

20th Sunday of Ordinary Time Bread of Life Part 4
“Real Presence and Simple Faith”

Fr. Frank Schuster

Have any of you heard of the Santuario de Chimayo just north of Sante Fe? It is a pilgrimage site that has grown in popularity in recent years. Several years back, having time off in July, I decided to drive there taking in some national parks along the way. And so, what is the story about this pilgrimage site in Chimayo? The story is, about two hundred years ago on a Good Friday, a rancher by the name of Don Bernardo was on his knees praying on a hill on his property during the night. While he was praying, he noticed a brilliant glow coming from the ground from the other side of his property a considerable distance away. He was awestruck by this and decided to check it out. When he got to the spot, the glow was gone but his feet tripped on a hole there and noticed that there was something buried in the hole. Reaching down, he finds himself lifting a beautiful wood carved crucifix. He rejoiced in his discovery by bringing the cross back to his house on the other end of the property. After praying before it, he went to bed, and the next morning the crucifix was gone. It was quite puzzling. Where did it go? Well, the next time he was on the other side of his property, he checked out the hole where he found the crucifix, and lo and behold, the crucifix was there in the hole.

Don Bernardo, puzzled by this, called the priest from nearest parish a town away. The priest came, saw the crucifix, and remarked how beautiful it was and told Bernardo that the crucifix belonged in a church. Bernardo agreed to this. The priest took the crucifix to the nearest parish the next town over and enjoyed attending to it, but not for long. The next day, the crucifix was gone. Where did they find it? The Crucifix was back in the hole on Don Bernardo's property. Bernardo invited the priest over again and suggested that maybe Jesus wanted a church built there over the hole. The priest suggested that would be a good thing for Bernardo to do! And this is what Bernardo did and this church has been there now for about two hundred years with the crucifix proudly displayed above the altar.

On the side of the church is a room with the hole where the crucifix was found. Pilgrims go there because healings have been associated with the dirt taken from there. In fact, there is a room where pilgrims have left their crutches behind in thanksgiving. The special aspect of this pilgrimage site in my mind is that Chimayo is a shrine that celebrates the triumph of simple faith. And I have found this to be true in my priesthood. We tend to get more mileage out of giving someone a holy card than a theology book. Both faith and reason are celebrated in the Catholic Church, but there are times we overthink things. At the end of the day, it is the mystery of our faith that moves our hearts.

Jesus says, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.” And the people listening to Jesus are left scratching their heads wondering what this rabbi, who claimed to be God’s son, was trying to tell them.

We are in the fourth Sunday of the Bread of Life discourse from the Gospel of St. John chapter 6. The chapter, remember, begins with the multiplication of the loaves and fish. The people were so amazed that they wanted to make him king. He feeds us, let’s put him in charge. As a result, Jesus leaves them. He wants to be our savior, not a political ruler. The next Sunday, the story continues with the people finding Jesus back in Capernaum. Jesus teaches them to stop working for food that perishes but rather work for food that endures for eternal life. We are invited to stop being so preoccupied with earthly concerns but rather start seeing our lives from God’s perspective, the big picture so to speak. Last week, the drama heated up when the multiplication of the loaves was compared to the bread from heaven that the Jews ate with Moses in the desert. More than that, Jesus said “I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.” This week, we are shocked to learn that Jesus is not speaking metaphorically. Jesus is speaking quite literally when he says, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me.”

Now we understand clearly what Jesus was thinking when he multiplied the bread. This sign points clearly to the institution of the Holy Eucharist. And, Jesus is not talking about a metaphor or a symbol. The word “flesh” in the original Greek is *sarx*. The word *sarx* can only mean “flesh”. Jesus could have used the word *soma* if he wanted to convey a concept closer to body and spirit. However, *sarx* is closer to the word “steak” than it is to the word “body”. This is why, in my mind, John chapter 6 is the most advanced treatment of the Holy Eucharist in the New Testament. Clearly, in Christ’s mind, the Eucharist is really and truly his body, blood, soul and divinity. This is the bread that has come down from heaven, in Jesus’ very person. In this way, the Promised Land is no longer a piece of real estate that God was leading Moses’ people to. The Promised Land now is eternal life in Christ because we are what we eat.

The crowd gathered was sincerely grumpy about this because Jesus was making himself out to be God. It reminds me of something Bishop Barron used to tell us while we were at seminary. He would tell us that passages like we have today force us to choose either one of two conclusions. Either Jesus is lying and therefore a really bad person to be opposed or Jesus is the Son of God and we should be on our knees. These two conclusions present themselves when we come forward to communion. Either Jesus is fully present in the Eucharist, body, blood, soul and divinity or it is all a lie.

Personally, I think sometimes we put too much thought into these things. Sometimes it is simple faith that builds a church in the middle of a desert. Sometimes it is simple faith that moves millions of people over time (myself included) to make a pilgrimage there. Sometimes the Eucharist is best understood with simple faith in our Lord who really and truly is present in the Blessed Sacrament so to be as close to us as food and drink as we make our journey towards everlasting life. And if we looked at our lives and our relationships more with simple faith how much better would our lives be? More on that next week as we wrap up the Bread of Life discourse, stay tuned!