

John 6:51–58

⁴¹ The Jews murmured about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven,” ⁴² 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?’” ⁴³ Jesus answered and said to them, “Stop murmuring among yourselves. ⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him, and I will raise him on the last day. ⁴⁵ 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. ⁴⁶ Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷ Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died; ⁵⁰ this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die.

[The following is the gospel text for the Feast.]

⁵¹ 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.” ⁵² The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us (his) flesh to eat?” ⁵³ 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. ⁵⁴ Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. ⁵⁵ For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶ Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. ⁵⁷ 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. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever.”

Post 1

Corpus Christi - history

This coming Sunday is the [Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ](#). It is a celebration perhaps better known by the Latin Corpus Christi. At its core, the solemnity is a celebration of the Tradition and belief in the Eucharist as the Real Presence of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. Many folks wonder why this celebration is not part of Holy Thursday. In the past it was and was mixed in with other themes, e.g., institution of the priesthood. And, all this occurs in the shadow of Good Friday. The placement of the celebration was not one that necessarily lends itself to a joyful celebration.

Saint Juliana of Liège, O.Praem, was the one who became the spark leading to a joyous celebration of Corpus Christi. For her devotion, life, and efforts, she is known as the “Apostle of the Blessed Sacrament.” Liège was already a center for devotion to the Eucharist, so from her early youth, Juliana had great veneration for the Eucharist and longed for a special feast day in its honor. In 1208 at age 16, she began having visions of the moon in its full splendor, crossed diametrically by a dark stripe. In time, she came to understand that the moon symbolized the life of the Church on earth, the opaque line, on the other hand, represented the absence of a liturgical feast in honor of Christ’s Body and Blood. Not having any way to bring about such a feast, she kept her thoughts to herself, except for sharing them with Blessed Eve of Liège, who lived in a cell adjacent to the Basilica of St. Martin, and a few other trusted sisters in her monastery. The vision was repeated for the next 20 years, but she maintained it as a secret. When she eventually relayed it to her confessor, he relayed it to the Bishop of Liège, Robert de Thorete as well as petitioning the learned Dominican Hugh of St-Cher. At that time bishops could order feasts in their dioceses, so Bishop Robert ordered in 1246 a celebration of Corpus Christi to be held in the diocese each year thereafter on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday. In 1252, now Cardinal-Legate established the feast for his whole jurisdiction (Germany, Dacia, Bohemia, and Moravia), to be celebrated on the Thursday after the Octave of Trinity

The archdeacon of the Diocese of Liège, Jacques Pantaléon of Troyes was also won over to the cause of the Feast of Corpus Christi during his time in the Diocese of Liège. He eventually became Pope Urban IV in 1264. In addition to his devotion to St Juliana's vision, the feast of Corpus Christi was also proposed by St. Thomas Aquinas in order to create a feast focused solely on the Holy Eucharist, emphasizing the joy of the Eucharist being the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ. On August 11, 1264 the pope instituted the Solemnity of Corpus Christi on the Thursday after Pentecost as a feast for the entire Latin Rite, by the papal bull *Transiturus de hoc mundo*. It was the first papally-mandated feast for the world-wide church.

Image credit:

Post 2

Context: bread and Passover

This coming Sunday is the [Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ](#). All the gospel writers describe the miracle of the fishes and loaves (Mk 6:33-46, Mt 14:13-23, Lk 9:10-17, and Jn 6:1-15). Through the dialogue that precedes and follows the miracle, Jesus teaches the disciples to trust in him whenever they meet with difficulties in their future apostolic endeavors. He teaches them that they should engage in using whatever resources they have even if they are clearly inadequate. He will supply what is lacking and underscores the meaning of their continuing mission:

- they are to nourish the people,
- they will need God's help in nourishing the people, and
- their job is to distribute that which Christ provides.

In the account of the miracles, although Jesus orders the Apostles to feed the people, the main act is performed by Jesus alone. In a solemn, liturgical style, St John describes the scene as "*Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated...*" (Jn 6:11). Where the other gospels go on to describe more events, the fourth gospel pauses to theological reflect on the meaning of the miracle whose inner meaning is spelled out at length in Jn 6:25-59. These verses are known as the Bread of Life Discourse.

