



Fr. Laurence Kriegshauser
19th Sunday, Year B

We are in the middle of a five-Sunday series of readings from the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John. Two Sundays ago we heard about Jesus' multiplication of the loaves; the rest of the chapter is Jesus' commentary on the miracle in which he teaches that he himself is the bread of life which has come down from heaven to give life to the world. Jesus' hearers grumble at this teaching: how can this man come down from heaven when we know his parents who are very ordinary people? Jesus calls this attitude "murmuring" or "grumbling," which is what the Israelites did in the desert when they had no food. Although God had miraculously brought them through the Red Sea and freed them from slavery to the Egyptians, they did not trust that he would take care of them in the desert. In the same way men find it difficult to believe that an ordinary human being can be the source of eternal life.

Jesus says that the ability to recognize him as bread from heaven is not a human decision but an invitation from God. "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him," he says. Those who are open to the divine will recognize that Jesus is sent by God. They respond to the invitation of God in their hearts by turning to the man Jesus. They hear in him the voice of the Father. So Jesus can say that through him all men will be taught by God. Jesus and the Father work together in drawing hearts to the gift of life. All that is necessary for salvation is to acknowledge that God is in Jesus and to submit to him there. That is what we mean by faith. It is what Jesus meant when he said, "Whoever believes has eternal life." To believe is to say yes to the offer of life from God in Christ.

Yet Jesus says more. Being taught by God and believing in Christ seem to have nothing to do with the theme of bread. Yet the Lord who said, "Whoever believes has eternal life," says only four verses later, "Whoever eats this bread will live forever." So what is necessary? Believing in Jesus or eating his flesh? Clearly the two are not separate, although they have been separated in history. To accept the offer of life from God in Jesus, which is what we mean by faith, is to accept the concrete way in which Jesus chose to give us that life, which is through the bread and wine consecrated into his flesh and blood. Reception of the Eucharist is the fullness of faith. Yet we know so many folks who claim to believe in Jesus and who indeed have a lively active faith, but who do not come to receive his banquet of life, do not come to receive him in the humble way he left us, in a small wafer and a sip of wine dispensed in the believing community. For that reason they cannot be fully one with the body of Christ which is constituted by the Eucharist and we must pray for their reconciliation to the Church. It is that bread of life which will sustain us on our journey in this life, just



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as the bread from God sustained Elijah on his forty days trek to Mount Sinai where he was to experience the presence of God.

We say in the Mass that the Eucharist makes us one body, one spirit in Christ. The Eucharist connects us to Christ as members of his body, each with his own function in the Church and each loving the other. The Eucharistic Prayer actually attributes this unifying effect of the Eucharist to the Holy Spirit, so that all three persons of the Holy Trinity are involved in this gift of life. This is the same Holy Spirit we heard about in the second reading: we must not grieve the Holy Spirit by harboring bitterness or anger, but must forgive one another as God forgave us in Christ.

So we have a triple duty to God: we must listen to God the Father as he speaks to us in Christ; we must eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Lord Jesus, and we must respond to the work of the Holy Spirit living in us by loving one another with the strength that comes from the very sacrament we are celebrating. As Abbot Thomas once put it, “Through the Spirit—and I would add via the Eucharist—God gives us the very love he commands.”