

The Twentieth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Proverbs 9:1-6
<i>Response</i>	Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7
<i>Second Reading</i>	Ephesians 5:15-20
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him, says the Lord.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 6:51-58

The Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time continues our journey through the Gospel of John 6 in Jesus' famous bread of life discourse, his teaching on the Eucharist. As we saw last Sunday, what Jesus did was reveal the fact that the bread that comes down from heaven, the new manna of the Messiah, is his flesh which shall be given for the life of the world. In today's gospel, what we see is the reaction of Jesus' Jewish audience in Capernaum to that claim. So let's begin with John 6:51-58, that's the gospel for today, and as you're turning to that gospel I just have to say this is a very special passage for me. This passage here, the reaction of the Jewish people to Jesus' Eucharistic teaching is, in a sense, the reason I'm a biblical scholar today. It was a debate about this chapter that really got me interested in diving into the study of Sacred Scripture. And so I love to talk about this chapter and I love to focus on it, so I'm looking forward to this gospel for today. So in John 6:51 Jesus says this:

I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh." The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent

me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me. This is the bread which came down from heaven, not such as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live for ever.”¹

Alright, so, a lot going on here. What do we make of it? First point, you’ll notice that the lectionary here picks up where last week left off by repeating Jesus’ identification with the manna from heaven. That first verse, “I am living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he’ll live forever.” So Jesus here is beginning the gospel for today by pointing out that he is the true manna that has come down from heaven and then he shifts his emphasis now away from believing in his divinity to eating his flesh, right: “The bread that I’m going to give for the life of the world is my flesh.” Now you can see that this is what the theme of this part of the discourse is about by the way his Jewish audience reacts. So just as when Jesus made the first claim about his divinity the Jews said how can he say he has come down from heaven, so now that he makes the claim about the sacrament, now that he makes the claim about the food that he’s going to give, the flesh that he’s going to give under the form of food and drink, the Jews respond by saying, “Woah, how can this man give us his flesh to eat?” So notice they understand what he’s saying, they just don’t understand how he’s going to do it or what he means by it, what are the implications of it. And it is so crucial to note here that when they say that, when they ask that question, how can this man give us his flesh to eat, Jesus does not back down. He doesn’t back away from the teaching, he doesn’t try to soften it. He certainly doesn’t say no, no, no, you misunderstood me, I was only speaking metaphorically or symbolically. To the contrary, he actually makes the teaching more concrete, more explicit, and even more offensive when he says to them, “Amen, Amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”

Okay, now to understand the impact of that it’s important to recall that in the Old Testament, in the Book of Leviticus, one of the aspects of Jewish religion that was very distinctive was that they were prohibited from consuming animal blood in the offering of sacrifices. So in the Book of Leviticus 17 — if you have a bible and you

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

want to turn there for just a minute you can see this really clearly — Leviticus 17:11 is giving descriptions and proscriptions about how to offer sacrifice and how not to offer sacrifice, what to do when you're engaged in worshipping God. In Leviticus 17:11-12 it says this:

For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, No person among you shall eat blood, neither shall any stranger who sojourns among you eat blood.²

So what is that talking about? Well many ancient religions in Old Testament times, and even up to Jesus' day, would use the blood of animals in sacrifice. And, in some religions they would actually consume the blood of the animal in order to draw on the power of the life of the animal, to take the soul of the animal, so to speak, into themselves and draw on that particular power of whatever creature it was that they were worshipping. So when God commands the Israelites to offer animal sacrifice, he's very clear that they're not to do it like the pagans do it. They're not offering those sacrifices to consume the life of the blood of the animal, to take it into themselves, rather they are to pour out the blood upon the altar. He says the life is in the blood because the blood is given to make atonement for their souls. The word atonement there is used to speak of covering the sins of the people, reconciling them to God through the blood of the sacrifice. So in this case then it would be a common thing, and any Jew would've known it, that one of the things that marks Jews out as different is that they don't drink blood. They do not drink the blood of animals; the law explicitly forbids consuming the blood of animals in the Old Testament. So now in Capernaum, Jesus is speaking in the synagogue and he tells them not only do you have to eat my flesh, but you have to drink my blood, and if you don't drink my blood you have no, what? Life in you. So you can hear the echo of Leviticus 17. The life of the animals was in the blood and the same thing is true of Jesus. His life is in the blood. But the very reason they were prohibited from drinking blood in the Old Testament — because the life

