

EUCHARIST: Spirit and Life

Last in a series of 5

August 25, 2024

This year, the Lectionary takes us through the Gospel of Mark—except for a five-week stretch of summer Sundays when we read John, Chapter 6. This offers us an opportunity for an extended reflection on the Bread of Life—the Eucharist. In this series, we reflect on this central mystery of our faith.

THIS SAYING IS HARD

For five weeks now, we have been reading the sixth chapter of St. John. Jesus multiplies the loaves and fishes for the multitude, and then, little by little, he leads the people into the mystery of his Body and Blood—his abiding presence in the Eucharist. This teaching is a breaking point for some. Not only is Jesus talking about feeding people with his Body and Blood, but he is talking about sacrifice and death. And that is not what people are looking for in a Messiah. “This saying is hard; who can accept it?” The answer is, not everyone can, and even some of Jesus’ disciples part ways with him. Jesus says to the Twelve, “do you also want to leave?” Peter answers for all of the Apostles. He does not claim to understand Jesus’ teaching about his Body and Blood. But he does know that no one else speaks like Jesus. Only Jesus has “words of eternal life.” Only Jesus is “the Holy One of God.”

EUCHARISTIC FAITH

The Eucharist is still a “hard saying.” There are still controversies and debates in our own time. Within the Church, there are sometimes different understandings of what it means to be Eucharistic people. At the same time, though, the Eucharist is the source of our unity. Indeed, “the Eucharist makes the Church” (Catechism 1396).

The Eucharist is not easy. How could it be? To believe in the Real Presence is an act of faith in the power and presence of God. “Sight has failed, nor thought conceives,” wrote St. Thomas Aquinas. We see the signs—bread and wine—but only faith can discern the reality, Christ’s living presence in the Eucharist. St. John Henry Newman could say with total confidence, “I have no doubt whatever on my mind about the Gift which that Sacrament contains,” because he relied on the teaching and faith of saints, doctors, and martyrs down through the ages: “I cast my lot with them. I believe as they.”



Raphael, *Disputation of the Sacrament* (1509-10), Vatican City. There is a lot going on here—above, seated upon clouds of cherubs, we see the Holy Trinity, Mary, John the Baptist, along with prophets, apostles, and martyrs. Below, there are crowds of philosophers, popes, and more. But the focus of their attention—and of Raphael’s fresco—is a simple monstrance containing a host. The Eucharist is at the center of the painting, a link between earth and heaven. The Church has never stopped discussing, pondering, wondering, learning, and adoring the Eucharist—and never will.

EUCHARISTIC CONSEQUENCES

The Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist has consequences. It changes how we see those in the pews around us: we are no longer strangers, but family, one Body in Christ. The Eucharist changes how we respond to the poor: “Remember that he who said *this is my body*, and made good his words, also said, *You saw me hungry and gave me no food*” (St. John Chrysostom, 4th c). The Eucharist changes how we look at the universe around us: “The Eucharist joins heaven and earth; it embraces and penetrates all creation... the Eucharist is also a source of light and motivation for our concerns for the environment, directing us to be stewards of all creation” (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, 236).

The Eucharist is the foretaste of the heavenly banquet, the pledge of the world to come, and the transformative presence of Christ in our lives and our community, here and now. The Eucharist changes everything.

—Corinna Laughlin

THE FAITH OF THE SAINTS

Our Lord doesn’t come down from heaven every day just to wait there in a gold ciborium; he has found a much better heaven for his resting-place; a Christian soul, made in his own image, the living temple of the Blessed Trinity.

—St. Therese of Lisieux (1873-1897)