

## **WORD AND LITURGY: GOD SPEAKS TO US – John 6:24-35**

*Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B*

*Father Cole Daily*

We know that Jesus is truly present to us in the Eucharist, but He is also present to us in the Word. After all, St. John says at the beginning of the Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). There is a reason that we place the Gospel book on the altar; why we all stand when the word is proclaimed. Today, I wish to speak about how God makes His Word present to us at the Mass.

We heard today the very beginning of the Bread of Life Discourse. Notice what the people say: “Our ancestors ate manna in the desert, as it is written: He gave them bread from heaven to eat.” They begin the discourse by quoting from Scripture – from the book of Exodus to be precise. And then Jesus begins to make the Word of God come to life by preaching on that Scripture. We should notice that Jesus is familiar with the Word of God. He studied it as a young man and now He knows it. Remember when he spent those forty days and nights in the desert; when Satan showed up to fight, Jesus wielded those words of Scripture like a sword to defeat him. If we want to follow Jesus seriously, we too must live in the Word. St. Jerome said it best: “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.”

When we come to Mass, there are two parts of the sacred liturgy that we experience. The first is called *the Liturgy of the Word*. This is the time we are in currently, beginning with the readings and culminating in the Gospel, the homily, and the universal prayer or intercessions. This is not just a chance to sit down and rest. We are experiencing the very Word of God making the Mystery present in our midst. All the readings, Old Testament, New Testament, Psalm, Gospel make God’s will known to us in this place, at this time. I

think if most Protestants would come to a Mass, they would be shocked at how much Scripture we read on any given Sunday. Good Catholics should be attentive to the Scriptures proclaimed at Mass, but even more so, they should be filled up with the Scriptures every day. The Word has power to transform your life by preparing a dwelling place for God. It begins with the Liturgy of the Word at Mass.

But there is more to God's Word at Mass. This all works out because of the nature of the *liturgy*. We hear that word a lot, but what does it mean? "Liturgy" comes from a Greek word meaning "work". Whose work is it? First of all, it is God's work for us. He is at work in all the signs, symbols, and gestures that we see at Mass and in all the rites of the Church. The liturgy is the language whereby God communicates Himself to us. It is the language He uses to express His love for you and me, especially during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. It happens in everything: the music, the vestments, the prayers prayed by the priest. I don't make up the liturgy. Yes, there are options for the priest to choose, but I am limited by the fact that the liturgy of the Mass is something *given* to me, not something I create. It might seem strange at times: Why do I have to stand and sit? Why all these things, these gestures and decorations? Why these new translations? You could ask another question: Why does this [nodding the head] mean "yes" and this [shaking the head] mean "no"? It's not that it's arbitrary, but the meaning lies in the depth of human expression. The same goes for the liturgy. Why all this? Because of who God is. If you want to understand the signs, words and symbols of the Mass, read the Book of Revelation or the Letter to the Hebrews. God is taking us up into the life of heaven: the life that we are destined to experience with His grace. The liturgy is God expressing His love for you.

There is a beautiful story told about St. Louis King of France. He was a king during the high Middle Ages and a very holy man. One day while he was working on the business of the kingdom, a messenger ran into his room and interrupted his work. The messenger, out of breath, said “My Lord! There has been a Eucharistic miracle at the cathedral. The priest has said the words of consecration, and the child Jesus has appeared for all to see. Come quickly and see the miracle!” But the holy king silently went back to his work. After some time, he looked at the messenger and said, “I will not go. Every time I go to Mass I see a miracle.”

That is the truth, my friends. Every time we go to Mass, there is a miracle to see. I mentioned earlier that the liturgy is God’s work among us; but it is also our work, yours and mine. What does that work consist of? **Attentiveness**. Are we aware of Christ in our midst? Our work is to put ourselves – mind, body, soul – into the heavenly banquet. That is not easy, and we often fail. Being attentive to all the details takes time and practice, and most of all, God’s grace. Being attentive requires preparation before Mass, and silence of heart. Regular attendance at Mass is absolutely necessary for us to develop this habit. That is why it is a grave sin to deliberately miss Mass on Sundays or Holy Days of Obligation. We need to be attentive. We need to hear God speak His Word of life.

Our work, then, must be attentiveness to God’s Word. Every time we come to Mass, Jesus is speaking to us. He might feel far away at times, but often He is just waiting for you to listen and be quiet. He is present here in the Word, in the signs and gestures, in the Eucharist. Ultimately, if we risk ourselves in this way, if we throw ourselves into the Mass as if it were heaven itself, we open ourselves to an incredible world, full of hope. Then we will honestly say that every time we come to Mass, we see a miracle.

## **EUCCHARIST AS SACRIFICE – John 6:41-51**

*Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B*

*Father Eric Underwood*

**People tell me that before the Second Vatican Council, Vatican II – Catholics were taught to *pray, pay, and obey*.** There wasn't a great deal of personal study about the faith – not on a wide-scale at least. I know my grandpa was a member of the Catholic Book Club, but I don't know anyone else who was. At that time, it was up to the priests to teach what people needed to know. Add to that the fact that the Mass was so mysterious - many people struggled to understand what was going on.

Immediately after Vatican II, teaching about the Mass focused so much on the gathering of the people in community – that the mystery was still left unexplained. We heard a lot about the Mass as a Meal - where we gather to be fed, but, we didn't hear much about the language of Sacrifice. It was definitely a more difficult (and messier) part of the understanding of the Mass. To top it all off – Catholics had been criticized so much with statements like 'you re-sacrifice Jesus' .... And “Catholics must not think Jesus' sacrifice was enough”... So, the Church seemed to step back from talking so much about sacrifice – thus the focus on the meal aspect of the Mass.

