

An old Italian gentleman lived alone in New Jersey and wanted to plant his summer tomato garden, but the work was difficult because the ground was hard. His only son, Vincent, who used to help, was in prison. So the old man wrote a letter to his son describing his predicament. "Dear Vincent, I'm feeling pretty sad, because it looks like I won't be able to plant my tomato garden this year. I'm just getting too old to dig up a garden plot. I know if you were here, my troubles would be over. I know you'd be happy to dig the plot for me, like the old days. Love, Papa."

A few days later, he received a letter from his son. "Dear Papa, Don't dig up that garden – that's where the bodies are buried. Love, Vinny."

At 4 AM the next morning, FBI agents and local police arrived. They dug up the entire area, without finding any bodies. They apologized to the old man and left. That same day, he received another letter from his son.

"Dear Papa, Go ahead and plant the tomatoes now. That's the best I could do under the circumstances. Love, Vinny."

OK, we've been reading from this 6th chapter of John for the last 5 weeks; today is the end. Just a couple of notes of background to begin. We need to remember that Jesus was very graphic in making it clear that this bread was truly His body and His blood. The Greek word Jesus uses for 'eat' means to chew, chomp, or gnaw, like a dog with a bone. The word for 'drink' is to slurp. It is purposely vulgar, homely. In no way could we consider this just a symbol, and that's the point.

Non-believers are right when they are shocked at our Catholic belief that we literally eat the Body of God incarnate and drink His Blood in the Eucharist. Many believe this to be only symbolic, and the logic that follows is that Catholics are the world's worst idolaters, because we are bowing down to bread and worshipping wine, adoring the created as if it were the Creator. That would be so stupid that it would be insane. And unbelievers must think also that we are insane, for a second reason: for believing that this man Jesus, this fully human being, who was born from a human mother's womb and who died on a cross, is literally divine, literally God, eternal and all-powerful and perfect.

You see, there are 2 scandals going on here at the same time, and they are deeply related. The scandal of the Incarnation and the scandal of the Eucharist. This man Jesus is literally God, and His death on the cross literally gives us eternal life, and that what we eat in the Eucharist is not bread and wine, as it appears to be, but truly and literally Christ's Body and Blood.

To be outraged at these 2 shocking claims is at least to understand how shocking they are. If we believe them without being shocked, we are missing something, and we need to learn that something from those who deny these truths.

If we believe that the Eucharist is only symbolic but not literally true, and if we think we are still Catholic Christians, we are more deluded than those unbelievers. That's like claiming to be a Marxist and not believing in revolution, or claiming to be a Muslim but not believing Muhammad was a prophet.

Unbelief is not admirable, but there's something admirable in at least understanding what you don't believe; there's nothing admirable in not understanding what we believe.

What is it that we will eat when we receive Holy Communion? That it is not literally bread and symbolically Christ. It is literally Christ and only in appearance still bread. It is not just the physical bread that was made on earth; it is the real 'bread' that came down from heaven. What we drink is literally Christ's blood and only in appearance still wine. What we will literally chomp and slurp is God. The Eucharist is not a thing but a person; a divine person; our Savior, our only hope of heaven, our eternal life. (taken and adapted from Peter Kreeft, FOOD FOR THE SOUL, Cycle B, p. 644-645)

OK, so here's some application of this. My second point. Earlier in this gospel, in chapter 3, Jesus says "Whoever BELIEVES in the Son has life eternal..." (3:36). Now He ramps up the imagery with talk of our eating and drinking of His flesh and blood, imbibing Him bodily within our bodies (v. 67). Which means that being connected to Jesus is not so much a matter of correct, right belief or intellectual comprehension but as nothing less than relationship with, communion with, Christ Himself, imbibing His body and His blood. Jesus invites us to a level of deep intimacy and relationship, more than mere intellectual assent. Jesus makes a promise to us in this gospel: When we eat and drink His Body and Blood, He says "I'll be there." He will ABIDE, remain, in us, and we will abide, remain, in Him.

But Jesus says this as He is about to depart for the cross. He is leaving the disciples in a tragic, violent, horrible way. And as He departs, He promises them that though He departs from them, He will continue to be with them, but in a whole new way.

