

Homily for 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B, 25 July 2021

“Partaking of the Eucharist commits us to others, especially the poor, teaching us to pass from the flesh of Christ to the flesh of our brothers and sisters, in whom he waits to be recognized, served, honoured and loved by us.”

*Pope Francis, Catechesis on the Mass 2018*

This Sunday’s readings (see “Saving Word” attachment) remind us that God provides for us physically as well as spiritually. He provides for the care of the whole person in our era of human history through his Body which is the Church. Last Sunday’s gospel, in which Saint Mark recalls that Jesus set himself to teach a large crowd at some length, sets up nicely for this Sunday’s readings in which we begin the first of five Sundays when the gospel is taken from the sixth chapter of Saint John’s gospel. This Sunday’s gospel, which consists of an account of the multiplication of the loaves (John 6:1-15), is followed by a long discourse from Jesus on the Bread of Life. The teaching and preaching of Jesus and his feeding of the people with the multiplied loaves establish the pattern that Jesus comes to us in Word AND Sacrament.

Of course, there is an enormous, if unwelcome irony in the timing of this sequence of Sunday readings at precisely the time when the faithful followers of Jesus Christ, namely yourselves, are denied his sacramental presence in Holy Communion. However, Pope Benedict writes brilliantly about the “sacramentality of the word” in his 2010 Post-Synodal Exhortation on the Word of God *Verbum Domini* (literally “the Word of the Lord”, with the Holy Father incorporating a quote of the great Church Father Saint Jerome when he writes:

“The sacramentality of the word can thus be understood by analogy with the real presence of Christ under the appearances of the consecrated bread and wine. [197] By approaching the altar and partaking in the Eucharistic banquet we truly share in the body and blood of Christ. The proclamation of God’s word at the celebration entails an acknowledgment that Christ himself is present, that he speaks to us, [198] and that he wishes to be heard. Saint Jerome speaks of the way we ought to approach both the Eucharist and the Word of God: ‘We are reading the Sacred Scriptures. For me, the Gospel is the Body of Christ; for me, the Holy Scriptures are his teaching. And when he says: whoever does not eat my flesh and drink my blood (Jn 6:53), even though these words can also be understood of the [Eucharistic] Mystery, Christ’s body and blood are really the word of Scripture, God’s teaching. When we approach the [Eucharistic] Mystery, if a crumb falls to the ground we are troubled. Yet when we are listening to the Word of God, and God’s Word and Christ’s flesh and blood are being poured into our ears yet we pay no heed, what great peril should we not feel?’. Christ, truly present under the species of bread and wine, is analogously present in the Word proclaimed in the Liturgy. A deeper understanding of the sacramentality of God’s Word can thus lead us to a more unified understanding of the mystery of revelation, which takes place through “deeds and words intimately connected”; an appreciation of this can only benefit the spiritual life of the faithful and the Church’s pastoral activity. (*Verbum Domini*, n. 56)

When we in the Church look for the providential fruits of our current strange local and indeed global situation, a reawakening in us of the “sacramentality” of the Word of God may well be one fruit that is staring us in the face. We could well ask ourselves the questions:

- Do we habitually take advantage of the most important texts of Sacred Scripture as presented to us in Holy Church’s Liturgy, i.e. in the Mass, in the Sacraments, and in the Liturgy of the Hours (the Prayer of the Church), and
- Does Sacred Scripture, revealing as it does the Word of God, the Son of God, Jesus Christ, form the basis of our personal prayer??

The amazing post-Tridentine saint, Lorenzo di Brindisi, whose feast the universal Church celebrated last Wednesday and who, *inter alia*, was a profoundly expert biblical scholar, writes in the Office of Readings for his feast day:

“Finally Christ, God and man, came to preach the Word of the Lord, and he sent out the apostles on this task, just as previously he had sent the prophets ...

The Word of God is so filled with manifold goodness that it is like a treasury of all good things. From this Word come faith, hope, charity, all the virtues, all the gifts of the Holy Spirit, all the gospel beatitudes, all good works, all merit in this life, all the glory of paradise: Receive, therefore, the implanted word which is able to save your souls!

For the Word of God is light to the mind and fire to the will, enabling man to know and to love God. To the interior man who lives by grace for the Spirit of God, it is bread and water ... For the heart that is obstinately hardened in vice it is a hammer; and against the devil, the world and the flesh it is a sword that slays every sin.”

(That said about the critical importance to us of the Word of God, the sequence of Sunday Gospels over the coming weeks do offer us an opportunity for a sustained catechesis on the Eucharist. It should be noted, however, observes Fr. Brendan Byrne, that while eucharistic overtones are there from the start of this sequence, i.e. from this Sunday’s gospel, it is only towards the end of the discourse (John 6: 51-58) that they become explicit. The principal focus of the whole discourse, comments Fr. Byrne, is on Jesus as the One sent down from heaven to be “the life-giving revelation of God”. Our overall interpretation will be richer, he says, “we do not allow the eucharistic allusion to ‘swamp’ the whole meaning from the very start.”)