

HOMILY for August 22, 2021, 21st Sunday Ordinary Time

Today we had our fifth and final reading from John Chapter Six, before we enter back into Mark.

To go over what we would have read the past two weeks: Our Lord told the crowds who had been fed by the five loaves and two fish that He Himself is the bread of life come down from heaven. He went on to say that the bread He gives is His flesh for the life of the world. This comment shocked everyone. Yet, as Christ continued to teach, He did not soften what He was saying by calling it only a symbol. Instead, He intensified his language. For example, He used a graphic word for “eating” which could be better translated as “gnawing.” And He said that those who eat of His flesh and drink of His blood will live forever.

And we come to today’s passage. What is striking is that now, it is not the crowds or the Jews who He is in dialogue. It is those who have walked with Him and believed in Him. Those who are murmuring about His words are His disciples. Even they find His words too hard to accept. And so many of them leave and return to their former way of life.

And the rest are asked if they will leave as well. And we, here today, are invited to say with Peter, “Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

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For Catholics, Jesus’ words at the Last Supper and His words that John records here following the Feeding of the Multitudes are obviously interrelated. For this reason, I find it interesting that in many stories of ministers joining the Catholic Church, they mention that until they were close to becoming Catholic, they had never noticed how John Chapter Six makes much more sense if it is read in light of the Last Supper. John Chapter Six is a theological reflection on the Eucharist.

Our Lord many times uses something to describe Himself, so that others may understand Him better. He uses: a vine, a shepherd, a physician, and Bread. But He does not use Himself to describe something else. He does not say a vine is Him. He does not say that shepherds are Him. We do not go around worshipping every physician we see.

Except in one case. He Says at the Last Supper that the bread He is holding is His flesh and the chalice of wine He is giving is His blood. In that case only.

(Well, He comes close when He says that whatever we do to the least, we do to Him. And in this case, just like the Eucharist, we have spent all of Christian History running after the hungry and hurting in order to feed and heal them – because Our Lord has identified them with Himself.)

Only in the Case of John Chapter Six and The Last Supper are we given this two-fold revelation. He is the Bread of Life. This Bread and wine become His Body and Blood. Those who eat His Flesh and drink His Blood are given Life Eternal.

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How can people miss this? It seems so obvious to us. There are many possible reasons.

One objection which I have heard from those who do not believe as we do, proposes that a literalistic understanding of Christ's words of His Flesh and Blood are undercut by these words we hear today toward the end of the chapter, "It is the spirit that gives life, while the flesh is of no avail."

For these people, everything Jesus has just said about His Flesh are meaningless because of this final comment on the flesh. Even though Christ has declared boldly of life only through eating His flesh and drinking His blood.

But John's gospel does not see these two as mutually exclusive. Jesus DOES have the words of eternal life. And His words spoken included telling us of the necessity of His flesh and blood for life.

In this chapter, as often happens in John's gospel, Our Lord has used a word in in two different senses. He does not contradict Himself. He uses a few simple words in multiple ways to clarify His teaching to the disciples.

Bishop Mueggenborg of Reno Diocese says it this way:

"Our Lord then goes on to address the disciples' disbelief by identifying the source of their doubt: They are attempting to understand the mysteries of God with limited human knowledge and experience. Jesus specifically says, "The flesh is of no avail." The Gospel of John uses the word "flesh" (Greek sarx) thirteen times to

refer both to the flesh of Jesus and the flesh of human beings. The flesh of Jesus manifests the Divine Presence, makes the love of God known to the world, and is the source of our life (because Jesus is the Eternal Word of God who became Flesh and dwelt among us; as God, He can give us His Flesh as Bread in the Eucharist). The flesh of human beings, however, is limited in understanding and only sees what is “below”, a term that means the things of this world. As such, the flesh of human beings only perceives on a superficial or physical level and is not able to grasp the divine presence operative in the world. By pointing out the danger of using superficial human experience as the basis for faith, Jesus is cautioning the doubtful disciples to let go of their human expectations and to accept His divine revelation.”

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My Brothers and Sisters: John Chapter Six is a rich treasure of theological and spiritual wisdom and revelation. Jesus teaches us how closely knit are the mysteries of our faith. These include that He came down from heaven and will return; that it is the Father’s will that we believe in Him; that He is the living bread; that He gives His flesh and Blood for the life of the world so that we may never die and will be raised on the last day; and that He alone has the words of eternal life, that He is the Holy One of God, that His words are Spirit and life.

Ultimately, as always, the Gospel is about Jesus. Ultimately, the Gospel is about the choice – do we leave, or to whom shall we go? Whether we can grasp everything yet or not, do we understand that Only in Him do we really live. He came. He comes to us in this hour. Do we stay – hard saying or not?