

Chaplain's Bulletin June 11, 2023



Dear Folks,

This is the Feast of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ. You have heard a good deal (I hope) about the Eucharistic revival. We have heard about the majority of those who call themselves Catholic who don't believe in the Church's teaching on the Real Presence. I consider this to be a part of a larger problem of so many Catholics being led to believe that the Catholic faith is much, much less than it really is. Given that, it should not surprise us that so many people stop going to church. Without much profound reason to come, a bad experience or just apathy can trigger a departure. I would suggest a lack of Catholic belief in the Eucharist has three causes: casual practice, careless talk, and mushy teaching. Many of us are trying to build a greater sense of reverence in our practice and how we talk about the mysteries, and today I want to address what we are taught.

Many people's formation so emphasized Mass as our family meal, there was not much talk about what made it different from other meals, and how it is so much, much more than a meal.

Some of our Evangelical brothers and sisters say that we are mistaken in our belief and claim that Jesus was speaking metaphorically when He spoke of eating His body and drinking His blood. They point to other times that Jesus used metaphors and say that this teaching follows that pattern. Since most Catholics (including priests) are not prepared to respond, that is often the last word on the subject, and the skeptics feel confirmed, and the Catholics feel insecure. It is time for that to end. We can look closer at the Biblical text (something I'm always in favor of) and see how Jesus' talk about the Eucharist is very, very different from His use of metaphors.

When Jesus used metaphors, they were in line with the Old Testament imagery. "I am the good shepherd (John 10; see Ezekiel 34 and also Psalm 95). "Rivers of living water (John 4; John 7; Ezekiel 47; Psalm 1; Jeremiah 17)." "I am the vine; you are the branches (John 15:1-10; Isaiah 5)." By Contrast, the metaphor of eating someone's flesh in the Old Testament is not about believing in someone but conquering and destroying them. "When evildoers come at me to devour my flesh, these my enemies and foes stumble and fall (Psalm 27:2; see also Zechariah 9:15 and Ezekiel 39:17-20)." Jesus built His teaching on the Old Testament; he did not toss it out and start from scratch. Foreshadowing of the Eucharist can be found in the manna in the desert and the eating of the Passover lamb, and these are not metaphors but realities that meant life or death.

When there was confusion about Jesus' figures of speech, either He or the Gospel writer would clarify. "Lazarus is dead (John 11:14)." "He was speaking of the temple of His body (John 2:21)." When Jesus speaks of giving living water (John 4 and John 7) it is clarified that "He said this in reference to the Spirit that those who came to believe in him were to receive (John 7:39a)."

Jesus never said, "I am this vine" or "I am this door" but He did say, "this is my Body" while holding it in His hands "Matt 26:26-28; Mark 14: 22-24; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:24-25).

None of the instances' of Jesus metaphors lead to most of His followers who believed in Him walking away and not coming back (John 6:66). There is no parallel of disciples walking away saying "This nut thinks he's a sheeppate."

The Bread of life discourse in John 6 bears closer examination. The guts of the talk is in two sections vv. 35-47 and vv. 48-58. The first emphasizes belief, and if that were all there was, I would say a case could be made that "I am the bread of life, whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall not thirst (v. 35)" is a metaphor for believing in Jesus. The second section, however, responds to their skepticism by doubling down, and does not talk about belief but eating His flesh and drinking His blood (the blood came out of nowhere). He says, "My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink." (These two sections echo the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist.). If one is still skeptical, I would ask, what could Jesus have said that would convince you that He really meant it?

It really is the Body and Blood of Jesus, as Bishop Barron teaches, not in "a reductive physicalist sense (we're not talking about a piece of meat here)" but a more Jewish framework, in which the flesh and the blood are the person (hence Catholic teaching that every particle of the Eucharist is the complete Jesus, body, blood, soul, and divinity). We, of course, remember that Jesus in Jewish and not Greek.

Given how unique this teaching is, the price Jesus paid is losing most of His followers, and how it is referred to in all four Gospels and Paul, how important was it to Jesus? How important was it to the early Church? How seriously should we take it? What should our response be?

Blessings,

Fr. Jim