

Homily for August 17, 2003  
20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Father Charles Bowes

Proverbs 9:1-6

Ephesians 5:15-20

John 6:51-58

## *We become what we receive in Holy Communion: Jesus for the world we touch.*

We hear these wonderful passages from Saint John's gospel about Jesus as the bread of life, giving us his glorified flesh and blood as food and drink, and we quite naturally associate that with the discussions concerning the presence of the Lord at Mass - the real presence at Holy Communion as well as in the word proclaimed in the gathered assembly and the person of the minister. But that is to read into Saint John's gospel a much later discussion. Clearly this is a Eucharist passage, but it is Eucharistic in the Johannine sense of that term. For Saint John, the whole thing began with Moses and manna in the book of Exodus chapter 16. Throughout John chapter six, the progression has been constant whereby Jesus himself assumes the role of the manna that came down from heaven. Now, in this passage, the movement is complete and Jesus is totally identified as the living bread that came down from heaven, duplicating, making present again God's saving deeds begun in the Old Testament,

but now fulfilled and made more powerful in Jesus the Christ. He himself is the living bread that will provide eternal life. The people clearly followed this logic and understand the point that is being made; they simply cannot believe it.

Flesh and blood, eating and drinking, are the images Saint John's gospel uses to express the belief that, in order for a believer to have eternal life, that believer must totally be united with Jesus the Christ. Remember that at this time in the Church's history, in those early, early years, there was not specific concern about the individual elements of bread and wine as the matter for the Eucharist. For Saint John's gospel, the key to encountering the real presence in the Eucharist was all about the relationship between the believer and Jesus as the living bread that came down from heaven. Eating and drinking were terms of table fellowship, terms indicating intimacy, unity and fidelity. Jesus is trying to explain to his Jewish kinsman that he is more than they know. He is more than the bread that fed their ancestors in the desert. He continues to make those "I am" statements about his true identity, and his listeners continue their struggling with this new idea.

Jesus, who set the table with six loaves and two fish in order to feed thousands, now sets the table of faith containing a new wine. He invites the simple to

turn in and eat. He is inviting those who lack understanding to slide their knees under his board and drink more deeply. Jesus invites us not to be impatient and judge the meal by the first course or even the table setting. Jesus' listeners see his flesh and know there is real blood keeping the flesh alive. This is the first course; it is what they see. Jesus is inviting them to wait for the next servings, but they keep clinging to their plates and demanding second helpings, more of the same, keeping everything on the sense level - more ordinary bread and ordinary wine while Jesus is offering them the banquet of eternal life.

The essential element required of everyone who desires a deep relationship with Jesus is faith. Faith is required to believe Jesus is who he claims to be, and that he can do what he claims to do - to be the food of everlasting life. The only way that we can eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood is through faith. In this, and this alone, is the gift of eternal life. To say amen when we receive the body and blood of Christ is to affirm that we are willing and ready to live the divine life that is given in scripture and in sacrament. It means that we are ready to be word and sacrament ourselves, to make the presence visible and tangible to those in our lives as individuals and as a community of faith.

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