

How can this man give us his flesh to eat (from the Pastor)

Through the month of August, I am continuing to reflect on St. John's Gospel, chapter 6. That is the Gospel proclaimed at Mass for containing Jesus' teaching on the Eucharist, the core of our Christian life. Today we hear vv. 51-58, where we see some of the crowd listening to Jesus begin to divide themselves against each other because of His challenging words: "The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?'"

Unfortunately, it is still the same in modern times, especially in the last 500 years, since the Protestant revolution rejecting many teachings of Jesus' true Church. The teaching on the Bread of Life is one of the most important things that, sadly, still divides Christians since many non-Catholic Christians have refused to accept the Eucharist as Jesus' true body and blood. Ironically, many of these Christians claim that the Bible is their ultimate authority, yet simply ignore this key passage from the sixth chapter of St. John's Gospel altogether. Some of those who do try to grapple with it claim that Jesus is speaking symbolically, just as He does when He says "I am the vine, you are the branches." But that is just not credible.

When we look at the actual words of Jesus, He takes great pains to speak in very literal, not poetic, language, repeating Himself several times for emphasis: "My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in Me and I in him." His words mean exactly what He says.. Jesus always speaks the truth plainly, because He is the way, the Truth and the Life that leads us to the love of God the Father.

Although what we receive in Holy Communion is the True and Real Body of Jesus, Our Lord, His own flesh and blood, it is "disguised" or "veiled" in its sacramental form, so that to outward appearances, it continues to look like the unleavened bread and altar wine that were transformed at the priest's command during the words of consecration.

We should certainly understand why some of the Jewish crowd objected to Jesus' words. Perhaps they understood him to be advocating cannibalism. Perhaps they just couldn't believe that what Jesus was claiming was possible. But we believe in Jesus' words and promise because He Himself testified to them.

It is still an intelligent question to ask today, some 2,000 years after Jesus first spoke these words, "How can *this man* give us His flesh to eat?" The short answer is that Jesus is no mere man. He has a human nature, yes, but He is also the Son of God, with all of His divine power to work this marvelous miracle of love. *How* does He do it? It is a mystery that is beyond our human measurement and science. To use the technical term, it is a "metaphysical" reality: God, the Creator of the universe, can suspend the ordinary laws of physics because He can do all things.

Here is what the Catechism of the Catholic Church says, quoting the seventh century teacher, St. John Damascene: *You ask how the bread becomes the Body of Christ, and the wine . . . the Blood of Christ I shall tell you: the Holy Spirit comes upon them and accomplishes what surpasses every word and thought . . . Let it be enough for you to understand that it is by the Holy Spirit, just as it was of the Holy Virgin and by the Holy Spirit that the Lord, through and in himself, took flesh.*

In some ways, the more important question than *how* the Lord does it is, *why* He does it. He does it so that He can remain with us and as a pledge of the future glory that believers and disciples of Christ will share with Him in Heavenly Communion. We remember that when Jesus

was about to ascend into Heaven, His parting words were, “Lo! I will be with you always, even to the end of the world.” He wanted to fulfill that promise, and remain with us Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity, even as He reigns in glory at His Father’s right hand. So He gave us the Eucharist to perpetuate His presence and His love. What an indescribable gift!