

**Good News**  
**Christ in the Eucharist**  
*Ordinary Time 19 & 20*  
by Paul Turner

The Catholic belief in the real presence of Christ in the eucharist derives partly from the gospel we'll hear the weekend of August 17 (John 6:51-58). Jesus proclaims, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you . . . . My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink." This passage, linked with those of the last supper in the other gospels, indicates that when we eat and drink at Mass "in memory" of Jesus, we are eating and drinking his true body and blood in the form of bread and wine.

John's gospel does not include the familiar words of Jesus from the last supper which we hear at every Mass, "Take, this is my body; this is my blood." Chapter six of John, therefore, where we find Jesus' discourse on the bread of life, takes on added significance, since it bears enormous weight in proclaiming the mystery of the eucharist in this gospel.

Before we hear this important passage about the eucharist, though, next Sunday's gospel (John 6:41-51) prepares the way. A continuation of the discourse we've been hearing in the previous two weeks, it tells more of the bread of life.

In the background of this passage lies the exodus from Egypt. Moses led the chosen people of God away from slavery into freedom, but they had to cross the dreaded desert. Hot, hungry, homeless, and tired, a throng equivalent to the population of Kansas City, many days on the road and no end in sight, started complaining about the food (Exodus 15:24; 16:2,7,12; and even Psalm 106:25). Moses brought the predicament to God, who provided manna in the desert to fortify the faith of the chosen people. This "bread from heaven" still did not satisfy the murmuring crowd.

In retrospect, in the light of John's gospel, maybe they had a point. Jesus observed that after eating this bread from heaven, they died. But, eating his bread from heaven will bring life.

A parallel episode unfolds in the gospel. Some of those hearing Jesus' discourse also began to complain. Jesus, implying a connection to the exodus story, concluded they had no faith. Longing that they put their complaints aside, he proposed that those who believe will be raised up on last day. "They shall all be taught by God," he says, citing Isaiah 54:13 and perhaps Jeremiah 31:34. God teaches faith to those who believe in Jesus. As bread, Jesus brings the comfort of God's instruction and care.

For a moment, think about this "bread from heaven" not specifically as the eucharist, but as an expression like "the Good Shepherd" or "the Vine" or "the Light of the World." That is, think of it as a metaphor which helps us understand Jesus, the incarnate Word of God, the bringer of

salvation and of life in God. Up to this point in the discourse, the "bread" motif works as a symbol of the nourishing life which comes from God in Jesus Christ.

But starting in verse 51, the last verse of next Sunday's gospel and the first verse the following week, the whole discourse becomes more focused to describe Jesus specifically as the Bread of the Eucharist. In these verses Jesus speaks unequivocally about himself as the eucharistic Bread from heaven, who grants eternal life to those who eat his flesh and drink his blood. This passage articulates our understanding of the eucharist as it has been celebrated and shared from the first generation of disciples up to today.

It is generally assumed that John's gospel was composed over many years. Hence, a careful researcher can discern several layers of composition. Some parts are older than others. These verses (51-58) may represent a later addition to the earliest versions of the gospel, a later remembrance of Jesus' teaching incorporated here as part of the final version of the gospel, to make the point of this discourse more plain to the reader.

No matter what stage of composition we have here, the words have been recorded for the Church as inspired writing in the fourth gospel. They boldly proclaim our faith as we have received it from the life, ministry, and teaching of Jesus.

The End.