

## **The Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time B - The gift of faith gives us access to eternal life, and the Eucharist, Nourishes Eternal Life**

August 11, 2024

All sustenance and nourishment for fullness of life comes from God. Christian life is by no means plain sailing and we often find ourselves broken and crushed by circumstances that come our way. Left to our own resources we can find no light at the end of the tunnel. To keep going we need God to help us carry our crosses, rescuing us from every predicament that befalls us. This Sunday's Gospel points out that we have such a help in Jesus who is the Bread of Life. Christ packs three momentous lessons on the Eucharist. First, he points out the mystery of faith, that no one can believe in him "unless he is drawn by the Father." Faith in Jesus Christ supplies us with life's only dependable fuel, and yet, faith in Christ is God's gift, no one can pride themselves in their own faith. Jesus Christ is truly present in the little wafer, body, blood, soul, and divinity but no scientific test can prove that. Yet, we know he is because we have been given the gift of faith. This is why the priest says, after the consecration at each Mass: "Let us proclaim the mystery of faith." Second, this faith in Christ leads to "eternal life." Jesus tells us that eternal life consists in knowing "the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom [God has] sent" (John 17:3). In Biblical language, "knowing" implies deep interpersonal intimacy. That we can have a relationship like that with God himself is the Good News of Jesus Christ. God hasn't kept his distance from us sinners; he wants us to know him and share his life. Third, Jesus himself is the "bread" of this eternal life, its source and sustenance. Without bread, without food, physical life perishes. Without Jesus, without his "flesh for the life of the world" in the Eucharist, our life of intimate communion with God will perish. It's that simple - and it's that crucial. In his discourse Jesus speaks of himself as the bread of life eleven times; he's really hoping that we'll get the message. The gift of faith gives us access to eternal life, and the Eucharist makes that life grow within us. Jesus brings each of us just what we need to sustain us on our pilgrim journey to God. Jesus is heavenly bread, medicine for the sick soul, nourishment for a wounded spirit, light and strength for a weary mind, the source of new and eternal life. He is the living Bread that comes down from heaven, the unique source of life.

This intimacy with God leads us faithfully along the path to heaven, but it also leads along the path to a fruitful, meaningful life while we are here on earth. St. Peter Julian Eymard is a great example of this. He lived in France during the stormy years after the French Revolution. He grew up in a poor family, and his first attempt to enter the seminary ended in failure - he was sent home when he became too ill to carry on. That was only the first of many obstacles, but none of them could hold back his energy and zeal for serving God and neighbor. He struggled mightily to make it through seminary. Then he joined one religious order, only to leave it in order to start his own, fighting against all odds to make it grow and take root in the Church. Amidst constant troubles and even violent opposition, and plagued by chronic sickness and overwhelming poverty, he nevertheless founded a parallel order of nuns, an association of lay people, and another association of diocesan clergy. He wore himself out and died at the age of 57. What was the source of his boundless energy, tireless charity, and unbending enthusiasm? The Eucharist. All his foundations, in fact, were dedicated to Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, a practice he had begun while just a boy. One day when he was only five-years-old his sister found him in church, perched on a stepladder behind the main altar, with his ear pressed up against the Tabernacle. She asked him what he was doing. He simply said that he wanted to get closer to the Eucharist so he could hear "Him" better. Eternal life reaches its fullness in heaven, but it begins here on earth, where, our faith tells us, it is nourished by Christ truly present in the Eucharist.

We accept and believe this on faith, but it is not a blind faith. God supports our faith in many ways. He knows that the culture of this fallen world is constantly trying to erode our faith. And so, in his wisdom and according to his providence, he sends us miracles, sometimes dramatic, to give our tired faith a turbo boost. The history of the Church is full of Eucharistic miracles. Recorded miracles include hosts that survived fires, hosts that started to bleed during Mass, hosts that lost their appearance of bread and transformed into flesh... But some of the most remarkable signs God has given us regarding the Eucharist has to do with Holy Communion. As Pope Benedict XVI put it: "In the sacrament of the altar, the Lord meets us, men and women created in God's image and likeness, and becomes our companion along the way. In this sacrament, the Lord truly becomes food for us, to satisfy our hunger for truth and freedom. Since only the truth can make us free, Christ becomes for us the food of truth." (Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, #2)

We all believe in the Eucharist. We have all been given the gift of faith, and the Father has drawn us to Jesus Christ and to the Blessed Sacrament. But it's always helpful to polish that faith up.

If someone took a video of us on a Sunday morning, would that video have sufficient evidence for a court of law to conclude that we truly believe in the Eucharist? When we enter and leave the Church we all genuflect and make the Sign of the Cross, because we are in the presence of the Eucharistic Lord reserved in the Tabernacle. But are that genuflection and Sign of the Cross sincere and meaningful, or just Catholic quickies? During the Eucharistic prayer, which happens at Mass between the bringing up of the gifts and the Our Father, are we making a decent effort to focus our attention on the words? Their beauty and meaning can enhance how we receive Communion, if we let them.

How about the way we approach Holy Communion and what we do after we return to our seats?

If someone were to watch a video of that, would they be able to tell that we truly, deeply believe in Jesus present in the Eucharist as our nourishment and salvation? When we approach the altar to receive Communion, is our heart full of bitterness because of hurts inflicted on us? In the eucharist we meet the bigness of God who has forgiven us and who asks us to give freely as we have received. The eucharist is an opportunity for reconciliation, for wounds and old sores to be bound up and forgiveness to be shown. For God to love us we must try and be loving also. And then, during the week, how often do we make an effort to come and visit Jesus in the Tabernacle, just to thank him for his blessings, and to talk to him about our needs, concerns, and loved ones? He is always here, eagerly waiting for us. Today, let's activate our faith, so that as we continue with this celebration of the Eucharist, to which the Father has drawn us, we will give the Lord a solid opportunity to strengthen us for the everlasting life that he died to give us.

Faith is connected to the Eucharist because it reveals Christ's presence to us, but it is also connected in another way. Physical food nourishes our bodies simply by the act of eating. Our digestive processes take over as soon as we swallow our food. We don't have to think about it; our attitude doesn't help or hinder it. Not so with the spiritual food of the Eucharist. If we receive the Eucharist out of routine, in a distracted frame of mind, then we will not receive all the grace that God wants to give us. But if, on the other hand, we receive the Eucharist with the right dispositions, God's grace will have more room to act, strengthening our souls and making our spirits grow. Faith, a lively, profound, and solid faith, is part of this right disposition. As we pray before the tabernacle, for example, or as we come forward to receive Holy Communion, we should activate our faith, consciously stir it up. We should focus our attention as completely as possible on Jesus Christ, the living bread who has come down from heaven to be our spiritual food. And then immediately after receiving Holy Communion, we should enter into a conversation with him in our hearts. This is why the Church invites us to have some time of silence after Communion, so that we can activate our faith and spiritually digest the living bread. And if this is hard, there is no need to be afraid. Remember, it is the Father who draws us to his Son; it is God who gives us the gift of faith. So if we need a faith-boost, all we have to do is ask for it, saying, humbly and confidently, "Lord, increase my faith, so that your grace can bear more fruit in my life."