The best way to understand this discourse is to recognize that it centers on one biblical text, "*He gave them bread from heaven to eat*" (v. 31), and is therefore a conscious demonstration of the truth of 5:39, 46-47 that the Scriptures illuminate the person of Jesus. The pivotal text is an echo of many Old Testament verses:

- Exod 16:4: "I will now rain down *bread from heaven* for you";
- Neh 9:15: "*Food from heaven* you gave them in their hunger";
- Ps 78:24: "He rained manna upon them for food and *gave them heavenly bread*";
- Ps 105:40: "... and with *bread from heaven* he satisfied them."

All of these verses are referring to the miracle of manna in the desert during the Exodus from Egypt. The first reading on Corpus Christi Sunday is taken from Dt 8 in which Moses reminds the people of what God had done for them: "...*fed you with manna, a food unknown to you and your fathers, in order to show you that not by bread alone does one live, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of the LORD.*" (Dt 8:3)

This is a sign/miracle which discloses Jesus as the one who sustains us with his living word and with the gift of his own life in the Eucharistic bread. Not only the sign of the bread but also the reassuring

words to the disciples, 'It is I' (John 6:20), along with the Christological 'I am' statements (vv. 25, 35, 41, 48-51), all draw our attention beyond the words of Jesus and beyond the Eucharist itself to the person of Jesus who communicated his life-giving power through them. For St. John, the point of this scene is that Jesus is the Moses-like prophet who feeds his people with a new bread. This new bread is Jesus' word of revelation received in faith as well as his Eucharistic bread. But the crowd's understanding is clouded by their messianic expectations because their hopes are tainted with politics and power. They do not see the spiritual nature of the messianic kingdom; only the outward signs.

The discourse is interrupted four times by dialogue from/within the audience. Lifted from the text and placed in order of occurrence it is easy to see the shifting reaction of the audience as their messianic expectations are not being met.

So they said to him, "What sign can you do, that we may see and believe in you? What can you do? Our ancestors ate manna in the desert, as it is written 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" (John 6:30-31)

So they said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." (John 6:34)

The Jews murmured about him 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'?" (John 6:41-42)

The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us [his] flesh to eat?" (John 6:52)

In Jn 6:4 we are told that the Passover was at hand. After that St John has little to directly say about the Passover and its relation to the Bread of Life Discourse. Many Catholic scholars believe that St John's writing assumes that the reader is familiar with the synoptic Gospels. Consequently, St John does not recount the story of Jesus, rather, St John gives the theological perspective. Whereas the synoptic writers recount the Eucharistic institution in their Gospels, St John provides the theological basis for the event. Where the synoptic writers place their accounts in the proper historical setting, the Passover feast; St John provides the explanations in a different setting, following the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000. In this way he shows the prefiguring of Holy Eucharist in the OT via the Exodus account, as well as an immediate prefiguring here at another Passover.

But St John did not simply use the Passover setting as a backdrop. There is some evidence that in St John's telling of the story he has captured very strong parallels to the Passover feast, just as in the Last Supper. In the Passover liturgy four children ask questions about what is enacted by the celebration. These questions have parallels in questions that the crowd asks of Jesus. The first question of the meal is about the works of God. The second question regards passages in Scripture. The mocking question in vv.41-42 is equated with the third question posed at the meal by the 'wicked child'. The 'sincere child' asks the fourth question supposed to be a practical question paralleled in v.52.

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Post 3

Coming to Jesus for Life

This coming Sunday is the [Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ](#). In the previous posts in this series we have not yet commented on the verses that comprise the gospel. As noted earlier our verses (Jn 6:51-58) are part of the much larger Bread of Life Discourse (Jn 6:22-69). And so it is good to explore meaning in the verses that precede our gospel passage.

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. But I told you that although you have seen [me], you do not believe. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and I will not reject anyone who comes to me, because I came down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me. And this is the will of the one who sent me, that I should not lose anything of what he gave me, but that I should raise it [on] the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have eternal life, and I shall raise him [on] the last day." (John 6:35-40)

In Jn 6:35-40 Jesus spells out the need of faith in himself, a faith that is an active movement of coming to him. The Jewish midrash literature identifies manna/bread as signifying the divine word or instruction - the *memra*. The Word was the means of the covenant, the means of salvation, the revelation of God, the agent of creation, and the same as God. Jesus clearly says that he is the Word made flesh and tells them of the rewards for those that believe. Much of the OT background for this discourse is found in the descriptions of the messianic banquet. In Jewish thought the joys of the messianic days are often pictured under the imagery of an intimate banquet with Yahweh or his Messiah. Is 55:1-3 echoes the command in Jn 6:27 not to work for perishable food and makes it clear that Yahweh's invitation to eat is part of his promises to renew the covenant with David, and therefore a messianic banquet. The words of Is 55:3 - 'Come to me heedfully, listen, that you may have life' - are restated by Jesus, announcing that the banquet is at hand for those servants of Yahweh who believe in the one who Yahweh has sent.

