

**“The True Bread of Life from Heaven:
Doing in Our Lord’s Memory as He has Done for Us”
Homily, Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord’s Supper
March 29, 2018**

Introduction

The Italians have a saying to describe someone who is truly a good person, the kind of person that exudes goodness. We have all met such people at times in our lives. The Italians call such a person “a piece of bread”: “My next-door neighbor Luigi, he’s something. I came home from the store the other day with a carload of groceries and thoroughly exhausted. He noticed how tired I was, and interrupted the lively conversation he was having with his best friend to come over and help me carry them into the house.” “Oh yes, good ol’ Luigi; he’s a piece of bread.”

Bread, the Staff of Life

It’s an Italian saying, but it’s something that transcends cultures. All cultures understand that quality of genuine goodness, and in just about every culture, bread is the staff of life.

In the biblical mind, and still to a large extent today, bread is essential to life. Just think about freshly baked bread: the fragrance is irresistible, it will make anyone’s mouth water. And so essential is bread to life that in our own country the word “bread” as a slang word is used to mean “money.”

The Bible also uses the image of bread to describe situations in everyday life. For example, eating “the bread of tears,” or “of anguish,” or “of ashes” describes a suffering person or one whom God seems to have abandoned, while someone who is joyful eats bread “in joy”; the sinner eats the “bread of impiety” or “of falsehood,” and the slothful the “bread of idleness.”

Bread, though, is not only a means of subsistence or the description of an individual's lot in life, it is also something intended to be shared. Just think about how, to this day, people in the Middle East eat a meal: the food is on platters at the center of the table, and they pick up bread with their hands to scoop the food up into their mouths. Breaking bread together is what happens at every meal, and it carries with it the meaning of communion, deep bonds of friendship and family ties.

Significance at the Supernatural Level

It is not surprising, then, that in God's saving action bread assumes a central place, most especially in worship.

These holy days we are embarking on tonight are the Christian Passover. In our first reading from Exodus, we heard some of the prescriptions for the Jewish Passover. One such prescription given is that of eating only unleavened bread, which serves as a reminder to the Jewish people of God coming to their rescue by liberating them from the slavery of Egypt. It is unleavened, because they had to eat it in haste, and also to symbolize casting out all corruption. But bread also has a metaphorical meaning.

In his Sunday Angelus address back in August of 2012, when the Gospel of the day was from the Bread of Life Discourse from sixth chapter of St. John's Gospel, Pope Benedict explained that in Jewish thought it was clear that "the true bread from heaven that nourished Israel was the Law, the word of God," as given to Moses in the Torah. It was this that distinguished them from their neighbors, because through this "true bread," they knew God's will "and therefore the right path of life." He said: "Now, Jesus, in revealing himself as the bread of heaven, testifies that he is the Word of God in person, the Word incarnate, through which man can make God's will his food, which guides and supports our existence."

Service Through Vocation

The use of bread in worship, of course, finds its culmination in the mystery we celebrate tonight: the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. St. Paul describes it to us in our second reading. But when it comes to the accounts given in the four Gospels as to what happened that fateful night, it is the account from the Gospel of St. John that is read every year at this Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday.

St. John famously does not include an institution narrative. Rather, here the emphasis is placed on service more than on the action of the ritual. The reenactment at this Mass tonight with the ritual of the washing of the feet is meant to express the fullness of what our Lord meant by taking the bread and saying, "Do this in memory of me." The true bread from heaven for us is the law of service, humble service, lowering ourselves to consider others first. This is how we "do" in our Lord's memory what he asked us, and this is the whole point of a vocation.

God gives each of us a vocation, which is the way we live out His call to serve one another, the commandment He gives us at the Last Supper, "As I have done for you, you should also do." That is St. John's translation of, "Do this in memory of me." There is no way to persevere in a vocation without living this way, learning that lesson over and over again. So in the foot washing this evening, we will have representatives from different vocations in life. This is the law for the follower of Jesus, the true bread from heaven that keeps and sustains us on the right path of life.

Conclusion

It is in living this way that we make ourselves to be "a piece of bread": the pure goodness of loving the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and loving our neighbor as ourselves, in humble service, putting the good of the other before ourselves. That is how we fulfill his command to do for others as he has done for us.