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Give Us This Bread Always!

Biblical Reflection for the 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time B

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, JULY 29, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- We can certainly understand God's frustration with his people in today's first reading from Exodus (16:2-4,12-15).

The God of Israel has just delivered his people from slavery and has set them on the way to their promised land. Yet after crossing the Red Sea and celebrating their victory, the first recorded action in the Sinai proves to be grumbling and dissatisfaction, first over the bitter water at Mara (Exodus 15:22-27), and then more complaining and nostalgic longing for the fleshpots in the land of Egypt, where they were able to eat their fill!

Into this setting of ingratitude and lamentation, God rains down bread from heaven (manna) and quail for their food. The Exodus passage (16:2-4,12-15) contrasts the nonbeliever (who grumbles that the manna and quail are meager nourishment) with the believer (who sees these as God's generous gifts to the hungry).

A different kind of food

In today's Gospel text (John 6:24-35) that follows the miraculous multiplication of the loaves, Jesus says to the crowds who were seeking him: "Truly, truly I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you" (John 6:26-27).

Jesus' hearers continue the conversation and ask him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" (John 6:28). Jesus answers: "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (John 6:29). It is an exhortation to have faith in the Son of Man, in the giver of the food that does not perish. Without faith in him whom the Father has sent, it is not possible to recognize and accept this gift which does not pass away.

The miraculous multiplication of the loaves had not evoked the expected response of faith in those who had been eyewitnesses of that event. They wanted a new sign: "Then what sign do you do, that we may see, and believe? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: He gave them bread from heaven to eat" (John 6:30-31). The disciples gathered around Jesus expecting a sign like the manna, which their ancestors had eaten in the desert. But Jesus exhorts them to expect something more than a mere repetition of the miracle of the manna, to expect a different kind of food. He says: "It was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (Jn 6:32-33).

Along with physical hunger there is within each of us another hunger, a more basic hunger, which cannot be satisfied by ordinary food. It is a hunger for life, a hunger for eternity, nostalgia for God. The sign of the manna was the proclamation of the coming of Christ who was to satisfy our hunger for eternity by Himself becoming the "living bread" that "gives life to the world."

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What is so startling about Jesus' remarks in this discourse is that he is not claiming to be another Moses, or one more messenger in along line of human prophets. In giving us the bread of life, Jesus does not offer temporary nourishment, he gives us the eternal bread of his word. It will not pass away. It will nourish and give life forever. Jesus is this bread, and in offering to share it with us he calls us to faith in him.

Jesus invites us to "come to him," "believe in him," "look upon him," "be drawn to him," "hear him," and to "learn of him." All of these verbs invite the active response of our faith (cf. John 6:36, 37, 40, 44, 45). His word is nourishment for our faith.

Those who heard Jesus ask him to fulfill what had been proclaimed by the sign of the manna, perhaps without being conscious of how far their request would go: "Lord, give us this bread always" (John 6:34). How eloquent is this request! How generous and how amazing is its fulfillment! "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst."

Grumblings and ideologies

How difficult it was for Jesus' hearers to make this passage from the sign to the mystery indicated by that sign, from daily bread to the bread "which endures to eternal life"! Nor is it easy for us, the people of the 21st century to make such passages in our own life, from sign to mystery.

At times our grumblings and murmurings about the Eucharist and the Church often rise to fevered pitch, not much different than the grumbling and murmuring of Israel in the desert. Excessive tensions arising from Church politics, gender issues, liturgical practices, language -- all of these influence today's Eucharist -- and can lead us to a feeling of God's absence.

Our Eucharistic celebrations are not taking place at Massah and Meribah -- places of murmuring in the desert. We are often stuck in endless arguments between devotion and liturgy, or in a constant dispute between charity and justice. When devotion is treated as the enemy of liturgy and charity as the betrayer of justice, or when liturgy is reduced to private devotion and justice not recognized as constitutive to the Gospel.

Adoration rediscovered

Here is one concrete example to illustrate the above point about liturgy and devotion. Many of my generation have responded very negatively to the younger generation's rediscovery of Eucharistic adoration and devotion.

Benedict XVI has put a great emphasis on Eucharistic adoration and devotion in Catholic life. Many of us have failed to see that our public worship is intimately related to adoration, so much so that that they could be considered as one. Piety and devotion can be springboards to mature faith. Each time we gather together to celebrate the Eucharist as the Christian community, we profess, together with the whole Church, our faith in Christ the Eucharist, in Christ -- the living bread and the bread of life.

Last year during the 49th International Eucharistic Congress in Quebec City, Philippino Bishop Louis Antonio Tagle delivered a remarkable catechesis that concluded with a profound explanation of the meaning of authentic Adoration of the Eucharist (<http://www.zenit.org/article-22972?l=english>).

Bishop Tagle said: "In the Eucharist, the Church joins Jesus in adoring the God of life. But the practice of Eucharistic adoration enlivens some features of worship. We believe that the presence of Christ in the Eucharist continues beyond the liturgy. Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament connotes being present, resting, and beholding. In adoration, we are present to Jesus whose sacrifice is ever present to us. Abiding in him, we are assimilated more deeply into his self-giving. Beholding Jesus, we receive and are transformed by the

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mystery we adore. Eucharistic adoration is similar to standing at the foot of the Cross of Jesus, being a witness to his sacrifice of life and being renewed by it. The sacrifice or spiritual worship of Jesus on the cross is his supreme act of adoration."

This week let us ask ourselves: What does Jesus' Eucharistic presence mean for us? Does our participation in the weekly (and for some, daily) celebration of the Lord's meal transform us into people of gratitude, loving kindness and justice? Let us consider what Jesus requires of us who partake of the Eucharistic banquet. In what ways does the Eucharist symbolize the life we are living and our life symbolize the Eucharist? How do we express gratitude? Is the Eucharist the spiritual exercise giving direction to our life?

May our Eucharistic celebrations continue to transform our parish communities and the society around us into a civilization of love! May they nourish in us a hunger and thirst for justice. May our longing for the Eucharist make us ever more patient and kind with one another. Let us pray that we may truly become what we receive in the Eucharistic meal.

[The readings for the 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time B are Exodus 16:2-4, 12-15; Ephesians 4:17, 20-24; and John 6:24-35]

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