

I Am the Bread
19th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Jn 6:41-51)

At the height of his public ministry, Jesus introduces his followers to the Eucharist, which will be the heart and soul of the future Church. It is the goal of why he came, because it brings man the true nourishment of salvation which he needs, which is the fruit of his sacrifice on the Cross. The Eucharist will not be instituted for another year, at the Last Supper when he accomplishes his Paschal Mystery, but now is the time to prepare the people for it, especially his apostles.

Jesus thus “knew what he would do” (Jn 6:6) when he changed the simple offering of loaves and fish into an abundant nourishment for a crowd of 20,000. The miracle would foreshadow a different and greater kind of change that would take place in the bread and wine offered in the Eucharist; it would set forth the structure of the future Liturgy of the Eucharist (the “Mass”); and it would indicate the purpose and meaning of that sacrament in the life of the Church: superabundant, divine nourishment.

The following day, in the synagogue at Capernaum (Jn 6:59), Jesus draws out the significance of his miracle in the “Bread of Life” Discourse (Jn 6:25-71) and explains what the Eucharist is, after which most of the people stop following him (Jn 6:66).

Unsurprisingly, the people are not able to understand or accept what Jesus has to say, except the apostles, and even they have to rely on total faith and trust. Prior to his death and resurrection it will be a confounding and scandalous teaching. But even after he “ascends to where he was before” (Jn 6:62), i.e. even after his Resurrection and Ascension, the belief in the Eucharist will be a challenging part of Christianity. Many Christians, i.e. the non-Catholics, have followed the way of the crowd who refused to accept Jesus’ words in John 6 at face value, and reject the doctrine of the Eucharist. But even many Catholics in reality do not believe or really understand what Jesus accomplishes in this mystery of faith.

Today’s Gospel presents the second of three important things Jesus will teach in the “Bread of Life” discourse with regard to the Eucharist. The first thing, which we heard last Sunday, is the that bread which Jesus gives is not food for the body, which perishes (Jn 6:27), but rather food for the soul which endures for eternal life (Jn 6:27), a bread which like the Manna in the desert comes from God, from heaven (Jn 6:31-34).

The second point, which is the subject of this Sunday’s selection, is that Jesus himself is this true bread from heaven: “I am the bread of life” (Jn 6:35); “I am the living bread which comes down from heaven” (Jn 6:51). And the third point, which

is the final part of the discourse (next Sunday), is that Jesus will give himself to be consumed by means of actual food and drink (i.e., in the Sacrament of the Eucharist).

For many Catholics (who accept the doctrine of the Eucharist), and for many non-Catholics (who reject the doctrine of the Eucharist), as well as for the crowds who heard Jesus in Capernaum, it is the third teaching which is most difficult: “how can this man give us his flesh to eat” (Jn 6:52)? This is the teaching of “Transubstantiation,” that bread and wine are somehow changed into the Body and Blood of Jesus, while still retaining all the sensible qualities of bread and wine. In reality, however, the most challenging part of Jesus’ teaching is what he says today in the second part of the discourse: “I am the living bread come down from heaven” (Jn 6:51). If we can understand who Jesus is, where he is actually from, and why he came, the Last Supper and the third part of the discourse will make more sense.

The challenge is believing in the Incarnation, how God became man.

Thus the Jews in the audience murmured because he said, “I am the bread which came down from heaven” (Jn 6:41). How could Jesus be “from” heaven, when they knew he was the son of Mary and Joseph, that he was “from” Nazareth, and a man like all of them, “from” the earth.

Man indeed comes from the clay of the ground; God creates a man by breathing a spiritual soul into this clay (Gn 2:7), which biologically speaking, comes from the flesh of the parents. Though he is true man, Jesus insists he is nevertheless “from” heaven, from God Himself, that he has seen the Father (Jn 6:46). Whereas every other man comes “from” the ground, and did not exist prior to being conceived of his parents, Jesus insists that even prior to being conceived and born of Mary, he existed with the Father: “Before Abraham was, I AM” (Jn 8:58). Jesus was in the beginning with God, because he was/is God (Jn 1:1-2). As we proclaim in the Creed, He is “eternally begotten of the Father,” proceeding forth as the Logos, “God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father.”

It is this which above all scandalizes and intrigues those who encounter Jesus. Though he is clearly a man, with everything that entails, there is more to him than human nature. The apostles had the benefit of seeing him walk on the water (Jn 6:16-21), but everyone in the crowd saw with their eyes and ate the bread which he miraculously multiplied the day before, something only God has power to do.

It is this truth of his divinity which requires faith, it is this that is meant when the Gospel says they “believed in him.” To have faith is to see what cannot be seen with eyes, to understand and recognize what the mind by itself cannot fully grasp. Faith gives knowledge and understanding beyond reason, the fullness of truth. The

truth of faith is not contradictory to reason, but it is above reason, and requires diligent use of reason to explore and understand it more fully.

Jesus says two things about this faith in the Bread of Life discourse (as well as throughout the Gospel): 1) First, it is a grace and gift of the Father – “no one comes to me unless the Father draw him” (Jn 6:44). God Himself will teach and reveal (Jn 6:45), by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. True faith is not something that is humanly manufactured. The teaching on the Incarnation and Eucharist are no human inventions, the Church didn’t make up these doctrines, the Apostles didn’t invent them; God Himself revealed these things in Jesus.

2) Second, it is a real work that requires spiritual effort on our part: “this is the work of God, that you believe in the one He sent” (Jn 6:29). To be a Christian doesn’t mean you check in your reason and intelligence at the door upon entering, as is required with many false and counterfeit cults which give such a bad name to religion: Mormonism, Jehovah Witnesses, Islam, among others. The teaching of Christ, including the Eucharistic doctrine of John 6, requires tremendous inquiry, contemplation, questioning, and examination. At the end Jesus will put the question directly to the twelve: “Will you leave me too?” (Jn 6:67) If they are to stay with him, he expects their faith to be informed. Peter will answer with a beautiful confession of faith indicating both his free will and his informed consent, i.e. his reason and intelligence. A Christian may not understand by reason everything in the revelation of Jesus, but a Christian certainly does not follow or believe blindly, surrendering his reason and will to lies and fiction. And as paradoxical as the Christian doctrines may be, as scandalous as they seem at first, they harmonize with reason and bring to reason greater insight than it had before.

Jesus therefore commands the crowd to stop murmuring (Jn 6:43), and to listen and see with greater openness to grace, with more exacting attention to the prophecies of old, and with more receptiveness to what his miraculous signs actually mean and reveal about himself: *“don’t follow me because I miraculously took care of your physical hunger, see from this miracle that I myself am the bread of life.”* Many people still hanker after religions in the first way; Catholicism proclaims religion in the second way.

Thus the great challenge in believing the Eucharistic doctrine is not how bread and wine can be changed into something else. That’s easy: Jesus by a word changed water into wine (Jn 2:9), and changed five loaves into 20,000. The greater challenge is recognizing that Jesus comes from God, that he is from eternity, that he is God.