

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time – B

One of my nieces, when she was about 4 years old, was very precocious and inquisitive. She would ask a lot of questions. For example, she might say to her mother, “What are you doing?” And then her mom would reply something like, “I’m making dinner.” And then my niece would say, “Why?” “Well, because we need to eat.” “Why?” “Well, because we get hungry.” “Why?” And so on and so on, getting deeper and deeper into what became very philosophical territory, until her mother would finally run out of answers.

Her questions would become more and more fundamental. What started as, “What are you doing”, eventually turned into, whether my niece realized it or not, “What’s the meaning of life?” Which is perhaps the most fundamental question of human existence. It could also be worded like this: “Why do we exist?” Or,

“do we have a purpose and if so, what is it?” I think that’s a question that most human beings do ponder at least on some level in their lifetimes. They might only ponder it very briefly, before being distracted or choosing to ignore it and then moving on to something else, but I think that question kind of remains in the back of our minds throughout our lives.

Catholics over a certain age probably remember being taught this question in their catechism class: “Why did God make you?” And the answer they all learned: “God made me to know him, to love him, and to serve him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in the next.” Every 7-year-old Catholic boy and girl used to know that answer to one of the most challenging questions of human existence.

Another way of answering that question is this: “God made me to be in communion with Him.” And related to that, one could also add, “And to be in communion with one another.” Because when we

are full communion with God, we will also be in perfect communion with everyone else who is in full communion with God. What else do we often associate with that word “communion”? If you answered in your head, “Holy Communion” – as in the Eucharist – you’re correct! God made us to be in full communion with Him, and we can begin to experience that communion – albeit in a very limited and imperfect way – even now, in this life here on earth. And probably the most intimate way we experience that communion in this life is by receiving the Lord in the Eucharist at Mass.

But it’s true, it may not seem like an intimate encounter with the Lord; it can often seem very ordinary. That’s in part because, while in this life, we are still very limited human beings – we are not yet in heaven. And it’s also in part due to where we are in our spiritual journey or our relationship with the Lord. As I mentioned last week, the more we give of ourselves to the Lord, the more we

open our hearts to Him, the more God will be able to work in us. But, regardless of how we “experience” being in communion with Jesus when we receive Him in communion at Mass, objectively speaking, we are still receiving Jesus’ very Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity. We are consuming Him in the form of physical nourishment, but which is primarily spiritual nourishment. And again, one could say that the more we’ve opened our hearts to Him, the more spiritual nourishment we will receive in the Eucharist.

In our readings this week, which continue through the Bread of Life discourse from the Gospel of John, we hear about how the Lord feeds his people. In the first reading from Exodus, we go back to the time when Moses and the Israelites were crossing the desert after fleeing slavery in Egypt on their way to the Promised Land. They have been traveling for a while, and the Israelites are starting to grumble – “We’re hungry!” They even begin to say crazy things like wishing they were back in Egypt; even though they were in

slavery there, at least they had enough to eat! Even after seeing the incredible works the Lord performed through Moses while in Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, etc., they still doubt that the Lord will provide for them.

And then in our Gospel reading from John, we hear how the crowds follow Jesus after He has performed the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and the fish, when he fed the crowd of more than 5000. And Jesus says to them, “You are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate the loaves and were filled. Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life.” In a sense they are like the Israelites in the desert complaining for food – they see Jesus as a source of food. Like the Israelites in the desert, their focus is on physical, material things, not spiritual.

After Jesus exhorts them to work for the food that endures for eternal life, however, they ask him to show them a sign. If I were

Jesus, I would have answered them with probably more than a little edge in my voice: “You do realize that I just fed more than 5000 of you with five loaves and two fish? (And there were leftovers!)” But of course, that’s not Jesus’ way; instead, he tells them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.”

