

19<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (August 9, 2009)  
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It seems hard to believe that another school year is just around the corner—less than two weeks away. Some of our students (and teachers) are probably looking forward to it; others may have different reactions... In any event, I think we would all agree that the learning process—whether in or out of the classroom—never actually comes to an end. There is always more to learn; we are always called to grow in our knowledge so that we can know truth and be grounded in reality.

Jesus, the master Teacher, was always trying to lead his followers to a deeper and more profound understanding of his gospel message. Today's passage from John 6 provides a very good example of this. Last week we heard an earlier passage from this chapter in which Jesus referred to himself as the "bread of life"; today, he restates that teaching ("I am the living bread that came down from heaven"). To this point, images like 'bread of life' and 'the living bread' could certainly be read or interpreted in a symbolic way—Jesus is the food, so to speak, that nurtures and nourishes our spiritual lives.

But then Jesus begins to take that message even further. Listen again to the last verse of today's gospel: "...and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world." This is going beyond the merely symbolic, the metaphor—Jesus is taking us to a whole new level of understanding of himself as the Bread of Life. He speaks of giving us his flesh: his material, physical substance. This will become even more explicit in the passage from John 6 that we will hear next Sunday, when it will become crystal clear that Jesus is speaking about the Eucharist—receiving his Body and Blood in that sacrament.

For now, though, I want to focus for a moment or two on that more general idea of growing in our knowledge, of being drawn to a deeper appreciation and understanding of our faith and life in Christ. Our kindergarten students last year learned a lot, but they have a whole lot more to learn—that is why they are going on to first grade this year. Last year's eighth-graders completed an important part of their education, but they do not know it all—that is why it is time for high school for them. Last year's high school graduates had a real cause for celebration in getting their diplomas, but now they are called to learn more about themselves and their world through, e.g., higher education, joining the work force or going into military service. There is always more to learn; we are always called to further growth and deeper understanding.

And that is especially true in our lives of Christian faith. Our children and young people learn a lot about Jesus, the Catholic Church, the sacraments, the Bible and the gospel way of life in our Catholic schools and religious education programs. Those schools and programs fulfill a vitally important function, and they need and deserve our support (financial and prayerful). But the call to learn and live our faith and life in Jesus Christ is a lifelong call. Jesus had to keep teaching the apostles: they did not always get the message, or they forgot, or they were a little slow on the uptake... But Jesus kept calling them, teaching them, challenging them to make further progress in knowledge, love, truth and holiness.

Jesus extends that same invitation to us. We adults may no longer be students in a school building classroom, but do we make the effort to inform ourselves more deeply about Jesus, our life in him, and our Catholic faith? Or do we think we have nothing else to learn at this step of our lives? And I am not just talking about book learning—the doctrines and dogmas of our Catholic faith and the moral teachings of the Church. Of course those are essential and they are supremely relevant to our earthly lives and our hope for eternal life. I hope you are educating yourselves on these issues with the many different resources that are available; and you can rest assured that I will continue to address specific teachings and doctrines in this pulpit from time to time.

But on an even more basic level: do we strive, do we make the sincere and genuine effort to grow in holiness, to reflect Jesus ever more completely in our own selves? Not just live a holy life (surely a challenge in itself), but to grow, to increase in holiness? Consider, for example, St. Paul and his words we heard in the second reading (Ephesians): “be imitators of God as his beloved children”. Do we imitate God? Really?? Or how about this, from that same reading: “All bitterness, fury, anger, shouting and reviling must be removed from you...be kind to one another...forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in Christ.” When you look in the mirror, can you honestly say to yourself: “I don’t have a single ounce of bitterness or lingering anger toward anyone; I have completely forgiven everyone who has ever crossed me.” Can any of us truly say that, and with a straight face?? Don’t worry—I’m not going to ask for a show of hands...

The point is: there is always room for growth in holiness; there is always a way in which Jesus is calling each one of us to become more like him. That is true no matter how old we are or where we are in life. Particular areas of weakness or temptation may come and go as the years roll on, but there is always some area in which Jesus calls us to further progress. Remember his words from the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5): “you must be made perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect”. Of course that sounds impossible, and indeed it is—if we try to achieve that perfection by our efforts alone. But thank the Lord we are not left on our own. God’s grace and help is available to us in so many ways—prayer, the sacraments (especially Eucharist and confession), Scripture reading and reflection, acts of unselfish love and service among others.

But God will not force that grace on us if we do not want it or if we think we do not need it. Do we truly want to grow in holiness, or do we think we are good enough as we are? Back in 2001, Pope John Paul II issued a letter to close the Jubilee Year of 2000 in which he reminded us that in baptism we enter into the holiness of God through incorporation into Christ. Because of that, he went on to say that “it would be a contradiction to settle for a life of mediocrity, marked by a minimalist ethic and a shallow religiosity.” Now, there is an examination of conscience for us! Do we really desire to be more like Jesus and grow in that holiness to which he calls us—even if it goes against the grain or rubs others the wrong way? Or are we satisfied with spiritual or moral mediocrity and that ‘shallow religiosity’ of which John Paul spoke, so that we do not have to rock the boat or come off as (heaven forbid) some kind of religious fanatic?

Precisely because Jesus loves us so much and in fact thirsts for us and for our love, he invites us to that ever deeper, ever richer love and knowledge of himself; in the words of that classic old hymn, “Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling.” And what is our response??