

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Christ is truly present in the eucharist. The Catechism of the Catholic Church quotes Pope Paul VI to make this clear: “This presence is called ‘real’ - by which is not intended to exclude the other types of presence as if they could not be ‘real’ too, but because it is presence in the fullest sense: that is to say, it is a *substantial* presence by which Christ, God and human, makes himself wholly and entirely present.” Several years ago the Pew Research Center made headlines by claiming only 34% of Catholics believe that. Since then many Catholic leaders have wrung their hands in dismay. But the research center asked a different question: “Which best describes Catholic teaching about bread and wine used for Communion: They actually become the body and blood of Jesus or They are symbols of the body and blood of Jesus?” Well, we don’t teach that the bread and wine “actually” become the body and blood of Jesus if by that you mean Jesus’ actual, physical skin and bones are here as they were in Nazareth. We believe he is “really” present. It’s his risen body and blood we receive. The results of the questionnaire are therefore flawed. In practice, when the distribution of communion begins at Mass, a priest, deacon or minister holds up the host and declares, “The body of Christ,” and every communicant answers the same way: “Amen”—which means, “I believe.” That makes a stronger foundation for the percentage of believing Catholics than a flawed questionnaire does.

That said, some people do experience doubts, whether they pertain to the existence of God, the incarnation of Jesus, or holy communion. It’s been that way since the time of Jesus. Even when he walked the earth, some of those who met him and listened to his own preaching did not accept it. In the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, at the end of Jesus’ life, many of his disciples fled from Calvary. They could not follow him to the cross. Even when they saw him risen, some disciples doubted. In today’s passage from the first part of John’s gospel, Jesus lost many of his followers not over the threat of death but because his teaching was “hard”—not hard to understand, hard to accept. Which teaching? This one: “My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in [them].” Some of his own disciples could not accept this. They were murmuring about his teaching, so Jesus asked, somewhat bewildered, “Does this shock you?” Yet, as a result of his teaching, “many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him.” In the very moment when he shared his heart, a central teaching they would need after he died, some simply walked away never to return. One of the most poignant moments in the bible comes next. Jesus looks around and sees only the Twelve. He realizes his big speech has failed worse than he imagined possible. Perhaps lowering his head, he lifted his eyes to them and asked, “Do you also want to leave?” It was all on the line right there: If they walked away, his mission would have failed long before the cross. Peter speaks up on behalf of the Twelve and asks a rhetorical question. At first, it isn’t very encouraging: “Master, to whom shall we go?” It implies if they found someone else, well, yes, they would leave. But Peter goes on, “We have come to believe... you are the Holy One of God.” They didn’t believe it in an instant, they came to believe. It took time. Any of us may have doubts, but over time we come to believe what we express in a single word: “Amen.”

Sunday, August 22, 2021