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of the animal was in it — is the reason Jesus requires them to drink his blood. Because if you don't have his life then you will not have eternal life; if you don't have his life you won't be raised up on the last day. So in order to receive his life you have to consume his body and drink his blood. That's why Jesus says — note this very clearly — “whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”

So Jesus is trying to get his Jewish listeners to, so to speak, lift up their eyes to the supernatural end that he wants to bring them to. He's not talking about consuming natural food and natural drink for the sake of natural life that passes away after 70 or 80 years or whatever; he's talking about consuming supernatural food and supernatural drink so that we can have eternal life. The Greek expression there is *zōēn aiōnion*, literally the life of the age. The implication there is the life of the age to come or the life of the new creation, the world to come, which any Jew, or at least any Pharisee, would've understood was the life of the resurrection of the body. So Pharisaic Jews, common Jews, as a rule did not believe simply in the immortality of the soul, they also believed in the resurrection of the body. There were some Jews who denied it, like the Sadducees, but they were in the minority. The majority of Jews accepted the Scriptures of the prophets, like Daniel, which clearly predict the resurrection of the body. So what Jesus is saying here is that if you want to be raised up on the last day, if you want to have the life of the world to come, if you want to have the life of the resurrection which is a bodily immortality, not just a spiritual immortality but a bodily immortality, then you have to eat my flesh and drink my blood, right, and then I will raise you up on the last day.

And then in verse 55 he makes the key statement, “For my flesh is food indeed, my blood is drink indeed.” Now in this case I would actually point out that there's a realism in these verses that can be a little obscured by the translations. So for example, the Revised Standard Version said “My flesh is food indeed, my blood is drink indeed.” By contrast the New American Bible says, “My flesh is true food, my blood is true drink.” Those are okay translations but actually the Greek word here is not the same word as true, it's the word for real. So when he says my flesh is *alēthēs*, real food and real drink, there he is emphasizing the realism of the sacrament that he's describing here, in a sense, for the first time, okay. In fact, ironically, it's a Protestant translation, the New International Version, a very

popular Protestant Bible — English Bible — that gets this right and says “My flesh is real food, and my blood is real drink.” So it’s kind of funny that the most popular Protestant translation of the Bible is more realistic in its translation than the Catholic translations, but I digress. In any case, the point is whatever, however you translate it, scholars agree on the emphasis of the word *alēthēs* meaning the realism. That he's not talking about pure symbolism here or imaginary food and drink. These are concrete food and concrete drink that he’s saying we have to consume in order to have eternal life.

And even more than that he says whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him. Now that's really powerful because what Jesus is saying there is that the new manna that he's going to give is not just going to sustain you like natural food sustains you, it's going to effect a mystical union with him in which we will abide in him, and even more amazingly he abides in us. The Greek word *menō* there means to remain, so it’s this mutual exchange. That’s why we call it communion because there’s a union that takes place through the reception of the Eucharist. Union with Christ, my union with Christ and Christ’s union with me. In fact, then he goes on to say, “As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me.” Here again the realism of this sacramental language is irrefutable because the Greek word that John uses here is not the ordinary word for eating. Up until this point he's use the Greek word *esthiō*, which is just a common word for eating, and it can be used in a metaphorical context as well, you know, to consume something. Like you might say I ate up that book; I gobbled it up; I read it quickly, like you can use eat as a metaphor in English, you can also use eat as a metaphor in Greek the language of *esthiō*. But there's another word, *trógó*, that Jesus uses here. When he says he who eats me will live because of me, he says he who *trógós* me, literally he who chews me or he who gnaws me will live because of me. Now that word is never used as a metaphor for some kind of symbolic consumption, it’s always used as a concrete expression for actually eating something, right. And in this case Jesus has just said I'm giving you real food and real drink so he's emphasizing the realism of his presence in the Eucharist.

For a moment I’d like to pause in order to demonstrate my point. I think it’s important here to actually emphasize that it’s not just Catholic interpreters who

recognize that Jesus' use of the word *trógo* is a literalistic word, it's an emphatic word that points out the realism of the Eucharist. In my bigger book, *Jesus and the Last Supper*, I actually quote Rudolph Bultmann, who was a very famous Protestant scholar. He was a rationalist. He was certainly not committed to the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, but he wrote a commentary on the Gospel of John and he recognized the realism of John's words. This is what Bultmann says about that line when Jesus says, he who eats me, chews me. Bultmann, Rudolph Bultmann wrote this:

[T]he offence (of Jesus' words) is heightened in v. 54 by the substitution of the stronger *trōgein* for *phagein*.

