

A doctor was addressing a large audience in Tampa. “The material we put into our stomachs is enough to have killed most of us sitting here, long ago.....Red meat is awful. Soft drinks corrode the stomach lining. Chinese food is loaded with MSG. High fat diets can be disastrous, and none of us realizes the long-term harm caused by the germs in our drinking water. However, there is one thing that is the most dangerous of all and we all have eaten, or will eat it. Can anyone here tell me what food it is that causes the most grief and suffering for years after eating it?” After several seconds of quiet, a 75-year-old-man in the front row raised his hand, and softly said, “Wedding cake.”

Bob, a 70-year-old, extremely wealthy widower, shows up at the Country Club with a breathtakingly beautiful and very sexy 25-year-old blonde-haired woman who knocks everyone’s socks off with her youthful sex appeal and charm and who hangs over Bob’s arm and listens intently to his every word. His buddies at the club are all aghast. At the very first chance, they corner him and ask, “Bob, how’d you get the trophy girlfriend?” Bob replies, “Girlfriend? She’s my wife!” They are knocked over, but continue to ask, “So, how’d you persuade her to marry you?” “I lied about my age,” Bob replied. “What did you tell her – you were only 50?” Bob smiled and said, “No, I told her I was 90.”

OK, some background. The disciples did not automatically understand the full reality of Jesus’ identity and the purpose of His mission. It deepened over time, and was not even complete after the resurrection. After 2000 years, we still don’t fully understand Jesus, and that’s the beauty of His person. For example, in Mark’s Gospel, the first gospel written, the true identity of Jesus is withheld until near the very end, when a Roman soldier proclaims the dying Jesus to be the holy one of God. A couple of decades later, when the Gospels of Matthew and Luke achieved their final form, the early believers clearly understood that Jesus was Lord and Christ from the moment of His conception; the infancy narratives were written to attest to this deeper understanding. By the time the 4th gospel was completed – around 90-100 AD, there was no doubt in these believers minds that Jesus was God, the very Word of God made flesh – an insight given voice in the beginning of John’s gospel called the prologue (Jn 1:14)

All throughout the Johannine Gospel, it is evident that the early Christian community had by then grown to recognize Jesus as the living and breathing presence of God in their midst. Repeatedly, the Johannine Jesus acts and speaks in a manner which emphasizes His divinity.

In today’s first reading, the authors of Exodus recall God’s gift of sustenance in the wilderness, manna. Scholars know that manna is the secretion of 2 insects on the leaves of the tamarisk bush. As the substance falls from the leaves to the earth and cools in the night air, it becomes firm. Even today, nomadic tribes of the central Sinai are nourished by what the ancient Israelites called manna. Etymologically, the word ‘manna’ is difficult to explain. One solution has been provided by the authors of our passage, who transformed the Israelites’ question “Man hu?” (“What is this?”) into a term that thereafter described the desert phenomenon – MANNA. On your next vacation to the Sinai desert, now you know how to look for a real gourmet treat!

Despite their grumblings and their hardness of heart, God feeds the weary escapees from Egypt with manna and quail. Affirming God’s power and presence with them, Moses proclaims, “This is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.”

Circling back to the Gospel we just heard, the Johannine Jesus reprises that heavenly gift of bread with the miracle of the loaves and fish, and then explains the significance of His action in detail. This is what we will

be hearing over the next few weeks, in what is commonly referred to as THE BREAD OF LIFE DISCOURSE. Jesus uses one of His I AM statements – telling us “I AM the Bread of Life.” Each associates Jesus with the God who was similarly revealed to Moses (Exodus 3:14). Jesus was offering, as food, the gift of Himself, His teaching, His very body and blood given up in sacrifice for sin. Through the ages, faith in Jesus’ unique gift of Himself continues to challenge us. (Adapted from CELEBRATION, 5 August 2012, p. 1-2)

But so what? My second point. Why is the Eucharist so important to us as Catholics? Why do we hold this Sacred Bread and Cup so dear? What is the big deal? The key is found in the last lines of today’s text: “Sir, give us this bread always.” Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.”

What is it that you and I are looking for? What is it that we seek? We all have this deep-seated longing that we spend our entire lives – and maybe even our fortune – trying to fulfill. There is within the human heart a fundamental dis-ease, an unquenchable fire that renders us incapable, in this life, of ever coming to full peace. This longing lies at the center of our lives, in the marrow of our bones, and in the deep recesses of the soul. We are not easeful human beings who occasionally get restless, serene persons who once in a while are obsessed by desire. The reverse is true. We are driven persons, forever obsessed, congenitally dis-eased, living lives, as Thoreau once suggested, of quiet desperation, only occasionally experiencing peace. Desire/longing is the straw that stirs the drink of our lives.

