

3 – My Flesh is Real Food
20th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Jn 6:51-58)

Today's Gospel selection is the third and climactic part of the Bread of Life Discourse. First, Jesus had stressed the bread he would provide would, like the manna, come from heaven and be nourishment for the soul, not the body. Second, he explained that he himself was this bread, and stressed that faith is required to recognize that he "came from heaven," is consubstantial with the Father, and pre-existed the world from all eternity (cf. Jn 1:1-2). This second part was shocking enough, causing the crowd to murmur and wonder how Jesus could be the "true bread come down from heaven."

In this third part, Jesus will speak directly about the Sacrament of the Eucharist and say that he will give his body and blood as food and drink to be *eaten* – eaten not metaphorically or symbolically, but eaten actually and physically, with the mouth, teeth, and stomach. The people are shocked that Jesus is speaking so literally. Jesus shocks them further by emphasizing how literal his teaching is.

As he brings the second part of the discourse to completion, he reiterates: "*I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever...*" (Jn 6:51a). This is a key verse. Up until now, the word "eat" can be understood in a metaphorical way, that is, as referring to the act of faith. This is how one can understand it in the following passage where he began the second part of the discourse: "*I am the Bread of Life. He who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst*" (Jn 6:35). And if he ended the discourse with that passage "as is" from John 6:51, that is where Eucharistic doctrine would remain: bread as symbol of body, eating as symbol of faith. But that is not where it ends.

The final phrase of verse 51 adds an important twist that begins a new idea, introducing the third and climactic part of the teaching: "*...and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.*"

The bread, which is himself, which is the bread he will give, will be his actual flesh and his actual blood. The words at the Last Supper make it clear: this flesh of his, which is him, will be eaten ("Take and eat, this is my body/flesh, given for you... Take and drink, this is my blood shed for the forgiveness of sin).

When Jesus added that shocking sentence at the end of verse 51, in which he seemed to be speaking literally, the crowd was confused: "*They argued and disputed saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?'*" (Jn 6:52). It is an appropriate reaction, and history has always reacted to the Eucharistic doctrine of the Catholic Church in the same way: how can people be eating another man's

flesh? Many Romans suspected or accused the early Christians of actual *cannibalism* in their secretive Sunday morning gatherings.¹ Christian Apologists such as St. Justin Martyr took great pains to explain this was not the case, but insisted that Christians did communicate in the actual body and blood of Jesus by means of a change that took place in bread and wine at their Eucharistic celebrations.²

When Jesus confirmed with the people that he had just spoken in a shockingly literal way (Jn 6:61), he hinted that the mystery would be more fully understood following the Resurrection (Jn 6:62), something which the people at this stage had no knowledge about. The Resurrection does help us understand why it is that Christ would want to give us his flesh to eat, and the use of Last Supper elements of bread and wine as the means to eat his flesh do alleviate the graphic picture of flesh-eating that his language in John 6 evokes, but there can be no doubt that literally and physically “eating flesh” is exactly what Jesus said and meant.

When the people are horrified at his language, he then proceeds, not to clarify or adjust or explain away what he just said, but rather to reiterate it in a dramatic, solemn, and biblical way. What follows in John 6:53-58 is one of the most unique and dramatic passages in all of Scripture, utilizing a biblical style of speaking that a modern reader may miss or not understand. It requires some exegesis. Three things stand out: 1) the solemn repetition; 2) the word used for “eat”; and 3) the chiasmic pattern.

In the Bible, **solemn repetition** is used to say something strongly, solemnly, formally. A single idea is re-stated usually three times, with a slight variation or expansion on each repetition. Almost everything important (solemn) in the Bible is done, repeated, or stated three times.³

¹ Cf. *Octavius* of Minucius Felix

² “We do not receive this [Eucharistic food] as common bread and common drink; but just as Jesus Christ our Savior, having been made flesh by the word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we learned that the food over which thanks has been given by the prayer of the word which comes from him, and by which our blood and flesh are nourished through a change [Gk. *Kata metabolen*], is the Flesh and Blood of the same incarnate Jesus” (Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 66).

³ A classic example is the promulgation of the commandment to keep holy the Sabbath (Ex 20:8,9-10,11). Other examples are the way the covenant with Abraham is inaugurated three times (Gn 13-15, 16-17, 22-23); or how Moses has three theophanies in which to give the Law (Ex 19-24, 24-31, 33-40). Many important laws are promulgated by a three-fold repetition, such as the prohibition against eating blood (Lv 17:10,11,12)

Jesus repeats, and reiterates what he said at the end of verse 51 not three but *seven times!* The repetition centers on the word “eat” or “feed” which in the Greek text of St. John is the very strong and literal word “*Trogo*,” which means the physical act of eating (gnaw, munch, crunch).

