

“Whoever Eats this Bread Will Live”

Proverbs 9:1-6
Psalm 34
Ephesians 5:15-20
John 6:51-58

We use a lot of figurative language in the United States. I didn't realize just *how* much until I went to Mexico years ago to study Spanish. I tried to translate, word for word, various phrases that I was accustomed to using, but it only confused people. Phrases such as, “in a nutshell,” “on the ball,” or “chewing the fat,” don't have the same figurative meaning in Spanish as they do in English. Regardless of what language we speak, it is important for us to know when someone is speaking figuratively and when they are speaking literally.

For three weeks, we have been hearing from the “Bread of Life Discourse” in chapter six of the Gospel of John. This passage has a very particular and special place in Scripture for us as Catholics because it deepens our awareness of the importance of the Eucharist. Today, we're going to look at why the author of John included this passage in his Gospel and why it's important for us to take the passage *literally*, not figuratively.

As many of you know, the Gospel of John was the last Gospel to be written. Therefore, the author was not interested in simply repeating what was already found in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Instead, he was interested in presenting Christ as the early Christians¹ understood Him. So, we find the “Bread of Life Discourse” in the Gospel of John because it was a story that made perfect sense to the early Christian community, which regularly ate the Body of Christ and drank His Blood in the celebration of the Eucharist.

Now that we know more about why the author of John included the “Bread of Life Discourse” in his Gospel, we can ask the question—why should we take this Scripture passage literally? I want to point out two answers to that question. First, we should take Jesus' words literally because the first hearers of His words took them literally and Jesus did not correct them. When people misunderstand us, we quickly point it out to them. We *want* to be understood. When the people gathered around Jesus took His words literally—that He was asking them to eat His Body and drink His Blood—He did not correct them. As one author put it, “Jesus made no attempt to soften what he said, no attempt to correct ‘misunderstandings,’ for there were none.”² There are places in Scripture, however, where Jesus *did* correct misunderstandings.

In the Gospel of Matthew, chapter sixteen, Jesus was talking to His disciples while riding in a boat. He told them, “Look out, and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matthew 16:6). His disciples took His words literally, assuming that Jesus was talking about bread. Jesus immediately explained to them that He was not speaking literally, but figuratively. He did not make a similar correction in His “Bread of Life Discourse,” however. Instead, Jesus let the disciples who could not accept His words walk away. We read, “As a result of this, many (of) his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him” (John 6:66).

Another reason why we should take Jesus' words in John chapter six literally is because He used literal language, not figurative language. There are many verses in the Gospel of John where Jesus *does*, in fact, use figurative language. For example, Jesus calls Himself the “Good Shepherd” and the “Vine.” However, when Jesus talked about Himself as the Bread of Life, there was nothing figurative about His language. In fact, the Greek word that is used to describe

¹ The Gospel of John was written about 60-70 years after Christ's death and Resurrection.

² http://www.catholic.com/library/Christ_in_the_Eucharist.asp

Jesus' command for us to "eat" His flesh is τρώγων (*trogon*), which literally means to gnaw, crunch, or chew. Such language is not figurative.

While many people left Jesus because they couldn't understand His command for them to eat His Body and drink His Blood, the early Christian community quickly came to understand what He meant. It was an instruction to celebrate the Eucharist! During the Last Supper, Jesus connected the Passover celebration, in which unleavened bread and wine was used, to the sacrificial gift of His Body and Blood. He was so clear that the Eucharist celebration, a transformation of the Passover celebration, was the avenue for fulfilling His command to eat His Body and drink His Blood that we find it talked about in the writings of St. Paul and the early Church Fathers.

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?
The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?

-1 Corinthians 10:16

The food over which thanksgiving has been offered through the word of prayer which we have from [Christ]—the food by which our blood and flesh are nourished through its transformation—is, we are taught, the flesh and blood of Jesus who was made flesh.³

-St. Justin Martyr (2nd century)

For what is the bread? The body of Christ. And what do they become who partake of it? The body of Christ.⁴

-St. John Chrysostom (4th century)

Therefore, when [Christ] has spoken and says about the bread, "This is my Body," who will have the nerve to doubt any longer? And when he affirms clearly, "This is my Blood," who will then doubt, saying that it is not his Blood? Once, by his own will, he changed water into wine at Cana of Galilee; is he not worthy of belief when he changes wine into blood? Therefore, do not consider them as bare bread and wine; for, according to the declaration of the Master they are Body and Blood.⁵

-St. Cyril of Jerusalem (4th century)

As Catholics, we have a two thousand year history of celebrating the amazing gift of Christ's Presence in the Eucharist. He gave us a tangible, tasteable reminder that He is with us, and that reminder is not figurative, but literal.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:

- ✚ Read Luke 22:14-20. What is it that you "remember" about Christ when you participate in the Eucharist?
- ✚ Spend some time reflecting on these words and talking to God about them—"Faith in the Eucharist is not a mental challenge of trying to figure out how bread and wine is transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, but rather, a challenge of the heart to believe that Christ loves us and is with us always."

³ St. Justin Martyr, *Apologia I*, 65-66.

⁴ St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 24*, on 1 Corinthians.

⁵ St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 23.15.