

Bread of Life Discourse (John 6:44-51)

Before entering the seminary, I had a job in downtown Minneapolis. I rode the city bus and oftentimes read a book while on the bus. One time a gentleman struck up a conversation with me about what I was reading. It was a book on theology, and he asked me about my religion. When I said to him that I was Catholic, he told me that he used to be Catholic and was now in a non-denominational church. In response, I asked him, "Is there anything you miss about being Catholic?" And he paused and replied, "The Eucharist." I said, "You could always come back."

"Is there anything you miss?" is a great question for a fallen away Catholic because it highlights right away their understanding of the Eucharist. If they respond, "No," they have been poorly catechized. They do not understand the infinite riches of Jesus truly Present in the Eucharist and what they have left.

The first reading for our daily Mass readings has been going through John 6 or Jesus' Bread of Life Discourse, which can be divided into two parts. Both parts begin with Jesus' statement, "I am the bread of life."

Part I: Jesus begins by saying, "*I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.*" In this first part, Jesus emphasizes *belief*. In part I, Jesus invites his listeners to believe that He is from heaven. He is God. Those who come to Jesus will no longer hunger. In part I, this belief includes that Jesus is from the Father and does the Father's will. This belief also includes that Jesus has the power to give eternal life. In part I, then, we have a *strong emphasis* on belief in the Person of Jesus Christ, including his origin and power.

Part II: Jesus begins the second part of the Bread of Life Discourse by again saying, "*I am the bread of life.*" We hear the beginning of part II in today's gospel. Part II moves from *belief* in Jesus to *expressing your belief* in Jesus by eating his Flesh and drinking his Blood. If the Jewish people had a hard time with the belief in Jesus' divinity in part I, they will *really struggle* with his graphic language in part II. In fact, our Protestant brothers and sisters who believe in Jesus struggle with his language in part II.

Today, we have the first reference to eating Jesus' Flesh. *"I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my Flesh for the life of the world."* Tomorrow, we will hear how the Jews begin to argue among themselves over this graphic statement. They are struggling!

In response, Jesus does not back down. "Don't take me literally everyone. I am talking about *belief* and coming to me." Instead, our Lord turns up the heat on the stove and says, *"Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the Flesh of the Son of Man and drink his Blood, you do not have life within you."* The Greek word for eating (*tragan*) is very graphic as it is used for animals munching on their feed.

You *express* your belief in Jesus by eating his Flesh and drinking his Blood in the Eucharist. Our entire parish is built not on goodwill or values but rather on Jesus Christ, i.e., by eating his Flesh and drinking his Blood. Jesus in the Eucharist is the source (beginning) and summit (goal) of everything we are and do!

In closing, I remember a gentleman hounding me at a gas station many years ago. He was harping on how much he believed in Jesus and finally I asked him, "Where do you worship?" He told me that he was at a non-denominational church and used to be Catholic. I responded, "Really? So, you *believe* in Jesus and you don't eat his Flesh and drink his Blood as he commanded us to do in John 6?" I received a blank stare. I pressed, "You need to go back to Sacred Scripture and read it again." To his credit, he said, "I guess I need to look at that."

In short, we believe in Jesus and we express our belief in Jesus by eating his Flesh and drinking his Blood. We take Jesus at his word when he says, *"Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the Flesh of the Son of Man and drink his Blood, you do not have life with you."*

~St. Thérèse, pray for us!