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Health Food for the Soul

Biblical Reflection for 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time B

Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

[Editor's note: This column appears today as ZENIT will not publish during the first two weeks of August, but wanted to make sure a reflection was available for Aug. 16. The column for Aug. 9 appeared Thursday.]

VATICAN CITY, JULY 31, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- In chapter six of John's Gospel (vv. 41-51), Jesus speaks of himself as "the living bread that came down from heaven" and invites his hearers to eat of this bread" -- that is, to believe in him.

He promises that those who do so will have eternal life. Jesus compares himself to the manna that came down from heaven to sustain the people of Israel in the wilderness. It is a vivid image that certainly evokes important memories for the people of Israel.

Then in John 6:51, Jesus says, "The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." Then his hearers ask: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Did they respond in this way to give Jesus a chance to explain himself? Surely, they may have imagined, Jesus meant to say something else. After all, to eat someone's flesh appears in the Bible as a metaphor for great hostility (Psalms 27:2; Zechariah 11:9). The drinking of blood was looked upon as an abomination forbidden by God's law (Genesis 9:4, Leviticus 3:17; Deuteronomy 12:23).

Yet Jesus responds to the question by further explaining his initial declaration with explicit terms: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day, for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them."

No observant Jew would consider eating human flesh. We may ask ourselves: "Why couldn't Jesus continue using such pleasant terms as "abiding," "dwelling," "living in me" terminology? Was he advocating pure cannibalism with such vivid imagery and language?"

Flesh and blood

In today's Gospel, Jesus uses strong language to express the indissoluble union and inextricable participation of one life in another. Jesus uses sacrificial language. The Torah requires ritual sacrifice of animals, and specifies how they are to be prepared and how their flesh is to be used. Some flesh is to be burned on the altar and other flesh is to be eaten.

Jesus makes his sacrifice in behalf of the world -- not just Israel (see also John 3:16-17). The Hebrew expression "flesh and blood" means the whole person. To receive the whole Jesus entails receiving his flesh and blood. To encounter Jesus means, in part, to encounter the flesh and blood of him.

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For those who receive Jesus, the whole Jesus, his life clings to their bones and courses through their veins. He can no more be taken from a believer's life than last Saturday's dinner can be extricated from one's body.

True reception of Jesus

In our cerebral approach to religion we often assume that what really matters is believing some important religious dogmas or truths. Receiving Jesus can be reduced to a matter of intellectual assent. There are times, however, when we can be particularly grateful that the presence of Christ is not something that can be recognized cerebrally, but can be received by other means as well.

The bread that Jesus used to feed the 5,000 on the mountaintop was something less than true bread, because it satisfied the people's hunger only momentarily. By way of contrast, Jesus' flesh and blood are true food because "whoever eats of this bread will live forever" (v. 51) -- and "have eternal life" (v. 54).

"I am the living bread that came down from heaven" (v. 51a). This "living bread" parallels the "living water" that Jesus offered the Samaritan woman (4:10). To eat of this bread, in this context, means the once-and-for-all action of accepting or believing in Christ.

Historical background

It is important to be aware of two things that were happening at the time of the writing of this Gospel that might have influenced the John to emphasize the eating of Jesus flesh and the drinking of his blood.

The first was the influence of Docetic and Gnostic heresies, both of which considered flesh to be evil and denied that Christ could have a physical body. The second was Jewish discrimination against Christian believers. Christians who observed the Lord's Supper were likely to be banned from synagogues.

The Eucharist fulfills the meaning hidden in the gift of manna. Jesus thus presents himself as the true and perfect fulfillment of what was symbolically foretold in the Old Covenant. Another of Moses' Acts has a prophetic value: To quench the thirst of the people in the desert, he makes water flow from the rock. On the "feast of Tabernacles," Jesus promises to quench humanity's spiritual thirst: "If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as Scripture says, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water'" (John 7:37-38).

The ways we eat

Our eating style reflects and affects who and what we are. It identifies our approach to life. If we examine various societies and cultures, we see that each has its traditional foods and food rituals. "I am of Italian descent. I often eat spaghetti, lasagna, tortellini alla panna or pizza," or "I am a real American. I eat hamburgers, hot dogs, steak, coke, and French fries."

"I am Québécois. I feast on poutine and drink maple syrup." The French eat crepes, Belgians eat waffles, Chinese eat rice, Palestinians and Israelis eat falafel, the Swiss eat chocolate, and Eskimos eat whale blubber. In short, the "way we eat" reveals how we identify ourselves. It reflects and often determines our worldview, our values, and our entire approach to life.

Foods are much more than just a collection of nutrients; they are a wealth of influences and connotations. Rare foods and spices are treasured as special culinary delights. Some foods are worshiped in various cultures as having an unusual holiness or are avoided altogether. The type of food we choose can affect our moods. Hot, spicy, or stimulating foods may influence many of us toward hot-temperedness or nervousness. Cooling

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foods can relax us and give us peace of mind. Foods can help us celebrate and can comfort us when we mourn. They are a sign of love and are a means of uniting people on many occasions.

The "ways we eat" are an important part of our heritage. The soul is not nourished by physical bread, as the body is. The food we eat is actually a combination of both a physical and a spiritual entity. The body is nourished by the physical aspects, or nutrients, contained in the foods we eat; the soul is nourished by the spiritual power which enlivens the physical substance of all matter, including food.

Catholic rather than catabolic?

The actual phrase "you are what you eat" didn't emerge in the English language until the 1920s and 30s, when the nutritionist Victor Lindlahr, a strong believer in the idea that food controls health, developed the Catabolic Diet. In 1942, Lindlahr published "You Are What You Eat: How to Win and Keep Health With Diet." From that moment onward, the phrase entered the public consciousness.

For all who seek the presence of Christ, Jesus' teaching in John's Gospel is good news indeed: "We are what we eat." We become what receive in the Eucharist. This week, let us examine our spiritual diets and look at the things that truly give us life, and those things that are junk foods that don't lead us to eternal life.

[The readings for the 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time B are Proverbs 9:1-6; Ephesians 5:15-20; and John 6:51-58]

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