**Today, we are going to delve into this area of great mystery – the Sacrificial Aspect of the Mass.**

If we were to get into a time machine and go back over 2,000 years – what would strike us most would be the prevalence of **sacrifice**. Religions all over the world engaged in sacrifice – animal sacrifice. To us, this is weird. Most of us have never seen an animal put to

death. But, in that time most people would have – and most of the time in a religious context.

**A Sacrifice was and is more than just giving up something.** In a sacrifice, you take some part of God's creation and you offer it back to God – as a sign of your thanksgiving / communion / desire for reparation. You return to God something that God has given to you. This is where it gets interesting. In a perfect world, sacrifice would be easy. However, we live in a world gone wrong – marked by sin. We have turned away from God and are alienated from God. Turning back to God is a painful thing. That is why animal sacrifice becomes symbolically significant. The pain the animal is going through – **pain unto death** – is an expression of the pain I am going through as I am trying to re-align my life to God. The Church has taught for centuries that in a world gone wrong, there is no communion with God without sacrifice.

**Let's look to the Old Testament:** The heart of ancient Israelite life is the TEMPLE. In Jerusalem, you could smell the temple long before you could see it – the slaughtering and burning of animals (Bishop Barron calls it a great BBQ). In the Temple, people would bring the animal - the priest would slaughter it - and that person would catch the blood. The blood would be given to the priest and the animal burned. In this painful way of sacrifice - people are affecting reconciliation with God. **Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement - is the highlight of Israelite life.** On this day, the priest would go into Holy of Holies – offer sacrifice - and sprinkle blood around the Holy of Holies. Then he would come out with the rest of the blood and sprinkle it on the people. God and his people had become blood brothers after being alienated. They were now bonded again – reconciled through a

sacrifice. This Jewish background is massively in the minds of the first Christians – as they meet Jesus and are trying to figure him out.

**All four Gospels compel us to see Jesus through the lens of John the Baptist.**

John the Baptist was the son of a temple priest – Zechariah. His mother Elizabeth was also from a priestly family. John is a priestly figure – engaged in temple sacrifice. When John sees Jesus – he says: ***“Behold, the Lamb of God.”*** Bishop Barron once asked a group of people what this phrase meant – “Behold, the Lamb of God.” Most of them said – it means that Jesus is gentle, humble and meek like a Lamb. First century Jews, however, would have heard *“the Lamb of God”* as the one who has come to be sacrificed. It is a temple reference – sacrifice language.

**Jesus makes reference to himself and the temple:** People came to the temple to have their sins forgiven – what did Jesus do? He forgave their sins. *“My son, your sins are forgiven.”* People came to the temple to be cured. Jesus heals people. People came to the temple to be taught by the Scribes and Pharisees. He teaches. That is why he says at one point: ***“You have a greater than the temple here”*** – referring to himself.

**At the climax of his life, he goes into Jerusalem – enters the Temple** (the place of sacrifice). He cleanses it. Then he curses it (“I will tear down this temple and in three days I will rebuild it”). He is referring to the temple as his body. He himself is the place of sacrifice.

**To appreciate this more, we look to the Last Supper** – A meal is a place where God feeds his people. It is also something else. ***“Take this all of you and eat of it. This is my body, which will be given up for you.”*** Jesus uses sacrifice language – a body that will be killed and offered for you. ***“This is the chalice of my blood.”*** First century Jews would not have missed the sacrifice reference - to the priest who caught the blood in a chalice-like

bowl. Christ is saying – here is the chalice of my blood – the blood of the Covenant – that will be poured out for many. Jesus is anticipating what will happen on his cross the next day.

**The Cross has become the altar of sacrifice.** The Lamb of God is sacrificed. His body killed, offered up. His blood poured out. Jesus, having taken upon himself the sins of the world – becomes the sacrifice by which divinity and humanity are reconciled. That is why, at his death, the curtain in the Temple is torn in two. It is a judgment on that Temple – and a revelation of the true Temple (Jesus). Jesus' side is pierced – opening up the true Holy of Holies – that is His wounded heart.

**We won't understand the Mass – until we get all of this.**

**What is the Mass?** It is the re-presentation of the Last Supper and the Cross. In Sacramental form, Christ is offering His body and blood in Sacrifice. When we come forward to receive, we won't just be sprinkled with the life blood – we are going to drink it. We are not just going to look at the sacrificed body of Jesus – we are going to eat it – and assimilate it to ourselves. We participate in the great sacrifice by which the world is reconciled to God.

**Bishop Barron, in one of his lessons, reminds us that it is very important that the minister at the Mass is not wearing doctoral robes.** The clothing a priest wears here might seem insignificant. But, let's think of a protestant preacher – he might be wearing the doctoral robes – because he has come to teach. Priests teach too... Luther and the other reformers knew what they were doing – they denied the Mass was a sacrifice. So the official for protestants became not a priest, but a minister or a preacher. But, at the Catholic Mass, I stand here not in doctoral robes...but in the robes of a temple priest – because I am going to

be performing a sacrifice. I am a priest – that is what a priest was in the ancient world – someone who sacrifices – not just a preacher. I am a priest – and a sacrifice is performed – by which the world is continually reconciled to God.

The Sacrifice of the Mass is a beautiful gift to us from God. It is where He reconciles us once again to a right relationship with God.