



A PASTORAL NOTE
BY ARCHBISHOP SAMUEL J. AQUILA, S.T.L.



You Have the Words of
ETERNAL LIFE

“ I am the bread of life...For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him” (Jn 6:35a; 55-56 ESVCE). The sixth chapter of the Gospel of John provides us with the clearest teaching on the Eucharist. As we enter this second year of the National Eucharistic Revival, the Parish Year, I want to provide you this pastoral note on two passages of the Gospel that I hope you will take to Eucharistic adoration to pray with and to listen to the words of Jesus. My prayer for you is that like the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35) your hearts may burn with love for Jesus as you listen to him, as your teacher, and learn from him (Mt 11:29), both at Mass and at adoration in your parish.

Recently at a dinner with a group of people, we were discussing the Eucharistic Revival and I brought up the passage from John 6. While they were vaguely aware of the teaching, they did not know the depth of it, nor did they know that it caused division among Jesus’ disciples. Jesus makes clear in John 6 the truth of his real presence in the Eucharist, and he never waters it down or speaks of it as a sign or symbol. Disciples who followed Jesus saw it as a hard teaching, and “...many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him” (Jn 6:66).

In this second phase of the revival, the emphasis is on the Eucharist and the parish. The reason for this is that the parish is the home of the local celebration of the Mass and the Mass is the home of the Eucharist. Said another way, the Eucharist is at the heart of parish life and is without a doubt the most common place the faithful encounter Jesus’ presence in the Eucharist. In every parish in the diocese the Eucharist is celebrated each Sunday and of our 108 parishes, 70 plus parishes have some form of adoration each week and over 12 have perpetual adoration. It is from the Mass and from adoration that we are sent into the world to bring the love of Jesus to the world.

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JN 6:35A; 55-56 ESVCE

A CRISIS OF FAITH

Pope Francis recently lamented that “Sadly...there are those among the Catholic faithful who believe the Eucharist is more a symbol than the reality of the Lord’s presence and love...[T]he Eucharist is God’s response to the deepest hunger of the human heart, the hunger for authentic life, for in the Eucharist Christ himself is truly in our midst, to nourish, console and sustain us on our journey.”¹

I am reminded of the words of Pope Benedict XVI’s to the Church in Germany in 2011. He commended the Germans for being “superbly organized” and prophetically said, “We must honestly admit that we have more than enough by way of structure but not enough by way of Spirit. I would add: the real crisis facing the Church in the western world is a crisis of faith.”²

This crisis of faith exists today, and we are called to believe. We are called to put our faith in Jesus Christ and in his word. When Jesus, in John 6, asks the Twelve if they, too, want to leave after listening to him, Peter responds, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God” (Jn 6:67-69). How I desire for that faith, that love, that confidence to burn in the heart of every believer!

¹ Francis, “Greeting of his Holiness Pope Francis to the Organizing Committee of the National Eucharistic Congress in the United States of America,” June 19, 2023, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/june/documents/20230619-comitato-congeuc-usa.html>

² Benedict XVI, “Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI,” Sept. 24, 2011, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110924_zdk-freiburg.html.

LET JESUS BE THE TEACHER

In acknowledging the crisis of faith and that the crisis extends to lack of faith in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, we must ask the Lord, what must we do? In the Bread of Life discourse, Jesus says, “It is written in the Prophets, ‘And they will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me” (Jn 6:45).

When we were praying and discerning Jesus’ plan for the Eucharistic Revival in the Archdiocese of Denver, my attention was drawn first to the Bread of Life discourse in John 6 and then to the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24. In my heart I heard the words, “Let Jesus be the teacher.” I cannot stress enough how important it is for us during this Eucharistic Revival to have frequent recourse to these two passages and to approach them with the heart of a true disciple. I am convicted that Jesus desires to teach each one of us and reveal his eucharistic mystery more deeply.

JOHN 6

In John 6, we encounter Jesus’ direct teaching on the Eucharist. If anyone would question whether the Church’s teaching accurately represents Jesus’ own teaching, look no further than this chapter where Jesus says:

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh...Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.”

JN 6:51, 53-56

Jesus is emphatic in his teaching and consistent in his claims. It is difficult to understand how a believer reading this passage could come away with a different understanding of the Eucharist than what the Church teaches. If they did, their conclusions must be drawn from a flat experience of the sacrament or a lack of belief that God is faithful to his word. Jesus states clearly, “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe” (Jn 6:63b-64).

Today we are witnessing a very beautiful and public questioning and reflecting on John 6 by several courageous and deeply faithful non-Catholic Christian pastors. Most notably, Francis Chan, an evangelical pastor, has been very open about his journey with the Lord and his growing understanding of John 6. The most beautiful part of the story is that it is Jesus' own teaching in the Gospel which moves Chan's heart and inspires him to press deeper into the mystery Jesus is revealing.

It is this same disposition that I hope we can bring to the Word of God, one that is able to take Jesus' words at face value and not dismiss them as if full assent to them is optional. This is the truth which Jesus places before us: He gave us his flesh to eat and his blood to drink so that we might have eternal life. The Eucharist appears as bread and wine, and it is truly the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus Christ. The second Person of the Trinity, our Risen Lord, is truly present, which leads me to Emmaus.

