

47. The Bread of Life

47.1 Manna is the symbol and figure of the Holy Eucharist, which is the true spiritual food.

Jesus said to them, *'I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.'*¹ Following the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes, the enthusiastic multitude went again in search of Jesus. When they discovered that He and his disciples had already departed, they got into their boats and sailed for Capharnaum. According to Saint John in today's Gospel it was there that the revelation of the Holy Eucharist took place.²

With the miracle of the previous day, Jesus had awakened the crowd's deepest hopes and longings. Thousands of people had left the comfort of their homes to come and bear him. They wanted to make him their king. But the Lord departed from them. Upon meeting them again, Jesus says to the people, *Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs. But because you ate your fill of the loaves.* Saint Augustine comments: *You seek me for worldly motives, not for spiritual ones. How many people there are who seek Jesus solely for worldly ends! ... Rarely does someone look for Jesus for the sake of Jesus*³. We want to be among those few.

This attachment to earthly goods is not what Jesus is looking for in men. With great courage and an infinite love, He presents to the people the ineffable treasure of the Holy Eucharist, in which He becomes food for us. It does not matter to him that many of his loyal followers will abandon him as a result of this revelation. Jesus begins the discourse by hinting at the great mystery: *Do not labour for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life. Which the Son of Man gives to you ... Then they said to him, 'What must we do to be doing the works of God?' Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.'*

Despite the fact that many of those present had only the previous day witnessed a great miracle, they said, *Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe in you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'*

In today's first Reading we are shown how Yahweh manifested his Providence to the Israelites in the desert.⁴ He sent down manna from heaven to feed them. This bread is a symbol and figure of the Holy Eucharist which Christ first announced in this small city on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus Christ is the true food which transforms us and gives us the strength to live our Christian vocation. Pope John Paul II has pointed out in this regard: *It is only by means of the Eucharist that we are able to live the heroic virtues of Christianity, such as charity to pardon one's enemies, the love which enables us to suffer, the capacity to give one's life for another; chastity at all times of life and in all situations; patience in the face of suffering and the apparent silence of God in human history or our very own existence. Therefore, strive to always be Eucharistic souls so as to be authentic Christians.*⁵

¹ Communion Antiphon, John 6:35

² John 6:24-35

³ St Augustine, *Commentary on St. John's Gospel*, 25, 10

⁴ Ex 16:2-4; 12-15

⁵ John Paul II, *Homily*, 19 August 1979

With the words of the poet Dante, we petition the Lord, *Give us this day the daily manna, without which he goes backward through this harsh wilderness who most labours to advance.*⁶ Truly, life without Christ is a harsh wilderness. It is a way of life where it is especially difficult to reach the journey's end.

47.2 The bread of life.

When the Jews tell Jesus that Moses had given them the bread of heaven, Jesus replies that it was not Moses, but his Father who had given them *the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world.*

*The Lord presents himself as superior to Moses. Not even Moses had had the audacity to claim that he himself gave the food which never perishes, which lasts unto eternal life. Jesus promises much more than Moses. Moses promised a kingdom, a land of milk and honey, earthly peace, numerous sons, physical health and all the other earthly goods ... Thus you would fill your bodies here on earth with perishable goods. In contrast, Christ promised a food which would never perish but would last forever.*⁷ Those present at the synagogue of Capharnaum knew that the manna was a symbol of the messianic goods. It was for that reason that they asked Jesus to work a similar sign. Yet they had no idea that the manna was indeed a figure of that great messianic good, the Holy Eucharist.⁸

Jesus tells the Jews that the manna in the desert was not the true bread from heaven since those who ate of it did die. He says that his Father will give them the true bread from heaven. They respond, *'Lord, give us this bread always,' Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.* Our Lord leaves no room for doubt that this bread is a reality. He repeats the verb to eat eight times. Christ will become food so that we might gain a new life, the life which He has brought to us: *The bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.* This is not a bread from the earth. It is bread *which came down from heaven, not such as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live forever.* In the Holy Eucharist we become *flesh of his flesh and blood of his blood.*⁹ The Eucharist is the supreme realization of those words of Holy Scripture that have God *rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the sons of men.*¹⁰ The Blessed Sacrament is Emmanuel, 'God with us' the food of eternal life.

He was the greatest madman of all times. What greater madness could there be than to give oneself as he did. And for such people? It would have been mad enough to have chosen to become a helpless Child. But even then, many wicked men might have been softened. And would not have dared to harm him. So this was not enough for him. He wanted to make himself even less, to give himself more lavishly. He made himself food; he became Bread. Divine Madman! How do men treat you? How do I treat you¹¹? How do I prepare to receive you, Lord? How is my faith, my joy, my desire? We

⁶ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Purgatory*, XI, 13-15

⁷ St. Augustine, *Commentary on St. John's Gospel*, 25, 12

⁸ cf *The Navarre Bible*, in loc

⁹ St Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis*, 22, 1

¹⁰ Prov 8:31

¹¹ J. Escrivá, *The Forge*, 824

should make some resolutions in preparation for our next Communion. Perhaps within the next few minutes or hours. It cannot be like so many of the previous times. We have to receive with greater love.

47.3 We receive the same Christ in every Communion. His presence in the soul.

When we receive Communion, we receive Christ himself with his Body, his Blood, his Soul and his Divinity. He gives himself to us in an intimate union which binds us to him in a real way. Our life is transformed into his life. In Holy Communion Christ is not only God *with* us, but God *in* us.

After we receive Communion, Christ is truly, really, substantially present in our soul. We can apply here those words of the Lord to Saint I Augustine: *J am the food of grown men. Grow. And you shall feed upon me.· You will not change me into yourself, as you change food into your flesh, but you will be changed into me.*¹² Christ gives us his life! He divinizes us! He transforms us into himself! The infinite merits of the Passion are poured out into our soul. He sends us strength and consolation. He leads us to his Most Sacred Heart, to transform our sentiments into his sentiments. The Eucharist holds all the graces and fruits eternal life for humanity and for each individual soul. This is because the sacrament *contains all the spiritual good of the Church.*¹³ If we frequently consider the effects which this sacrament can have on the soul we will come to treasure Holy Communion and spiritual communions. We will see the value of receiving our lord as often as we can, on a daily basis if possible. We will prepare ourselves well for each Communion. Each and every day, we will say to Jesus, *Lord, give us this bread always.*

The soul will be raised to a supernatural plane. Christ's virtues will vivify it. Then we will be able to say with confidence, *It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.*¹⁴

The words of the Lord during the Last Supper are also fulfilled with every Communion: *if a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.*¹⁵ The soul becomes the temple and tabernacle of the Holy Trinity. The life of the three Divine Persons will transform it, nurturing in it the divine seed that was implanted in Baptism.

When we draw near to receive him we should say, *Lord, I hope in you. I adore you. I love you, increase my faith. Be the support of my weakness. You, who have remained defenseless, in the Eucharist so as to be the remedy for the weakness of your creatures.*¹⁶ We go to Holy Mary. For thirty-three years she was in his physical presence. She treated him with the greatest respect and love imaginable. We unite ourselves to her sentiments of adoration and love.

Taken from the book, "In Conversation with God" by Francis Fernandez, Scepter Publishers Inc, Princeton, NJ, 2000

'Hablar con Dios" Francis Fernandez, Ediciones Palabra, Madrid, 1986

¹² St Augustine, *Confessions*, 7, 10, 16; 7, 18, 24

¹³ Second Vatican Council, Decree, *Presbyterorum ordinis*, 5

¹⁴ Gal 2:20

¹⁵ John 14:23

¹⁶ J. Escrivá, *op cit*, 832