

**19th Sunday in Ordinary Time – August 8<sup>th</sup> 2021**  
**A Reflection by Fr Sylvester O’Flynn OFM Cap., Rochestown, Cork**

**The Bread of Eternal Life**

This is the third successive Sunday when our Gospel is taken from John Chapter 6, all about bread. John likes to start with something familiar like water, light or bread and to rise up step by step to divine life. Two weeks ago, we read about the multiplication of the loaves and fishes when Jesus fed the needs of physical hunger. Last Sunday he urged people to regard that miracle as a sign to move on to the internal hungers of the heart such as loneliness, and to the thirst of the mind such as the search for meaning. The bread for these internal hungers would be faith in Jesus as the way the truth and the life. “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry; whoever believes in me will never thirst.”

**Bread from Heaven**

In today’s Gospel (John 6:41-51) we soar higher than physical hunger or internal hunger to the bread of eternal life. The people hearing Jesus complained that he was getting beyond himself in saying that he was the bread come down from heaven. After all, they knew who he was, they knew his family. But Jesus insisted that while he grew up in Nazareth, he really came down from heaven and as such, he would be the one to raise them up to the eternal life of heaven. His audience would have inherited the story of the manna from heaven which nurtured people a day at a time. Jesus told them, “Your fathers ate the manna in the desert and they are dead; but this is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that a person may eat it and not die.” And then he came to the climax. “I am the living bread which has come down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I shall give is my flesh, for the life of the world.”

Notice the change to the future tense. Bread for the body and bread for internal hungers had already been given. The bread he now promised would not come until the Last Supper and the time of the Risen Lord.

More confused than ever, the crowd argued with one another: “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” So, Jesus repeated himself in a further six variations of his message. That means seven statements. Seven, in John’s Gospel, is the divine number as in seven great “I am” statements, and seven great miracles or signs.

**The Last Supper**

The bread that Jesus promised in the future came to realization at the Last Supper. The context is the annual Passover meal celebrating the passing of the Israelites out of Egypt and slavery, into a land and nation of their own. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to pass over from this world to the Father. His disciples found it hard to accept talk of his departure. For thirty or more years, Jesus, whom we believe to be the Word made flesh, walked the roads of this world in a real, human body. Now he assured the disciples of his continuing presence in their lives. Although his human body died, he remains in a new embodiment. What or where is this new embodiment or presence? Taking the bread, he consecrated it and gave it to them saying, “This is my body which is given up for you.” Taking the cup of wine, he consecrated it: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood poured out for you” (Luke 22:20).

## **The Real Presence**

I fear that a great many people are very confused about the real presence of Jesus in the Blessed Eucharist. If they do believe then how come that so few under sixty come to Mass? How many will return when all crowd restrictions are lifted? Will people think that watching Mass on television is the same as having to go out to church? What can replace the extraordinary privilege of Holy Communion?

## **More than a symbol**

A recent survey of US Catholics showed that seventy per cent believe that the eucharist is merely a symbolic presence. I doubt if Irish Catholics would fare any better. Symbols are great for stirring up our memory, imagination or feelings. But a symbol is not the real thing. A national flag or anthem can stir up the heart, but it is not the real thing. Jesus did not say "This is a symbol of my body." No, he said "This is my body ... this is my blood" ... the real thing. The American writer, Flannery O'Connor, was known for shooting from the hip and sometimes in colourful language. A friend one day remarked about the beautiful symbol Catholics have in the Eucharist. Flannery let fly. "If the Eucharist is only a symbol, then to hell with it!"

## **It is the Risen Lord we receive**

Some critics claim that catholic belief in eating the body of Christ is cannibalism. But Jesus anticipated this objection. "Does this upset you? What if you should see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before?" (John 6:62). In other words, we can understand the Lord's presence only in the light of the resurrection. It is the Risen Lord whom we receive, no longer walking our roads in human flesh but now embodied in the consecrated bread and wine. "This is my body ... this is my blood ... do this in memory of me." These are the words of Jesus, the foundation of our belief.

## **Prayer**

Ponder prayerfully on what Jesus said.

I am the living bread which comes from heaven ... and the bread that I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world.

My flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.

Anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in that person.

As the living Father sent me and I draw life from the Father, so whoever eats me will also draw life from me.

This is my body ... this is my blood.