

HOMILY FOR THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, 8 August 2021

- Fr. Jim Fredericks

Part One: the readings for the day

Part Two: reflection on the readings

Part Three: guidelines for *lectio divina*

PART ONE: READINGS FOR THE DAY

Lectionary: 116

Reading I 1 Kgs 19:4-8

Elijah went a day's journey into the desert,
until he came to a broom tree and sat beneath it.

He prayed for death saying:

"This is enough, O LORD!

Take my life, for I am no better than my fathers."

He lay down and fell asleep under the broom tree,

but then an angel touched him and ordered him to get up and eat.

Elijah looked and there at his head was a hearth cake
and a jug of water.

After he ate and drank, he lay down again,

but the angel of the LORD came back a second time,

touched him, and ordered,

"Get up and eat, else the journey will be too long for you!"

He got up, ate, and drank;

then strengthened by that food,

he walked forty days and forty nights to the mountain of God, Horeb.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9

R. (9a) Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

I will bless the LORD at all times;

his praise shall be ever in my mouth.

Let my soul glory in the LORD;

the lowly will hear me and be glad.

R. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Glorify the LORD with me,

Let us together extol his name.

I sought the LORD, and he answered me

and delivered me from all my fears.

R. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Look to him that you may be radiant with joy.

and your faces may not blush with shame.
When the afflicted man called out, the LORD heard,
and from all his distress he saved him.
R. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.
The angel of the LORD encamps
around those who fear him and delivers them.
Taste and see how good the LORD is;
blessed the man who takes refuge in him.
R. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Reading II Eph 4:30—5:2

Brothers and sisters:

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God,
with which you were sealed for the day of redemption.
All bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, and reviling
must be removed from you, along with all malice.
And be kind to one another, compassionate,
forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in Christ.
So be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love,
as Christ loved us and handed himself over for us
as a sacrificial offering to God for a fragrant aroma.

Alleluia Jn 6:51

R. Alleluia, alleluia.
I am the living bread that came down from heaven, says the Lord;
whoever eats this bread will live forever.
R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Jn 6:41-51

The Jews murmured about Jesus because he said,
“I am the bread that came down from heaven,”
and they said,
“Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph?
Do we not know his father and mother?
Then how can he say,
‘I have come down from heaven’?”
Jesus answered and said to them,
“Stop murmuring among yourselves.
No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him,
and I will raise him on the last day.
It is written in the prophets:
They shall all be taught by God.
Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him comes to me.
Not that anyone has seen the Father

except the one who is from God;
he has seen the Father.
Amen, amen, I say to you,
whoever believes has eternal life.
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.”

PART TWO: REFLECTION ON THE READINGS

Can we do some theology today?

We need to do some theology because the Blessed Sacrament has been in the news lately. A prominent social research organization has done a poll about what Catholics believe about the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. The polltakers report that almost 70% of Catholics in the USA think that the presence of Christ in the Eucharist is “merely symbolic.” In addition, the polling organization notes that this view is not in keeping with the official teaching of the Catholic Church.

As a Catholic theologian, I am puzzled by this survey. I doubt if the polltakers understand what the Church actually teaches about the Real Presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. Based on their misunderstanding, the polltakers asked questions that forced Catholics to give answers that are misleading to say the least.

The Catholic Church, of course, teaches the “Real Presence of Christ” in the Eucharist. For a lot of modern Americans, however, to say that Christ is “really present” can only mean that Christ is “literally present” in the host at mass. This is not what the Church teaches, and it is certainly not what Catholics should believe.

Christ is not “literally present” in the Eucharist. “Literally present” would mean that, if one were to examine a consecrated host under a microscope (don’t do this!!!), we would see human cells. I guess this would mean skin cells, bone cells or muscle cells. No Catholic should believe anything as silly as this. And, according to the poll, apparently, Catholics don’t believe this. Certainly, the Church doesn’t teach that Christ is physically present in the Eucharist.

Christ is not “literally present” in the Eucharist. Christ is “really present” in the Eucharist.

This will be confusing to anyone who lacks what I call the “sacramental imagination.” I suspect that the polltakers, in preparing their questions for their survey of Catholics,

simply presumed that “real” can only mean “literal.” This is understandable. Under the influence of modern science, lots of people have come to believe that “real” can only mean “literal.” But this way of thinking leads to a rather superstitious understanding of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist.

I mean no disrespect to science. I am only saying that science is very useful in our quest to know some things about the world and quite useless in our quest to know everything else.

In their report, the polltakers concluded that Catholics believe that the host is “merely symbolic” of Christ’s presence among us at mass. As I have said many times in the past, Catholics are not allowed to say “merely symbolic.”

A real symbol is not a mere marker or token. My mom’s wedding ring is a real symbol. The letter my dad wrote me when I turned 21 years old and the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the alcove at the back of Saint Leo’s church are real symbols, not just tokens or markers like “men’s room” or “send.” Genuine symbols make present to us realities that cannot be present in merely physical ways.

