

Bread from heaven

Feast of Corpus Christi, June 23, 2019

The Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will 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, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever." - John 6:47-58

At the end of this Solemn High Mass, following the post-communion prayer, I will open the door of the Tabernacle, remove a consecrated Eucharistic Host, and place the Host in the eye of our beautiful, and recently refurbished, monstrance. Then I will be vested in what is known as a humeral veil. It prevents my hands from touching the monstrance while raising it, with the Blessed Sacrament, for our adoration. We will then go together in procession out into the world.

This ritual for the Feast of Corpus Christi has medieval origins. One author invites us to imagine a time in which the consecrated bread "*was largely kept in the protective custody of the clergy ... Only rarely was sacred bread distributed to the laity, and then under stringent conditions. Most churchgoers took Communion just once a year. As if to compensate for lack of tangible access ... the host [assumed] a growing visual presence that had a power of its own.*"¹

Our own procession to the garden altar today could be viewed as only a vestige. Processions in former times would have been a matter of great festivity and devotion for entire communities. Today, by contrast, some of our good neighbors from the non-denominational church across the street, leaving their own worship, may gaze across the busy traffic on LaSalle and catch sight of the monstrance under the gold canopy, and ask: "What could they possibly be doing over there?"

What is it that we are doing over here? If those of us who take part 'over here' are alert and blessed in the Corpus Christi procession, we may still be touched by at least a bit of the awe and wonder originally evoked on this day. That awe and wonder may even be of the kind felt by some in the crowd who heard the bread of life teachings of Jesus from which today's Gospel text is taken: "*I am the living bread that came down from heaven.*"

As much as our Corpus Christi devotion may raise up a lofty and reverent view of Christ in the sacrament – and I hope it does – our understanding of and devotion to it are not complete unless we also raise up a compelling view of Christ in the Sacrament *in us*. The

living bread ‘came down from heaven.’ And later in the gospel text, Jesus says, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them ... “

It could therefore be said that, rightly understood, when we gaze on Christ in the sacramental Host in the monstrance, we are also contemplating and gazing upon ourselves, the continuing Body of Christ in the world. The Orthodox theologian and liturgist Alexander Shmemann sought to provoke this view when he wrote: “*The Purpose of the Eucharist lies not in the change of the bread and wine, but in the partaking of Christ, who has become our food, our life, the manifestation of the Church as the body of Christ.*”²

Some of you here will remember a former Suffragan Bishop in the Diocese of Chicago by the name of Bill Wiedrich. He had previously served as Rector of Grace Church, on the capitol square up in Madison, Wisconsin, where I also served, more than fifteen years later. Even after so long, many Father Wiedrich stories were still circulating and still informing the faith and lives of members there.

One of the most enduring stories was of the Sunday on which Father Wiedrich distributed two Communion Hosts to everyone at the rail. He prepared them in advance during his sermon: “*In the one Host, take for yourself the bread that came down from heaven. And then take the other host out into the world. I’m sure,*” he said, “*that you won’t have any trouble finding someone who is starved for mercy, someone who has lost his or her way, someone who is being eaten alive by resentment or despair, someone who is heartbroken. Give them the Bread of Life!*”

If we Christians are who we say we are, then we also are the bread that came down from heaven, for a world that is still starving.

You and I, also, could make up a long list of pastoral or theological or canonical reasons why a priest should not give communicants more than one Host. But I gather we can all comprehend Father Wiedrich’s vision and intention.

In that same spirit and with that same intention, I wonder if you can briefly imagine yourself in the eye of the monstrance—not displacing the bread that came down from heaven but there in it and with it because you have known Christ and been nourished by Christ and are, by God’s grace, becoming Christ-like.

Imagine with me that Jesus himself is the one bearing the monstrance, carrying you out from this worship that we share, out into a world of starved souls, waiting and hungry for you to feed them with the bread of life – with truth and love and justice and mercy, in Christ’s name. *Amen.*

¹ *Mystical manna, radiating salvation*, Holland Cotter, NYT, July 4, 2013.

² Alexander Schmemann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*

