**THE EUCHARIST -----** BELIEF AND DISBELIEF

Each year the Church celebrates a special feast day honoring the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ, this year falling of June 17. At the Last Supper, the Lord Jesus asked that what he did that night continue to be celebrated by those who are to follow him, enriching them with his love “until he comes again”. (See I Corinthians, 11,26) The words of Jesus, inviting us to partake of what he offered that night -- food and drink that he speaks of as being his body and blood-- are profound and meaningful, our “mystery of faith”. There is much to gain by trying to learn more about this gift of the Lord to us. If we are to say our “Amen” as we receive the sacrament sincerely, and desire to know our Lord’s wishes in leaving us this means of communion with him, we need to learn more about this holy sacrament. It presents a challenge to our ways of human understanding; but both the grace of God enlightening our faith, and the searching of our rational mind need to be paired as we give credence to this element of our faith. Throughout the history of the Christianity some dissenting voices have been raised, and divisions have arisen over the interpretation of what his words meant. In affirming our Catholic faith in the Eucharist at the adult level, we do well to look closely at how this was expressed in the Scriptures. The gospel accounts of the Last Supper present the factual basis, of course. As regards to understanding the meaning of the Eucharist, Paul’s teachings, notably in I Corinthians—chapters 10 and 11, are highly valuable in our comprehension of what the Lord Jesus intended in giving this gift to the community of believers. At Corinth, the lack of understanding the deeper meaning of the Eucharistic observance gave rise to very unchristian treatment of some of the community present. Paul opens their minds and hearts as to what this communion with the Lord’s body and blood means, even in their very manner of participating in this sacred meal.

In this reflection we direct our attention to the teaching found in the Gospel of John, the beloved disciple. In the sixth chapter John records the extensive teaching of Jesus in the synagogue at Capernaum. The Lord speaks at length about faith in him as the source of eternal life; he speaks of himself as bread, feeding and nourishing those who have a hunger for his truth. As he expands on these words and images and reveals more about his very own body as this food, and his blood as life-giving drink, strong reactions begin to come up. Serious disagreements are expressed, some believers present even walking away in dismay. But there is in the end of all of these significant passages, a voice professing faith in the Master and in what he has revealed to them, even with its mystifying character. All this gospel teaching is offered for our acceptance as well. We respond in faith as we approach “the table of plenty.”

Let us examine closely this sixth chapter of John’s gospel, considering it as a catechetical lesson for us who want to be strengthened in our eucharistic faith. John the evangelist could have intended it for believers of his own community, who could possibly be in a crisis of dissension over the meaning of those weighty words of the Lord pronounced at each Eucharistic gathering, inviting all to this communion with him in his very own body and blood. As we see in several of the letters in the New Testament, doctrinal arguments and opposing interpretations existed early in the history of the Church. The whole of this chapter of John’s gospel can be seen to be of one piece as each segment leads us along a path of learning. Our close attention to the whole and its parts is important.

I

The opening verses of the sixth chapter speak of eager followers of Jesus coming along after him as he moves on from one place to another. He wondrous acts in the healing of the sick drew them—signs of his heavenly power. The word **sign** has special importance in this gospel account. The Lord’s public ministry began with a miracle, “…the first of his signs, at Cana in Galilee. Thus did he reveal his glory, and his disciples believed in him.” (2,11) The concluding section of this same gospel can be seen as expressing the intent of this whole written account: “Jesus performed many other signs as well…. But these have been recorded to help you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, so that through this faith you may have life in his name.”(20, 30-31) Jesus on one occasion deals with the other side of miraculous signs, again at Cana as he expresses his exasperation: “Unless you people see signs and wonders you do not believe.” (4,48) Chapter 6 has an extended dialogue focused on signs. The teaching opens with a reprimand given by Jesus to the people who were fed at the miraculous multiplication of loaves. (6,26) He detects in them a double failure: their attempt rushing towards him showed an enthusiasm that remained at an all too human level—a desire to make him a king in their world, not in the world that Jesus had come to establish (6,15); he sees in them an excitement and joy that came from having been given a bounteous gift of food, satisfying their human hunger (6,27). A higher hunger must be involved here, because of the role that Jesus has be given by the Father. In the acts of Jesus, God is at work, and for their part, faith is what is necessary. (6,26-29) At this point the people ask for a sign that will engage their faith.

Words of special meaning are given to us at opening stage of the chapter. We are told that the Passover of the Jews was near. (6,4) For Christian believers, this would be a reminder to them of the Passover meal celebrated by Jesus with this apostles on the night before he died, and the occasion of the Last Supper when he offers them food and drink as his own body and blood. They are to do this as a perpetual memory of him. This reference was meant to set the scene for something very much connected with that evening.

Jesus looks up and sees a vast crowd that is coming towards him. The heart of a shepherd is shown in his first concern for them: to provide sufficient food for the thousand of people who have come to him. (6,5) We in later times know that love of his is still giving us the food we need.

