less than 100 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. In a letter he wrote on his way to his execution, he declared: "I have no taste for corruptible food nor for the pleasures of this life. I desire the Bread of God, which is the Flesh of Jesus Christ...and for drink I desire His Blood, which is love incorruptible."

How can this happen? How does regular bread and wine become Jesus' Body and Blood? It certainly is mystery, and it is one of faith; we cannot provide a scientific explanation that can be verified in a laboratory. But there are many things that science (a noble and necessary discipline, to be sure) cannot explain but are undeniably real—e.g. love, beauty, and the very fact that we even exist in the first place. Regarding the Eucharist, the best description for the change of bread and wine into Jesus' Body and Blood is that famous word 'transubstantiation'. The Catechism puts it this way: "the entire substance of the bread [is changed] into the substance of the Body of Christ", and the same happens to the wine—its 'entire substance' is changed into the Blood of Christ. All that remain are the physical appearance of bread and wine; a scientist examining a consecrated Host under a microscope would see what visibly appears to be bread, and nothing more.

God the Son accomplished the unexplainable in becoming one of us, taking on our human bodily existence and nature without for a moment losing or sacrificing any of his divinity, his God-ness. Who would dare say that this same Jesus could not change the basic essence and reality of mere bread and wine into his Body and Blood? For 2000 years the Church, gazing in awe at this great mystery, affirms that Jesus meant precisely what he said at the Last Supper and his words as recorded by St. John in chapter six of his gospel. The fact that we do not or cannot understand it is rather beside the point, isn't it?

The Eucharist is the very center, the heart of the Church because it is Jesus Christ himself. Let me conclude with a quote from one of my favorite contemporary authors—Peter Kreeft, a philosophy professor at Boston College and one of the very best advocates for our faith: "The real presence of Christ in the Eucharist is a magnet drawing lost sheep home...The Church's biggest drawing card is not what she teaches, crucial as that is, but who is there. 'He [Christ] is here! Therefore I must be here.'" "He is here" indeed—that's why we are here.