

Ordinary Time 20B 2016

How Can This Man Give Us His Flesh to Eat

In today's gospel, Jesus proclaims that he is the living bread that has come down from heaven. And he says that whoever eats this bread will live forever. But then he adds that the bread he gives is his flesh for the life of the world. When the people who are listening hear these words, they argue with each other, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

People have been asking that question ever since. How is it possible for Jesus to give us his own body and blood as food and drink for eternal life? Perhaps Jesus was exaggerating. Perhaps he really meant to say that the Eucharist is simply a sign, a symbol, a memorial, but not truly his body and blood. Jesus can't mean what he says, can he? So perhaps it is better to take his words in another way.

But our Catholic faith is quite insistent. The Eucharist is not merely a symbol or a sign, or a memento of the past: it is truly the body and blood of the crucified and risen Lord under the sign of bread and wine. What we see and taste and touch are bread and wine. What we eat and drink are the body of Christ given for us, the blood of Christ poured out for us.

This is why, when we enter church, we genuflect in profound adoration to the Blessed Sacrament present in the tabernacle. This is why, when we receive the Eucharist, we approach with reverence, with awe and with holy fear. This is why this church is a holy and sacred place, none

other than the house of God; for in this place, in this tabernacle, the crucified and risen Lord, our Savior and Redeemer, is present.

There was a time, not too long ago, when Catholics rarely received the Eucharist. On a typical Sunday in the 1940s or 50s, the church would be packed but only twenty or thirty people would approach the altar for the sacrament. Most others, for whatever reason, saw themselves as unprepared or unworthy. Things began to change in the 1960s with the Second Vatican Council, and now nearly everyone approaches the altar to receive the sacrament; and this is as it should be. But sometimes I get the impression we approach this sacrament somewhat casually, that we are not aware of what we are doing, of whom we are receiving.

The sacrament we receive is not just a piece of bread; it is the very body of Christ under the appearance of bread. The wine we drink is the very blood of Christ shed for our salvation. This is why we ought to approach this sacrament with such wonder and awe, with such profound humility and thanksgiving, with reverence and devotion. This is why it makes so little sense to excuse ourselves from the Eucharist week after week. For if the bread and wine are body and blood of Christ, the promise and pledge of eternal life, why would we absent ourselves from this holy gathering?

How can this man give us his body and blood? How can the crucified and risen Lord be present in the sacrament we receive? The only answer I

can give is this: It is by the power and the grace of God. For with God all things are possible.