

**June 23, 2019 Eating and Drinking Homily:** Every couple of months I see my local doctor, an Orthodox Jew, at Albany Medical Center. A remarkably genial fellow, he is thoroughly knowledgeable about his religion, and openly and unapologetically practices it. In our brief time together, it is not uncommon for us to share our thoughts on our respective faiths. Only recently, I pointed out to him that our two religious faiths have something very important in common, namely, the sacred act of eating and drinking. Eating and drinking affords the Christian and Jew to enter into communion with others. It is a Eucharistic act in the sense that the person of faith can render thanks to God for his many gifts, including the food and drink on our tables. Jewish families gather together for the Sabbath meal and observe the High Holy day of Passover with a ritual meal commemorating their deliverance from oppression in Egypt. Roman Catholics celebrate the Eucharist on Sunday in response to the Lord's command to eat and to drink. "Take and eat, for this is my body, which is to be given up for you" and "Take and drink, for this is my blood which is to be shed for the many."

Pause for a moment to consider the dwindling number of Catholics who gather around the table of the Lord on Sunday. Also consider the few who gather around the family table for meals in so many parts of the Western world. Even when they occasionally sit down for a repast, the meal is often rushed or those sitting at the table are often preoccupied with their smart phones, and ignore their fellow table mates. The opportunity for communion is lost.

On today's solemn feast of the Body and Blood of Christ, the Church renews the mystery of Holy Thursday. Recall that at Jesus' farewell meal with his disciples, he thanked and praised God. The twelve apostles were the first to receive the gift of the Eucharist from the Lord. The Eucharist was destined for all, for the entire world. On the night of the Last Supper, Christ entered into communion with his disciples by distributing to them his sacred Body and Blood. The Eucharist is a mystery of communion. When we partake of the Eucharist we are in communion with our brothers and sisters of every nation.

For us to understand and appreciate the mystery of Our Lord's body and blood, it is crucial that we turn to Our Lord's words of institution at the Last Supper. What happened at the precise moment Jesus uttered the words, "This is my body, which is to be GIVEN UP for you" and "this is the cup which is Poured out for many"? In using the language of sacrifice, Christ was anticipating the event of the following day: his death on the cross. Out of love, he accepted the whole passion. "...He loved us to the end". (Jn. 13:1) His body was broken for us; his blood was poured out for us.

The greatest gift God gives to us is Himself in the Holy Eucharist. And one of the central mysteries of this great sacrament is the transformation of bread and wine into the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. It is a deep and profound mystery that far surpasses our human understanding. Indeed, it is a mystery of faith. It will always be a sign of contradiction. After proclaiming Himself as the "Living Bread come down from heaven" and insisting that His body is true food and His blood true drink in a Capernaum synagogue, Christ provoked a negative reaction from some of his followers. They simply walked away. His bold words scandalized the Jewish faithful.

Several years ago, a German journalist interviewed the then pontiff, Pope Benedict XVI. In the course of the interview he expressed his thought that Christ's presence in the Eucharist is symbolic. The Pope

protested. His words are worth noting. "Christ does not give us symbols. He truly gives Himself. That means that communion is an encounter between one person and another, and that Christ enters into me and I in Him". As Roman Catholics, we are nourished by this sacred mystery and made holy.

Joey "Jaws" Chestnut is considered an American hero and a national treasure by the Major League Eating and International Federation. His accomplishment: consuming 74 hot dogs in the span of ten minutes at the annual Nathan's Hot dog eating contest held at Coney Island. Binge eating for money proved to be a profitable exercise for the winner of the event. But not only does it reveal gluttonous behavior, it also casts a rather dim light on the true meaning of eating and drinking... entering into fellowship and communion with family and friends, aliens and the outcast.

On this feast day, let us all remember that the Eucharist is the mystery that constitutes the heart of the Church. It has the power to foster communion and inspires us to be thankful for his greatest gift. In closing I turn to St. Paul. "We have a cup that we bless; is not this cup we bless a participation in Christ's blood? Is not the bread we break a participation in Christ's body? The one bread makes us one body, though we are many in number; the same bread is shared by all." (1 Cor.10:16-17)

Amen!