



Theology Corner

Vol. 11 – September 24th, 2017

Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation

Is the Eucharist just a symbol?

Now that we have covered the Five Ways of St. Thomas Aquinas, I'd like to turn our next series of discussions to something more apologetic in nature. This week, we'll discuss the concept of the real presence in the Eucharist. Non-Catholics, and even some Catholics themselves have a hard time believing that the host we see held up at Mass is actually the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus Christ himself. If you have personally struggled with this, you are not alone. In fact, Christ's own disciples left when they heard this! Let's take a closer look at scripture to see what Christ says. Speaking of the bread he was breaking at the Last Supper he says, **"I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down from heaven that a man may eat of it and not die." I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.**" (John 6:48-51). The very next verse, we see some of the disciples said, "...how can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (John 6:52). Notice that after this, Christ does not clarify that he is speaking symbolically, but instead says, **"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed."** (John 6:53-55). After this affirmation from Christ, some of the disciples said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" (John 6:60). Then by the end of the discourse, they eventually left as we see in John 6:66, "After this, many of the disciples drew back and no longer went about with him."

Notice in John 6, that as the disciples progressively continued to become frustrated with this, Christ stood his ground to the point that some of the disciples no longer followed him. If he was being symbolic, don't you think he would have said, "Wait! You are misunderstanding me. I am only speaking symbolically."? Well, he didn't. So for us to think otherwise, would put words in his mouth. One other point from an exegetical point-of-view is that Christ changes his words to emphasize his point about the Eucharist. ****For those of you taking my Greek class, you should be able to read/pronounce the words I will be mentioning here.**** When Christ speaks of the manna that the fathers ate, he uses the word, **"φάγω."** This word is used similarly to how we use the word "eat" in everyday parlance. But, when he begins to speak of the Eucharist, he changes this word to, **"τρώνω."** This word is translated as to "gnaw" or "chew." He seems to change his terminology to drive the point home – this is not a metaphorical "eating" of his flesh, but a literal one. It is no wonder that the early Church Fathers dating back to around 110AD reaffirmed that the Eucharist was indeed the flesh and blood of Christ. When the words are said at Mass, the host undergoes a transubstantiation. It literally transforms from an ordinary wafer to the real presence of Christ's body, blood, soul, and divinity.