

Homily for August 3, 2003
18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Father Charles Bowes
Exodus 16:2-4; 12-15
Ephesians 4:17, 20-24
John 6:24-35

We, too, can satisfy the hungers of humankind...

And here is Jesus in John, chapter six, saying to hungry folks who want a repeat of the sudden influx of food the day before, “Hold on, people, you don’t need that bread...you need the bread from heaven.”

Of course, the people completely miss the point - which is precisely the point of Saint John’s narrative - to make the believer feel good, to make us feel good that we get what Jesus is talking about. Like the Samaritan woman who misunderstood Jesus’ reference to himself as “life-giving water,” the crowd thinks Jesus is referring to something other than himself, and thus they want this bread that will fill them perpetually. So finally, Jesus says point blank, “I am the bread of life.” And the crowd misses the point.

But do we get it, you and I, the point about Jesus being the bread of life? What’s it for, this Jesus as the bread of life? Is it to be adored, received, solve a need to be intimate with God? Oh, much more than that. In his sacrament, the Lord presents himself to us not as he is, but as he wishes us to draw near to him - as food to be eaten. And, wonder of wonders, we

become the food we eat - the reverse of what usually happens where the food we eat becomes us. We become Jesus, for the world we touch as we eat the bread of heaven.

Among the liturgical reforms introduced in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council was that we receive Holy Communion standing. There were several reasons to restore this ancient practice; one of them was to remind us of the experience of the Exodus, the Hebrews’ journey from slavery to freedom, the story in chapter 16 we hear today. Just as the manna sustained the Israelites on their desert journey, the Eucharist reassures us that God will provide the spiritual food to sustain us on our journey, our pilgrimage of faith through life. The practice of taking the consecrated bread and the cup in our hands while standing reminds us that life is essentially a pilgrimage, and that this is food for a people on a journey - but a journey with a purpose. That purpose is not just to save ourselves, transform ourselves, but through us to change the society in which we live. God’s Spirit, given in Jesus through these signs of bread and wine and people and word, this Spirit makes us God’s intermediaries in the work of this world’s transformation. This Holy Communion, this food we become, makes us Jesus to the world we touch.

It was the willingness of Moses and the disciples of Jesus to act as intermediaries that enabled God to satisfy the hunger of the people. The Eucharist makes this our vocation today; together and individually we are called to be God's intermediaries in a world of physical and spiritual hunger. The Eucharist can't help but make us into this sort of people, because it is a holy food that transforms those who receive it into itself - the glorified Lord Jesus who lives now in us through his Spirit.

It was the great Mahatma Gandhi who, while not a Christian himself, nonetheless had high regard for Christianity. He observed one day, "If God were to come to earth, he would come in the form of bread."

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