

## Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ – Year A –

There is bread for today and food for eternal life

### Introduction



When we enter a building we immediately realize what function it is assigned to. A classroom is decorated differently from an infirmary, a discotheque, an office. It is easy to recognize a church: the altar and the tabernacle to house the Eucharist, the paintings and the statues of saints and the baptistery. The sacred vessels allow us to identify immediately the environment dedicated to prayer, worship, and devotional practices.

However, the architecture and excessive decor of some of our churches do not always suggest the idea of the place where the community is called to be fed at the double table of the word and the bread.

Whoever enters the chapels in use in the African forests immediately captures this message. The chapels are bare and unadorned huts built with mud and straw. I recall them with nostalgia. The stakes that serve as seats are arranged in a circle to promote the unity of the assembly and to ensure that the participants face each other and not turn their backs. The altar is at the center. It is a table, certainly the best in the village, but simple and poor. A lectern, with the lectionary, opened on the day's reading, is on the altar. Nothing else.

Here they have clearly marked: the two loaves or, if we like, the only bread in two forms or the double table. These are the signs: the altar of the Eucharist, the lectionary of the Word.

The Second Vatican Council has recalled it: "The Church has never failed to take the bread of life, taking it from the table both of the Word of God and the body of Christ and offer it to the faithful" (DV 21).

To internalize the message, we repeat:

*“The material bread keeps us alive for another day; the word of God gives eternal life.”*

-----1st Reading | 2nd Reading | Gospel  
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**First reading: Deuteronomy 8:2-3,14b-16a**

Deuteronomy presents itself as a collection of speeches by Moses on Mount Nebo before he died. It was actually written many centuries later, in the years immediately prior to the end of the monarchy and the destruction of Jerusalem. It is a reflection on the events of the Exodus which aims to give light to the dramatic situation that Israel is living: It is surrounded by enemies and coming close to ruin. What to do in such a difficult time?

In the book of Deuteronomy, a heartfelt invitation is repeatedly addressed to the people: remember, do not forget. Look at your past, consider what God has done, keep in mind the wonders he accomplished in your favor, always remember his works of salvation: “Remember that you were once enslaved in the land of Egypt, from where Yahweh, your God, brought you out with his powerful hand and outstretched arm” (Dt 5:15). “Recall the days of old, think of the years gone by; your father will teach you about them, your elders will enlighten you” (Dt 32:7).

This recommendation is insistently repeated also in today’s reading. The memory of the severe hardships faced in the desert and the providential interventions of God is intended to instill confidence and hope in the present moment.

The description of the difficulty is particularly alive: the desert that opened wide before the Israelites was “great and terrible, full of fiery serpents and scorpions, and arid land where there is no water” (v. 15). If they had to rely only on their own strength and their ability, they would certainly perish. From where did salvation come?

The reading answers: from “that which comes from the mouth of the Lord” (v. 13). The expression, a bit enigmatic for us, was rather well-known in Egypt where it showed the power of the word of God to create completely new nourishment.

Bread was known but the manna was a mysterious, unknown and unexpected food. It miraculously appeared in the wilderness. The Israelites had seen this as a gift “coming from the mouth of the Lord.”

With this amazing food, he wanted to humiliate and to test his people (vv. 2-3).

As was promised, Israel had settled in a fertile country, “a land of streams and rivers, of subterranean waters that gush forth in the valleys and mountains, a land of wheat and barley, of grapes and figs, of pomegranates and olives, a land of oil and honey” (Dt 8:7-8). Instead of being grateful and blessing the

Lord, Israel had forgotten him. After “having built comfortable homes and live in them, when your livestock have multiplied, when you have silver and gold in abundance and an increase in good things of every kind, your heart became proud and forgot God” (Dt 8:13-14).

Progress, prosperity, beautiful and cozy houses, pleasant life are judged positively in this text but the danger of wealth and well-being is denounced because instead of leading to God, they make him forgotten.

That’s the reason for the invitation to remember, to take into account the experience of the desert. There God taught simplicity, the essentials to his people. He made them understand what are the basic needs and what stems from avarice, greed, craving for possession and accumulation. The induced needs, the superfluous, the sloth, and the life of pleasure move people away from God.

“All these things—says Paul—were written as a warning for us” (1 Cor 10:11). The invitation to remember and not to forget is addressed also to us. The forty years spent by the people of Israel in the desert represent, according to the biblical symbolism, an entire generation and, therefore, our whole life.

