

Homily 21st Sunday Yr B Jn 6 Bread of Life

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Our first reading today is from the Book of Joshua. In the Old Testament, the Book of Joshua follows the first five books of the Bible, known as the Pentateuch, or Law of Moses.

Joshua became the leader of the nation of Israel after Moses' death, and he led the Israelites in conquering the pagan nations after they entered into the Promised Land.

Today's reading is from the end of the Book of Joshua, after the Israelites conquered that land.

Joshua gathered all 12 tribes of Israel, and gave them a choice – really a test of faith: “You can serve the pagan gods, or serve the one true God, who brought your ancestors out of slavery in Egypt and led you into this land.”

The Israelites responded, “We will serve the Lord, for he is our God.” They put faith in the one, true God.

Our Gospel reading today is the conclusion of chapter 6 of John's Gospel, in which Jesus delivers what is known as His Bread of Life discourse: He tells us that He is the “living bread” that comes down from heaven; that *“unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.”*

St. John tells us that “many of Jesus' disciples who were listening said, ‘This saying is hard; who can accept it.’”

These disciples of Jesus had been with Him for about three years. They had seen Him perform many miracles, even raise people from the dead.

But saying that they must eat His flesh and drink His blood was just too much for them. So they walked away. They left Him.

And Jesus let them walk away, which tells us that He was speaking literally. He meant what He said. Only the 12 Apostles remained with Him.

And when Jesus asks them, “Are you going to leave too?”, Peter speaks for them all, saying, “To whom shall we go, Lord? You have the words of eternal life. We will come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God.”

If His words “*eat my flesh and drink my blood*” were meant to be understood only symbolically, Jesus would not have let them walk away. But he did. Why? Again, because He meant what He said.

Jesus’s words to His disciples about eating His flesh and drinking His blood were meant to be a test of faith – for those who would be His true followers, and who would not - just like the test of faith that Joshua put before the ancient Israelites.

At every Mass, when we receive the Eucharist, we truly receive the substance of the Body & Blood of Jesus, under the form of bread and wine – the same way that the Apostles received it at the Last Supper, the first Mass.

If the Eucharist is just a symbol of Christ’s body and blood, if it remains ordinary bread and wine, then what is the point of St. Paul’s words in First Corinthians, when he warns people to examine their conscience before receiving Holy Communion, because whoever receives the body and blood of our Lord unworthily “*eats and drinks condemnation on himself*” (1 Cor. 11:27-29).

If it’s just bread and wine and only a symbol of Christ’s Body and Blood, why examine our conscience, why worry about being in a state of grace/free from mortal sin to receive Holy Communion?

There’s a saying in Latin, “*lex orandi, lex credendi,*” which translates loosely as, “how one prays, and worships, affects how one believes.”

This is why it was a long-standing tradition of the Church to always kneel down to receive Holy Communion: an act of worship/adoration before God. We stand to greet a friend; we kneel before God.

Kneeling at the communion rail allows one to better prepare, interiorly, in mind and heart, to receive Jesus, Our Lord and God; to recollect ourselves – one can look up at the crucifix, speak to Jesus, heart to Heart.

I remember in second grade, Sister Veronica Marie, in preparing us for our First Holy Communion: We had to receive Communion on the tongue – this was the Church's liturgical law and practice, one could only receive on the tongue back then.

And she taught us never to touch the consecrated Host with our hands, even if the Host should fall to the floor. Sister explained to us the reason for this rule: Only the priest could touch the Host because his hands were consecrated when he was ordained. No one is really worthy to touch the consecrated Host, because It is Jesus Christ – the Word made flesh, the Second Person of the Trinity, God, who created the universe and all that is in it. Only the priest, with consecrated hands, can touch the Host.

These practices – kneeling for Communion, receiving on the tongue, helped to cultivate a deep reverence for Christ's Real Presence in the Eucharist; moreover, they nurtured and strengthened our faith that it was truly the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, our Lord and our God, whom we receive when going to Communion.

