

YUCK! EEEW! GROSS! DISGUSTING! NO WAY!

Undoubtedly some of the reaction that accompanied the statements Jesus proclaims about “eating my body” and “drinking my blood.” Years (generations) of reading and hearing them from the sixth chapter of St. John’s Gospel and proclaiming them in the Institution Narrative during the Eucharistic Prayer at Mass we’ve become, if not immune, then at best, non-questioningly comfortable with them. But to the original hearers Jesus’ words induced shock, ridicule and (as we’ll see next week) outright rejection prompting Jesus to ask his disciples if, they too, want to leave his company. Jesus’ words and the people’s reaction prompts *two questions. What is the place of the Holy Eucharist in my life of faith? What, if any effect, does it have (or should it have) on my life?*

As in other places in his gospel St. John employs a literary device of misunderstanding, even hostility, to drive home Jesus’ teaching. The crowd assumes Jesus is advocating cannibalism (by the way a charge still labeled at us Catholics in regard to the Eucharist by some fundamentalist Christian sects). If Jesus is in fact advocating cannibalism, the reaction is understandable. So, what is going on? In identifying himself as the “Bread of Life” and his flesh as “true food” and his blood as “true drink” Jesus states that what was prefigured by God providing the manna (bread) and the quails (flesh and blood) to the Hebrew people in their desert journey from slavery and death to freedom and life in the Promised Land in the Exodus journey and celebrated in the Jewish Passover feast, now has reached its ultimate fulfillment in his person. Personal relationship with Jesus, not some philosophical, doctrinal or spiritual concepts of him, feeding and drinking of him ingesting his life into our own, is the way we experience freedom from the slavery and death of sin and rise to freedom and eternal life in him.

In the opening chapter of St. John’s Gospel, the evangelist proclaims that the “Word became *flesh* and made his dwelling among us” (Jn. 1:14). Jesus, the eternal Son/Word (the exact representation of God the Father) united our human flesh and blood to his divine nature. In the culture of the Bible a person’s spoken word was more than the communication of ideas or feelings. It was an enfleshment of the person who uttered it. A person’s word was their person. Through his Word, Jesus, God brought creation, including human life, into existence. Jesus, the Son of God, uttered his words “this is my body”; “this

is my blood” over earthly creations of bread and wine. In doing so he united them to himself. Ordinary bread and wine now carry the fullness of divine life. Given to the apostles at the Last Supper and through them to the Church, these words of Jesus continue to effect what they state—bread and wine become the person of the risen and glorified Jesus. Jesus, the Word of God, is truly present in the fullness of his person in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, his “body” and “blood”. What has changed is the mode of his presence, not the reality.

So what is our response to Jesus’ invitation to “eat and drink” of his flesh and blood? Eating and drinking of Jesus’ life given for us in the Mass in the act of Holy Communion makes us accountable to the “Amen” we give in response prior to receiving it. In choosing to eat and drink of Jesus we publicly witness to the choice of becoming what we consume. We proclaim that we are and choose to live as the Body of Christ, Jesus in our world. So, ***how willing am I to renounce my self-will and unite myself to the person and will of Jesus, to myself being blessed, broken, poured out and shared for others?*** Not idle questions without implications.

Recently someone commented to me about people they noticed receiving Holy Communion and immediately walking out the door from Mass prompting them to wonder, if those doing so realize who and what they have received and what it commits themselves to. (By the way, my commentator was a non-Catholic who went on to say, “We have Holy Communion infrequently. It’s so special to us we’d never think of eating/drinking and running out the door after partaking in it like the drive-thru at McDonald’s given what Holy Communion is supposed to effect in us.)

Like lady Wisdom, Jesus sets his feast before us. We know the reaction of his original hearers to his invitation. He waits on our RSVP.

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