

A widow was quite lonely, so she went to a pet store to find some animal that could keep her company. She ended up buying a fabulously expensive talking parrot, which she figured would be just the thing to lift her spirits. After several days had passed and the bird still had not spoken, the woman returned to the pet store and complained. The owner said, "What your bird needs is a ladder for his cage. When he's climbing up and down, he'll be sure to talk." The widow tried that, but still the bird didn't talk. She returned to the pet store and complained some more. "What you need is a swing for the cage," the owner said. But that didn't work either. Next the woman purchased a mirror for the bird, but that didn't cause him to talk either. After a week had gone by, the woman returned to the pet store one last time. With tears in her eyes, she reported that her expensive parrot had died. The owner was deeply embarrassed, "Didn't he ever say anything before he died?" The widow replied, 'Yes. Just as he was taking his final breath, he said, 'Don't they have bird food at that pet store?'" (LECTIONAID, March 14, 2004)

First some background on this rich gospel text. John tells us that as soon as Jesus finished saying "I am the living bread....the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world," the people in the synagogue got into serious arguments with one another – a sign that Jesus had hit a nerve and that their opinions were fiercely divided. That never happens in OUR parish, does it? I know I've heard RUMORS of it happening in OTHER parishes, but surely, not St. Andrew's! Actually murmuring is a LONG and rich church tradition stretching all the way back to the Old Testament! And most of us can murmur with the best of them! Priests included! You people murmur about us priests and the priests murmur about the bishop! EVERYBODY have a good time!

We need to recognize that John framed this chapter in a paschal setting. He subtly planted and reinterpreted symbols of the Passover and Exodus in ways that both resonated with and startled His Jewish audience. In that context, John's words about bread and the flesh refer to the Passover meal of the lamb which gave them freedom from slavery -- and the manna in the desert – the food God sent morning and night as a sign of His faithful love and care.

Jesus' expounds on the gift of His flesh and blood which describes His genuine humanity. That is the real cause of the scandal. Italian Scripture Scholar Silvano Fausti explains: "This is the radical scandal of the incarnation: Jesus is Word and flesh, God and human being. Salvation comes precisely from the fact that He is as the same time the Son of Man and the Son of God." (UNA COMUNIDAD LEE EL EVANGELIO DE JUAN) Everything Jesus went on to say further elucidated His message and exacerbated the listeners' consternation. His I AM was a claim to being one with God – a claim they interpreted as blasphemy. So His I AM statement was a word that would be rejected. And the bread that He gave – Himself as the new manna – is bread that would be broken on the cross.

Second, trying to understand Jesus' explanations of bread, flesh and blood with contemporary scientific categories is like memorizing French vocabulary hoping it will improve our grasp of Chinese. Jesus was speaking the language of heart and soul, not chemistry and physics. Jesus Himself gave us the best explanation in a very similar discourse at the Last Supper when He said, "I am the vine and you are the branches." (John 15:1-8) In both discourses, Jesus bids us to allow His life to flow through us by using metaphors of the most intimate connection possible. When He presents Himself as bread, flesh and blood for the eating, the invitation is to receive and take Him in such a way that His life becomes our own. With the image of the vine and branches, the connection is even more intimate because the branch grows out of the vine. Flesh and blood become the medium of His presence. According to Jesus, the reason He took flesh and blood was to be like the vine which gives life. He is present to transform everyone 'who feeds on me' so that

we will live forever. Jesus was claiming to be the meeting point between the Father and humanity. That meant that taking Him in was the way to eternal life and, to such a transformation that those who accepted Him would become His branches. We would share His life as truly as He shared the life of the Father. (adapted from CELEBRATION, 19 August 2018, p. 1,3) Bottom line? The Eucharist was given to us to MAKE US LIKE CHRIST! Sharing His body and blood should MAKE us other Christs. Which is what we all began when we were baptized. The Eucharist is our ongoing help with that transformation, which takes a lifetime.

Jesus is ingenious in that the central image in this teaching is eating. Eating is an act of assimilation, an intimate act by which a part of the world becomes part of us. I was talking with Fr. Oswald about this gospel this week and I said that as an Irish kid, for many years I was about 60% potato. Now I eat a lot of pasta and I said I'm now about 60% spaghetti. Dan said "No Durbin, you are 100 % baloney!" I'm not wasting any of my deep and profound homiletical insights on him again. But when we eat, we are reminded that we are not separate from the world. In fact, we are physically constituted by the world. As we eat bread and it becomes part of us, so we must integrate the consciousness of Jesus, and make it our own. The key concern is the transfer of consciousness from Jesus to us. As one spiritual teacher puts it, "When we eat material food, it becomes us. When we eat spiritual food, we become it."

In the end, the Eucharist is to CHANGE us. As Catholics we often asked the question WHEN does the bread and wine change into the Body and Blood? It's a modern question. One of the early fathers of the church said: "What if the bread and wine change and the people don't?" THAT'S the question. The Eucharist is meant to make us like Christ – compassionate, forgiving, inclusive, generous, loving, peaceful, joyous, gentle. When we are becoming those things in our broken world, we are then becoming "Bread for the life of the world." (help from John Shea, EATING WITH THE BRIDEGROOM, p. 205-206)

A story to conclude. Thirteen-year-old Jared was about to celebrate his bar mitzvah. His grandmother, whom he called Bubby, asked what he'd like for a present. This 13-year-old, who could have asked his grandmother for anything in the world, said, "Bubby, I'd like you to make me a cookbook with all your recipes in it." His grandmother could not have been more touched.

She spent an entire year writing out all the family recipes by hand, and along with the recipes she shared her stories, about special occasions and about special people and what carrying on the traditions of her mother and grandmother meant to her. On the first page of 'Bubby's Cookbook,' she wrote:

Dear Jared, I feel greatly honored that you asked me to put this recipe book together for you. I don't know of any other grandchild that ever made such a request. In every way I thank you.

It brought back so many wonderful memories of dinners prepared for various holidays...Of course with the many meals and recipes I recorded here came the memories of so many people that gathered at my home, sat at my table and became forever inscribed in my heart and mind....Especially Friday nights – the lit candles, the braided challah...the beautiful faces that surround it all....I feel totally inspired...all this becomes my creative expression of my love for all of you.

My attitude toward food centers around bringing people together....feelings of warmth toward each other and in celebration of life. What better way to display nature's infinite bounty and beauty, for which I have enormous feelings of appreciation and gratitude.

Jared,I hope you find the recipes useful, that you enjoy the creative aspect of cooking and baking, but most of all, that you provide for others, as I'd like to think I did, with the opportunity to share it all. I love you dearly. Bubby. (From EINSTEIN AND THE RABBI: SEARCHING FOR THE SOUL by Naomi Levy).

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That's what Christ has done for us in giving us His Body and Blood – provided us with the opportunity to share it all, loving us dearly, and merely asking us to pass this love on to others. So may it be! Let the church say AMEN.

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