At the heart of all great literature, poetry, art, philosophy, psychology, and religion lies the naming and analyzing of this desire. We love stories about desire – tales of love, sex, wanderlust, haunting nostalgia, boundless ambition, and tragic loss. Why do the Olympics so fascinate us every 4 years? There is a fire, a force within that haunts us, DRIVES us to seek and find and do and accomplish.

Spirituality is ultimately what we do with that desire. What we do with our longings, both in terms of handling the pain and hope they bring us, that is our spirituality. Shakespeare spoke of our ‘immortal longings’ and theologian Karl Rahner spoke about the ‘torment of the insufficiency of everything attainable.’ We come to understand that, in this life, all symphonies must remain unfinished. (Adapted from Rolheiser, THE HOLY LONGING, p. 3-5)

And so my third point, a word about the Eucharist. At the heart of our Catholic spirituality is the Bread from Heaven, the Eucharist, the Bread that can fulfill the desire of our souls. This is one of the few places on this earth where, outside the marital bed or some compelling experience of the beauty and power of nature, that we can taste a bit of heaven. Jesus promised that whenever a group of people gather in prayer – He would be there in our midst. The early Church took that promise literally. The first disciples had been used to having Jesus physically among them and then, after His ascension, they often struggled to know what Jesus would want them to do. However, they had a simple formula for every occasion and difficulty, Jesus’ invitation to gather in His name: They would gather around the Word and the Breaking of the Bread, and there, let Jesus make His presence felt and effect through them what they could not otherwise accomplish themselves.

As Catholics, we still take that same promise literally. Our lives are not sustained only by private acts of prayer, justice and virtue. They are sustained in a community, by gathering ritually around the Word of God and through the Breaking of Bread. Where else in the world, but at the Eucharist, can king and peasant, the high and the lowly, the rich and the poor, all gather – and all be considered as equals – as ONE in the Body of Christ? If we are ever to have peace in our world, it will be accomplished by our coming together for the Eucharist, the meal that makes us one. It is here that our longings are fulfilled, even if only for a moment. But it is a taste – a foretaste, of the fulfillment that we are promised at the Great Banqueting Table of Heaven.

In his book, FATHER JOE, Tony Hendra remembers taking communion as a young man, just as he was beginning his relationship with Christ. He had been wrestling with whether the story of God was true – what could he believe about God and about himself? He writes:

“As I took the host a few minutes later, all the conflicting and confusing thoughts and feelings I normally experienced, the usual objections and reservations and logical, sensible, commonsense hesitations were swept aside, fused into a whole of certainty. It was all perfectly natural, it all made perfect sense – this was bread just as Christ had used bread, this was a meal just as the Last Supper had been; how else would you take your God into yourself but through your mouth, consuming Him in this ordinary, mundane way? The ordinary WAS the divine, where common sense met mystery....What had always bothered and often panicked me – the wafer sticking to the roof of my mouth and having to be poked and peeled away sacrilegiously with the tip of my tongue – was welcome now, intended, a way to savor its nature before its material vehicle dissolved. The host practically burned my mouth with the presence of what it contained. I felt as if a shaft of light had pierced the top of my cranium, and lit me up from the inside out.”

Hendra said he ran out of the church dancing, whooping, doing pirouettes, hugging trees, happier than he could ever remember being. “Truth existed – and so did I! I was real, me, a ME, not an idea or a possibility or someone else’s incomplete theorem or a mutinous bundle of neurons.” (FATHER JOE, p. 73-74)

And last, Peter van Breenan, a German theologian, tells of a woman who went into a restaurant with high tables where patrons could stand for a quick lunch. She bought a bowl of soup and a sausage sandwich and carried them to an empty table. She put her purse underneath, and went back to the counter to get a spoon for her soup. When she returned, a dark-skinned stranger was standing at the table, happily eating her soup. At first she was shocked. Then furious. Within seconds, she decided that, if this man wished to be so bold, then so would she. She stood at the opposite side of the table and began eating from the same bowl. But instead of being embarrassed or intimidated, the man continued to eat. He did not speak German, so he couldn’t understand what the woman was saying to him, but he kept a smile on his face as they ate together.

Seeming to provoke her further, the man offered her half of the sausage sandwich. When they were finished, he, still smiling, offered his hand across the table in a hand shake. Still flabbergasted, the woman shook his hand. Then the man left the restaurant. When she looked under the table for her purse, it was gone. She knew it! He was a thief! All of her money, credit cards, personal information – AND HER LUNCH! – were taken by this brazen man!

As she scanned the room to call out for help, she noticed a nearby table, with a bowl of now-cold soup, a sausage sandwich, and her purse underneath. It had never occurred to her that she had gone to the wrong table!

That is what the Eucharist – this meal of our longing and belonging – should do for us – make us into that man who, although he could not understand what was being said about him, made room at his table and shared what he had with another. For our deepest longing to be at last, one – with God – and with others – glimpsed and tasted every time we receive the Eucharist. Amen. (Story from THE GOD WHO WON’T LET GO, van Breeman, p. 102)