

THE MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF JESUS CHRIST – June 14, 2020

It's Not Cannibalism, it's Communion

By: Deacon Phillip Szabo

For those of you who could be with us last weekend for the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity, I spoke about how we believe in One God who exists as a loving communion of three Divine Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and I spoke about how the Trinity loves us in a way that is self-sacrificial and unconditional. This weekend we are celebrating the most intimate and powerful way that we are able to receive the love of the Trinity: by partaking of the very Body and Blood of Christ, which is to say, the Eucharist.

Bob Perron, who used to be the director of youth, young adult, and campus ministry for the diocese, told me a story once about one of his daughters. He said that, one day, at Sunday Mass, when this daughter of his was very young, He was quietly explaining to her how the bread and wine that the priest was holding would become Jesus' Body and Blood. He said, "Do you see the bread honey? Before the priest said those words, that was just ordinary bread, but now it is Jesus," and "do you see the cup of wine honey? Before the priest said those words, that was just ordinary wine, but now it is Jesus." Then, after Communion, as the priest was placing the remaining consecrated hosts into the tabernacle, he said, "Now the priest is putting Jesus into the tabernacle, that small golden box there." Then Mr. Perron told me that the expression on his daughter's face immediately went from wonder and excitement, to anger and disappointment. She slammed her hands down on the back of the pew in front of her, lifted herself up as high as she could and yelled at the top of her voice, "Don't worry Jesus, I'll get you out of there!"

What faith that little girl had.

We see in today's Gospel reading, that the Jews at the time of Jesus are not able to muster up that kind of faith, even while Jesus Himself is teaching them about the Eucharist. "I am the living bread that came down from heaven," He tells them, "whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world." In response to this revelation about the Eucharist, the Jews "quarreled among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?'" And, in the verses that follow after this section of the Gospel, St. John tells us that many of Jesus' disciples own disciples choose to leave because they too do not believe what He is saying. Let's place ourselves into their shoes for a moment to see if we can relate to their struggle to understand the Eucharist.

On the one hand, Jesus is *fully God*, and so He has the unique ability to share His Body and Blood with us in the Eucharist. However, on the other hand, Jesus is *fully man*, and so He looks, feels, sounds, and smells just like an ordinary guy. So, before His Death and Resurrection, Jesus' skin didn't sparkle in the sunlight or glow in the dark. If we could have used modern scientific research equipment to examine Jesus' body at that time, all of our tests would have indicated that He was a normal human being, and this is why most of Jesus' listeners did not

believe in Him. They thought that he was just like any other man, and so, when they heard him say things like, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life,” they thought that he was crazy. They thought that He was advocating for cannibalism!

It makes perfect sense. The definition of cannibalism is the consumption of human flesh that has been separated from the body, and Jesus, who is fully human, was telling everyone to literally consume His flesh. Other Christians, and even some Catholics, will try to say that Jesus was only speaking figuratively when He was commanding us to eat His flesh. However, this interpretation does not fit with the evidence that we find in both Scripture and Tradition. Just in today’s short Gospel reading, we can see that Jesus uses the Greek word *esthiō* when He first explains that we must eat His flesh. *Esthiō* is the most common word for eating in the New Testament. Perhaps one could interpret this in a symbolic sense. However, after the Jews express their confusion about this command, Jesus uses the Greek word *trōgō* which means to chew or to gnaw and leaves almost no doubt that Jesus is commanding them to literally consume His flesh.

Then, if we turn to Tradition, we can see as early as A.D. 153 that the Early Christian Church taught that, by the prayers of the priest, common bread and wine truly become the flesh and blood of Jesus. Just a few generations after Christ, St. Justine Martyr wrote this, “For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Savior, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh... are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.” – (First Apology, 66). So, without a doubt, Jesus commanded us to literally consume His flesh and blood so that we could have eternal life.

How, then, is this *not* cannibalism? Communion is not cannibalism because Jesus is not *just* human. He is God as well. As fully man *and* fully God, Jesus is able to make His flesh and blood become newly present under the appearances of bread and wine without ever losing any part of Himself. If Jesus was literally picking pieces of His body apart, and then transporting them to us each time that we celebrate Mass, then that *would* be cannibalism and Jesus would have ran out of flesh and blood a long time ago. However, the Eucharist is *not* cannibalism because, when bread and wine are consecrated at Mass, both of them become Jesus in His fullness. The bread becomes Jesus and the wine becomes Jesus. We do not believe that the bread becomes His Body and that the wine becomes His Blood. Instead, both the bread AND the wine become Jesus Christ, fully present, both His human Body, Blood, and Soul, AND His Divinity. This is why you hear so often that the Eucharist is Jesus Christ, Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity. It is not dead human flesh, but Jesus Christ Himself, risen, glorified, and living. If you had the endurance to pay attention to the sequence that I sang, one of the lines read, “Whoso of this food partakes, Does not rend the Lord nor breaks; Christ is whole to all that taste.”

This is why the Mass is the greatest prayer of all. In the Eucharist, we are nourished directly by Jesus Christ Himself. We consume the living and glorified Body and Blood of our Lord, not as an act of gruesome cannibalism, but as an act of intimate love with our God who *literally* wants to fill us with His very self.

Also, this is why Adoration is greatest way to spend extended time with Jesus in prayer. In Adoration, we can look directly at Jesus, who is truly present on the Altar while we pray. We are now offering Adoration for a full hour before the 9:00 AM Mass in Parsons on Wednesday, and before the 5:00 PM Mass in Thomas on Fridays. Come to Mass and Adoration as early and as often as you can.

Now, maybe you are still struggling like the Jews and most of Jesus' disciples in today's Gospel reading. Maybe the Eucharist still seems more like a distant mystery instead of the beautiful face of our loving Savior. Or, maybe you are more like the little girl in the story that I told at the beginning of this homily. Either way, during the Eucharistic Prayer today, when Fr. Grassi lifts up the bread and the wine which will become the Precious Body and the Precious Blood of our Lord, ask Jesus to grant you the gift of Faith so that you can take a few steps closer to the strong and shameless faith of the little girl who believed without a doubt that, what appears to be just ordinary bread and wine, is truly Jesus Christ. On this day above all others, the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ, I am certain that Jesus is willing to grant us the grace to recognize His true presence in the Eucharist.

For more on this topic, see:

<https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/blog/st-justin-martyr-on-the-eucharist-and-the-ancient-mass/18543/>

<https://www.catholic.com/magazine/online-edition/are-catholics-cannibals>

<https://www.catholic.com/qa/is-receiving-the-eucharist-cannibalism>