Phagein is another common word for eating.

It is a matter of real eating and not simply of some sort of spiritual participation. Thus there is every indication that v. 55 should also be taken in this way. It is really so! Jesus' flesh is real food and his blood is real drink!³

So Bultmann is not an apologist for the Catholic faith, just a good interpreter of that verse in John's gospel. He's just admitting what is clear from the Greek text, which is that Jesus is talking about actually eating his flesh and actually drinking his blood under the form of real food and real drink.

Now if you have any doubts about that you can look at Jesus' last words in the gospel for today. Once he has revealed this mystery of his real presence in the bread and wine, the food and drink that he's going to give, he leaves his audience with one last clue to grasping the mystery — because you have to feel a little sorry for them. How are they supposed to take all this in? How are they supposed to understand it? Especially given the fact that the law had prohibited the consumption of animal blood, how can they possibly understand what this man was saying when he says you have to eat my flesh and drink my blood? I mean, think about it, put yourself in their place, if you heard that there was a teacher or a

³ Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 236

prophet, you know, who'd risen in popularity and maybe he was from a town not far away and he came and he was speaking, if you heard him actually get up in the synagogue and say, okay, now, you have to eat my flesh and drink my blood, your natural response is going to be first, revulsion, because you're going to assume that he's talking about cannibalism, right, eating his corpse, cannibalizing his dead body. And then second, it's going to be, shall we say, confusion or doubt, skepticism, about the man's sanity. Because if he is actually asking you to cannibalize his corpse, he's not in his right mind. So it's easy for you, it's easy for us if we grown up Catholic, if we've grown up with the teaching of the real presence as something we've learned from a young age to just kind of be nonchalant or, you know, ho-hum about well oh sure it's his body and blood, of course that makes perfect sense. But if you try to put yourself back in the shoes of people hearing this message for the first time, the offense is really strong, the scandal here, the potential scandalous words is undeniable. And the fact that he heightens the scandal by using this word *trōgein*, *trógó*, which can only be used for a realistic act of eating just takes it to the next level and really makes it hard to understand how anyone might not have just walked away from Jesus' words. And as we'll see, that's going to be a response some people have.

But with all that said, I think it's really crucial to point out that Jesus doesn't leave them just with the realistic affirmation, he also gives them a clue. He gives them a kind of a window or insight into how to understand the mystery that he's just revealed to them. And that clue is the manna, this is really important. The bread of life discourse both begins and ends with Jesus alluding to the manna in the Old Testament. So what does he say here? "This is the bread which came down from heaven, not such as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live forever." Why does Jesus refer to the manna there? Well on the one hand he's setting up a contrast. What he's trying to show is unlike the old manna that when the fathers ate it they would die, in other words, it gave them temporary natural life, by contrast this new manna, when you consume it, it's going to give you eternal, supernatural life. So as opposed to temporary natural life, this is everlasting supernatural life, so that whoever eats of this manna will never die. So the contrast is there and it's very important; the new manna is greater than the old manna. However, it's precisely that transcendence, that contrast, that points up the similarity as well and gives us the clue to understanding the Eucharist. Because if

the old manna is miraculous bread from heaven, which we've seen in previous studies of the Old Testament readings — like Exodus 16 — then the new manna that Jesus gives cannot simply be a symbol. It can't simply be crackers and grape juice or just earthly bread and earthly wine. It also has to be miraculous bread from heaven, otherwise the old manna would be greater than the new manna, and that's not how typology works. Old Testament prefigurations were never greater than their New Testament fulfillments. The types, the shadows, are never greater than the realities, right. Think about your own shadow, right. Your own shadow could be very big, it could be 6, 7 feet long, but substantially it's not greater than the reality that it reflects, right. That's how shadows work. In this case the same thing is true with the manna. So Jesus gives them the final clue to understanding his real presence by pointing out that the food and drink that he is going to give, the new manna, is going to also be miraculous, but that this miraculous bread will actually give us not just natural life but supernatural life, eternal life, the life of the world to come, the life of the resurrection, right, the bodily life of Christ.

