

## A WAY OF LIFE (Jn 6:41-51)

Food --- it all began with food. Two weeks ago we heard the story of the multiplication of the loaves and how Jesus fed the crowd of thousands with plenty left over. Then last Sunday we heard Jesus telling the crowds that he is the "bread of life" come down from heaven. And now he begins to meet resistance from the people because they think they know him. And when he tells them today that he gives his flesh for them to eat, many will turn around and leave. And it all began with food.

When I was growing up in La. in the 50's, food was a precious commodity for my family because my parents had so little money to be able to provide a nourishing meal for us. Yet we never went hungry. Today, with so much food available, I don't worry about going hungry; I have to be concerned about being overweight from **too much** food. The food industry puts in front of our eyes glossy images of mouth-watering dishes that get the saliva flowing in our mouths and the gastric juices pumping in our stomachs. Mary loves trying new dishes when we go out to eat. But so often when the food is served, she complains, "This doesn't look anything like the picture in the menu." Never in the history of this world has so many people had access to so much food and in such variety. Many of us have made food into an obsession. Almost immediately after finishing one meal, we start thinking about what we are going to eat at the next meal. And we don't settle for just anything; it has to be what suits our palate. This seems to be such a growing problem in our country that we hear of all kinds of diets to get us to eat healthily and in moderation. But diets really don't work over the long term because diets don't become a way of life for us but merely a fad we use for a few weeks or months or a year or two. But food can actually become a way of building the kingdom of heaven here on earth.

In Jesus' time there were two kinds of bread, leavened and unleavened, meaning bread made with yeast which made it rise and bread which was flat. Today bread is not just bread; we have dozens of different kinds of bread --- white, wheat, sourdough, rye, multi-grain, foccacia, cibatta, potato, buns, baguettes, rolls, and on and on. In the Bible "bread" is a code word for "food." So every time we hear the word "bread" think "food" in our terminology. When we hear Jesus say that he is the "bread come down from heaven," think of him as the "food come down from heaven" for the nourishment of our spiritual life. And since we are spiritual beings, we need to eat of this spiritual food. Eating of this "bread of life," this "food of life," enables us to become more and more like Jesus and to follow his way of life. Eating the "bread of life" needs to become a way of life for us. Having a good meal once or twice may be beneficial to our bodies, but the more "good" meals we have the healthier our bodies become. Coming to communion once or twice is beneficial to our souls, but the more of-

ten we receive the "bread of life" the greater is our sharing in the life of our God, a life of peace, a life of love, a life of fulfillment, a life of joy. And we have been incredibly blessed in that we can dine on the "bread of life" every day if we so choose. That wasn't always so. **We** have been chosen to receive this amazing gift from God and then to share it with the world. Being chosen by God for this gift doesn't mean that we are more special in the eyes of God than anyone else; what it means is that we have a **greater responsibility** to share the love with others which has been made manifest to us. From the bread we eat we are to be **love** for the world, **compassion** for the down-hearted, **mercy** for the poor and mistreated, **forgiveness** for those who hate and persecute others, **peace** for those filled with worry and anxiety. That is not easy to do, for anyone, but that's why Jesus gave us his own body and blood and why we need to eat of this food as often as we can.

The fundamental meaning of eating the Body of Christ is to enter into total union with him in our way of thinking and our way of living. The Eucharist is not a "magic" meal but is rather a way of assimilating everything that Jesus teaches into our lives. Eucharist will not give us all of the answers to life but rather will lead us to sharing our lives in ways we never considered before. By eating the "Bread of life" we become bread for the world --- we give ourselves, who we are and what we have to offer, in order that the world may live in love.

There are many hungry people in the world --- 80% of the world's population goes to bed hungry every night, women, children, babies. Yet we don't have to look beyond our own city or county, even in our own parish, in order to see the hungry of the world. I volunteer for the Golden Empire Gleaners one day a week to deliver food to seniors in our community who live below the poverty level. But I learned that my job is not only to bring them food but also to bring myself so that they feel valued as a human being, as children of our heavenly Father. And I find that I receive more from them than what I give. With their smiles, their gratitude, and their stories, I return home enriched and blessed and fed. The motto of the Gleaners is "It starts with food." All we have to do is to look at Jesus' life to see how true that is. He fed the hungry crowds and he feeds us today. Jesus filled their stomachs so they could hear the message to "follow him." He fills our souls that we may follow him with our lives and become the hands and the feet, the eyes and the ears of God for the life of the world.

When we sit down for one of our meals today, reflect on we are eating and what it means to us. Then let us remind ourselves that, at that very moment, someone is hungry and offer a prayer for them. But let's not let our good thoughts stop with the prayer; find some way to make a difference in the life of someone who is hungry --- hungry for food, hungry for spiritual nourishment, hungry for love, hungry for an ear to listen, hungry for a shoulder to lean on. Let one meal a week become a changed "way of life" for us to feed the world.

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