

Today's gospel shows us the response to Jesus' bread of life discourse. Many of the disciples rejected the teaching because it was too hard for them to accept. Jesus didn't back down. No retreat. No surrender. Last weekend I showed you how the Greek words used to describe "eating" were increasingly literal, from language which could be interpreted in a metaphorical sense to a word which literally meant to gnaw on food the way a lion gnaws on a gazelle out on the Serengeti. Knowing that many of his disciples were getting ready to walk away, this would have been the point for Jesus to say, "Sorry guys, I took that a little too far. I didn't mean it the way it came across." That is not what happened. Instead, Jesus circled back around to the beginning of the teaching and told them that they were missing the one thing they needed in order to accept it: they didn't believe; they lacked faith. And then he let them walk away. This is why the Church has always taught that Jesus meant what he said at the Last Supper: "This is my body. Eat it. This is my blood. Drink it." The eucharist is the flesh and blood of Jesus. This teaching requires a personal response from each one of us.

Let's look at the responses we see in the scriptures. Did you notice anything about who left and who stayed; about who believed and who doubted? The ones who we know accepted the teaching were the twelve. The ones who had spent the most time with Jesus; the ones who "knew" Jesus the best. Because they "knew" Jesus better than the others, they may have been better able to believe in him and trust him. That personal relationship with Jesus is critical in how we respond to him.

Notice something else about the twelve. It was Peter who spoke on behalf of all of them. Peter was stepping into his role as the leader of the apostles and the future first Pope. It was his job to speak on behalf of the Church. However, after that initial group response, each of the apostles would have to make their own personal response—not only to Jesus as the Bread of Life but also to Jesus as the messiah, the son of God, the savior of the world, the king of the universe, and as God made flesh. Judas would betray Jesus and not come back. The others would all abandon Jesus but eventually come back. Peter would deny Jesus and reverse it by professing his love for him. Thomas would need some extra convincing by touching the risen Lord. John would run away in Gethsemane but then stand at the foot of the cross on Calvary and be the quickest to believe at the empty tomb.

The proclamation of the gospel requires a personal response from each one of us. When we say the Creed, we begin by saying "I believe," not "We believe." Yes it is a collective statement but it is also a personal statement of faith

because Jesus demands a personal response. Do we come up and receive the Eucharist because everyone else is doing it? No. That is also a personal statement of faith. The church is very clear that a person's presence at Mass does not oblige them to receive the Eucharist nor does it give them the right to receive the Eucharist if that person is not in the appropriate state to do so. "Appropriate state" means they are not aware of being in a state of mortal sin nor are they aware of any other circumstances which would prevent them from receiving Communion. For example, someone who is divorced and civilly remarried without having received an annulment and had their marriage convalidated in the Church should not receive Communion. This has been the teaching for centuries. If you have a question about your particular situation, please don't corner me with it right after Mass. That is not the appropriate time or place to discuss it. If you need some clarification about a specific situation, we need time to discuss it. Call your pastor and make an appointment to talk about it.

We heard about the responses of the people who first heard Jesus' teaching about the Bread of Life.

People often like to know my own response to today's teaching—which means a tiny bit of my conversion/vocation story. This will shed a little light on why I am something of a tyrant when it comes to making sure nobody wanders off with the Body of Christ during Communion. Most of you know I am a convert. Before starting RCIA in 2008 it would have been much easier for me to go to the protestant church a few miles from my house. Instead I chose to become Catholic and make the extra 25 mile trip into Medford every Sunday. Why? Because the protestant church did not have the Eucharist—and they fully acknowledged that for them, communion was purely symbolic. My response was that of St Peter: "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." If I was going to be a Christian it had to be where the true presence of Jesus is, which is where the Eucharist is. If I did not believe Jesus was truly present in the Eucharist, I would not be here right now. To quote the author Flannery O'Connor: if the Eucharist is only a symbol, then the hell with it. The Eucharistic root of my conversion is what led me to become a priest and it is also why I take my duty to protect the Body of Christ so seriously.

That was and is my response to Jesus. What is yours?