

August 22, 2021

11:30 a.m.

St. Augustine Cathedral

### **Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Even though the weather remains very summer-like, and there are nine days left in August, and Labor Day is still two weeks away, for all intents and purposes, it seems like “Summer” is coming to an end, because---it’s “Back to School” time! Many college campuses are already back to normal, and most of our high schools and grade schools return to session later this week. Whether you’re a student, a Teacher, or a Parent/Grandparent of Students, with the beginning of the School Year, much of the relaxed and casual summer-time days we have been enjoying begin to be replaced with more regimented Fall schedules and daily routines. Even for those of us who have “graduated” into other life routines beyond the classroom, the “Back to School Bells” affect us all, one way or another.

Over the last several weeks of our Sunday Eucharistic celebrations, we’ve been listening to a continuous reading from the 6<sup>th</sup> Chapter of St. John’s Gospel known as the “Bread of Life Discourse”. If we want to think about that long and beautiful Discourse on the Eucharist *in these “Back to School” terms, it was like an intensive “summer school” session that Jesus was teaching to the growing crowds of His Disciples. And over the course of these last five weeks, Jesus taught them some extremely important lessons, and challenged their “Spiritual I Q”.*

After the amazing miracle of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes, which we heard about in the first week, where Jesus had provided a superabundance of bread and fish to a crowd of more than 5,000, the crowds kept growing, and following after Him, hoping that He would keep doing that.

So the first thing Jesus taught them in the second week was: *“Do not work for food that perishes, but for the Food that endures for eternal life.”* And then, He added: *“I am the Bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger.”*

In the next week, St. John told us that the crowds began “murmuring” amongst themselves, and yet Jesus just expanded on His teaching, saying: *“I am the living Bread that came down from Heaven; whoever eats this Bread will live forever....and the Bread I will give is my Flesh for the life of the world.”*

The following week, St. John told us that beyond murmuring to themselves, the people then began arguing with one another, wondering how could any of this be possible? And that’s when Jesus really “upped the anti” and said: *“My*

*flesh is real food, and My Blood is real drink; if you do not eat the Flesh of the Son of Man and drink His Blood, you have no life in you; but anyone who DOES so,... has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."*

And that brings us to today's Gospel passage, in which St. John now tells us: *"Many of Jesus' disciples said: 'This saying is hard; who can accept it?'"*. But Jesus didn't change His teaching; in fact, He just asked them: *"Does this shock you?.....the words I have spoken to you are Spirit and life."* In other words, this is Revealed Truth---it's non-negotiable!

Sadly, we know what happened, as St. John told us: *"As a result of this, many of His disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied Him."* In other words, there were a lot of "dropouts" from this very intense, and challenging, yet critically important "summer school session". But did Jesus change His message? Did He run after those walking away and say, "Wait maybe you misunderstood", or "Let me make a few adjustments"? No, because, again, as St. John told us: *"Jesus knew from the beginning the ones who would not believe."* He even knew: *"the one who would betray Him"*.

As the numbers of the crowd dwindled down to just a few, Jesus turned to the Twelve and bluntly ask: *"Do you also want to leave?"* Simon Peter has one of his shining moments as the "Star Pupil" when he quickly answered on behalf of his 11 Student-Apostles: *"Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe, and are convinced, that you are the Holy One of God."* That really was an extraordinarily astute answer, and Peter deserved an A++ for that insight.

God's Holy Word is powerful----it's life-giving----and it's always challenging. We don't just listen to Scripture Readings when we come together for Sunday Mass and only think about people and circumstances of times long ago in history. For example, in today's First Reading, we don't just think about the People of Israel being led by Joshua; or the people in today's Second Reading that St. Paul was preaching to about the beauty of Marriage in Christ between a husband and wife; or in this Gospel passage we just heard, we need to do much more than criticize or praise the various reactions we heard about in the Gospel Reading.

NO; we listen to these Readings for the purpose of allowing God's Word to speak to YOUR Heart, and to MY Heart; we listen to God's Holy Word so that we

can be inspired in our own faith lives here and now; so that we can allow God's Word to challenge us to stronger faith in our lives.

So, where do we stand? Are we "fair-weather" disciples; those who follow Jesus as long as it's "easy", or as long as it makes sense, or as long as what He teaches (or the Church teaches) agrees with what we think? But Jesus is God's Word in the Flesh----Jesus came to teach the Truth. And the "Truth" is rarely "easy".

The comment that a number of the people in the Crowd following Jesus made--- *"This saying is hard; who can accept it?"*----is such a weak excuse. Learning is NEVER easy! Think about how hard it is for a baby to learn how to walk; remember how challenging it was for us to learn multiplication tables, or geometric theorems, or the rules of grammar. I for one know how hard it is to learn Spanish late in life. If we just say in any of those situations "this is too hard", we'd never learn anything. Learning IS hard.