Let me offer an example.

Some of you will remember Monsignor O’Hare. Jack was the pastor at St. Leo’s many years ago. I have Jack’s pix. (A pix is a little container that eucharistic ministers use to bring the Blessed Sacrament to those who can’t make it to mass). In one sense, Jack’s pix is just a piece of metal. It looks like a pillbox. But I never bring the host to you in Jack’s pix without feeling that “the old pro” is with us.

I brought the Blessed Sacrament to Marilyn Caselli before she died. Many of you will remember her. She was so good to us. We chatted a little and said a few prayers. Then I reached into my pocket and pulled out the pix.

“By the way, Marilyn, this is Jack’s pix.”

Marilyn couldn’t say many words at that point in her illness, but she lit up when I told her that I have brought the Blessed Sacrament in Monsignor O’Hare’s pix. I placed the pix, with the host within it, in her hand and then held her hands in mine for a moment. I think we can say that our Holy Communion was Real even before Marilyn received the host that day.

I am not saying that Monsignor O’Hare was physically present to Marilyn and me when I brought out his pix. But I certainly don’t mean that Jack’s presence was “merely symbolic.” He was a blessing to Marilyn and me when he was alive. He is blessing us still. I will never forget how Marilyn rejoiced when I told her it was Jack’s pix.

And of course, it is the Real Presence of the Risen Christ in the Eucharist that makes our real presence to one another at mass possible.

This is what I mean by the “sacramental imagination.” This is hard for some people to understand today because the modern world has impoverished our imaginations, at least in some respects.

You can see the problem in the confusion about the term “transubstantiation” in the poll about Catholics and the Eucharist.

The Council of Trent, back in the 1500s, said that transubstantiation was useful in our quest to understand how Christ is present in the Eucharist. (Although Trent never said that transubstantiation was the only way we can affirm the Real Presence). During mass, the host continues to look like bread. It crumbles like bread and gets stale like bread gets stale. Theologians like Thomas Aquinas called these characteristics of bread “accidents.” If you examine a host under a microscope (don’t do this!!!), I assure you, you will see wheat cells.

According to the theory, the accidents of the host stay the same. The host’s “substance” – what the host really is – is changed into the Body of Christ. The host continues to look like bread – even under a microscope. But it is really the Body of Christ.

I think this theory is ingenious.

The problem with this Medieval theory, however, is that the meaning of the word “substance” has changed. Today, because of modern chemistry, “substance” has come to mean the physical characteristics of an object. Sulphur dioxide is a substance. SO₂ has physical characteristics that carbon dioxide (CO₂) does not have. SO₂ certainly smells different than CO₂. This might lead some people to think that “transubstantiation” means that the wheat-cells in the host are changed into human bone or muscle cells – a different “substance” as chemists use this word today.

This is unfortunate. In fact, it is the opposite of what the bishops at the Council of Trent were trying to say. In the Eucharist, we have the Real Presence of Christ, not a literal or physical presence. The reality of the host changes, even though its physical characteristics do not.

The Psalm for today’s mass comes with a beautiful refrain.

R. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

This is a splendid example of what I am calling “the sacramental imagination.” The goodness of the Lord is not an abstraction. It is something we can “taste and see.” It’s like bread and wine – created things that we know a lot about here in Sonoma. But, of course,

this must be understood symbolically, not literally. And when I say “symbolically,” I do not mean “merely symbolically.” As a Catholic, I am not allowed to say this. Symbols are what are put us in touch with what is truly Real.

PART THREE: INSTRUCTIONS FOR *LECTIO DIVINA*

I suggest that you use the readings and my reflections as an opportunity for practicing *lectio divina* (“divine reading”). This is an ancient spiritual practice that started with the great monks in the Syrian and Egyptian desert back in the early days of the Church. It is really quite simple.

Step one: calm your mind (my Buddhist friends describe the mind as “a mango-tree full of chattering monkeys”). I find that paying attention to your breath for a few minutes is a practical and effective way to do this.

Step two: read the readings slowly and attentively. Savor the words as if you were tasting a great Pinot Noir. Don’t rush. You are not looking for information or instructions. You are making friends with a sacred text which will bless you abundantly if you will only open your heart to it and let it speak to you. In *lectio divina*, we are not actually “reading” the Bible. Rather, we are “listening” to the Bible as the sacred words speak to us.

Step three: repeat step two.

Step four: read the reflection on the readings.

Step five: Ask yourself a few questions:

- What particular words in the readings call out to me most forcefully?
- What is going on in my life such that these words call to me so forthrightly?
- How am I being asked to change, both interiorly and exteriorly?
- In light of this *lectio divina*, how am I being invited to be of service to the world today?