During our “exodus” to the “heavenly dwelling that lasts forever” (2 Cor 5:1), the Lord offers also to us a completely new food, other than those that man has always known and experienced, a food “coming from the mouth of the Lord” coming from heaven like manna: his Word become bread.

### **Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 10:16-17**

It is difficult that full agreement and perfect harmony always reign in the Christian communities. It’s inevitable that, even in the unity of faith, diverse views emerge. It is especially true when it comes to theological interpretations and moral choices to make. It happened also in Corinth, where the issue of meat sacrificed to idols was much debated.

The community was made up of converted pagans whose family members and friends continued to offer sacrifices to idols. The question was whether, in order not to be considered anti-social and not to be marginalized, one could participate in these ceremonies. There was discussion on the legality of buying from the market meat sacrificed to the gods.

In Corinth, they do not only have different opinions, but they take offense, they get excommunicated and cursed. The situation had become so hot that brought Paul to intervene—how to convince the Corinthians to maintain unity and respect to each other despite the diversity of opinions.

The Apostle resorts to a stronger argument at his disposal: the celebration of the Eucharist. It is from this one bread, shared by the brothers, that the community’s need for unity is born: “The bread is one, and so we, though many, form one body, sharing the one bread” (v. 17).

The Eucharist is not a bread that can be eaten alone. It is bread broken and shared with the brothers of the community and this assumes that all should strive to be truly “one heart and one soul” (Acts 4:32).

Note well: it is the bread broken that creates unity. While it holds the brothers in one body, it is also a sign of distinction and call to respect and value diversities.

Further on in the same letter, Paul will invite the Corinthians to consider as sign of God's benevolence and gift of the Spirit the manifestation in the community of different charisms, ministries, and services. The diversity serves common usefulness and should lead to unity: "As the body is one, having many members, and all the members, while being many, form one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Cor 12:4-12).

### **Gospel: John 6:51-58**

This passage is the concluding part of the so-called discourse on the bread of life, taught by Jesus in the synagogue of Capernaum, after the multiplication of the loaves and fishes.

The miracle aroused great wonder, which resulted in an uncontrollable enthusiasm and dangerous collective exaltation: the people saw the sign; they decided to take him by force to make him king (Jn 6:14-15).

Why do these amazed and admiring crowds seek Jesus? One might answer: because they understood that the power of God acts in him. They, therefore, believe in him. In reality, they are victims of a dangerous misconception. They are moved by an immature faith. They are interested in Jesus just because they think he is able to satisfy, through miracles, their material needs.

Mature faith is something else. It is that of those who understand that Jesus does not perform miracles to impress but to introduce a deeper reality. In the healing of the man born blind, the true believer realizes that Jesus is presented as the light of the world; in the water turned into wine, he discovers the gift of the Spirit, the source of joy; in the resuscitation of Lazarus, he understands that Jesus is the Lord of life; in the bread distributed to the hungry people, he beholds Jesus, the nourishment that satisfies.

Instead, in Capernaum, the crowd does not understand. It stops at the outward appearance, the surface of the event. It needs to be helped to move from the search of the "food that perishes" to what "lasts for eternal life" (Jn 6:27). A difficult task, but Jesus attempts it.

He starts presenting himself as the bread of life which comes from heaven (Jn 6:33-35). He declares that whoever listens to him, assimilates his message, his gospel, feeds himself of the words of life. Whoever feeds on other words—even if enjoyable and captivating—ingests poisons of death.

His statement is not listened to. For the Jews, the bread that came down from heaven is the manna (Ps 78:24) and the food that nourishes is the word of God (Is 55:1-3). How can "the son of Joseph claim such right?"—they ask indignantly. Who does he want to be? (Jn 6:42). Even the Samaritan woman had reacted in a similar way: "Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob?" (Jn 4:12).

Instead of mitigating his claim, Jesus makes an even more surprising statement. The bread to eat is not only his doctrine but his own flesh. "The bread I shall give is my flesh, and I will give it for the life of the world." These are the opening words of today's passage (v. 51).

