

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time B - The Eucharist Nourishes Eternal Life

August 8, 2021.

In this Sunday's First Reading (1 Kings 19:4-8), Elijah is dejected and ready to give up when it seems his mission has failed and his life is in danger. Forty days and nights before reaching Horeb, Elijah had worked a great sign showing the Lord was God, overthrew false prophets, and witnessed the end of a long drought imposed on the unfaithful Israelites. Despite this, his life was in danger because Jezebel tried to kill him after he'd humiliated her prophets and pagan religion. But the Lord encouraged him, continued sending him food and drink when he was prepared to die. That nourishment and encouragement sustained him for a long journey, just as Our Lord, through the Eucharist, nourishes us and encourages us in the journey of life. Elijah needed encouragement to keep believing, and we need it too. In the Second Reading (Eph 4:30 -5:2), **Paul reminds us that faith in Our Lord and all the benefits that come from it is not a question of a moment, but, instead, a process.**

Christ packs three lessons on the Eucharist in this Sunday's Gospel passage (John 6:41-51). First, he points out ***the mystery of faith saying that no one can believe in him "unless he is drawn by the Father."*** Faith in Jesus Christ supplies us with life's only dependable fuel. When we look at the small white Host, no scientific test can prove that Jesus Christ is truly present there, body, blood, soul, and divinity. And yet, we know that he is; we have been given the gift of faith. **The Holy Eucharist is like a divine storehouse filled with every virtue; God has placed it in the world so that everyone may draw from it.** (St. Peter Julian Eymard). This is why the priest says, after the consecration at each Mass: **"Let us proclaim the mystery of faith."** Second, this faith in Christ leads to "eternal life." Later in the Gospel (John 17:3), Jesus tells us that eternal life consists of deep interpersonal intimacy, the kind of relationship we all yearn for. **"And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."** A relationship with God himself is the Good News of Jesus Christ. **God hasn't kept his distance from us sinners; he wants us to know him and share his life.** If Jesus makes himself available to us then we have to make ourselves present to him. Third, Jesus himself is the "bread" of this eternal life, its source and sustenance. Without food, physical life perishes. Without Jesus, without his **"flesh for the life of the world"** in the Eucharist, our life of intimate communion with God will perish. It's that simple. **The gift of faith gives us access to eternal life, and the Eucharist makes that life grow within us.** Throughout the Old Testament, we find images of the holy banquet. On God's holy mountain, Isaiah says, there will be good meats and pure, choice wines. And throughout his ministry, Jesus hosts meals to which all are invited. God wants to share his life with us. This comes to full expression in the Eucharist, when Jesus identifies himself so radically with the bread and the wine that they change into his Body and Blood, and then he invites all of us to feast and share life, to give and receive and give again. God loves us so much we must try and be loving to God and others (friends and foes) as well.

The Eucharist is the real presence of Christ, body, blood, soul, and divinity, under the appearances of bread and wine. But many people decide for themselves what the truths of our faith are or what they should or should not do to live the Christian life. They may not say those words, but we witness this in people who treat communion as a symbol or a sacramental instead of a sacrament. A sacramental is a devotional object or practice to remind us of some aspect of our faith. Signing ourselves with holy water is a sacramental. It reminds us of our baptism. Receiving ashes at the beginning of Lent is a sacramental. This practice reminds us our dependence on God. Sacramentals are useful, but are totally optional. **The Eucharist is not a sacramental. It is a sacrament. It is the real presence of Jesus Christ uniting His Body and Blood to us and presenting us with Him to the Father. Communion is the**

Bread of Life that we need to eat to have eternal life. Jesus is our heavenly bread, medicine for the sick soul, nourishment for a wounded spirit, light and strength for a weary mind, the source of new and eternal life, whose presence and power strengthens us. Yet, some people will treat communion as a sacramental, an option that may or may not be received. But it's not up to us to relegate the teaching of Jesus Christ as inferior to our own perception of the truths of the faith. The "up to me to decide" or "to me this or that is moral or immoral," are the same faulty ways of understanding and living the faith that are reflected in this Sunday's Gospel. Simply put, **it is not up to us to decide what faith and morality is or is not. It is our obligation to learn what the Church teaches and to follow these instructions. In doing this we are protecting ourselves from rendering all teaching superfluous, even that teaching which emanates from Christ Himself.**

St. Peter Julian Eymard, Apostle of the Eucharist, whose memorial day is on August 2, encouraged perpetual adoration as a response of love and frequent Communion as a source of strength for the Christian life. The Presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist became the all-consuming focus of his life. He said: **"The greatest grace of my life has been a lively faith in the Blessed Sacrament since my childhood. The Holy Eucharist is Jesus, past, present and future."** He felt that the spiritual anxiety of his times could only be changed by the fire of Eucharistic love. **"The Holy Eucharist is the perfect expression of the love of Jesus Christ for man, since It is the quintessence of all the mysteries of His Life."**

Physical food nourishes our bodies simply by the act of eating. Our digestive processes take over as soon as we swallow our food. We don't have to think about it; our attitude doesn't help or hinder it. Not so with the spiritual food of the Eucharist. If we receive the Eucharist out of routine, in a distracted frame of mind, then we will not receive all the grace that God wants to give us. On the other hand, when we receive the Eucharist with the right dispositions, God's grace will have more room to act, strengthening our souls and making our spirits grow. Faith, a lively, profound, and solid faith, is part of this right disposition. After receiving Holy Communion, we should enter into a conversation with Jesus in our hearts. This is why the Church invites us to have some time of silence after Communion, so that we can activate our faith and spiritually digest the living bread. Remember, it is the Father who draws us to his Son; it is God who gives us the gift of faith. So if we need a faith-boost, all we have to do is ask for it, saying, humbly and confidently, **"Lord, increase my faith, so that your grace can bear more fruit in my life."** When we come forward to receive Holy Communion, we should activate our faith, consciously stir it up. As St. John Mary Vianney said: **"Every consecrated host is made to burn itself up with love in a human heart."** **We should focus our attention as completely as possible on Jesus Christ, the living bread who has come down from heaven to be our spiritual food. It takes great leap of faith to believe in the Eucharist.**

Jesus is here to be our strength and light in the gift of the Eucharist all week long, not just on Sundays. This week, as we strive to grow in Christian kindness, let's make better use than ever of this truly amazing gift.