

**Unless You Eat My Flesh
Corpus Christi A
(Jn 6:51-58)**

The Church has added additional liturgical feasts following the Easter season to further celebrate the mysteries which the Lord opened to his disciples at the Last Supper: Holy Trinity, and Corpus Christi. These are mysteries which are among the deepest secrets and most important treasures in the Church.

The Eucharist is central to the life of the Church, but when Jesus first spoke of it, no one understood what he was saying. In fact, they were confused and scandalized. It took place one year before the Last Supper, the day after Jesus changed a single meal of five loaves and two small fish into an abundance of bread to feed a crowd of 5000 families. It was such a spectacular miracle that Jesus was acclaimed as the great prophet (Jn 6:14).

The following day, when Jesus encountered some of that crowd clamoring for him in Capernaum, he confronted them with the reason he performed the miracle. It was to prepare them for the Eucharist: *“Do not seek me for food that perishes. Seek instead the food which the Son of Man will give you, that endures to eternal life”* (Jn 6:27). When they ask him to provide this bread, Jesus tells them, *“I am the bread of life”* (Jn 6:35). Jesus is looking for their faith in him: *“he who believes in the Son will have eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day”* (Jn 6:40).

And then Jesus explains why it is that he refers to himself as “bread.” It is because he will literally become the bread which nourishes people into their eternal life: *“I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh”* (Jn 6:51).

The Jews are understandably confused by this overly literal way of speaking: *“How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”* (Jn 6:52). But instead of tempering, or moderating, or explaining away what he just said, Jesus proceeds to give us one of the most remarkable passages in all of the Bible: a sevenfold repetition to reinforce in no uncertain terms what he meant (vv. 52-58). In the fourth repetition Jesus stresses that *“my flesh is real (i.e. “true,” “actual”) food, and my blood is real drink”* (Jn 6:55). And whereas St. John had been initially using the Greek word *“phago”* to describe “eating” (Jn 6:23-53), he switches to the much more literal word *“trogon”* (Jn 6:54-58), to emphasize the physical act of chewing food.

Jesus came down from heaven for the world’s salvation, by calling men to faith in him as the Son of God. But this faith will be expressed in a communion of flesh and blood, a real and true “marriage.”

Even after his Resurrection and Ascension, this teaching of Jesus remains a great mystery, but before the Resurrection it was so shocking – and abhorrent – to the people that they stopped following him, who only a day before acclaimed him as king and prophet (Jn 6:66). And rather than take back or alter a single word of what he said, Jesus allowed the crowds to withdraw, and even pushed the twelve apostles for a profession of unconditional loyalty and belief. Peter responded on behalf of the others in a beautiful confession of faith: “*Lord to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life, and we have come to know that you are the Holy One of God*” (Jn 6:68-69). They do not understand how it is that Jesus will give them his flesh and blood to eat, but they know who he is, and that what he says must be true.

Peter’s faith is still that of Catholics. We don’t necessarily understand *how* the Eucharist happens, and to all appearance the consecrated bread and wine on the altar which we receive in Holy Communion seem to be nothing more than bread and wine. But we know who Jesus is, and accept the truth of his word, since he would never deceive us. We place our trust in his word even more than in our senses. As we sing in the famous Eucharistic hymn, *Tantum Ergo*: “*Præstet fides supplementum sensuum defectui*” (“Let faith provide a supplement for the failure of the senses”).

At the time he first spoke of the Eucharist, which was in the synagogue of Capernaum a year before his death (Jn 6:59), it was impossible to understand the doctrine. Jesus himself indicated at the time, that only with his glorification (i.e., his resurrection and ascension) would it begin to make more sense (Jn 6:61-62).

A year later, at the Last Supper, Jesus instituted the Eucharist, when he took bread and wine and gave it to his disciples saying “take and eat/drink... this is my body/blood.” Now the apostles received the answer to that original question posed by the Jews in Capernaum: “*How can this man give us his flesh to eat?*” (Jn 6:52). Jesus would indeed give his flesh and blood to the world as real food and drink, but he would do so in the form of bread and wine.

Some have tried to argue, then, that the Eucharist is merely symbolic. The bread that we eat *symbolizes* Christ’s body, and the wine *symbolizes* or represents his blood. But this is not at all what Jesus intended, said, or accomplished. This interpretation (which is the doctrine of the Protestants), completely denies what Jesus explained in John 6:51-58, where he said his flesh would be *real food*, and that unless you eat *his flesh* you have no life in you. If the Eucharist is only a symbol, then we are not *in fact* eating his flesh nor in fact drinking his blood. Which means the scandalous words spoken by Jesus at Capernaum are not true.

The final important event necessary for accepting the Eucharist is the Resurrection (together with the Ascension and outpouring of the Holy Spirit). Once the apostles saw the Lord in his glory, and how the Resurrection brought about a new reality beyond suffering and death, and beyond the constraints and limitations of this world, and beyond the laws of nature and matter, they appreciated better what the Eucharist was, and how Jesus could give his flesh and blood to his followers, even though they were in different times and places, and even though his flesh and blood were in a different form of bread and wine.

There are therefore several characteristics about the sacrament of the Eucharist, flowing from the reality of the Resurrection, which St. Thomas Aquinas describes in the Corpus Christi Sequence we heard before the Gospel.

For one thing, Christ is not divided or diminished, even though the Eucharist is divided among many recipients. Furthermore, each disciple receives the “whole Christ” (Body, Blood, Soul, Divinity), regardless of how large or small a portion of the Eucharist he receives. Or whether he receives Communion under one kind or both kinds. There is no such as thing as larger or smaller, more or less, when it comes to the Eucharist.

Another characteristic of the Eucharist is that, like the manna of old in the desert, the Eucharist is heavenly and not earthly bread. It does not nourish in the same manner as regular bread. As Jesus said, if you are just hankering for regular bread (such as the bread he multiplied for the large crowd), you will be hungry again in a few hours. With the bread from heaven, however, you do not hunger anymore, nor are you subject to death. It is a nourishment for the soul, which transcends the world.

Therefore, to emphasize this truth of the Eucharist, we *fast* from earthly food in order to receive the heavenly food. The Eucharist nourishes by leaving us hungry (for God), and it fills us by making us empty (of the world). The host is made from simple pure wheat and water. No salt, sugar, or earthly delightfulness. The very way we prepare for Holy Communion, is a lesson of faith and discipleship by which we set aside earthly things, purify our lives, and prioritize the spiritual over the physical. First, seek the Kingdom of God and the Bread from Heaven by fasting, and only then proceed to needs of the body. “Man does not live on bread alone, but by the word of God.” First, Mass; then break-fast.

Special theme for glad thanksgiving is the quick'ning and the living bread today before you set... Sight has fail'd, nor thought conceives, but a dauntless faith believes, resting on a pow'r divine. Here beneath these signs are hidden priceless things to sense forbidden... Lo! the angel's food is given to the pilgrim who has striven; see, the children's bread from heaven!