In the following line Jesus says "*But I told you that although you have seen [me], you do not believe*". The connection of these two passages recounts Amos 8:11-13 - '*Yes, days are coming, says the Lord God, when I will send famine upon the land: Not a famine of bread, or thirst for water, but for hearing the word of the Lord. They shall wander in...in search of the Word of the Lord, but they shall not find it.*' Israel has been given the opportunity to partake of the bread of life but has rejected it. In the closing lines of Jesus' statement he clearly states that it is Jesus who mediates this divine life to believers and through whom we enter into a life giving communion with God, now and in eternity.

Like the people in the desert who refuse to believe Moses, In Jn 6:41-50, the crowd reject ('murmured about him') the bread from heaven. After all, the crowd knows his father and mother - how can he claim to come down from heaven? But Jesus does not let their lack of faith pass without comment. "Coming to" Jesus in faith is not only the will of the Father but it is also his work, for the Father draws believers to faith in Jesus. Consequently, to believe in Jesus is to be open to God. Moreover the prophets (Is 54:10-13 and Jer 31:33) had spoken of a new covenant when God would teach his people through a new law which would be more than an external message (*'I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts'*). In listening attentively to Jesus, one hears the Father for he is the source of the teachings of the Messiah. God then draws the believers to faith in Jesus in two ways: (a) through the message of Jesus and (b) as an interior teacher where he makes the message of Jesus an interior law of the heart.

Jesus restates his message in vv. 47-50 - he is the bread of life, without which there is no life.

Image credit:

Post 4

Flesh for the life of the world

This coming Sunday is the [Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ](#). With all that in mind (the previous posts) we come to the gospel passage for the feast.

⁵¹ *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.* ⁵² *The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us (his) flesh to eat?”* ⁵³ *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.* ⁵⁴ *Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day.* ⁵⁵ *For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.* ⁵⁶ *Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.* ⁵⁷ *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.* ⁵⁸ *This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever.”*

But let's place this in a larger perspective from the whole of the Discourse: *He gave; bread from heaven; to eat.* Let's observe this happen.

- a) **He gave** (vv. 26–34). In this first section, the emphasis lies on the giving. Jesus will give (vv. 27, 34), not as Moses gave (v. 32) a perishable manna food of mortality, but as the Father, source of eternal life, gives (v. 32). Thus far, Jesus appears as the giver of bread and therefore as the new and superior Moses.
- b) **bread from heaven** (vv. 35–47). The insistence now shifts to the bread from heaven that Jesus not only gives but actually is (vv. 35, 38, 41, 42). It is important to note here that the operative verb is “believe.” Jesus as bread from heaven is accepted and consumed through the belief required in verses 35, 36, 40, 47. What this means is that this is a faith nourishment. Jesus is bread from heaven, feeding all believers, in the same sense that Old Testament wisdom nourished all who accepted it (Prov 9:1–5).
- c) **to eat** (vv. 48–59). In this final section, the vocabulary changes radically. The significant words are “flesh,” “blood,” “eat,” “drink.” Note the constant repetition of “eat” (*phagein*) in vv.49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 58. “Feed on” (*trōgein* - an even more physical verb in the Greek than “eat”) occurs in v.57. These verbs become overwhelmingly insistent, as does the constant reference to flesh and blood, food and drink. The meaning of the discourse has changed. Where in the preceding section Jesus nourished through wisdom-revelation those who believed, the verb “believe” has now completely disappeared and is replaced by “eat,” “feed on.” This is language which clearly speaks of sacramental nourishment, of the food and drink that one eats and feeds upon, of the Eucharistic nourishment provided by the flesh and blood of the Son of Man (v. 53). The “Son of Man” phraseology tells us that this is not the physical flesh and blood of the earthly Jesus and that we are asked to eat and drink but the spiritual, Spirit-filled flesh and blood of the heavenly Son of Man. Verse 58 ties the discourse together by referring back to the central phrase of verse 31.

What this discourse has done, therefore, is to deliver a rich and multi-faceted exposition of the Jesus-as-Bread-of-Life theme.