I think human nature has not changed that much since the Israelites were wandering in the desert and since the time of Christ. How often are we focused only on this life? I have to admit that I am often thinking about when my next meal is. Sometimes even during Mass! But God made us for more than our next meal; He made us for more than the next vacation, the next game, the next iPhone or video game or whatever. It’s not that these things are bad per se, but our human desires for these things can and often do become very distorted: material things, this-world-only things become the priority, and our relationship with God becomes

secondary. Or, our relationship with God might be completely forgotten, although I would say that if you are here today, that is not the case for you. But we have to ask ourselves: do other things sometimes crowd out Mass on Sunday and holy days? Do we take time for prayer every day? We might answer, “Well, I’m too busy.” But everyone has the time for prayer; it’s just a question of our priorities. Are we working primarily for the food that perishes, or are we working for the food that endures for eternal life? Yes, it’s true, if you have some little children in the house, it is going to be difficult to have a consistent prayer life. Spending a significant block of time and at the same time every day with the Lord might very well not be possible at this stage in your life. You might have to snatch prayer time here and there throughout the day, wherever you can. It will not always be this way however.

Our communion with the Lord can and even must begin now, in this life. We cannot wait for the next life because that is what this

life is for: to make the choice to follow Jesus Christ or not, to work for the food that perishes or to work for the food that endures for eternal life. And of course, as food for our journey through this life, our manna in the desert as we journey to the Promised Land, Jesus gives us His Body and Blood in the Eucharist. And in our series on the Mass that we have been going through these last few weeks, we are at the point at which we enter into the Eucharistic Prayer, the heart of the Mass, in which the bread and wine will become Jesus' Body and Blood.

The Eucharistic Prayer begins with what is called the Preface; it is like an introductory prayer to the Eucharistic Prayer. The Preface has three parts: the first part is a dialogue between the priest and the people: "The Lord be with you" – "And with your spirit." – "Lift up your hearts." – "We lift them up to the Lord." Etc. This short dialogue symbolizes the unity of the Church and places Christ in the midst of our gathering. This dialogue also includes what is

called in the Eastern Church an “anaphora” – a lifting up of one’s heart to the Lord. And then the priest says, “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.” And the people respond, “It is right and just.” This response comes to us from Ancient Greece – it was the response of the people at civic assemblies when they were in agreement with whatever had been discussed. So, as an aside, our liturgy is a sort of amalgamation of elements of Greek, Roman, and Jewish culture – the three prominent cultures at the time of Christ and where Christianity began and the first Masses began to be said.

The second part of the Preface is a prayer of thanksgiving which the priest prays. It begins, “It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation, always and everywhere to give you thanks, Lord Holy Father...”. These prayers focus on different aspects of the mystery of Christ: for example, on his conception, his transfiguration, and so on. And finally, the Preface concludes with the Sanctus or the Holy-Holy-Holy acclamation, which we usually

sing at Sunday Masses. The Sanctus uses words from the prophet Isaiah, from Revelation, and from the Gospel of Matthew.

After the Sanctus is said or sung, the congregation then kneels for the remainder of the Eucharistic Prayer, although in many other countries the congregation only kneels for part of it, which I will talk more about next week. Kneeling of course is considered the most reverent posture for the most sacred part of the Mass. And it is the most sacred part of the Mass, of course, because this is when ordinary bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, for our spiritual nourishment.

Jesus Christ gives himself to us in the Eucharist, and He Himself is the food that endures unto eternal life. Jesus must be at the very center of our lives. Everything that we do, ultimately we must do for him. Whatever you may find yourself doing in your day or in your life in general, it is good to ask yourself from time to time: what am I doing, and more importantly, why am I doing it? Perhaps

be a little like my inquisitive niece when she was younger, and keeping asking yourself, “Why?” Ultimately, our answers should trace back to God himself: I am doing this for the Lord; I am doing this because God created me to be in perfect communion with Him forever. Anything less than that means we are working for the food that perishes. And that’s not what God made us for. So let’s strive to put God at the center of our lives and of our hearts.

- **August 4, 2024 at St. Mary’s, Spring Lake**