- 1) v.51 “If anyone *eats*... the bread I will give is my *flesh*.”
- 2) v.53 “Unless you *eat* the flesh of the Son of Man...”
- 3) v. 54 “He who *eats* my flesh and drinks my blood...”
- 4) v. 55 “My flesh is *true food*...”
- 5) v. 56 “He who *eats* my flesh and drinks my blood...”
- 6) v. 57 “He who *eats* me will live because of me...”
- 7) v. 58 “He who *eats* this bread will live forever.”

This repetition also incorporates a biblical “**chiasm**,” which means it is a “bookended” or “mirror-imaged” passage in which the main idea to be highlighted is centered between identical first and final statements. Thus both the first (Jn 6:51) and final phrases (Jn 6:58) used by Jesus in this passage proclaim, “I am the bread *come down from heaven. He who eats this bread will live forever.*” As a chiasm, the passage as a whole is highlighting and emphasizing the central verse (Jn 6:55), which makes solemn pronouncement regarding the truth at hand: “*My flesh is real/actual/true food, and my blood is real/actual/true drink.*”

This is the mystery of the Eucharist, solemnly declared by the Lord in his own words in the Synagogue at Capernaum the day following the multiplication of loaves and fish (Jn 6:59). They prepare the apostles for the Last Supper one year later when he will reveal to them the actual food of his Body and Blood.

The Church thus has never failed to believe, that in the Eucharist when the bread and wine are consecrated, they *change* in substance, becoming a new and different substance, while preserving the original qualities of food and drink. Jesus wants the food and drink qualities of bread and wine to remain so that they can be eaten in the human manner of eating, but what he wants to be eaten is not perishable bread and wine, but rather his own imperishable Flesh and Blood. In the middle ages, the Church formally adopted the word “transubstantiation” to describe the miracle which takes place in the consecration at Mass. Jesus is not present “with” the substance of bread (consubstantiation), nor is he present “in” the substance of the bread (impanation) as held by Luther and other Protestants. Instead, the bread is literally and actually him; it ceases to be bread at all (except in its “accidents,” its sensible qualities).

Jesus is insistent that by means of the Eucharist he will nourish his Church with his actual body and blood. The bread and wine at Mass are symbols when they are brought up to the altar. But after the consecration they are not symbols anymore, they have become the actual reality which they initially symbolized.

The Eucharistic bread and wine are a fitting way for Jesus to give his flesh and blood. There is nothing unbecoming or indecorous in the means. But why did Jesus do this at all? Why do we need the Eucharist, as Jesus established it so solemnly at the heart of the life of the Church? Why do we need to eat his flesh?

One reason stands out: the *Resurrection*. The Eucharist is necessary for the resurrection of the body on the last day. Jesus said: “*he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day*” (Jn 6:54).

The reason for the Eucharist is the same one for the Incarnation. The Son of God came from heaven to be a man so that he could die. And rise. Man is under the curse of sin and death, and God wished to save man from death. God took upon himself man’s cursed flesh so that dying as a man He might undo the curse at its root. Jesus is true God, and therefore deathless: “I am the Resurrection and the Life” (Jn 11:25). Death can have no hold on him. Thus it is that on the third day after his crucifixion, the apostles are able to see Jesus risen, and touch his flesh that was sacrificed and experienced death, but is now beyond death.

Jesus didn’t become man, die and rise, so that he might simply prove to his apostles he was God and could do something like that. He died and then rose so that he could bring (his) risen and glorified flesh to man’s cursed mortality, so that man too, in facing death, can face it in the certainty of resurrection.

By means of the Eucharist, Christ unites our mortal flesh, to his own glorified risen flesh; we become “one flesh” with the risen Christ. Christ infuses the human blood flowing in our veins, with the very Blood that is eternal life. A Christian who has once consumed the Eucharist now has a physical body that shares in the eternal life of Jesus’ own glorified body. That body will never be conquered by death. “*Even though he die, yet shall he live*” (Jn 11:25). The body of a Christian, which has been united with the flesh of Christ through the Eucharist, is holy, and after death it is treated with great reverence and respect.⁴

This is why the body of Christ has to be *eaten*—it needs to become “one flesh” with our flesh, which is exactly what happens with food. If the Eucharist is only something symbolic, there is really, no point. In this incredible passage of the Gospel, Christ said exactly what he meant, and meant exactly what he said.

⁴ And why it is never symbolically appropriate to cremate the body. While cremation in no way affects the future resurrection of the body, and is permitted, it is permitted only reluctantly, when it is truly necessary for some reason.