

FOCUS ON THE WHAT, NOT ON THE HOW

This past week, the daily Masses had as their Gospel the sixth chapter of St. John spread in its entirety over six days. This particular chapter of John is so important for our faith, for it describes exactly what Christ was going to do for his fledgling church down through the coming ages. He describes very literally what his gift of our present day Mass was going to be. Our doctrine of the Eucharist is based not just on the actions and words of Christ at the Last Supper, especially his command to "do this in remembrance of me," but more fundamentally on just exactly what was to happen down through the ages and to the end of time.

It all started, as John describes, when Christ fed five thousand people with only a couple of fish and two loaves of bread. The people had come out into the country to listen to Jesus as he taught. It was a lengthy session, lasting into the dinner hour. Christ then asked his Apostles to feed the crowd. Well, that was impossible being so far away from any town and it already being late afternoon. Andrew told Christ that there was a boy there with a couple of fish and two loaves of bread. Jesus then had everyone sit down on the grass and he then blessed the loaves and fish and told his Apostles to distribute them among the people. There was enough food for everyone and, in fact, enough leftovers to fill twelve baskets. When the crowd realized what had happened, they wanted to take Jesus and make him their king, but he quietly slipped away and spent the night in prayer.

The next morning, the people began to look for Jesus and when they find him he tells them that they wanted to make him king because of the miracle they had seen the night before. He then begins a long discourse with them, telling them that if they knew who he was he could give them food and they would never again go hungry. "Give us that food!" they cried. They then asked Jesus for some sign just as Moses gave bread to the starving Israelites. Christ immediately corrects them, saying that it was God who fed them manna, not Moses. Then Christ turns the tables on them and proclaims that he is the Bread of Life. "Whoever comes to me will never hunger and whoever believes in me will never thirst." The Jews murmured about this: "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph?" To which Jesus answered: "Stop murmuring among yourselves." And Jesus goes on to explain that he comes from the Father. He then tells them: "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."

After a number of comments and discussion, Christ finally tells them again that he is the bread of life but then adds, that the bread he will give them is his flesh to eat and his blood to drink. There is a hush in the crowd as it slowly sinks in what he said. They are aghast for to them this is cannibalism! Does Christ correct them? In no way; he repeats what he said and shows that he means it literally. The crowd is speechless not knowing what to think. It all sounded totally wrong. Just how could he even begin to think like this? To their consternation, Jesus repeats what he said, saying that his flesh is real food and his blood real drink. This is too much for the crowd. They stand there at a loss of what to say. But Jesus does nothing to assuage their fears or to let them know that he is only speaking symbolically. No, he simply insists that he is speaking the truth and means every word he says literally. In fact he continues to insist he means what he is saying. "My flesh is true food, and blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as

the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever."

Slowly many in the crowd begin to walk away, shaking their heads, totally confused and deeply saddened. Jesus must have something wrong with him. None of what he says seemed to make any sense. Yet Jesus just simply leaves them go. He in no way says that they misunderstood him. He meant exactly what he said. There must have been a deep look of sadness in his eyes and in his face, so many were leaving him. And he couldn't help but hear their complaints and their deep genuine hurts. Shaking their heads, they just could not imagine what must have gone wrong or why was he suddenly so strict and so determined to stick by everything he said.

It was not long before he was standing there alone with just his Apostles. He turned to them and most likely with a tear in his eyes, asked them softly if they too were going to leave him. There was a moment of silence, an eternal moment it seemed. And then with a touch of infinite love and with most likely a fear in his human heart, he waited for their answer. He knew that they were as confused as were all the people who had just left him. But the twelve were a loyal group who absolutely trusted him and most likely they were going over his words slowly in their hearts gathering the necessary strength born of love, trust, and knowledge of their Lord and Master, to softly accept Him as their leader and teacher. Suddenly Peter spoke up loud and clear: "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God." One can just see all the other Apostles nodding their agreement. They hadn't a clue as to how Jesus would give them his body and blood to eat and drink. They would wait and see.

One year later at the last supper, that religious ritual meal remembering the great Passover when the Jews were finally freed from their slavery, Jesus suddenly broke the liturgy, broke the ritual by taking bread and telling them to take and eat: "This is my body which will be given up for you." And then the cup of wine: "Take this and drink, this is the cup of my blood which will be shed for you." And then those most wonderful of words: "Do this in remembrance of me." He gave them the power to do the same, a power they would pass on to their successors.

There is always a tendency to wonder just how this can be true. Just how can bread become the body of Christ? Just how can wine become the blood of Christ? These are excellent questions and in a way go to the heart of the matter. But they are also questions which are very difficult to fully answer. Aristotelian logic gives an answer using his teaching of substance and accident. But this is very abstract and few ordinary Catholics know anything about this. And even if it is understood, it still remains theoretical. The best one can do is to go to one's faith and take our Lord at his word. Don't get lost in the "how" of things; rather, concentrate on the "what" that happens. Christ certainly knew what his claims sounded like and he certainly was fully aware of human sensibilities. With faith, we accept Jesus as God made man. As God, he can do the impossible. He can change the "substance" of bread into his body, while still keeping all the physical looks and taste of bread. Thus what our doctrine about the Blessed Sacrament really depends on is one's faith and trust in Christ. The Apostles trusted and believed. We, too, must follow in their footsteps and do likewise.

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