Okay, with that said then, let's go back to the Old Testament. What's the reading for today? A lot of focus on the Eucharist in the gospel. When we turn to the Old Testament, it might be a passage you are not as familiar with, but which is really important in the history of the church, and that is sometimes called wisdom's banquet or lady wisdom's banquet. It's from the Book of Proverbs 9, and in this section of Proverbs, which is attributed to Solomon, the author is describing wisdom in terms of feminine categories. He describes wisdom, which in Hebrew is *hokmah*, as a woman, as lady wisdom. And in this case, the passage for today, wisdom is giving a banquet for the people, and this is what the chapter says:

Wisdom has built her house, she has set up her seven pillars. She has slaughtered her beasts, she has mixed her wine, she has also set her table. She has sent out her maids to call from the highest places in the town, "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!" To him who is without sense she says, "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Leave simpleness, and live, and walk in the way of insight."⁴

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So what are we to make of this passage? Well this is one of those times where in the wisdom literature you will frequently see the idea of divine wisdom being depicted as a lady, as a woman. I mentioned already in Hebrew the word for wisdom is the feminine *hokmah*, the same thing is true in Greek. The Greek word for wisdom is *sophia*, right, we not only get the name Sophie or Sophia from that, we also get the word philosophy from that Greek term. *Filos sophia* in Greek means friendship with wisdom. People often say the love of wisdom, and that's true, but *filos* means friend. So a person who has friendship with wisdom is a philosopher and a philosopher is a person who lives as a friend of wisdom. And when you have a friend what you do? You cultivate a relationship with them. You spend time with them. You like to spend time with them. You like to do things together. There's mutual enrichment. So a friend of wisdom is a philosopher.

So in this case wisdom has been depicted as a woman and she's depicted as a woman who is hospitable and who is setting up a banquet for all those who love her, for all those who want to come to her table to feast on her food and to drink of her wine. So in its original context this is a kind of symbolic or metaphorical description of lady wisdom's banquet, of the fact that when we study Scripture, especially for Proverbs, when you study the wisdom of the Sages, when you study the wisdom of Solomon, it's like consuming truth. We're taking the truth into ourselves, we're being nourished by the truth and the more we consume of the truth the more we want, right. It's like a great banquet of truth and of wisdom and of knowledge and insight, right. In its original context that's what we're looking at. However again the church has always read Old Testament text typologically as pointing beyond themselves to some fulfillment in the new covenant. And if you read through the New Testament very carefully you'll see that, for example, like in 1 Corinthians 1 Paul describes Christ as the wisdom of God. And so if Christ is, in a sense, the wisdom of God, not just the *logos*, the reason of God, but also the wisdom of God come into our world in the flesh, then the banquet that he gives to us is also a banquet of wisdom, right. Except in his case he's giving us a banquet that doesn't just metaphorically point to bread and wine but actually consists of bread and wine. So that, of course, in the Eucharist when Christ gives us the bread and wine he's not just giving us his body, his blood, his soul, and his divinity, he's also inviting us to consume the word. To consume him as the word and the wisdom

of God made flesh. To receive the truth into ourselves, to be filled, to be nourished with wisdom incarnate, so to speak.

This is a really beautiful text because I love the way wisdom here is inviting people to this banquet of bread and wine. If you think of this in Eucharistic categories, it's kind of like a Eucharistic invitation to people to come to the table, to the altar, of the Eucharist. And I know someone who in particular was a non-Catholic Christian who became Catholic, who at one point they had come to mass, I don't remember what the occasion was, and they heard this reading for the Twentieth Sunday of Ordinary Time. And when they heard the words come eat my bread, drink of the wine I have mixed, leave simpleness or foolishness behind and live, walk in the way of insight, they realized that God was calling them to become Catholic, to come to the Eucharistic banquet, because they had been attending a non-Catholic Church where the services were all about the reading and the proclamation of Scripture. And that's a good thing, it's good to hear the word of God and to proclaim it. But at the end of the day Christ wants for us to not just hear the word but to consume the word, to feed on the word, to come to the living banquet of his body, his blood, that he gives to us in the Eucharist.