Special attention must be given to certain words in the text. John writes for people who have knowledge of many used in important parts of the bible. The use of them even without an explanation would make knowledgeable Christians bring to mind passages of scripture that had significant meaning. As Jesus asks that the people be seated on the ground, the word recline is used to indicate the manner of the seating of these many people. The word **recline** is used at the direction of Jesus. (6,10 & 11) In its customary understanding, this would mean that five thousand people are to be lying down and stretching out on the grassy area—a rather impossible position to take. But the evangelist seems to be using this term “out of place” so as to relate this miracle to the same words used in the accounts of the Last Supper in John 13,12, Luke 22,14, Matthew 26,20, Mark 14,18 In the Greek language used in the New Testament, all four evangelists use the word in their accounts. Reclining was introduced into the Jewish culture from the time when the empire of Alexander the Great had been extended to the land of the Jewish people. The Greeks brought their language and made cultural changes to the area that lasted for a long time. People present at a lengthy, more “formal” meal, for instance, would lie down on couches, as did Jesus, as is described on the occasion of the anointing and washing of his feet. (Luke 7,36)

Other forms of wording continue to make more connections for the Christian reader. The miracle of the multiplication of loaves includes more familiar words: “Jesus then took the loaves of bread, gave thanks and passed them around to those reclining there’ (6,11) These words would resonate for Christians who repeatedly shared in the Lord’s Supper. S t. Paul in I Corinthians, 11,23 & 24, as well as other evangelists give the accounts of the Last Supper describing the action of Jesus at this solemn moment with the very same words : Matthew 26,26; Mark 14,22; Luke 22,19 These words were sacrosanct, so much so that care was taken that no deviation was made in the passing down of the tradition over time. Other evangelists recount the story of the multiplications of loaves by Jesus with the same careful wording: Matthew 15,36, Mark 6, Luke 9,16. In a passage harkening back to the multiplications of the loaves and fishes (the fishes having no further mention in the chapter since the bread must have the major attention) John again uses a significant term when he describes the crowd as they again return to the place near “ where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks”. (6,23) The Greek word “eucharistein” is used to express his giving of thanks, a term used from early Christian times to identify what was also called the Lord’s Supper in St. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians (11,20) and in the Acts of the Apostles, the Breaking of the Bread (Acts 2,42)

II

A second miracle of Jesus is described in this chapter: after he had fled from the crowd, he returns and goes to meet his disciples, walking on water. ( 6,16-20) John repeats some of what was in other gospel accounts of this extraordinary event, but deals only with the walking itself and the fright by the disciples. This was a revealing of divine power taking over his body, with the resulting reaction of fear in the disciples, repeated a number of times in the scriptures when individual meet with figures manifesting heavenly power. “Do not be afraid” are the words meant to bring back a sense of calm. The two miracles are connected: Jesus manifests bread and his body as important features in the blessing he would give to the people.

Jesus in then shown to be in the synagogue, a frequent location for much of his teaching. He begins his instruction with the subject of signs, a word of great meaning in the gospel of John, as we have spoken about already. In his discourse, Jesus responds to a request from the people that he perform a sign for them so that they could believe in him. They bring up a special sign from God given to the Jewish people in a time of great need for them. They speak of what God did for them in their wanderings in the desert, feeding them with “manna”, bread from heaven. (Exodus, chapter 16) Jesus takes up this subject and launches into his profound teaching with the word **manna** as his beginning point. Manna in Hebrew is translated “What is it?”—the response uttered by the Jews on the morning when this mysterious element appeared on the desert, a kind of light material, somewhat like bread, which ended up being edible. It came not as a result of a hungry people’s prayer, but as described in the account in Exodus, was the answer to their bitter complaining about the scarcity of food in the barren wilderness. They were remembering their time in Egypt, where even as slaves, they at least some dependable supply of food. Now in a later time, the Lord Jesus prepares to give them another “mystery” bread, and true to their history, these people have some antagonism to express in the process. Among the Jewish people present, there rises a resistance to what he has to say, and “they started to **murmur”.** (6,41 & 43) A close look at this word has ended in the discovery of exactly the same word used in the passage in Exodus 16,2, as it was expressed in the Old Testament Greek translation popular among Jews in the time of Jesus. “Bread from heaven” holds a significant in the long history of God’s people.

As we look further at the discourse of Jesus unfolding the eucharistic mystery, he leads them on. The Father has sent him to be the new bread from heaven, and those who profess faith in him, enabled by grace from his Father will receive the gift of eternal life. A beautiful prayer comes from the crowd: “Sir give us this bread always.” (6,34) He declares forthrightly: “I myself am the bread of life.” (6,35) Over and over again he repeats the message. Doubts and opposition come back at him. (6,41 & 42). Undaunted, he continues. He declares again, “I am the bread of life” (6,49) He reaches a new level: “ The bread I will give is my flesh for the life of the world”(6,51) As could be expected, further negative disturbance arises (6,61) Once again the Lord returns to the theme with deep feeling: “Let me solemnly assure you: unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you have no life in you.” (6,53) The mention of the blood reaches a high point. This proves to be too much for even his followers who now begin to **murmur**: “…many of his disciples remarked, this…is hard to endure. How can anyone take it seriously?” And sadly, “From this time on, many of his disciples broke away and would not remain in his company any longer.” (6,66) Jesus at this point mentions the betrayal of Judas, connecting that with his own love for those who are with him. Peter expresses the faith of the true believer: “You have the words of eternal life.” (6,68)

Jesus had offered words to support the faith of those who held on. He would one day ascend to where he was before. It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is useless. “The words I spoke are spirit and life.” (6, 62-64) His words are not to be understood in a crass, physical way. For it was at the at the resurrection that his body would be transformed by heavenly life that filled him, enabling him to ascend to his original state in heaven. A new state of humanity came to be with Jesus, and opened up for us.. The Eucharist cannot be understood without its meaning connected with the “spiritualizing” that came upon the body of Jesus, risen from the dead. And for us who believe, and join in communion with his eucharist presence, he pledges that we will be raised up on the last day.