

21st Sunday per Annum - B
Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b;
Ephesians 5:2a, 25-32;
John 6:60-69
Little Flower - 8/22/21

My Brothers and Sisters,

For the last several weeks with the exception of last week, our Sunday Gospels have come from John 6, Jesus' Bread of Life Discourse." Because of the Solemnity of the Assumption last Sunday, we missed the climax of the reading. At the beginning of the Gospel for the 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Jesus said, "*I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world*" [Jn. 6:51].

There are Christians and even some Catholics who would argue that Jesus was only speaking symbolically and, therefore, that the Eucharist is only a sign of Christ's body and blood. However, both last Sunday's Gospel and today's Gospel argue the contrary. In last Sunday's Gospel, we are told that after Jesus spoke, the Jews quarreled among themselves, "*How can this man give us his flesh to eat?*" [Jn. 6:52]. Jesus responded even more clearly and more forcefully, "*Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink*" [Jn. 6:53-55].

In today's Gospel, we are told that even Jesus' disciples struggled with what he had said even to the point that "*many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him.*" If Jesus had intended to say that his presence in the Eucharist was only symbolic, i.e., if the disciples had misunderstood him, it seems to me that Jesus would have called them back and clarified what he meant. However, he did not call them back. From both of these Gospels, it seems clear that Jesus promised to give us his flesh to eat and blood to drink, a promise he fulfilled at the Last Supper when he changed bread and wine into his body and blood, a promise he continues to fulfill at every Eucharist.

Part of the reason we struggle to believe in Jesus' Real Presence in the Eucharist is because we have a hard time understanding it. Let me share with you my understanding of Real Presence. Jesus' real presence in the Eucharist is a sacramental presence, not a physical presence. In other words, the bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ but retain the appearances, i.e., the physical properties, of bread and wine.

How is this possible? Our soul or life principle is limited by the boundaries of our bodies. However, at the Last Supper and at every Eucharist, Jesus identifies the bread and wine with himself. In other words, he extends his being, his spirit to them, transforming them into His Body and Blood. We call this transformation transubstantiation. Therefore, when we receive Communion, we receive the true Body and Blood of Christ sacramentally.

Likewise, we believe that not only bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. The Eucharist also transforms us into the body of Christ and calls us to pour out our lives in love and service of others. St. Paul wrote, "*Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf*" [1 Cor. 10:17]. When we receive the Eucharist, we deepen our union with Christ and our communion with one another. This is why attendance and participation at Sunday Eucharist is so important.

My brothers and sisters, in the homily two weeks ago, I mentioned that "the seven sacraments correspond to critical needs or moments in the life of the individual and the community." Sunday Eucharist meets a critical need in the life of our spirit. Just as we need to eat and drink to nourish our bodies, we need to receive the Eucharist to nourish our spirit, i.e., to deepen our union with Christ and, equally importantly, our communion with each other.