

Reflections on John 6

Archbishop Naumann - Week 3



Deacon Bill Scholl:

Welcome to Enflaming Our Hearts with Eucharistic Amazement by Archbishop Joseph Naumann of the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas, a series of reflections on the gospel of John, as we contemplate our Lord's marvelous gift of Himself through the action of the mass, as Christ gives Himself to us in the Eucharist. (music)

Archbishop Joseph Naumann:

So friends, this is Archbishop Joseph Naumann and we're continuing our meditations on the sixth chapter of St. John's gospel. Today, we're going to read from verses 41 to 51. It reads,

"The Jews murmured about him because he said, 'I am the bread that came down from heaven,' and they said, 'Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph? Do we not know his father and mother? Then how can he say, 'I have come down from heaven?' Jesus answered and said to them, 'Stop murmuring among yourselves. No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him, and I will raise him on the last day. It is written in the prophets: 'They shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died; this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that the one may eat it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.'"

Well, as we listen to Jesus teaching, and again, if you recall, this is... He's giving this bread of life discourse after he has performed the miracle of the multiplications of the loaf and fish. People pursued him because they want this free bread and free fish every day. And he takes the occasion to tell them, "Don't be seeking out this physical bread, but seek this bread."

So it begins this portion today where the Jews are murmuring. I always love that when the scriptures use that term. They're murmuring amongst themselves. They're having these side conversations and they're saying, "How can he be the bread from heaven? Isn't this Jesus, the son of Joseph? We know his father and mother. How can he said he's come down from heaven?" So, I think we should have some sympathy for this Jewish crowd, because they're looking at Jesus. They've seen him physically present, and now he's describing himself as this bread come down from heaven.

I think he's trying to help them to bring them to understand God's love for them and how God is fulfilling the promises that he made to the prophets. It's right in front of their eyes, that Jesus is

the long-awaited one, but he's coming in a way that's very different from the way that they were envisioning the Messiah. They were thinking of a military leader, someone that would restore the dynasty of David. But instead, he comes as this preacher, this itinerant preacher who grew up in this out of the way place of Nazareth. And from all appearances, there's a lot of irony that John uses in the gospel in this passage, particularly because they say, "Well, we know who his father is." Well, they don't really know who his father is.

And then he comes to conclude about talking about the manna in the desert, because earlier, if you remember, they said, "Well, Moses gave manna to the people." And again, they're thinking in this physical terms of Jesus continuing to provide bread for them. But he says, "Moses really isn't the one that gave the manna. It was God that gave the manna to them." But now God wants to give them something even more powerful, more precious, this ability to actually receive God himself.

My friends, if we could just for a moment realize what is being offered to us every time we come to the Eucharist, that it's Jesus Christ who's presenting himself to us and who was given to us in the waters of baptism. We were given his very life. And now he wants to come in this sacrament to nourish that life within us, to strengthen that life within us, to renew that life within us. And when we come to receive the Lord in this sacrament, if we are aware of the miracle that's being offered to us, what a gift it is.

So many, I think, in our Catholic church at times, in my conversations with them, they get put off sometimes by the language that the Lord wants to have a personal relationship or friendship with us. They think that that's somehow Protestant. It's not Protestant, it's the gospel and it's what Jesus came so that we might share in his very life. And that in receiving the Eucharist, we receive this bread of life and we become what we're receiving. We're receiving the life of Jesus himself. He's coming to us in this way to empower us then to be his living presence in the world. So each and every time that we receive the Eucharist, it's a moment where the Lord is trying to help us to have a new encounter with him. Each reception of the Eucharist offers that to us.

It shouldn't surprise us that Jesus would come to us in what seems such an unassuming way, this simple bread, this unleavened bread. It is. I mean, it's quite extraordinary what we believe, that God is present there, that the creator of the cosmos, the Lord of lords and King of kings, that he makes himself present to us in this way. But again, when we think about Jesus, what we believe in the incarnation, that Jesus, the son of God, the second person of the Trinity, came into our world and was conceived in the womb of Mary and was born in the austere circumstances of Bethlehem, and grew up in this small town that nobody had really heard of, and spent most of his adult life as a laborer, that God came to us. This great humility that God shows in wanting to enter into our human condition, into our lives so that we can enter into his life.

This is the great miracle that's presented to us at each and every Eucharist. But we can be like the people that Jesus is first addressing this teaching to. We can be murmuring and say, "How can this be God? How can this be Jesus? This is just a piece of bread."

It always takes me aback sometimes. I mean, I understand it, but when the Eucharistic ministers sometimes are gathering and they're dividing up responsibilities and they might say, "Well, I'll be ministering the wine. I'll be ministering the bread." No, you're not ministering wine and bread, you're ministering the very body of Jesus Christ, the blood of Jesus Christ. And of course, these words were startling to the people that first heard them.

