

Today's gospel is the beginning of the Bread of Life discourse from John's gospel. This teaching of Jesus is the background for what he will do later when he institutes the Eucharist at the Last Supper. I am going to spread this out over two weekends. Today I want to begin with one sentence from the gospel: "Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you."

Jesus is not telling us not to work; he's not telling us to starve. Remember: Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. He got hungry. He got thirsty. He got tired and needed to sleep. He wept. The only part of our humanity that he did not participate in was sin. When Jesus tells us to work for the food that will endure for eternal life, he is telling us not to let our earthly needs completely consume us and become the sole focus of our life. We must look beyond the things of this world that are passing away and keep our eyes fixed on the ultimate goal which is eternal life in heaven.

If we want eternal life, we need the Eucharist. Jesus himself tells us: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you." Jesus made it possible for us to have the Eucharist when he instituted it at the last supper. It was his intention that whenever Mass is celebrated we participate in that first Mass. During Mass, when the priest calls down the Holy Spirit to hover over the gifts of bread and wine, a sacred area is created in which all barriers of time and space disappear and we are back in the upper room with Jesus and the Apostles. When the priest says, speaking in the first person and the present tense: "This is my body. This is the chalice of my blood" it is the voice of Christ himself that you are hearing. It might sound like the priest, but the words are the words of Jesus. And when Jesus speaks—when God speaks—what He says becomes reality. The bread is no longer bread. The wine is no longer wine. From that moment on, what we see on the altar is the flesh and blood of Jesus. That is how we are able to receive and eat the flesh and blood of the Son of Man which we need for eternal life.

I'll come back to that but right now a quick story. Before I was in seminary, I went to a vocation discernment retreat up in Beaverton with Archbishop Vlazny. He was talking to us about the state of the presbyterate in the archdiocese and he shared that a lot of priests were coming up on retirement age and he was concerned about how he was going to meet the needs of all the parishes. He just matter of factly stated, "I need priests." Later in the day, we were having a holy hour in front

of the Blessed Sacrament. The Archbishop was giving a short reflection and he said those words again: “I need priests.” Only this time when I heard those words, it wasn’t the Archbishop. There was an incredible power to those words...and a deep, deep sadness. If I hadn’t already been on my knees I would have hit them right then. That was the moment that I decided to apply to the seminary—hoping the seminary would say no—but you can see how that worked out for me. Archbishop Vlazny needed priests to keep all the parishes staffed, but it wasn’t Archbishop Vlazny’s voice that I heard. I am convinced that it was the voice of Jesus that I heard and he needed priests—and still needs priests—in order to give us his flesh and blood in the Eucharist.

If we want eternal life, we need the Eucharist. In order to have the Eucharist, we need priests. In order to have priests, we need vocations. That vocations retreat I went on was ten years ago; things haven’t gotten better since then. The good thing is that we have 29 great men like Brent over there willing to lay down their lives for Jesus... but we need more. Jesus needs more. We need vocations so that Jesus can have the priests he needs to give us the Eucharist.

Where do vocations come from? Every year a survey is done of newly ordained priests and deacons. One of the most consistent findings of this survey is that vocations come from families and parishes where vocations are actively encouraged. I want to increase vocational awareness in this parish and I am working with the archdiocesan vocation director to try and make this happen.

To a certain extent, I can control what happens in the parish but I cannot control what happens in the family. A lot of times there is resistance, even among faithful Catholic families, to having a son consider the priesthood. An extreme reaction is that of Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati’s mother. When someone asked her about the possibility of her son becoming a priest she replied: “I’d prefer he graduate college and then die.” Pier Giorgio actually did die a short time before taking his final exams and graduating. Parents today usually take a softer approach, but the message is often the same: I don’t want my son to become a priest. Compare that to what my friend’s dad told him when my friend brought up the subject of carrying on the family name. My friend had asked his dad if he ever thought about how the family name would end because my friend had become a priest. His dad replied, “Yes, and there was a moment of sadness...but...when I considered the good you can do as one of God’s priests, I let it go and have never

thought of it since. Grandkids and success and carrying on the family name is nothing compared to your mission of making Jesus truly present on the altar.”

Jesus told us in the gospel: “Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life.” Encouraging your sons to consider the priesthood and your sons and daughters to consider consecrated religious life are concrete ways to work for that food that endures. Don’t be afraid of what their lives as priests or nuns or monks will be like. The Son of God will provide all that they need. And through them—through the prayers of the consecrated religious brothers and sisters and the actions of the priests—God will give us the food we need for eternal life.

Pray for vocations and encourage vocations at home.