- Jesus is first of all the *giver* of the bread, a new Moses.
- He is also the *bread of wisdom and revelation* who nourishes all who come to him in faith.
- He is, finally, the *Eucharistic* source of eternal life for all who eat and drink the flesh and blood of the heavenly and glorified Son of Man.

Because John uses this Eucharistic material in this Bread of Life homily, it will not be too surprising — yet surprising enough — that the Eucharist will not be mentioned at the Last Supper. Its material has been transferred to this incident. John has also succeeded, with this transfer, to unite in this one chapter the essentials of Christian Eucharist, the word and the bread — the revealing word of vv.35–47 and the sacramental bread of vv.48–59.

Jesus gives his flesh to eat. The question that emerges from the dispute among “the Jews” is a rejection of Jesus’ outrageous suggestion: “*How (ōs) can this man give us his flesh to eat?*” (v. 52). But it allows Jesus to conclude his discourse on his perfection of the Mosaic gift of bread from heaven through his gift of himself as the true bread from heaven. Unable to go beyond the physical, “the Jews” by their question misunderstand Jesus’ promise. Jesus insists on a gift of flesh and blood for life by stating negatively (v.53) and positively (v.54) that whoever eats the flesh and drinks the blood of Jesus, the Son of Man, has eternal life now and will be raised up on the last day. The midrashic play on the verb “to eat” provided by the Exodus passage in v. 31 has reached its high point. “Flesh” and “blood” emphasize that it is the incarnate life and very real death of the Son that are life giving food. Only the physical body of a human being produces flesh and blood. The argument of vv. 25-51 continues into vv. 52-59, especially in Jesus’ words that point to the resolution of a series of promises (cf. vv. 12-13, 27, 35, 51c). Jesus will provide a food for the life of the world, and that food is his flesh and blood.

As the ancestors of Israel were nourished by the gift of the Torah, Jesus will nourish the whole world with the gift of himself.

The people of Israel were nourished by eating the manna, perennially recalled in the nourishment provided for them by their total receptivity to and absorption of the Law.

Now “the Jews” are told of the absolute need to eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man. Unless they eat the flesh and drink the blood (*ean me phagete . . kai piete*) of the Son of Man they have no life (v. 53); whoever eats the flesh and drinks the blood (*ho treigōn . kai pinon*) of Jesus has eternal life (v. 54).

The shift from the more respectable verb “to eat” (*phagein*) to another verb that indicates the physical crunching with the teeth (*trōgein*) accentuates that Jesus refers to a real experience of eating. Hints of the Eucharist continue to insinuate themselves into the words of Jesus. Flesh is to be broken and blood is to be spilled. Violence has been in the air since Jesus’ behavior on the Sabbath led “the Jews” to initiate a process that would lead to his death (5:16-18).

Image credit:

Post 5

Eucharistic Life

This coming Sunday is the [Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ](#). Where the principal focus of the previous section is the bread of life as the divine revelation given to men by and in Jesus, Jn 6:51 moves the focus to a clearly Eucharistic theme - 'I am the living bread come 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.' While some argue the words are metaphor, the Jews clearly understand. Jesus is referring to eating of his flesh. He recounts this action verb several other times between vv. 51-58, while adding the drinking of his blood to the command. This is no metaphor for accepting his revelation, already adequately expressed. "To eat someone's flesh" appears in the Bible as a metaphor for hostile action (Ps 27:2, Zech 11:9). In fact, in the Aramaic tradition, the "eater of flesh" is the title of the devil. The drinking of blood was looked upon as a horrendous thing forbidden by God's Law (Gen 9:4, Lev 3:17, Dt 12:23, and Acts 15:20). Its symbolic meaning was that of brutal slaughter (Jer 45:10). In Ezekiel's vision of apocalyptic carnage (Ez 39:17), he invites the scavenging birds to come to the feast: 'You shall have flesh to eat and blood to drink.' Thus if Jesus' words in v.53 (*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.*) are to have positive, favorable meaning, they refer to the Eucharist.

In v.51, we have a parallel with v.35, which is the beginning of the revelation form of the Bread of Life Discourse, except that in v.51 Jesus speaks of the “living bread”, a term more suitable for the Eucharist. In this same verse we see the connection of the living bread-the flesh-come down from heaven. Recalling Jn 1:14 where the entrance of the Word among us was spoken of in terms of becoming flesh; and it is this same flesh that is to be given to man as living bread. In the same passage John invokes the Incarnation and then closes with the death of Jesus, a Eucharistic theme. Where in v.32 it is the Father who gives the heavenly bread (revelation), in v.51 where the bread becomes identified with the flesh of Jesus, he must give it himself. Jesus must lay down his life of his own accord and that voluntary death makes Eucharistic participation in his flesh possible. At the beginning of the Gospel we hear that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the world's sins (Jn 1:29); now in context of a discourse set at Passover time we hear that Jesus becomes the Paschal lamb and gives his flesh for the life of the world.

