

Thirteenth Week of Ordinary Time
June 30, 2024
Year of the Most Holy Eucharist
Reflection #27

“I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died; this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.’ The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us [his] flesh to eat?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks, my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever.’” (John 6:48-58)

Last weekend I asked you read the sixth chapter of Saint John’s Gospel paying special attention to the reaction of those listeners who heard Jesus’ words that day. It was my intention for you to notice the escalation of resistance offered by those who were the first to hear Jesus. There is a cause-and-effect process which can be seen. The more Jesus insists His Flesh and Blood are real and must be eaten, the more the listeners fight among themselves and resist. Their resistance moves Jesus to repeat His words insisting they eat His Flesh and drink His Blood. Let us take a moment and consider this dynamic taking place before our eyes.

We must begin with the acknowledgement of an important fact: our English translation of the original Biblical languages, at times, does not convey the same degree of intensity as the original words used. Please know that Jesus, we believe, spoke Aramaic which is related to Hebrew. The Gospel of Saint John was written in Greek which would have been the language most common at the time. Therefore, we can understand the dilemma as scholars tried to assign English words hoping to convey the same understanding. Let us focus upon two examples found within these ten verses. The first occurs with our translated word “quarreled.” What Jesus has said publicly, eating His Flesh, would have both shocked and scandalized His listeners. His words would have contradicted their teachings. *“And whatsoever man there be of the children of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn among you, which hunteth and catcheth any beast or fowl that may be eaten; he shall even pour out the blood thereof, and cover it with dust. For it is the life of all flesh; the blood of it is for the life thereof: therefore I said unto the children of Israel, Ye shall eat the blood of no manner of flesh: for the life of all flesh is the blood thereof: whosoever eateth it shall be cut off.”* (Leviticus 17:13-14 KJV). *“Only be sure that thou eat not the blood: for the blood is the life; and thou mayest not eat the life with the flesh. Thou shalt not eat it; thou shalt pour it upon the earth as water. Thou shalt not eat it; that it may go well with thee, and with thy children after thee, when thou shalt do that which is right in the sight of the LORD.”* (Deuteronomy 12:23-25 KJV). Our English translation would convey a better understanding if we used the words “argued/fought” or something similar to these. Those around Jesus are having a heated discussion due to His statement.

The second example occurs with our English word “eat” which does not convey the graphic detail of the Greek word “*trōgein*.” This Greek word would not have been used to describe a fine dining experience. It is more common to use this word to describe a more animalistic form of eating flesh — to gnaw, chew or munch upon a thing. As so many have noted, this phrase, now more graphic to His listeners, would appear more akin to His desiring them to resort to the abhorrent practice of cannibalism. Cannibalism was understood to be an extreme sign of punishment from God. Only those most accursed would have need to practice this. “*And if ye will not for all this hearken unto me, but walk contrary unto me; then I will walk contrary unto you also in fury; and I, even I, will chastise you seven times for your sins. And ye shall eat the flesh of your sons, and the flesh of your daughters shall ye eat.*” (Leviticus 26:27-29 KJV).

We may be tempted to insert our own interpretation into this scene as described by Saint John. Surely, Jesus did not mean for those present to come to this conclusion leading to those heated arguments. Or, did He? In your reading did you notice how Jesus “doubled down” on this understanding with His famous double Amen. When Jesus uses a double Amen, we are to understand it as though He is saying “Truly, truly I say to you.” Now, I ask again for you to again reread the sixth chapter of Saint John’s Gospel paying close attention to the reaction of the disciples of Jesus. They have accompanied Him on His journeys, listened to His teachings and witnessed His miracles. Ask yourself this question: “Why would Jesus double down of this understanding of eating His Flesh and drinking His Blood **IF** He knew it would cause unnecessary stress and anxiety for the disciples?”