

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time—Year B

One can ask why the Sunday Liturgy this year, while we make our way through this Season of Ordinary Time, puts the Gospel of Mark aside this Sunday, and the next four Sundays, and instead proclaims passages from the Gospel of John, particularly Chapter 6 of that Gospel, instead? One could say that the reason is the Gospel of Mark is the shortest of the 4 Gospels, and there is not enough content in the Gospel of Mark to meet the demands of a 33-week Ordinary Time Season. While that may seem to be a good reason, the real reason has more to do with the content of these Gospel readings. The fact is that the way these Gospel readings relate to each other—the Gospel reading from Mark last Sunday, and the Gospel reading from John this Sunday—brings out the best in both Gospel passages. Firstly, the passage from the Gospel of Mark last Sunday presented Jesus as the Good Shepherd. The Prophet Jeremiah, in last Sunday's First reading, offers a stinging rebuke of the leaders of his day—the priests, prophets and kings of Israel. He rebukes them because they were not shepherding, properly leading the Israelite people. They were taking advantage of their leadership positions and disregarding the needs of the people. Given this disregard, the prophet reminded them that God himself will therefore intervene and send them a Shepherd who will care for the nation. Jesus, as implied in the Gospel of Mark, is that Good Shepherd sent by God the Father. He looked upon the crowds who met him, and he pitied them because “they were like sheep without a shepherd”. He cares greatly for this people, this flock of sheep, and shows his care for them by feeding them, one of the most important ways Shepherd shows his care and regard for his Sheep. The miracle of the multiplication of loaves and fishes then follows, as the way Jesus meets their need, their hunger.

Although the multiplication miracle is found in all 4 Gospels, the only miracle to be found recorded in all four, Mark is the only Gospel writer who makes the connection between Jesus being the Good Shepherd and the feeding of the five thousand. He sees the crowd, pities them because they were sheep without a shepherd, becomes their shepherd and, as their shepherd, feeds them. He thus fulfils Jeremiah's prophecy.

But instead of continuing through the Gospel of Mark, where the multiplication miracle is described in that Gospel, we seamlessly segue into the Gospel of John, particularly the opening verses of Chapter 6 of that Gospel, which relates the multiplication miracle from the St. John's perspective. Why is this done? Because John the Evangelist carries the message found in the Gospel of Mark further. While Mark tells us that the Good Shepherd shows his care by feeding his flock, John reminds us, in Chapter six of his Gospel, that the food the Good Shepherd will give is nothing less than his very body and blood—the Eucharist.

This Sunday therefore, and continuing through the following four Sundays, the Church through her liturgies is presenting a catechesis on the Eucharist, as extracted from the sixth Chapter of the Gospel of John. Considering this, I would like to begin, with you, to explore what the Eucharist is today, and over the next four Sundays, drawing primarily from two sources—the sixth Chapter of John and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes the Eucharist as the completion of our Christian initiation, begun in baptism and strengthened through the Sacrament of Confirmation. The Second Vatican Council on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, restated the centrality of the Eucharist in the life of the Church when it stated the following:

At the Last Supper, on the night he was betrayed, our Saviour instituted the Eucharistic Sacrifice of his body and blood. This he did in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the cross throughout the ages until he should come again, and to entrust to his beloved spouse, the Church, a memorial of his death and resurrection, a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a Paschal Banquet in which Christ is consumed, the mind is filled with Grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us.

Sacrosanctum Concilium also described the Eucharist as the “source and summit of the Christian life”. This means that the Church’s life, her ministry, her outreach, her whole spiritual good is orientated towards the Eucharist. It is the Sacrament where Christ becomes present to us in a unique way. Where Christ is present in the celebration of all the seven Sacraments, he is uniquely present in the Eucharist in a substantial way. His very substance is with us and given to us as we participate in the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

In paragraphs 1328 to 1332 in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, several names are given to describe some aspect of the Eucharist. Among these names are:

Eucharist The Greek word *eucharistein* means “thanksgiving”. The act of thanksgiving is the correct response, given to God’s in thanks for His creation, redemption and sanctification. This is recalled in the eucharistic celebration and expressed especially in the Eucharistic Prayer.

By extension, we also have the term **Eucharistic assembly** because the Eucharist is celebrated in the presence of an assembly, a local tangible expression of the larger Body of Christ.

The Eucharist is both a **memorial** and a **sacrifice**. It is a memorial because it memorializes a past event, Jesus’ passion and resurrection. It is a sacrifice because it makes present, here and now, Jesus’ perfect redemptive sacrifice of himself, which surpasses the Old Covenant sacrifices. The Eucharist is able to transcend time and space in bringing Christ’s substantial presence to this place and time.

The Eucharist is also called **Holy Communion**. The word *communion* has a common root with words like *commune*, *communicate* and *community*. All these words imply a close, even intimate, relationship between persons. The Eucharist, too, brings about an intimate relationship between us and Christ Jesus. In Holy Communion, we unite ourselves to Christ and strengthen the bond we have in him which began in our baptism.

The place in which we celebrate the Eucharist is called the **Holy Mass**. The word “Mass” is drawn from the concluding words of the Mass, which in Latin are “Ite, Missa Est, which mean, in English “Go, you are sent”. This reminds us that, having been fed with the Eucharist at Mass, we are then sent forth to fulfil God’s will in the world.

The Eucharist, like Baptism, is an extremely important Sacrament, but it is important in a very different way. Like Confirmation and Holy Orders, Baptism is a consecrating Sacrament. That means that it changes us at the core of our being. We are no longer the same person we were before having received a consecrating Sacrament. Through Baptism we become God's adopted children and inheritor of His Kingdom. Through Confirmation we are strengthened by the Holy Spirit's gifts. The Sacrament of Holy Orders consecrates a man for service to the People of God as a deacon, priest or bishop. That is why a consecrating Sacrament is received only once in a person's lifetime.

The Eucharist, however, is a sustaining Sacrament. We are strengthened by Christ's substantial presence to enable us to continue in the on-going daily work of bringing Christ to the world. That is why the Eucharist is a Sacrament that can be received on an on-going basis, even daily, provided one is not in a state of grave or mortal sin. It is our daily bread, our heavenly food and our continuing sustenance.

While the Israelites were sojourning through the desert, making their way to the promised land, God sustained them daily by the presence of a white flaky substance the Israelites called *manna*, which in Hebrew means *what is it?* This unusual name reminded the Israelites that this food originated in the mystery of God's on-going providential care for them. It was, like the Eucharist, bread from heaven. Our Eucharist, like the manna, is given to us by God to remind us that he still loves, and out of that love, providentially caring for our spiritual need by sustaining us with himself.

As we continue through the next four Sundays, I'll be exploring with you the gift of the Eucharist, this Sacrament that recalls and celebrates God's providential care for his people, us.