

Give us this bread always! (from the Pastor)

As promised recently, over the next four weeks I am going to be reflecting on the critically important Scripture passage in St. John's Gospel, chapter 6. This is the very lengthy teaching of Jesus on what the Blessed Sacrament is, this greatest of gifts given to us, found only in the Catholic Church where the true and real divine presence of the Lord has been preserved for 2,000 years in the Blessed Sacrament.

At Mass today we hear proclaimed the beginning of Christ's explanation of this gift, shortly after he has performed the miracle of multiplying a few barley loaves and fish, to "prime the pump," so to speak, to help the people believe in His divine power. (The reference is John 6:24-35. Please read that over at home to reflect on it more!)

If we read this Scripture passage carefully, we see the marvelous way in which Jesus operates. At the same time that He challenges the people in love, He also wants to raise the bar so that they are longing for and focused on more than just what the world has to offer. He is continually teaching them to strive for their ultimate happiness and fulfillment, which can only come in divine friendship and relationship with him.

We see how this plays out in today's Gospel. Jesus tells the crowd, "You are looking for me not because you saw signs, but because you ate the loaves and were filled. Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life."

By this miraculous sign, Our Blessed Lord is beginning to reveal to His people – and us -- that He is truly the all-loving God of the universe, who desires fervently to fill all our deepest desires. But the people are missing the importance of the sign. They are following Him only because He filled their bellies and gave them good food to eat! Jesus is promising them much more: not food for their bellies, but food for their *souls*. The food that will draw them into the joys of Heaven, the eternal and complete happiness of being united with the Holy Trinity. This is so important that they should dedicate their lives to seeking this out, with far greater zeal and energy than they do to provide a good meal.

When we really reflect on this, it should have profound implications in our own lives. How much time and effort do we employ making and preparing a good meal, especially for a special occasion such as a birthday or anniversary or a holiday such as Thanksgiving? How much time and effort do we exert in finding the perfect restaurant or bakery? How does this compare with the time and effort we spend on Sundays preparing to receive the true Body and Blood of Christ worthily and gratefully, His own flesh and blood, in Holy Communion? What kind of reverence do we show when we actually take this Bread from Heaven from the priest and put it into our mouths? Sometimes, if we are honest, the answer is, not much. Like our spiritual ancestors, we often place far more importance on worldly food than on the bread of life.

A couple of generations ago, the Church required Catholics to receive Communion on the tongue, while kneeling at a rail before the altar. The Church changed that in the 1960s and 1970s, and my own opinion is that that was a huge mistake. When we received Our Lord kneeling at the rail, that gesture really communicated very clearly how important this heavenly food is, in a way far more profound than simply advancing in a line and taking it in the hand. Pope St. John Paul and Pope Benedict would only give Communion to those kneeling. And while we can't change the Church's norms and liturgical directives, we can make the extra

effort consciously to remind ourselves of just what we are receiving, every time we come to Communion, so that we may make a heartfelt prayer of true gratitude.

Like the crowd in John 6, the world still cries out with great longing to experience God's love, "Give us this bread always!" Astoundingly, Jesus responds to this demand from us who are undeserving sinners with those extraordinarily beautiful words, often carved into old tabernacles or eucharistic chapels in churches throughout the world, "*Ego sum panis vitae*. I myself am the bread of life! Whoever believes in me will never thirst." If we have the Eucharist, we have everything.