

## THE MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

*Gospel: John 6:51-58*

Jesus said to them, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."

### REFLECTION 1: MANNA – WHAT IS IT?

According to the Bible, around 1,200 B.C., God sent a substance called manna to a people wandering in the desert. Manna had a strange effect on the wandering people. It helped organise them. They had to plan a way to collect and distribute and consume this daily edible event, and to do so before the day's end, because the manna would not last overnight. The next day the same process would begin all over again. So the manna fed the people not only physically but socially and economically too. It meant that they didn't have to be self-sufficient anymore. Where there used to be a gathering of individuals, there was now a community of people with a capacity for the Promised Land.

Centuries later, Jesus also used food, materially and symbolically to build a community that was pointed towards the Promised Land. His message was this: After walking in our own wilderness of loss, and defeat, after all our mistakes we can still depend on the sufficiency of a Love that comes down to save us. 'Your ancestors ate manna in the desert, but they died; this is the bread that came down from heaven, that one may eat it and not die' (John 6: 49-50). To eat it is to acknowledge our dependence both on the food and on each other.

We are participants in Christ, Paul tells his Corinthian community. We are merged; we ourselves have been transformed. Eating from the one loaf makes us one body. We don't have to be self-sufficient any more. We who share this bread see ourselves first and foremost as a community caring for one another. It is that connectedness that allows the human self to be as sufficient as possible. The most significant thing is community, we aren't alone anymore. We cannot love God unless we love one another and to love we must know each other.

Just by eating we come to resemble the creature whose life/soul we have consumed. Flesh and Blood are God's food and to eat God's food is to strive to become like God. Jesus tells the Jews who have been following him that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood in order that they might ingest God's soul and so come to resemble God. There is much intimacy here, the actual absorbing of another's essence. We are what we eat. Jesus gives his body for the life of the world and tells us, 'Those who eat it will live forever'. Jesus is the living bread that has come down from heaven. By eating his flesh and drinking his blood, we are assured of eternal life and we will be raised on the last day because his flesh is real food and his blood real drink. In the Eucharist we become more Christ like. The priest in preparing the people for Holy Communion displays the broken bread and proclaims, 'This is Jesus who gave us the Eucharist as a memorial of his Passion and death in which he himself is consumed and a pledge of future glory is given to us'. It is the very substance of our lives together, our comings and goings, celebrations and conflicts, joys and grief. Paul seems to say that the act of sharing is as essential as partaking of the bread and cup. We are not the yeast, or the flour or the fire. But together we rise.

## REFLECTION 2:

## FOR THE LIFE OF THE WORLD

In today's Gospel, Jesus says 'Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in them' (John 6: 51-58). And he tells us that if we do not eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, we will have no life in us. The Eucharist is our nourishment, our true food, and without it we will suffer from spiritual starvation.

In a homily to his congregation on May 21, 1978, Archbishop Oscar Romero said, 'Faith is what a child has when a father puts out his hands and says 'Jump' and the child leaps into space with the assurance that its' father's hands won't let it fall'. As today's Gospel is proclaimed, a similar faith is required of all who listen, because believing in the gift of Jesus as living bread challenges us to move beyond what seems rational and to take that great leap of faith that says, 'I do not fully understand, but I believe ... help my unbelief'. In the verses that follow St. John the Evangelist attests to the difficulty of such a leap by telling his readers, 'As a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him'. They understood that Jesus was offering himself as true real food and true drink, but could not accept what their minds could not comprehend. The challenge is renewed to-day – do we believe and stay and eat and become one with him and one another, or do we depart? If Jesus' references to eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood are to have any positive meaning, they must refer to the Eucharist. Flesh and blood then are to be understood as designating the very life of Jesus – it is his life and through his mission, believers find eternal life. Participation in the sacrament of the Eucharist draws one into the very life of Jesus.

In Jesus' gift of holy and life-giving manna (bread from heaven) believers meet the Jesus of Calvary, the Risen Christ and one another. After our encounter with Jesus in the Eucharist we are to go forth and translate Jesus' action into words and works that will feed the hungers of others.

If I have been blessed to eat living bread, then I am challenged to be bread broken and shared for others. We become what we celebrate.

Paul advised his Corinthian readers that their sharing in the bread of Christ and the body of Christ forged a unity among them like no other sharing. The authors of the sacred texts today call us to renew our sensitivity and gratitude for the gift of the body of Christ and the union with Jesus that it gives us. Centuries ago St John Chrysostom wrote 'Just as bread is the result of many grains, so too are we mutually united with Christ'.