So I'll close there with that. Just a final note from the Catechism. Effectively what Jesus is doing in John 6 is giving us the most explicit statement of his real presence in the Eucharist. So I'd like to close with the Catechism's official summary of that statement and I just want to highlight what we mean when we say real presence, but also what we don't mean. So I call your attention to two paragraphs in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs 1373 and 1374. This is on the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist and I just want you...you can read along from the outline or you can just think about this for a second because this is really the source and summit of our faith, Jesus in the Eucharist. So what do we mean when we say that? The Catechism says this:

“Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us,” is present in many ways to his Church: in his word, in his Church's prayer, “where two or three are gathered in my name,” in the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned, in the sacraments of which he is the author, in the sacrifice of the Mass, and in

the person of the minister. But “he is present . . . most especially in the Eucharistic species.”⁵

Now pause there for a second. The word species we usually think of that with reference to animals, various kinds and classes of animals. But in theological literature the species comes from a Latin word that means appearances. So what it means there is in the appearances of bread and wine that he comes to us under in the Eucharist. He’s present most especially in the Eucharistic species. 1374 continues:

The mode of Christ’s presence under the Eucharistic species is unique. It raises the Eucharist above all the sacraments as “the perfection of the spiritual life and the end to which all the sacraments tend.” In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist “*the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, the whole Christ* is truly, really, and substantially contained.” “This presence is called ‘real’ —by which is not intended to exclude the other types of presence as if they could not be ‘real’ too, but because it is presence in the fullest sense: that is to say, it is a *substantial* presence by which Christ, God and man, makes himself wholly and entirely present.”⁶

Now we could do a whole course just on the doctrine of the real presence. There’s so much to say here, but I just want to highlight a few points. First, when we say Christ is truly present in the Eucharist we don’t mean to deny that he’s present in other ways. He’s present in all kinds of ways in the church. He’s present in his word. He’s present in the poor. He’s present through the power of the sacraments. He’s present in the person of the priest, right. Those are all presences of Christ and in a sense they’re real without a doubt, we don’t want to deny that. But when we say he is really present in the Eucharist we mean something unique. There’s a unique kind of presence there because in the Eucharist Christ is substantially

⁵ CCC 1373

⁶ CCC 1374

present, he's not just spiritually present. All those other presences are spiritual presences, but in the Eucharist he is substantially present because his body, his blood, his soul, and divinity are all present under the appearance of bread and wine. And that's different. It's really, really important, because what it shows us is that in the Eucharist Christ is not only present in spirit, he is present in his body. He's not just present in his divinity, his divinity is present everywhere. God is omnipresent, God is pure spirit, and the second person of the Trinity, the Son, is also pure spirit from all eternity, he's omnipresent. But when he assumes a human nature, by definition that human nature is limited. And in his humanity Christ is only present at the right hand of God, where he sits embodied on the throne of God after the Ascension and in the Eucharist in every tabernacle and on every altar.

So I think this is really important because for me when I was growing up learning about the real presence, I always thought okay, it's his body and his blood, like the bread is the body and the wine is the blood. And I didn't ever really think about the fact that it's not just his body and his blood, it is his body, blood, soul and divinity, and that is present under both species, whether it's the species of bread or the species of wine. Well the reason that distinction matters is you can have a body and blood at the scene of a car accident but what you might have there is just a corpse. But if you have a body, blood, and a soul united to that body and blood, then what you have is a person. And if you also have body, blood, soul, and divinity, then you have a divine person, you have the God-man. You have the God who has become man for our sake, present under the Eucharistic species. In other words, the Eucharist is God. The Eucharist doesn't just point to Christ, it's not just his body and blood, the Eucharist, as Cardinal Ratzinger said before he became Pope Benedict, the Eucharist is not just something, the Eucharist is someone. That's what we mean when we say Christ is really present in the Eucharist. You can be with the spirit of God anywhere, but if you want to be with the God-man, if you want to be with Christ in his body, you need to go to mass, you need to go to an adoration chapel, you need to go to the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. That's what lovers do. That's what people who are in love do. When we love someone, when we love another human being, we don't just want to be with them in spirit, we want to be with them in the body. We want to be close to them and we miss them when we are apart from them. That's the great gift that Christ has given us in the Eucharist. It's the great gift that he revealed on this day in John 6, that he wanted to

be with us not just in spirit, but in body. And in order to affect that union and that communion he's going to come to us under the miracle of the Eucharist, his body, his blood, his soul and his divinity.