To avoid misconception (not to be led to imagine a cannibalistic act), it should be noted that when the Bible says that “man is flesh” (Gen 6:3), there is no reference to the fact that he is covered with muscles, but that he is weak, fragile, precarious, subject to death. For example, in the face of the Israelites’ moral misery, God—says the Psalmist with bold anthropomorphism—appeases his wrath, and restrains his fury because “he remembers that they were but flesh, a breeze that passes and never returns” (Ps 78:39). When, in the prolog of his Gospel, John says that “the word was made flesh” (Jn 1:14) he refers to the lowering of the Son of God, his descent to the lowest level. He underlines his acceptance of the most fleeting aspects of the human condition.

Eating this God made flesh means recognizing that the revelation of God comes into the world through “the carpenter’s son” and to welcome this wisdom coming from heaven.

Even after this clarification, however, the scandalous aspect of the proposal of Jesus remains. How can one “eat his person”? The shocked reaction of the listeners is understandable and justified. “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (v. 52). They understand that he is not only referring to the spiritual assimilation of God’s revelation, but also to a real “eating.” What does he mean?

Jesus does not care about their embarrassment. He reaffirms what he has already said, adding an even more provocative demand: it is necessary to drink his blood (vv. 52-56). Many biblical texts strictly prohibit the practice of drinking blood “for the life of the flesh is in the blood” (Lev 17:10-11), and life does not belong to man, but to God. It is therefore about assimilating his life.

It is at this point that the discourse on the Eucharist is inserted.

Before explaining the meaning that, in his speech, Jesus gives to this sacrament “fount and summit of all Christian life” I would warn the readers of some reductive and even misleading interpretations. These are derived from a certain devotional and intimate catechesis, not supported by biblical foundations. I refer to the eucharistic spirituality that spoke of the “divine prisoner,” that exhorted people to go to church to “keep company, to console Jesus.” The Eucharist is not intended to capture Jesus to keep him closer, to have a chance to convince him to grant graces, to take advantage of the fact that “he came to visit us”, that “he came in our hearts.” It was established as food to eat and even when it is exposed for adoration (preferably in the pyx in which it was consecrated than in the monstrance), it is to be consummated as food. Only in this way it retains its authentic meaning.

If we start from the observation that, to attain union of life with Christ, faith in his word is sufficient, then we rightly ask: why is it necessary to receive the sacrament? Why has Jesus added a rather difficult to understand request: to eat his flesh and drink his blood in the signs of bread and wine?

We know that, for lack of priests, on Sunday many Christian communities do not gather around the table of the bread of the Eucharist, but around the Word of God. We are confident that they receive an abundance of life from this unique food available to them.

It is important that, in v. 54, Jesus says that whoever eats his flesh and drinks his blood has eternal life, just as v. 47 states that the same result is achieved by those who believe in his word. Why then the Eucharist?

First of all, it must be emphasized that this sacrament—that really makes the Risen Christ present—does not substitute the faith in the word of Christ. Receiving Holy Communion is not equivalent to performing a magic ritual. The host is not some kind of pill that works automatically and heals the sick, even if asleep or unconscious.

It is not enough to make many communions to receive the grace of the Lord. Jesus did not say to make many communions, but to “eat his flesh and drink his blood.”

That’s the reason why, before receiving the Eucharistic bread, it is necessary to listen to and meditate on a Gospel passage. The reading of the word of God is the essential premise.

When one signs a contract, enters into an alliance, one must first know and carefully evaluate all the clauses. Whoever agrees to become one person with Christ in the sacrament, must be aware of the proposal made to him, and take a firm decision to accept it. It is the meaning of the heartfelt recommendation of Paul: “Let each one, then, examine himself before eating of the bread and drinking from the cup. Otherwise, he eats and drinks his own condemnation” (1 Cor 11:28-29).

The gesture to reach out to receive the consecrated bread is the sign of the interior disposition to accept Christ and to ensure that his thoughts become our thoughts, his words our words, his choices our choices. In the sign of the Eucharist, his person is assimilated, as is the case with the bread.

The change, the metamorphosis will take place very slowly. The process will be marked by successes and failures but the humble listening to the Word and communion with the Body of Christ will accomplish the miracle. One day, the disciple will relish the transformation performed in him by the Spirit at work in the sacrament and he will exclaim, like Paul: Now “it is no longer me; Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

**- See more at: <http://bibleclaret.org/celebrating-the-word-of-god#sthash.XwLRKWqQ.dpuf>**

Fr. Fernando Armellini - <http://bibleclaret.org>