So why should we think that learning about God is easy---learning about why our God cares about us so much that He would send His Son into the world to become one with us, and then, to save us from the power of sin and death that held the entire human race in total bondage through Jesus' suffering, death and Resurrection. NONE of that is easy---NONE of that comes naturally to us. That's why we need the Master Teacher to reveal God's Love to us in a way we can understand.

As Catholics, as People of Faith, we realize that the "things of God" are hard to understand---learning about God and God's ways can be challenging for us to comprehend, since they deal with realities that are beyond our experience, and exceed scientific evidence or our own ability to reason to. That's why Faith is so important. One of the beautiful definitions of Faith can be found in the Letter to the Hebrews: *"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen."* (Heb.11:1)

In response to Jesus' question to the Apostles "if they too wanted to leave Him"?, Peter responds with another question: *"Master, to whom shall we go?"* And then, he goes on to say that they have come to realize that He is the One Who can teach them about those realities in our lives that truly, eternally matter, because it has become clear to them that Jesus Is the Holy One of God.

At some point, even when it's "hard" to understand, we need the openness of heart to say: "I believe, because it is Jesus Who is telling us what is True! And I believe in Jesus!"

It's clear to me, and I'm sure to most of us, that there are many people today trying to convince themselves that they do not need God; that they do not need to seek after "THE Truth"; it seems everyone thinks they can have their own version of "truth". For many people, science reveals to them all they need or want. Perhaps that explains why some people conclude that they don't need to come to Mass or receive the Sacraments, or follow the Teachings of Jesus or the Church. Not just because it's "too hard", but because for them, Faith in God is irrelevant. How sad!

Like many of the people who had been strong followers of Jesus when they thought He would keep giving them an abundance of bread and fish that they didn't have to work for, but who "*returned to their former way of life*" when His teaching became "too hard", there may be a growing number of people today who "return" to a faith-less level of existence focusing more on the "perishable" things of life, like food, money, sports, fame, possessions, and earthly pleasures.

There's nothing wrong with any of those things, of course; they're essential to our human lives; but they do not feed our soul, nor do they strengthen our spirit--and they will never help us to live beyond this world, which is our destiny. I imagine that I could say on behalf of all of us, that we pray that our destiny will be with God forever in Heaven. But, that requires a strong and vibrant Faith.

These last five Sundays Jesus have been teaching all of us this "special Summer School" lesson on the vital importance of the precious Gift of the Eucharist. Yes, what Jesus teaches us about the Eucharist "is hard"; it challenges our natural abilities to understand. But, Jesus teaches it because it is True; Jesus gives us the Eucharist because He loves us and knows that we can not be fully, spiritually alive without it.

The question Joshua and the People of Israel had to answer in today's First Reading, is the same question many people today seem to be asking: "*If it does not please you to serve the Lord, decide today whom you will serve.*" I pray that all of us here will answer with Joshua: "*As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord!*"

In today's Second Reading, St. Paul was teaching the people of Ephesus about "a great mystery" which is rooted in one of the most sacred and ancient of human relationships---that of marriage between a husband and wife. As St. Paul teaches, for a husband and wife who are married with a shared Faith in Jesus, not only does the marital union bind them together in "one flesh", but they become a "sign"---a reflection---a Sacrament----of the great Mystery of the Eucharist, in which Jesus gives Himself to us totally so that we can be bound with Jesus in that "oneness of His flesh within us".

None of us here has all the answers to life's "hard sayings". There are some things that simply cannot be explained; there are many realities and Truths that lay beyond our ability to see, hear, touch, dissect, and understand. But the ultimate Truth is that Jesus is our Master and Teacher, our Savior and Lord. He has told us very clearly that He is "*the Way, the Truth and the Life*". Not only did He come to ultimately save us, and all humanity, from the power of sin and death by His own suffering, death and Resurrection, but Jesus has provided us with the amazing Miracle of the Eucharist to be the way that Jesus remains with us always as our Food and Drink for our Journey of Faith.

Jesus IS "*the Living Bread come down from Heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever.*" That is His Gift of the Eucharist for us who choose to believe. We can say "this saying is too hard", and walk away, and live a purpose-less and faith-less life. OR, like Peter and the Apostles, we can believe that Jesus is the answer to all our questions; that He IS the Eternal Food that fills our spirits and quenches our fears.

So, let us not be "dropouts", but rather be committed to be ongoing learners, faith-filled and joyful disciples of Jesus who, with Peter, continue to say with confidence: "*We have come to believe, and are convinced, that You are the Holy One of God...You have the words of Eternal Life.*"

God bless you, now and always!