It's interesting. I mean, one of the criticisms of early Christianity was that Christians believed in cannibalism, because the language was so shocking in many ways that we're eating the flesh of another person, that we're drinking his blood. But of course, we understand Jesus is saying, "I'm giving my very life to you." That's what the Eucharist is, that we receive the very life of Jesus again in our lives.

So when you think about it and you understand it in that way, what possibly could be more important than receiving Jesus Christ in the Eucharist? What could be a greater priority in our lives than to come to the Eucharist, to come to mass? What could be more important for us?

I think it's sad, but we hear sometimes that people are expressing that they'll fit the Mass in. Or even there's some data studies now that define practicing Catholics as coming twice a month. Well, no, that's not true. We have the privilege of receiving the Eucharist on a daily basis, if we take advantage of it. But we at least need to weekly come to the Lord in this sacrament. What could possibly prevent us?

I think that many have been focused in recent weeks about the tragedy of the Russian invasion of the Ukraine. It brings back to me all the memories of growing up when we talked about the Iron Curtain and that atheistic communism dominated not just Russia, but all of these countries that they had taken over, and that they were imposing this atheistic communism upon them.

It was in that context that John Paul... He grew up first under the Nazis then under the Communists. It was under that atheistic communism that he exercised his ministry as a priest and bishop and suffered the persecution that was going on. But the faith in Poland was so strong that they could never totally stamp it out. They had to treat the church somewhat gingerly because they realized how important it was to the Polish people. And the transformation that happened.

Of course, John Paul, being chosen as pope, was considered ... we can't really appreciate it today, but back then, a non-Italian being chosen as a pope, this hadn't happened for hundreds of years. And that he would be a pope that grew up in Poland under the domination of atheistic communism.

So John Paul, one of his... Wasn't his first visit, but it was one of his first visits was to go to Poland. The government was trying not to let him in, but there was so much pressure, worldwide pressure. So he goes to Poland. There's actually a DVD that's entitled *Nine Days that Changed the World* that kind of lays out what happened when the Pope was in Poland. But there's this one scene where John Paul is celebrating a mass in this huge square with over a

million Polish people there, and the people just begin to cry out at one point, "I want God. We want God."

I think about that and how that was the beginning of the whole unraveling of the Iron Curtain and the freedom that these states now enjoy. And it happened without bloodshed, which is, again, amazing. But it was that moment, I think that was a pivotal moment of history, and it was happening in this context of the Eucharist and the Polish people crying out that they wanted God.

And to think about that each time when we come to mass, do we come with that desire that we want God? Because he is making himself available to us at each and every Mass. And do we come there with an awe that the Lord would invite us to come and to receive Him in this blessed sacrament?

When we'll hear young people and sometimes old people say, "Well, I don't get anything out of Mass." Well, sometimes they're talking about they didn't like the homily or they didn't find it inspiring or whatever. We priests, we have a great responsibility in making those homilies the best that we can. We're not to be entertainers, but we're to try to bring the message of God to our people.

But that's not the primary reason we come to Mass. It's not the homily, it's not the music. Again, these things are not unimportant, but those aren't the reasons that we come to mass. We come to Mass to be nourished and to be fed and to encounter the Lord in the Eucharist itself. If we understand that, what more could we be given? What more could we receive than receive the very life of God? And that there's this special time when we receive the Lord in the Eucharist ... and after that where he's uniquely present to us. And how can we ever not be in total wonder and awe that the Lord of lords, the King of kings, the creator of the cosmos, he's making himself present to us in this very intimate way. And that time of receiving him in the Eucharist, and that time after communion becomes a very profound time for us if we take advantage of it. So how can we ever say we didn't get anything out of mass when we received the bread of life, when we received the very life of Jesus Christ?

So I encourage you, as we continue our journey through this sixth chapter of St. John's gospel and we listen to the reaction of the people and think, "Well, wow, they're not recognizing Jesus." But are we recognizing Jesus in the way that he promised to be present to us? This amazing gift that he entrusted to his early church. And we see this in the scriptures, but also in the early Christian writings, that the breaking of the bread, as they would call the Eucharist then, was a central part of the Christian life. And that from the very beginning, Christians gathered for this encounter with Jesus, which is the Eucharist.

So as we continue these reflections, let's continue to reflect on what the Lord offers us at each and every mass. And do we believe that he's the bread of life? Do we believe that this bread of life has come down from heaven to offer himself to us? And that if we eat this bread, if we do that in faith, in the one who's given us this Eucharist, this living bread, as Jesus says, "Whoever

eats this bread will live forever. And that the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world." If we understand that, if we accept that, what could make us afraid? Even death itself cannot fill us with fear if we understand and accept that the words of Jesus in this discourse on the bread of life, that indeed he is the bread of life and he has given his flesh for the life of the world. He's given himself for us.

So thanks for joining today, and I hope you'll continue as we work our way through this amazing sixth chapter of St. John's gospel. May the Lord bless you, and may your heart be open when you receive him in this blessed sacrament to realize the miracle in which you are participating. Thanks for listening. God bless. (music)