THE ROAD TO EMMAUS

The story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus has always been one of my favorite resurrection passages because it parallels so well the celebration of the Mass.³ Here again, we find Jesus coming as the teacher and revealer of the mysteries of the Kingdom of God. Jesus encounters the two disciples and listens to their sadness over the crucifixion. After he listens, "... beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Lk 24:27). How I wish we would have had a full recording of what Jesus said, but we do in that we open the Scriptures and pray with them letting his word teach us. Not coincidentally, every celebration of the Eucharist is preceded by an opportunity to enter the Word of God. At every Mass, Jesus desires to break open his word for you just as he did for the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

We are reminded in that verse, that the law and the prophets lead to the Messiah. We are certainly not limited to a few key Gospel stories and some important episodes from the Old Testament to increase our understanding and love for Jesus in the Eucharist. Rather, God has ordered all things, but especially Revelation to point to the mystery of Christ. Any time we engage the Scriptures we avail our hearts to be moved deeper in love for Jesus Christ and what he has accomplished

³ For a more thorough treatment of this passage in relation to the Eucharistic Revival, please see the pastoral note, "Were not our Hearts Burning?"

for us.

The story of the disciples meeting Jesus on the Road to Emmaus concludes with a beautiful insight into what is to happen at every celebration of the Mass:

“And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem. And they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, saying ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!’ Then they told what had happened on the road and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.”

LK 24:33-35

When the disciples recognize Jesus’ presence in the Eucharist and the burning in their own hearts while Jesus was with them, they return to Jerusalem. They become missionary disciples proclaiming Jesus to the world. We, too, are called to do the same. Pope Francis prays for us that the Eucharistic Revival “...will be an occasion for the faithful to commit themselves with ever great zeal to being missionary disciples of the Lord Jesus in the world. In the Eucharist, we encounter the One who gave everything for us, who sacrificed himself in order to give us life, who loved us to the end.”⁴ We are called to go out into the world among the poor, the sick, the immigrant, those in jail, those on the “peripheries” to bring them the good news of Jesus Christ, the one alone who can give meaning and purpose to life, who reveals the Father’s eternal unconditional love for every human being. Jesus today still desires to rescue us and heal us most especially in the Eucharist.

A NEW RESOURCE

Throughout the history of our Church, praying with Scripture has proved to be a fruitful method of growing in knowledge and love of God. St. Paul teaches, that the “the word of God is living and effective” (Heb 4:12), and that, “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). Confident in Jesus’ promise and the power of his words, I am excited to introduce a new resource the Archdiocese of Denver has created to assist the faithful in praying with the sixth chapter of the Gospel of St. John. The John 6 resource is composed of three sections: The context, the six sessions, and an application

⁴ Francis, “To the Organizing Committee of the National Eucharistic Congress in the United States”

section.

The first section sets the context for the Bread of Life discourse by briefly explaining the Passover and its great importance in the history of God's people. The Passover and Exodus are foundational to our understanding of the Eucharist and what Christ is accomplishing for us in the Mass. The section concludes with an introduction to relational prayer and makes clear that our intention in praying with John 6 is to grow in understanding, to be transformed, to enter more deeply into the mystery Jesus is inviting us into.

The second section is composed of the six sessions. The entire sixth chapter is broken into six sessions in order to focus our prayer on different themes. Each session includes the biblical text to be prayed with, a summary of the key details in the passage, and then some questions to consider. The questions are of two kinds: questions to ask Jesus about the passage and questions to allow Jesus to ask you. It is my hope that these questions will aid us in dialoguing with the Lord and build the habit of speaking with him conversationally. Each session concludes with reflection questions to help us recall and focus on what we have received in the prayer.

The final section is an appendix which offers suggestions on using the resource in different ministry settings and with different methods of prayer. The resource could easily be utilized by an individual as well as a small group or even a family. The different methods of praying Scripture also provide a diversity of options which will more effectively help different audiences to engage Jesus' words and the scenes given to us in the Gospel.

CONCLUSION

We must grow in our conviction that Jesus is God and has the words of everlasting life. I encourage all the faithful in the parish year of the Eucharistic Revival to take time to pray with Jesus' words in John 6 and the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Jesus is the greatest teacher, and his words are true, for he is "the way, the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6). I pray that our eyes and hearts are opened to a deeper understanding and to greater participation in the mystery of the Eucharist, the love of Jesus given and poured out for us.

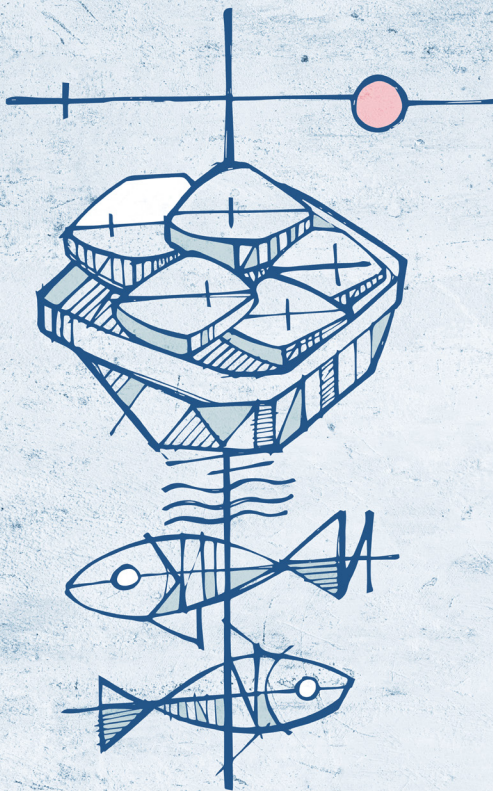


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