In v.52 we see a misunderstanding that parallels vv. 41-42. Strangely, Jesus does not take any pains to explain away the Jewish repugnance at the cannibalistic thought of eating his flesh; rather in v.53 he emphasizes the reality of "feeding" on his flesh and adds the even more repugnant note of drinking his blood. Versus 55-56 promises the gift of life to one who feeds on this Eucharist, but the Eucharistic promise follows the main body of the Discourse (vv 35-50) which insists on the necessity of belief in Jesus. The juxtaposition of the two forms of the discourse teaches that the gift of life comes through belief in Jesus. The Eucharistic life-giving is not through the "feeding". Jn 6:57 says '*..the one who feeds on me will have life because of me [Jesus]*'.

The two themes of the Discourse, faith and Eucharist, cannot be separated for neither faith nor the Eucharist are directly the focus of attention, but rather both are unified in the person of Jesus who offers a living relationship through faith and Eucharist. The sacramental experience does not replace faith in Jesus, but expresses and confirms it. For John Eucharistic faith is to believe that the same, risen, Incarnate Jesus continues to give himself to believers in a personal communion and to exercise his life-giving mission. Whoever participates in the exercise of faith and Eucharist 'remains in me and I in him'.

While the synoptic gospel writers record the institution of the Eucharist, the theological gospel writer is the one who explains what the Eucharist does for the Christian - the personal communion with Jesus and thus with the Father.

Image credit:

Post 6

Words of Life

This coming Sunday is the [Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ](#). In Jn 6:60, some of the disciples of Jesus react negatively saying '*This saying is hard; who can accept it.*' Are they referring just to the immediately preceding passages (vv. 51-59) or are they referring to all of Jesus' claim in v.42, 'I have come down from heaven.'? Jesus' own words give us the context, "*Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of man ascending where he was before?*" That a man from Nazareth should claim that he is a life-giving revealer sent down from God, from heaven, is "hard" to take and only faith can overcome the "offense" or stumbling-block of the Incarnation. But if his words are too hard to take, then a worse shock awaits them when they see him raised on the cross and then it will be a real test of their faith to believe in his death and resurrection.

In v.63 Jesus' words provide another stumbling block - "*It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail...*" Many non-Catholic interpreters believe that this line removes the basis for belief in the Real

Presence in the Eucharist. But St John has already provided us the context for interpreting Jesus' remarks. In Jn 3:6-13, Nicodemus can not understand how a man can be born from above. By way of explanation, Jesus calls upon the ascension into heaven of the Son of Man; for it is the ascended Son of Man who can give the Spirit. So also in Jn 6:63, the Spirit is mentioned immediately after the reference to the ascension of the Son of Man. The contrast between Spirit and flesh in v.63 is the same contrast found in Jn 3:6. Jesus is not speaking of Eucharistic flesh but of flesh as he spoke of it in Jn 3:6. There, the natural principle in man, which can not give eternal life, is useless. The Spirit is the divine principal from above which alone can give life. In v.63 Jesus once more affirms that man cannot gain life on his own. Jesus' role is to communicate to man the principles of eternal life so that those who believe in Jesus receive the life-giving Spirit.

In a sense the non-Catholic interpreters are correct in what they affirm, but they are wrong in what they deny. The Eucharist is of no avail to the non-believer who has not been blessed by the Spirit to believe the mystery of the Eucharist. It is only through faith in the resurrected Jesus that the Holy Eucharist has meaning.

A Final Thought - There are many commentaries that insist on a metaphorical interpretation of “eat” and “drink” and are thus unable/unwilling to move beyond “eat” and “drink” as metaphors for belief. There are some commentators who insist there is no metaphor, that the entirety of Jesus' discourse is sacramental/Eucharistic. As Fr. Raymond Brown and Fr. Francis Moloney point out, the truly Catholic position is “both-and.” What begins in John 6:22-50 as metaphor for belief, is ultimately answered in John 6:51-58 as Eucharist.

Image credit:

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