

## ***“I Am the Living Bread that Came Down from Heaven”***

**By Rev. Thomas G. Weinandy, OFM, Cap.**

August 19, 2018 – Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: Proverbs 9.1-6; Ephesians 5.15-20; John 6.51-58

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In today’s gospel Jesus proclaims to the crowds that he is the living bread that has come down from heaven. In saying that he is the bread that has come “down from heaven” Jesus alludes to God giving the Israelites manna in the desert. The Lord said to Moses, “Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you” (Ex 16.4). However, although God gave them bread from heaven, the people still died, as Jesus notes at the end of today’s gospel. Here lies the importance of Jesus professing that he is “*living* bread that came down from heaven,” and that “whoever eats this bread will live forever.” But why is Jesus the living bread, and why will those who eat the bread that is Jesus live forever? There are a number of reasons.

### Jesus the Living Bread

First, Jesus is the living bread that has come down from heaven because he is the Son of the living God who became man. Jesus, as the Father’s Son, existed from all eternity. He possesses divine and so everlasting life. In becoming man he came down from heaven and dwelt among us so that we might share in his everlasting divine life. John tells us that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3.16). Jesus himself declares that he came that we might have life and “have it abundantly” (Jn 10.10). Thus, in the act of becoming man Jesus truly became the living divine bread that has come down from heaven.

Second, Jesus continues to say that “the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.” The Son of God became man; he assumed the weakness of our very own flesh, a flesh that was under the condemnation of sin and under the sentence to death. Jesus, the Father’s Son, gave his human flesh for the life of the world in that he gave, on the cross, his human life in love to the Father out of love for us. By the loving sacrifice of himself on the cross Jesus reconciled us to the Father through the forgiveness of our sins and so obtained for us the new and everlasting life of the Holy Spirit. In the giving up of his life to death Jesus has made available to us his everlasting life.

Third, in response to those who thought it irrational and absurd for Jesus to say that we must eat his flesh, Jesus emphatically retorted, “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” Jesus insists, as the bread of life, that we must eat his body and drink his blood, and only in so doing will we have eternal life.

So far we have seen that Jesus is the heavenly bread of life because he is the eternal Son of God who became man and, as man, offered his life on the cross that we might be freed from death and given everlasting life. But here now we find a third reason for why Jesus is the living bread that has come down from heaven. The body that we must eat and the blood that we must drink are not the earthly body and blood of Jesus. We are not to consume the earthly Jesus. Rather, the body that we are to eat and the blood we are to drink is the body and blood of the *risen* Jesus. We are to consume the risen Christ; the Jesus who is glorious; he who conquered sin and vanquished death; the Jesus who lives and reigns

forever in heaven. This is the Jesus we receive in Holy Communion, and it is this Jesus of which we partake under the forms of bread and wine.

When we partake of the bread and drink of the chalice we are in communion with the risen Jesus, the divine Son of God, who gave his life for us. Thus, we share in his resurrected humanity. We share in his eternal divinity, and in so doing we procure his risen life, a life that establishes and assures our own resurrection, our own divine eternal life.

## Jesus' Real Presence

Here we see the importance of the Church's teaching and insistence on the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. Only if the risen Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist as he really is in himself – what has traditionally been called a “substantial presence,” that is, in the fullness of his risen humanity, body and soul, and in his full divinity – will we be fully in communion with Jesus and so be united to him in his risen and divine life. This understanding is confirmed when Jesus says, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.” Jesus truly abides with us, and we truly abide with him, because he is truly with us in the fullness of who he is, just as we are truly in union with him in the fullness of who we are.

Because we abide in Jesus and Jesus abides with us, we also share in the Holy Spirit – the life-giving divine Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son, the Spirit who makes us fully alive as the Father's loving sons and daughters. Thus, to be united to Jesus is to be taken up into the very divine life of the Trinity. Moreover, because all of us are truly united to Jesus, we are also truly united to one another. All of us become one body, one living reality *with* Christ because we all share in the one body and blood that *is* Christ.

Jesus sums up all that he has said and all that we have now come to see when he concludes, “Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me.” The living Father sent his living Son into the world. Jesus has life, therefore, because he shares in the very divine life of his Father. Similarly, all who feed on Jesus, all who eat his risen flesh and drink his risen blood, will share in Jesus' risen divine life. To share in Jesus' risen and divine life, therefore, means not only that we are united to him but also that we are, through him, united to the source of all life, his divine Father. To be in communion with Jesus, the Father's Son, is to be in communion with his Father as the Father's children. This is the glory and marvel of the Eucharist – that in Christ and through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit we come into communion with none other than God the Father himself, the eternal, ever-living source of all life.

## Responding in Gratitude and Love

What is to be our response to the awesome and marvelous mystery of the Eucharist? As the word “Eucharist” intends, we are to be thankful for so great a gift. We are to receive Jesus in Holy Communion with gratitude. We are to praise, honor, and glorify him for his humbly coming to us in the lowly form of bread and wine. Thus, we are to approach Jesus in Holy Communion with a holy life. And so it would not only be unbecoming to receive our risen Lord in the state of serious or mortal sin, it would actually be wrong. How could anyone who is not in communion with Jesus because of serious sin, someone who is unholy, receive him who is all holy in Holy Communion? It would be dishonest and sinful for us to do so. For anyone in such a sinful state, Jesus has mercifully provided the Sacrament of Reconciliation. There we can be reconciled to Jesus and to his Church and so rightly, properly, and fully participate once more in the Eucharist.

Lastly, and importantly, as Jesus gives himself totally to us in the Eucharist, the whole of who he is as the Son of God incarnate, fully God and fully man, so we are to give ourselves fully to him. Only if we give ourselves fully to Jesus in the Eucharist can he receive us fully. We are to hold back nothing of ourselves but give ourselves totally to him who has given himself totally to us.

Let us, then, approach Jesus in the Eucharist today in love and gratitude, with praise and honor, so that, in the assurance of eternal life, we can live with him forever; he who is the heavenly life-giving bread that has come down to earth.

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### ***For Further Reading***

[Catechism of the Catholic Church, ##1322-1419](#)

Blessed Paul VI, [Mysterium Fidei](#)

St. John Paul II, [Ecclesia de Eucharistia](#)

USCCB, Bishops' Committee for Doctrine, ["Happy Are Those Who Are Called to His Supper": On Preparing to Receive Christ Worthily in the Eucharist](#)

### ***In Short . . .***

- ***Unlike those who ate the manna in the desert and died, those who partake of Jesus will live forever.***
- ***By dying on the cross and rising from the dead, Jesus frees us from the condemnation of sin and from the sentence of death.***
- ***In the Eucharist we partake of the risen Jesus and so come to share in his risen humanity and his divine life. Thus, we too will rise from the dead and live eternally with his Father.***
- ***The fullness of Jesus' risen humanity and his divinity is truly present under the forms of bread and wine.***
- ***In receiving Jesus we fully come into communion with the Father through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We are truly taken up into the divine life of the Trinity.***
- ***We should receive Jesus in Holy Communion only if we too are holy and not in a state of serious sin. We should give ourselves totally to him as he has given himself totally to us.***