

REAL PRESENCE OF THE EUCHARIST – John 6:51-58

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B

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The Eucharist is not a sign or a symbol. It is Jesus Christ – our Savior – our Lord...truly present under the appearance of bread and wine. Try and wrap your mind around that one. How can we explain such an odd doctrine? We look to the 6th chapter of the Gospel of John.

Jesus was preaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. It was a two-story, beautifully adorned Jewish house of prayer - made of white limestone and appearing to have a red roof that reminds me of St. Lawrence. In this synagogue, Jesus gives his discourse shortly after feeding the 5,000 on the hillside. People had come to him because of the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fish. Jesus fascinated them. As Jesus knew what human motives had brought them back again, he instructed them: *“Don’t search for bread that perishes, but look for the bread that lasts unto Eternal Life.” “I myself am the living bread that comes down from heaven. Eat my flesh and drink my blood.”* To these profound words of Christ, the crowd balked. John said, *“they quarreled among themselves, saying ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’”* For a 1st century Jew, it is hard to imagine something more theologically problematic – and practically more disgusting, than Jesus’ statement, *“Eat my flesh and drink my blood.”*

But, why was this a problem for them? In Jewish practice and sprinkled throughout the Old Testament, there are many prohibitions against eating an animal with its blood. Blood was seen as the life source – it belonged to God. And so, it was strictly forbidden for a Jew to eat the flesh with the blood. The audience he was speaking to in the

synagogue was obviously Jewish. And he went a step further to concern them – not just telling them to eat animal flesh with blood – but his own human flesh and blood. Thus their response: *“How can he give us his flesh to eat?”*

Jesus has every opportunity to clarify and explain his word. Like any good teacher using symbolic images to teach a truth, Jesus could have said: “Hold on, let’s get something clear - it’s a metaphor.” But, **he didn’t.** We know there were times he did: like with Nicodemus when Jesus said, *“unless you are born again, you cannot have eternal life.”* And when Nicodemus asked how he was to be expected to go back in his mother’s womb, Jesus clarified – it is a spiritual metaphor. You must be reborn spiritually. He was talking conversion and baptism here.

But, Jesus didn’t use a metaphor when he said: ***“I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.”*** INSTEAD – he intensifies his language here. “Amen, amen, I say to you...” (*In John’s Gospel, this is always the clue for us to pay close attention*) “Amen, amen, I say to you... unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life within you.” AND HE GOES EVEN FURTHER: “My flesh is real food... my blood is real drink.” **This encounter with Jesus is foundational to our Catholic belief that Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist.**

How can this be? How can he expect us to believe that ordinary bread and wine, placed on this altar by your priests, can change – and become His body and blood? How?

We turn to the power of words for the answers. We are aware that words have power to them. Our limited human words can be powerful. They can describe all sorts of things... Think of the great stories you hear from relatives about when you were growing

up. Or instructions showing you how to build something. But, words can be more than descriptive – they can effect reality. Like words of praise or encouragement... How do positive words make you feel or encourage you? Words can motivate life-changing realities. But, words can also hurt... Critiques, attacks, and undermining of confidence can damage trust and relationships. They can even leave someone believing they are of little value.

Additionally, **the Divine word** – God’s word – has the power to effect reality. Think of the Creation Story in Genesis – God speaks the word and things happened. *“Let there be light – and there was light.” “Let the earth come forth – and the earth came forth.”* **God doesn’t just describe things – he makes them with his word**.

And, as John said at the start of his Gospel – Jesus is the Word. Jesus is God’s word spoken to us. Jesus is God’s word made flesh. He is not just another prophet. He is the same word by which God made the universe... And he is made personal for us! And, when Jesus speaks.... Things happen. *“Little girl get up.” “Lazarus, come out.” “My son, your sins are forgiven.”* The word of God doesn’t just describe – it effects something.

Keep this in mind as we consider the Eucharist... The night before he died – Jesus and his disciples shared a Passover Meal. He took the ordinary unleavened bread of the Passover: *“Take this all of you and eat of it... This is my body.”* And the cup of blessing, after the meal: *“Take this all of you, this is my blood.”* If any of us said something like this on our own power – it would be merely metaphorical. Like saying *“Soccer is my life.”* But, when Jesus says it – his words have the power to transform reality at the deepest level. **Jesus is God** – and He has the power to change ordinary bread and wine – into the substance of his body and blood.

John chapter 6 helps us understand this. The power is the Divine Word of Jesus!

When the priest at Mass effects the Eucharistic change, what is going on? The priest is not speaking his own words at the consecration. The priest speaks in persona Christi (in the person of Christ). The priest is ordained to do just this – to stand in Christ’s place so that Christ can come to his people once again. And, at the moment of consecration... The priest first speaks in third person - about what Jesus did... Then the language changes to first person when the priest says: *“Take this, all of you and eat it – this is my body.”* He speaks with the full authority of Christ. Christ’s words here have the power to effect change: the elements of bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ.

Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist. His body and blood offered as a sacrifice – to feed us. And through the Eucharist – Christ can effect our Salvation. This is why, when we encounter Christ truly present in the Eucharist – we cannot help but bow down and worship.