

Homily for the 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B

By Bishop Victor Galeone of St. Augustine

In October 1972 a charter flight from Uruguay was crossing the Andes Mountains to Chile. It never reached its destination. All forty passengers on board were presumed dead. But 72 days later, 16 emerged alive to tell how they had survived on the snowcapped slope where their plane had crashed. The world was stunned to learn their story. For food, they had eaten the flesh of the passengers who had died in the crash.

In today's gospel, Jesus' listeners are likewise stunned to learn the incredible promise that he makes: One day he will give a special bread for them to eat – a bread that in reality will be his own flesh. Is it any wonder that they object, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

Before examining the Lord's reply, let's place today's gospel passage in its proper context of John, chapter six. There's a unified theme closely linking the three parts of this chapter.

First, the chapter begins with Jesus feeding the crowd of 5,000 by multiplying five small loaves of bread. Normally, bread results from a long and tedious process – beginning with spring planting and ending in an oven. But Jesus' simple blessing dispenses with both time and effort. His action is a resounding declaration: "I can suspend the laws of nature for BREAD!"

Next, later that night, while the disciples are struggling to steer their boat on the storm-swept sea, Jesus comes walking towards them on the surface of the water. This is the strangest of all the gospel miracles. To walk on water seems to smack of what occurs in pagan myths. What's the point? A most important one, actually: The law of gravity mandates that weighty objects seek their rest at the lowest possible level. By preventing his body from sinking, Jesus was implicitly declaring: "I can suspend the laws of nature for my BODY."

Later that afternoon, some of the crowd that had been fed, came to Jesus on the other side of the lake in order to make him their "bread king." Jesus used the occasion to promise that someday he would give a special BREAD that would be his own BODY. (Jn. 6:51)

In short, when he fed those hungry thousands with only five small loaves, he proved, "I can do what I want with bread." And by walking on the water, he confirmed, "I can do what I want with my body." That afternoon, he drew the logical conclusion: "Someday, I will give a special bread that in reality is my body."

When did Jesus fulfill the awesome promise he made that afternoon? At the Last Supper, when he blessed the bread and wine saying: "Take, eat. This is my body...Take, drink. This is the cup of my blood..."

For almost 2,000 years the Church has firmly taught that whenever the priest at Mass does what Jesus did at the Last Supper, the bread and wine are changed in substance to the Lord's true flesh and blood, even though the accidentals of the bread and wine remain. Does this seem incredible? Perhaps the following illustration might shed some light on this marvel:

You grasp an iron bar. How do you know that it's iron? From its weight, its color, and its hardness. But in outer space, the bar becomes weightless, and in a blast furnace it becomes a red-hot liquid. Is it still iron? Yes, of course, for its substance remains the same. Only the accidentals (weight, color, hardness) have changed.

In the blast furnace of God's love at Mass, the reverse of this takes place. The accidentals of the bread and wine stay the same; the substance changes into the Lord's own body and blood. This marvelous change the Church calls transubstantiation.*

Ever since that afternoon of the promise at Capernaum, many have refused to take Jesus at his word. Some have said that the Eucharist only represents him, just as the Stars and Stripes represent our country. However, someone who burns our country's flag is charged with desecrating the flag, not our country. But in 1 Corinthians, St. Paul emphatically states: "Whoever eats this bread or drinks of the cup of the Lord unworthily will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord." (11:27)

Furthermore, if Jesus had meant a mere symbolic eating of his flesh, why did he allow his listeners to take him so literally? Elsewhere in John's gospel, whenever Jesus' listeners had understood him incorrectly, the misunderstanding was corrected at once:

In John 2, when Jesus told the chief priests – standing in the Temple courtyard – "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up," they thought he meant the temple of stone. So the evangelist added the clarification that he was referring to the temple of his risen body.

In the next chapter, when Nicodemus concluded that Jesus had in mind a physical rebirth ("Surely, a grown man cannot enter his mother's womb a second time to be born."), Jesus pointed out that he had meant a spiritual rebirth.

And in the eleventh chapter, when the disciples understood that Jesus wanted to awaken Lazarus from natural slumber, he had to specify that he had meant the sleep of death.

But when his listeners at Capernaum objected, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" far from correcting any misunderstanding, Jesus went on to reinforce his statement by adding that they had to drink his blood as well – something utterly abhorrent to a devout Jew!

When they refused to accept this "intolerable teaching," Jesus allowed them to walk off and leave him. He did not call them back so that he might restate his message to make it more palatable, by rationalizing: "Wait, you're misunderstanding me! I'm only referring to a symbolic eating of my flesh." No, he turned to the twelve and asked, "Do you want to leave me, too?" Why was Jesus prepared to risk so much – even the loss of his chosen twelve? The only possible answer is that the presence he spoke of was not symbolic but real.

I fear that this homily has been more an affair of the head than of the heart. Recent surveys indicate that many Catholics are entertaining serious doubts about the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. So I wanted to use this occasion to reinforce what the Church has taught from the

very beginning. A serious examination of the sixth chapter of John leaves no room for doubt that Jesus is really, truly and substantially present in the Eucharist – the Sacrament his Love.

Love demands union. The greater the love, the more intimate is the union desired. The lover longs to be joined to the beloved – in thought, in letters, in phone conversations, in physical presence, and ultimately – in spousal love – through the love embrace between husband and wife. So much does Jesus love us that he conceals himself under what looks like bread in order to ravish us in the love embrace of Holy Communion!

Such was the meaning of one of the early Church Fathers, St. John Chrysostom, when he wrote: “How many of you say, I would like to see his face, his garments, his sandals. You do see him, you touch him, you eat him. He gives himself to you, not only that you may see him – but also to be your food and your nourishment.”

* As used in this analogy, “substance” does not refer to the chemical substance of the iron bar or of the bread. Rather, it refers to the basic reality of the thing, i.e., what it is in itself. You might not recognize me if I don a disguise, but I still remain the person I was – my substance remains unchanged.