



ALL THINGS NEW
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EUCHARISTIC REFLECTION

THE EUCHARIST AS FOOD

The Eucharist is the primary way that Jesus gives himself to us as food: first, in the liturgy of the Word, teachings that we take in and digest. Jesus' wisdom nourishes our spirits and shows us the way forward step by step. The gospel reading at Mass provides rich food for our spirits and close attention ensures we don't miss any crumbs. Private reading of the following Sunday's Gospel and discussion with a few other parishioners or friends would contribute immensely to a better assimilation of the meal – pre-dinner drinks with nibbles!

Then in the liturgy of the Eucharist, a sacred meal of bread and wine is laid out for us on the table. The prayers make this clear. The Preface of the Holy Eucharist I says:

As we eat his flesh that was sacrificed for us, we are made strong, and as we drink his Blood that was poured out for us, we are washed clean.

The feeding of the five thousand with five loaves and two fish was a powerful sign of Jesus' ability to nourish his people and anticipates the gift of the Eucharist. In John's gospel this event is followed by a long discourse in which Jesus strongly asserts his power to feed. (John 6)

Jesus chides the people for chasing him around the lake because they wanted more of the free food that Jesus had given them. He says:

“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.” (v. 27)

He tries to lift their aspirations from the material to a spiritual level, and encourages them to believe in him, but the people ask for a sign, a work to warrant believing in him and they remind him their ancestors ate manna in the wilderness. Jesus replies it was not Moses who gave this 'bread from heaven' but God, and God would give them 'the true bread from heaven'.



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He then tells them:

“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” (v.35)

What an audacious and momentous statement!

No longer will Moses, the manna, Wisdom or Torah [Jewish law] provide sufficient nourishment. Jesus, the bread of life, will satisfy the deepest needs of humankind, all hunger and all thirst. (Francis J. Moloney SDB, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina series, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville USA, 1998, p.214)

By saying ‘*whoever* comes to me’ Jesus is again breaking down Jewish exclusivity; Jesus is food for the world. Jesus points out that those who ate the manna, even Moses himself, are now dead, but those who eat the bread that Jesus gives will have eternal life.

We need to be careful not to understand everything in this discourse as relating to the Eucharistic bread. Throughout the discourse there is a broader dimension: Jesus’ whole life and teaching are spiritual food. In verse 51 Jesus says:

“The bread that I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world.”

MOLONEY COMMENTS

Behind the Eucharistic language the interpretation given here is Jesus’ self-gift for the life of the world. (p.220)

Jesus was giving this discourse while teaching at the synagogue in Capernaum (verse 59) during Passover time (verse 4). It will be at another Passover meal that Jesus will fulfil his promise of giving people his body to eat and his blood to drink when he institutes the Eucharist.

When reading this chapter, and indeed, any part of the Bible, we have to understand the translation of words from Hebrew, Greek and other ancient languages is quite hazardous. We can be easily misled when we presume the literal meaning of the words. Just a few examples: ‘body’ in English means the physical body, whereas in Scripture it often means the whole person. ‘Blood’ often refers to life as there is no life without



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blood. Sometimes, as with Jesus at the Last Supper, it refers to a person losing their life by the shedding of their blood, that is, someone who is going to die.

Both 'flesh' and 'blood' can refer to what is worldly as opposed to what is spiritual. We find this when Jesus commends Peter for his answer to Jesus' question 'Who do you say I am?' Jesus said

For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. (Matthew 16:17)

We need to take special care when reading John as he likes to be poetic and metaphorical. 'Bread' can refer to wisdom as in 'Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed'. (Proverbs 9:5) Jesus' teachings are full of wisdom, how to live a fulfilled life, and we understand he is sometimes using the word 'bread' in this way.

Jesus is the Bread of Life in the sense that his revelation constitutes teaching by God (v.45), so that one must believe in the Son to have eternal life. (Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Doubleday, New York, 1996, p.346)