

Everyone here knows that Jesus was born in the little town of Bethlehem, right?...What you may not know is that Bethlehem is a Hebrew word that means “house of bread.” ..In Ch 6 of John’s Gospel, Jesus addresses a crowd that followed Him to Capernaum after He had fed 5000 people w a few loaves of bread, & He tells them: ”I am the Bread of life...I am the living bread that came down from heaven.” So, it makes sense that Jesus would be born in the “house of bread”...Now I’m not comparing myself to Jesus, but I think I can say that I was born in a house of bread too...In fact, every Italian-American kid growing up in East Youtica back then could say that,...because the main part of every meal in our homes was a huge loaf of hard- crusted Italian bread – not that soft, spongy stuff Wegman’s calls Italian bread - but bread with a crust so hard you had to slice it with a saw...I can’t tell you how many times I got my hand rapped with a wooden spoon every time I got caught dipping a piece of that incredible bread into the pot of tomato sauce simmering on the stove. But, Madonna mia, it was worth alla the pain.

Why all this talk about bread? Because today we celebrate the Feast of the Body & Blood of Christ...as the Church focuses on the Eucharist,...the great **mystery** of our faith: ordinary bread & wine becoming the Body & Blood of Jesus Christ....A mystery is a secret, something hidden from the human eye & human mind...St. John Chrysostom said a mystery is when what we see is not the same as what we believe...In the Eucharist, what we see is the bread & the wine;... what we believe is that it is: the Body & Blood of Christ....We believe what Jesus said to His disciples at the Last Supper...& what He says to us through His priests from the altar at every Mass: “This is my body given up for you...This is my blood which will be shed for you.”

Wen Jesus called Himself the Bread of Life, the Living Bread,...what He was saying to that crowd at Capernaum & what He’s saying to us is: “Listen, I’m not talking about ordinary bread that you eat to satisfy your physical hunger,...because that bread doesn’t last...you’ll be hungry again...I’m talking about the bread the Father has sent to satisfy your spiritual hunger....**I am** that living bread & whoever eats of that bread will never be hungry again.” ...Jesus knows we have spiritual hungers that can’t be satisfied with ordinary food...We hunger for purpose & meaning in our lives,...we hunger for peace, we hunger for love, ..hunger for faith, ...hunger for forgiveness,...These are hungers only He can satisfy....Pope Francis said–in a homily- that today “Some people nourish themselves with money, ...others with success & vanity,...others with power & pride.”...He said that such things appear “more satisfying,”...but those tempted by such things find out that they don’t last. They all perish.

The food Jesus offers – Himself, ..the Bread of Life, the Living Bread - will not perish...It is eternal food that will feed our heart, & soul & spirit when we come to His table **in faith** to partake of the Eucharist, His Body & Blood....So, each of us have to ask ourselves: Where do I want to eat?... Where do I want to get nourishment?...At the Lord’s table?...Or do I want what the world offers,...the false bread that will NOT feed the deepest hungers of my heart, soul & spirit?...I’m guessing that since we’re here, we have chosen to eat at the Lord’s table...But how do we come to His table? Do we come with eyes, ears, mind and heart open to all the ways He wants to feed us...open to all the ways he can feed our spiritual hungers?

Jesus said, “I am the living bread come down from heaven.” ...*Living bread!*...My friends, the Eucharist we receive is not a thing...It is not a piece of bread...It is the *living presence of Jesus Christ*...If a visitor who knew nothing about the Eucharist were to watch how we come to Communion,.. would they be able to see in our face & our demeanor that we truly believe we are taking the *living person* of Jesus Christ into our own body, and that He is becoming one with us?...When we gently cradle the host – the Body of Christ – in our hands, would they see our joy

& our gratitude at Jesus giving Himself to us in this mysterious way, ...to strengthen us,...to heal us,...to change us...to unite us with Him & with one another?

Or would the visitor instead see some of us get up from our pews, wait in line, receive a piece of bread, & then go back to our seats...with no real awareness of a deeper union with Christ, without any awareness of His life now within us, with no awareness of a change taking place in us?

I have to admit there are times at Mass when I let my mind be filled with distractions, ...maybe I'm thinking about bills that have to be paid,...or the big football game at 1 o'clock,...or where to go for breakfast after Mass,...so distracted that I come to Communion, & just go through the motions, with little, if any, thought of the incredibleness of the gift of Jesus Himself that I am about to receive...It's like I'm saying, "Thanks, Jesus, but I don't really need you right now..." ...And that is so, so wrong...I DO need Jesus. ...We ALL need Jesus...None of us are doing so well in our Christian journey that we should ever take this amazing gift for granted.

When I find myself doing that, I often think of a patient at RGH whom I visited twice a week for about 5 yrs....Ann was a very devout Catholic, & for all but a few months of those 5 yrs, she was not able to receive Communion because she had a breathing tube & couldn't swallow...She was fed through a tube in her stomach...So when I visited her I would hold the host up to her & I'd say the words "Body of Christ"...Since she wasn't able to speak, ..Ann would mouth a silent AMEN...& as I touched the host to her lips, she would tenderly kiss Jesus as tears rolled down her face,...tears of thanks, tears of gratitude that the living Jesus had come to her,...yet tears of sadness that she could not take His broken body into her broken body...She deeply longed for what we should never take for granted: the bread from heaven that we should get down on our knees & give thanks for every day.

But you know, being thankful for the Eucharist – for all the graces & blessings it offers us – means nothing unless it shapes who we are & what we do...Bishop Matano in his pastoral letter on the Eucharist said, "All that we do as Catholics stems from our attachment to the Eucharist" ...How we live, ...the decisions we make,...how we set our priorities,...our moral code, ...how we treat others, after we walk out that door...has to reflect the reality that we have become bearers of Christ. ...We carry Christ within us as we go back out into the world...Having Jesus within us has to make a difference out there.

Have you ever wondered why our Eucharistic celebration is called a "Mass" ?.. The word "Mass" is an English rendering of the Latin word "missa, m-i-s-s-a." From the Latin word "missa" also comes the English word "dismissal."... So "Mass" means "dismissal." ...Our Eucharistic celebration gets its name from the dismissal, God sending forth His people at the end of every Mass.

One of the last words Jesus said to His disciples before He ascended into heaven was "Go!"...Go and take my Gospel into the whole world...That was their mission...At the end of every Mass, at the dismissal, Jesus gives us the same command, "Go!"... With His Body & Blood He empowers us & strengthens us to GO and live His Gospel in our small part of the world, so that others may come to know Him. ...That's OUR mission.

I will end with the story of a young boy who had just received His First Communion...He went up to the priest after Mass and asked, "Father, you told us that after we receive Communion we are carrying Jesus inside us,...and that if we really believe that, it should change us to be more like Jesus. Right?"...The priest answered, "Yes, that's right."..."Well, Father, how will I be able to see that I've become more like Jesus?"...The wise old priest looked the boy in the eye and said, "It's not so important that YOU be able to see it...What's more important is that OTHERS can see it." AMEN!

