

18th Sun OT – August 5, 2018

As a reminder for those who weren't at Mass last week, we are continuing to read through one of the most critically important passages of the Gospels to help us understand what our Catholic faith is about: St. John, Chapter 6, where Jesus gives the teaching on the Bread of Life: what it means that He gives us the same Body and Blood that He sacrificed on the Cross for us every time we come to Sunday Mass.

In this part of the long discourse, we get to the heart of the questions that matter most to us: What are we really looking for in life? Where can we find it? What is worth working for in life?

All of these answers and more are bound up in what we do at Mass today.

Jesus' message to the crowds in the Gospel is that they are looking for what they think will make them happy but won't *really* make them happy. That's because the way God made us, with a soul that longs to be in Communion with Him, the only thing that will make us truly happy is His own presence, His own person.

We can easily fall into the same trap as the crowd from the Gospel— especially in our own day and age which bombards us with the message that we have to find immediate pleasure and comfort in worldly goods, rather than in the presence of Jesus.

It turns out a lot of the people who are following Jesus in the Gospel aren't there for the right reason. They were intrigued by the fact that He miraculously provided food for a hungry crowd of 5,000 men. Everybody loves a "free meal," right? They want to see more of this. So what is Jesus' response? He wants to help them set their sights higher. Not on a great meal, but on feasting on His presence.

So He tells them: "You are looking for me because you ate the loaves and were filled. Don't work for food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life!" And where can they get this "food that endures for eternal life?" Only from Jesus Himself: The Son of Man will give this to you.

Many of us work hard to provide for our daily needs, maybe even struggle to put food on the table for our families. Of course we have to take care of our bodily needs – we are not angels. The trouble is, we fall into the trap of thinking that is the be-all and end-all. That this is the *only* thing we need and the *only* thing that matters in life: the material but not the spiritual.

Jesus wants us to go the step further. The step that distinguishes us from the animals that He created. As much as we need to take care of our bodies, we have a spiritual hunger that is just as important. Far more important, actually. A hunger that can only be fulfilled by Jesus' presence.

Did we catch what Jesus says, "Don't *work* for food that perishes, but for food that endures for eternal life." That means that, in a very real way, properly receiving the Most Blessed Sacrament is work. Joyful work, yes. A work more fulfilling than any job or career could ever possibly be, but work nonetheless.

Just showing up at Mass is not enough, as important as it is. If we want to receive the Eucharist in such a way that it will fulfill us, we have to *work* at it. What does that mean? I'm going to suggest three things

[1] *Not* attaching too much importance to material things and comforts; [2] Preparing ourselves to receive it (3) Training ourselves to recognize—every time – just what it is, or better, *Who* it is – that we are receiving.

The first one might be the hardest for us as modern Americans living in a land of abundance and plenty. In the material sense, we are better off than just about any generation that has gone before us. With some exceptions, we have everything we need materially and lots more. So we start getting the false idea that we don't really *need* Jesus in the Eucharist. What we have in our possessions, our entertainment, is enough. We see a hint of that in the Old Testament reading. God in His goodness, leads the Egyptians out of terrible slavery and oppression in Egypt, and what do they do? They *complain*. "We had better food in Egypt! We had our fleshpots and our bread!" What they don't say is that they weren't allowed to worship God – the "food" they really needed. So some are less than grateful when God provides this manna, this mysterious bread from heaven, because they just can't detach themselves from material things. Sometimes it's the same with us. That's why the Church has a beautiful tradition of many monks and nuns who fast frequently, who deliberately deprive themselves of worldly goods, so that they can remember that the Eucharist they receive is their true treasure.

The second one is also hard for us as Americans, who are constantly rushing from thing to thing. So that we don't always take adequate time for preparation. We might come to Mass at the last minute, without praying first, without really thinking about what is about to happen. Especially without calling to mind why we need the Mass: that we need forgiveness of sins. And often without bothering to go to confession first. Sometimes for months or even years. So that our hearts aren't open to receive the fullness of God's love and mercy contained in the Holy Eucharist. If we don't do the work of preparation of coming to Mass then we can easily block the grace of God. I am going to suggest something that sounds very radical today – although it wouldn't have 40 years ago. It's this: that we should save the socializing in the church nave for after Mass. That our time before Mass should be the time that we save to talk to the Lord quietly, Who is truly present here in the tabernacle. Our friends can wait until after Mass to catch up with us then. It's not that I'm anti-social – not at all. But that our relationship with Jesus comes first. He is why we are here. We can socialize anywhere, but we can't be with Jesus present both bodily and in spirit – Body Blood Soul and Divinity – outside the Church. So we have a bit of a challenge here at St. Peter's because this church was unfortunately not designed to have a social space for congregating conveniently located before we come into Church. But we'll work on that. Some of you might be old enough to remember when the Church required fasting from midnight before receiving Holy Communion. Not a bad practice, for those whose health permits, even though it is now optional. Part of the preparation to receive is to make sure that we are hungry for Jesus. Being physically hungry is a great way to remind our body of that!

The third one might be the easiest, but still takes some work. When we receive, we should consciously call to mind what is happening. Even little things like praying "Lord, give us this bread always!" Or "My Lord and My God!" at the moment of consecration, may help.

Let us make that our prayer for our parish and our families. That we will truly increase our zeal to do the work necessary to receive with gratitude the very Bread of Life!