After the Second Vatican Council the bishops were surveyed as to whether or not allow communion in the hand. Overwhelmingly they responded in the negative.

But in the 1970's, many priests began to disobey the Church's law re reception of Holy Communion only on the tongue, and the liturgical practice of kneeling to receive Jesus in the Eucharist was abandoned by many; in fact, many priests tore out communion rails and forced people to stand, and pressured people to receive Holy Communion in the hand.

I recall this in my own parish. I was about 15 years old, and I resented having to stand, because I wanted to kneel to receive my Lord and my God.

I remember then in college, at Loyola U. Chicago, in the mid-1970's, Sunday evening Mass, the priest consecrated loaves of leavened bread (which is invalid); the bread was in small wicker baskets which at Communion time were passed around while we were seated; everyone broke off a piece of bread, crumbs were falling everywhere.

I recall thinking something was wrong with this practice, I just did not think it showed reverence to Our Lord, so I never went back.

Well, this practice of Communion in the hand became so widespread, that the Pope eventually permitted it, even though it was liturgically prohibited.

Still, even today, per the Church's liturgical guidelines, the **norm** is to receive Communion on the tongue; receiving in the hand is the *option*.

But just think, what this does to people's faith: You grow up learning to kneel down when receiving Holy Communion, and that only the priest with consecrated hands can touch the Host; and then, all of a sudden, you're told, "O, it doesn't matter anymore, anyone can take the host in hand; we encourage you to receive Communion in the hand": *lex orandi, lex credendi*: how people worship, affects how they believe.

Back in the mid 1960's, I don't think anyone receiving Holy Communion doubted that they were receiving the true Body & Blood of Our Lord.

Fast forward to the mid-1990's: I remember the first of many surveys were released, showing that about two-thirds of practicing Catholics did not believe that the Eucharist was the true Body and Blood of Jesus, but believed it was only a symbol of His Body and Blood.

Surveys done in the decades following the year 2000 reveal even a greater percentage of practicing Catholics believe the Eucharist is only a symbol.

This is one of the reasons I put in a Communion rail here at St. Therese, to return to this beautiful practice of kneeling to receive Communion; and it's very natural to receive on the tongue when one is kneeling.

Folks, if the Eucharist is only a symbol, then what we do at Mass is all for nothing. I'll take off the collar and do something else, because my priesthood is really meaningless.

If the Eucharist is only a symbol of Christ's Body and Blood, then the Mass is not a sacrifice, and there is no need for a priest – because that's what a priest does, he offers the Sacrifice of the Mass, in the same manner as Jesus, the Eternal High Priest, offered the first Mass at the Last Supper.

Martin Luther denied that the Mass was a sacrifice; hence, only a minister is needed, not a priest; and therefore anyone can celebrate Mass, and everyone can receive communion in the hand, because (per Luther) there is no transubstantiation at Mass; the Eucharist remains bread and wine.

In light of today's Gospel, I suggest: At every Mass, every time we approach the communion rail to receive the Eucharist, we undergo a test of our faith. Therefore, each of us should ask: "Do I truly believe in the words which Jesus spoke to His Apostles, that I must eat His flesh and drink His Blood?"

"Do I really believe that when the priest, during the Eucharistic Prayer, utters those words of consecration that Jesus spoke at the Last Supper, '*Take and eat, this is my body,*' and '*Take a drink, this is my blood,*' that the bread and wine undergo a change of substance which is not visible to my eyes; that only the *appearance* of bread and wine remains, but the substance of the bread and wine is now changed into the Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ – by the power of the word of God spoken by the priest who acts in the Person of Christ?"

At every Mass, let us beseech the Virgin Mary, under one of her beautiful titles, Our Lady of the Eucharist. Saints tell us that Mary remained on earth after Jesus ascended, in order that she might teach the Apostles and first Christians how to worship and adore Jesus in the Eucharist. Let us ask: "Mary, teach me to believe more firmly that your Son, Jesus, is really, truly present in the Eucharist. Give me a faith like yours, firm and steadfast. And teach me to better worship and adore your Son in this Most Blessed Sacrament!"