

We have a complex relationship with bread. Strolling down the “bread aisle” of any supermarket reveals a cornucopia of breads: sourdough, pumpernickel, rye, whole wheat, ancient grain, pita, white and many more. Variety and selection are the hallmarks of our society. It’s sometimes easy to forget how basic bread was to ancient cultures. Bread wasn’t a specialty item affording choice and distinction. Bread was the staple of life, consumed daily as an essential source of nutrition.

With its known complex carbohydrates, now various marketed diets have us “counting bread’s carbs”. Bread now has acquired a sinister side. One brand of “lite” bread advertises only 45 calories per slice. Not only have some people chosen to severely limit their consumption of bread, some have even eliminated it altogether.

The Hebrew people on their exodus journey from slavery and death in Egypt to the promised land of “milk and honey” cried out for bread. Our first reading tells how God heard their cry and satisfied their hunger by raining down “bread from heaven”, manna. Besides satisfying physical hunger, the manna was a sign of God’s faithfulness to his covenant relationship with the Hebrew people to provide for their life. Read through the lens of today’s Gospel, the manna come down from heaven foreshadowed God’s ultimate “heavenly bread”, the gift of himself through Jesus. Like us, the Hebrew people at the time of the Exodus and the time of Jesus had a complex relationship with bread, even “heavenly bread.” The Hebrew people began to grumble and complain about this “wretched bread” and in the Gospel we run into the skepticism of Jesus’ listeners following the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fish and his self-identification as “the Bread of Life” come down from heaven.

Reflecting on the story from the Book of Exodus and Jesus’ words in the Gospel along with our contemporary relationship with prompted me to ask, and reflect, on several questions which I pose to you as well: *What is my relationship to Jesus? Do I hunger for him in my life truly as my “daily bread” a relationship I cannot do without daily or, nibble on some form of “Jesus Lite Bread”—great taste but less filling—a faith life and practice content with minimally doing only what I must to “get to heaven?” Is*

*participating in Mass every weekend, the central act expressing and satisfying my hunger for Jesus as the “Bread of Life” or is it a “take it or leave it” proposition? If I “can work it in, fine” but if not, skipping Mass like skipping lunch isn’t going to hurt that much? While here, what is the level of my participation? Where and to whom is Jesus calling me to be, in him, “the Bread of Life”?*

Recently I read some sobering statistics that speak to the famine of bread affecting church life today. An article written by Bishop Robert Barron noted that the fastest-growing “religious” group in the United States is the “nones”—those claiming no religious affiliation. Fully 25 percent of our country—80 million people—say they have no formal religion. The picture for young adults is even more bleak. Almost 40 percent of those under thirty are nones, and among Catholics in that age group, the number rises to 50 percent. Of all the Catholic children baptized or confirmed these last thirty years, half no longer participate in the life of the Church. Some of you have shared your concern and anguish over these facts and their reality evident in your families.

Jesus offers himself in every Mass as our “Bread of Life”. Here at Mass Jesus continually gives himself as “viaticum”—food for the journey of our life to satisfy our deepest hungers for meaning and purpose to sustain and nourish the gift of eternal life received in baptism. Nourished by Jesus as the “Bread of Life” Jesus calls us to “do this in memory of me”—ourselves become full-bodied, Jesus enriched bread for others, living as the body of Christ—through our words and actions, offering his friendship, his life in us to all people in our families, school, work and wider community not through coercion or guilt trips, but by prayer, love and witness. For the many “nones” as well as others we are sent to offer ourselves as the “Bread of Life” in Jesus. We are sent as “manna” to feed the many who dwell in the desert of our world.

Our Preparation of Gifts hymn we will sing in a few minutes says it best: “I myself am the bread of life. You and I are the bread of life, taken and blessed, broken and shared by Christ that the world might live.”

Fr Jim Secora