

By the time Jacqueline Kennedy and Richard Nixon died this summer, they well knew the anguish of being in the public eye. And we knew the disillusionment which comes from knowing our public figures too well. Kennedy lived in seclusion to remove herself from her worshippers. Nixon appeared in the open to recreate himself for his critics. Like gods, they amazed us with their fame, power, and poise, and like people, they disappointed us with their ordinariness.

I blush to compare Jesus to Jacqueline Kennedy and Richard Nixon--both in the same homily. And yet the crowd in this story treats him as we do our celebrities. We elevate them like icons, and we censure them like peers. Jesus says, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." The crowd who came to listen to the guy says, "Isn't this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he say, 'I have come down from heaven'? Who does he think he is?" Jesus was teaching a mystery, but their familiarity with him blocked their understanding.

Since our church deals in the realm of mystery, this pattern affects us too. Mystery expects awe, and familiarity disillusion. Priests in our church used to enjoy unparalleled respect and authority. Their decisions were law, and no one questioned their behavior. Now people evaluate religious leaders more critically, partly because they have proven their weakness, and partly because what used to be mysterious has now become familiar. Priests still probably get much more respect than we deserve, but nobody takes it for granted any more.

However, what makes Jesus so great a mystery is precisely his ordinariness as a common human. God becoming human does not disillusion us; it fills us with awe at the mystery. In getting to know Jesus, familiarity does not conceal the mystery--it reveals how deep the mystery really is. Our God is human. Our eucharist is bread. Our priests are people--disappointingly like Jackie and Dick. How amazing of God to work so much mystery through what is so familiar.