

This weekend we are continuing with part three of Jesus' bread of life discourse. In part one, we reviewed some basic guidelines for receiving Communion. Last weekend I spoke about how receiving the Eucharist—the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus—in Communion is supposed to draw us closer to Jesus and each other. I was going to go deeper into that today, but the easiest way to make God laugh is to tell him your plans. Today He wants us to take a closer look at the gospel itself.

Today's gospel is supposed to shock us and then next weekend's gospel will present us with the only two possible ways to respond to this hard teaching. There is a progression in this teaching, one which we are probably missing if we are only hearing it in English or Spanish.

A quick summary of the story thus far. The bread of life discourse is Jesus' response to the crowd's response to him after the miraculous multiplication of the loaves and fishes. They followed him across the sea to Capernaum and Jesus told them they were following him because he fed them and they were full, not because they recognized the sign underlying the miracle. He then told them not to work for food that perishes but for food that will last to eternal life. They asked him how to do the works of God. Jesus said: "This is the work of God, that you believe in the one he sent." Three important points here: 1—faith is required for everything that is going to follow. 2—Faith is the work of God; it is a theological virtue but 3—we must help that virtue to grow once we receive it. That is a whole other homily.

The Jews understood that Jesus was referring to himself as the one sent by God and they asked him for a sign so that they could believe in him. He had already given them a huge sign (bread and fish) but they misunderstood that one so they asked for another. They referred back to Moses and the manna in the desert. Jesus responded that God had provided that food and that he also had the true bread from heaven which would give life to the world. The crowd said: "That's what we want. Give us that bread always." At which point Jesus told them that HE was the bread of life...and they began to murmur.

Jesus responded to their murmuring by increasingly raising the stakes. After the first murmuring, he told them that not only was he the bread of life, they must eat that bread. Here is where language matters. The Greek words that were used were "phago" and "esthio" which mean "eat" but could also mean to consume something. They have a metaphorical sense to them. We consume resources like gasoline and paper products and television shows, but we don't literally eat them. The Jews murmured again. Jesus responded by telling them

again that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to have eternal life. His flesh is true food and his blood is true drink and they must eat and drink it. But at this point and from here on out, the Greek changed from “phago” and “esthio” to the word “trogo” which means to gnaw and crunch the way animals eat. It is the most literal and non-metaphorical meaning possible. Jesus keeps raising the stakes to show us that he truly means what he is saying. Then, on top of Jesus telling the Jews that they have to eat his flesh, he is also using language that suggests he is God himself. God himself has become man and he is commanding the people to eat his flesh. No wonder the Jews were shocked. It is supposed to shock us. Every time we eat the Eucharist we are eating the flesh of God.

By giving us the Eucharist, Jesus has made it possible for us to eat his flesh in a less disturbing way by disguising it under the appearance of bread and wine—but after the consecration it isn’t bread and wine. One confusing thing that comes up sometimes is that after the consecration, the Eucharistic prayer will continue to mention bread—we are supposed to understand this as a reference to the bread of life, which as we have been hearing, is Jesus himself. Don’t get confused by this; the liturgy is trying to remind us of the bread of life discourse.

Jesus gives us his body and blood, living bread and living water, to help us attain eternal life. Natural food and water is essential for our natural lives, but no matter how much healthy food we eat, we are still going to die. The living bread and water that Jesus gives us will help us pass through death into eternal life. Do we understand the shocking lengths to which our Lord has gone for us so that we can be united with him in heaven? How do we respond to that shocking display of love?