The living bread come down from heaven is more than an idea or a doctrine; Christ is bodily, physically present like the bread we eat each day in order to survive.

And we are told "Whoever eats this bread will live forever." He connects 'this bread' with eternity. The 'bread' that He speaks of is not subject to spoiling over time, does not have a short shelf life. This bread is bread all the way into eternity. Furthermore, having compared Himself to bread, the Christ connects us to this bread, saying that it is His flesh, His bodily presence, that is given 'for the life of the world.' It is life 'forever.'

We frail, finite, human beings have no 'forever.' We are born, grow up, grow old and then die. Only God has a future. Only God is eternal. And in this passage, Jesus says that He gives us a connection with God's future, God's eternity. Eat this bread and we'll be with God forever. Christ is telling us "I'm giving you everything I have, all that I am."

There's one final note I want to offer. As westerners we do not fully understand what Jesus was saying when He said "I am the Bread of Life." In the Middle East, bread is not just something extra thrown in at a meal. It is the heart of every meal. They have those thin pieces of pita bread at every meal. They would not think of taking forks and putting them in their mouths. To put an object in your mouth defiles it. You certainly would not take a fork out and put it in again and go on defiling yourself like that. Instead, you break off a piece of the bread, pick up your food with it and eat it. Indeed, the only way you can get to the main dish, is through the bread. Jesus was saying that the only way we can come to life is through Him, the Living Bread. (from THE GREATEST THING SINCE SLICED BREAD, sermon by King Duncan, from SERMON AND WORSHIP RESOURCES, 18 August 2024)

Third, there's great comfort in all of this, even if it's very difficult to understand. But I think we often do have some understanding of it, in rather common experiences.

After Mass one Sunday, a woman said to me "I came to church so empty. I had given it all I had. More than anything, I wanted to care for my mother in her last days. I felt privileged to return some of the love and care she had given me over the years. But her last days were longer than either of us expected. I was

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physically, mentally and spiritually exhausted. I had no more to give. And she continued, "I came away stronger, revived. I knew I could do it."

'What happened?', I said, secretly hoping that she would say it was my brilliant 3 point homily. Oh no. She said "I can't explain it, it's just that when I got up and returned to my pew after receiving communion, I knew down to the depths of my soul that I could go on. That my mother and I would make it. I knew, but don't know how I knew." I still think it was the 3 point homily!

"Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in them."

In Hampstead, there was a man who came to church every Sunday. His commute was 20 miles each way. 40 miles round trip every Sunday. "Why do you drive all that way?," I asked, secretly hoping he was going to say it was my brilliant three point homilies. He said, "I don't have the words to describe it, but when I come to communion and hold out my hands and receive the Host and the Blood, well, I feel closer to God than at any other time in my life, in my week. I believe, I'm absolutely sure, though I can't explain why, I'm with Christ and know down deep that He's with me." Why can't it be the 3 point homily?

"Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in them."

A young woman in Chapel Hill came to me after Mass and said "This was so powerful. I have been wavering with a decision for months, and suddenly I could see clearly. I knew I was supposed to apply to the School of Nursing." "How did you come to that decision?," I asked, for certainly she was going to say it was my brilliant three point homilies. But she continued "When I knelt down after receiving communion, I just knew. Christ had given all for me; now I wanted, more than anything in the world, to do something for Him." WHY CAN'T IT BE THE THREE POINT HOMILY? WHAT'S WRONG WITH THESE FOLKS?

"Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in them." I'm sure there are many Sundays when you come to church and, as I preach, it sounds like I'm talking about life on Mars, or some dreamy, spiritual experience in a galaxy far, far away, a place that doesn't have anything to do with your life, that fails to connect with who you are and where you're at.

But Sunday Eucharist is different. It's a weekly experience that we all have, in one way or another, in varying degrees of intensity and meaning. We may not be the best at understanding the bible or the catechism, not always faithful in our prayer, and maybe we don't contribute as much as we should (Can I get an AMEN to that?!). But we can all do this. Eat His Body and drink His Blood. We HAVE done this. And Christ has done this for us. We have found that His promise is true.

"Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in them." AMEN. (last 2 points help from Will Wil