

The Real Presence

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 19, 2018

Today's Gospel passage marks the fourth consecutive week that we have been marching through the sixth chapter of John. This chapter is profoundly significant in the Church's understanding of the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. The Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it this way:

"In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist "the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained."

Exactly how this occurs is a mystery, but when we study John chapter six, combined with the Biblical accounts of the Last Supper, it is quite clear that Jesus intended it this way. As Father Ben puts it once we receive the Eucharist Jesus is truly physically present within us for fifteen minutes. And because we are the Church that he formed, we have always followed his teaching, and we always will. ***The real presence in the Eucharist is one of the most critical and fundamental beliefs that we hold as Catholics. But accepting and believing are two different things.***

Clearly, there is doubt about the real presence in other Christian faiths, who will say that the Eucharist is not the real presence of Jesus Christ but rather a sign or a symbol. What is disheartening is that surveys of Catholics tell us that at least half of all Catholics do not believe in the real presence. Now, it's not as bad as it may sound at first. Many of those who say they don't believe in the real presence in fact simply do not know what we teach about it. But there are some who truly do understand what we teach and yet refuse to believe it. And this is troubling.

In John chapter six, we find Jesus repeatedly standing his ground despite arguing from those around him when he states that we must eat his flesh and drink his blood. The people continue to argue that he can't be serious, but with each escalation in the argument Jesus escalates his response. If you were to take time to look at the original Greek of John six we see that the words that Jesus uses for "eat" continue to become more aggressive, moving from "eat" to words like "gnaw" and "munch." Jesus was not playing around; he was quite literal.

This would have been controversial, to say the least, but at the last supper he continues the dialogue from John six when he tells his disciples to take the bread and eat it, for this is my body, and to take the wine and drink it, for this is my blood. So in John chapter six Jesus gives us the “what” – we must eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to have eternal life. And in the Last Supper he gives us the “how” – we must eat the bread and drink the wine that is consecrated in the Eucharistic Prayer. ***In so doing, we literally eat his flesh and drink his blood through the real presence.***

And then he tells them to continue to do it in memory of him, and we as a Church have continued to do so for the past 2,000 years. The reason we go to communion is, “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.” We receive the Eucharist so that each and every one of us will be healed, will be changed. I imagine each and every Sunday that many of us are being healed in some way, physically, spiritually, emotionally, mentally as we come forward. That change in ourselves helps us as we are sent to go in peace to love and serve the Lord. We will be able to better minister to the Body of Christ. We are better prepared to change the world around us beginning with us. We are more effective witnesses with our healing to those around us. We are more able to stand against the influences of the world. We are healed in some way. ***So today when we come forward expect to be healed in some way, to be changed in some way and then go in peace to love and serve the Lord.***

The real presence in the Eucharist is both a mystery and a gift beyond our understanding. Why Jesus chose to reveal himself in bread and wine is something we may never understand this side of heaven. But if we believe that he is the Son of God, and if we believe that what he said is true, then we must take his words at face value and believe in the real presence. It is only by faith that we come to understand the real presence in the Eucharist. We believe and we are healed.