

Homily for 20th Sunday B, St Ignatius. Fr. Joseph T. Nolan

Consider those staggering words, “Eat my flesh and drink my blood,” followed by the dire warning that “if you don’t, you will not have life in you.” It is easy to understand that some of his followers protested, and said, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

How indeed? Not literally, of course. All the references to flesh and blood are really the Hebrew way of *talking about the human person*. A real person, really present. To grasp that meaning, imagine a courtroom where the judge is angry because a witness is not present and says, “I want him here in the flesh!” The bailiff is ordered to present him “in person.” Two words we have always associated with the eucharist are *real presence*. This is what Jesus has guaranteed: to be really present when we celebrate the supper as he once did with his disciples.

Let us try a paraphrase of this gospel: Jesus speaking: “I have been among you as a teacher. Of old you were fed with manna in the desert, but the real bread from heaven is the word of God. Remember it was said, “Man does not live on bread alone but on every word from the mouth of God.” I teach that word. I *am* that word. If you take it to heart and allow it to change your lives, you will really be alive, and in the end you will not die forever. I myself will raise you up. I have been among you in the flesh, one of yourselves. It is not as some will say of me in later times that I only seemed to be a man. No, in this body I have lived and in this body I will die. But I will remain among you. The bread you share, the cup you drink, will be a sign that I am with you, that I abide in you, and you will have life

because of me. But when you eat this bread and drink this blood, you must meet in faith and love.”

Thus the paraphrase. But all language concerned with the eucharist is inadequate before a mystery that we might sum up in three words: *a real presence*. Or in four words: *the body of Christ*.

Listen to John’s gospel again – Jesus speaking: “My flesh is real food, my blood is real drink.” If we understand the full meaning here, we can transpose the statement thus: “I am part of your world. Listen to me in the teacher of wisdom. Mark me in the goodness of the saint. Minister to me in the poor and suffering. Follow me in the way of the cross. I am flesh and blood, spirit in your flesh, word in your silence. I am human as well as divine, and all that humans can be. I am the bridge you pass over to eternal life.”

This is the real meaning. But the shock of those words - eat my flesh, drink my blood –actually led outsiders to accuse the Christians of cannibalism. And I have told some of you that to refute that charge, an account of the eucharist was written in 150 A.D. by Justin Martyr. I repeat it now because we should hear it often, and take to heart how simple and sublime is the Mass we offer. This is what it was like in 90 A.D. :

On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the *Memoirs of the Apostles* or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, he who presides gives a verbal instruction, and exhorts us to imitate these good examples.

Then we all rise together and pray, and... when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and he who presides in like manner offers Eucharistic prayers and thanksgivings according to his ability, and the people assent saying, "Amen."

And there is a distribution to each one, and a sharing in the Eucharistic Elements, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons.

And they who are well-to-do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; what is collected is deposited with the president [bishop] who succors the orphans and widows, and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds, and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word, takes care of all who are in need.

Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day, on which God made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead.

And this food is called by us the eucharist... Not as common bread and common drink do we receive these, but ... we have been taught that this food... is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.