

Reflections on John 6

Archbishop Naumann - Week 5



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:

Dear friends, this is Archbishop Joseph Naumann. Thanks for joining me on these podcasts. We're continuing our walk through this, and actually concluding our walk through the sixth chapter of Saint John's Gospel today. We'll have one more podcast after that. Today we read from the sixth chapter, verses 60 to 69 –

"Then many of his disciples who were listening said, "This saying is hard; who can accept it?" Since Jesus knew that his disciples were murmuring about this, he said to them, "Does this shock you? What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life, while the flesh is of no avail. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe." Jesus knew from the beginning, the ones who would not believe and the one who would betray him. And he said, "For this reason, I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by my Father." As a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him. Jesus then said to the Twelve, "Do you also want to leave?" Simon Peter answered him, "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God."

So friends, as we come to this conclusion of the sixth chapter of Saint John's Gospel, we see that many who heard this felt it overwhelming. Some of the disciples of Jesus who had been with him, who had seen him perform many miracles and had been attracted by his teaching. But now when he begins to speak this message about himself being the bread of life, and he talks about, "Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you'll have no life within you," as he says in this chapter. He's talking about what we would understand as the Eucharist, and identifying himself as this living bread that came down from heaven. Many find this just too much to believe, and so they walk away. Jesus says at one point, "Does this shock you?" And then he says, "What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?"

So Jesus is foreshadowing his passion, his death, and his Ascension. And he says that, "If this shocks you, how much more might that shock you," but this is the reality, this is the destiny that he has. And he tells him he's not speaking in the words of the flesh, but he's speaking words

that are spirit of life. And then Jesus, he doesn't say to those that are walking away, "Oh, stop, come back. I was just speaking metaphorically. This is just a symbol that I'm talking about." No, Jesus doesn't do any of that. In fact instead, he turns to the Twelve, the group that's been closest to him and says, "Do you also want to leave?"

And Simon Peter, in one of his shining moments in the Gospel answered him, "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We've come to believe and are convinced you are of the Holy One of God." So Peter and probably the other Twelve, they don't understand this themselves, but they have confidence in Jesus. They know who he is and they believed in the words that he's saying. And so it's really this sixth chapter of John that forms the basis along with the institution narratives that we find in the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and even in Paul's epistle, there's also confirmation of how the Eucharist was at the heart of the early Christian community's life. That it was so important to them, the Eucharist. I'd like to read a couple quotes from some of the fathers of the church that talk about the importance of the Eucharist. And so these are in the very earliest days of the church.

The first one is taken from Saint Ignatius of Antioch. Now he lived between 35 and 108. So he was born right around the time that perhaps Jesus died, but he's one of the early Christians and he is this great Bishop who will be martyred. But he said this, in his own letters, as he is writing to Christian communities on his way to his martyrdom. He says, "Come together in common through grace, individually in one faith and in Jesus Christ, who was the seed of David, according to the flesh, both the Son of Man and the Son of God. In this way, you will obey the Bishop and the presbytery." So they had bishops, even at the very beginning and priests. "Obey the Bishop and presbytery with an undivided mind, breaking one and the same bread, which is the medicine of immortality, and the antidote to prevent us from dying, enabling us to live forever in Jesus Christ."

So Ignatius is testifying to the importance of the Eucharist. And he uses this powerful phrase, that it's the medicine of immortality, the antidote, really, to death. And so this is how the early church saw the Eucharist. Again, Justin the Martyr is a little bit later, lived approximately between 100 and 165, but very much a part of the early church. Justin writes in one of his called apologies, "We call this food Eucharist, not as common bread nor common drink, do we receive these. But since Jesus Christ, our Savior was made incarnate by the word of God and had both flesh and blood for our salvation. So too, the food which has been made into the Eucharist is both the flesh and the blood of the incarnated Jesus." So again, Justin the Martyr's testifying to the early church's belief. That's why many have converted to Catholicism from Protestantism where the Eucharist has been largely rejected.

There's some that have kept some semblance of it, but because they studied the early church, the early fathers of the church, and they find that the Eucharist was so central to it. Saint Gregory of Nyssa, who's quite a bit later in the fourth century, 335 to 394, he says, "The bread, again is first, common bread, but when the mystery sanctifies, it is called and actually becomes the body of Christ." So those are just some of the testimonies from some of the great fathers of

the church, about the Eucharist and about the reality that this is Jesus Christ being made present to us.

And we go back to where we began, that this God who so loves us and desires to be in communion with us, we call it Holy Communion because when we receive the Eucharist, we are brought into union with Jesus in a very intimate and special way. That this God who would humble himself to become an embryo in the womb of Mary, to be born in these austere circumstances of Bethlehem, to grow up in this out of the way town in Nazareth, and then to spend most of his adult life as a laborer, as a carpenter. This is the crater of the cosmos, the Lord of Lords and King of Kings. He humbles himself in this way.

And would he not figure out a way to make himself present to his disciples for all time? And wouldn't this be in a form that again, to human appearance would be very humble? So this gift of the Eucharist, dear friends, is something as John Paul talks about, we should never cease being amazed by this miracle, but also to always treasure it. Many years ago now, when I was in St. Louis and an auxiliary Bishop, our Archbishop at the time, Archbishop Rigali, decided to have a Eucharistic Congress in St. Louis. And he invited one of his good friends. Archbishop Rigali had worked in the Curia, and had been close to Saint John Paul. And one of his best friends from his days, I mean he had spent I think over 25 years in the Curia, was a Cardinal by the name of Jan Schotte, who was a Belgian Cardinal. And Cardinal Schotte under John Paul was the head of the Congregation for the Synods.

So he was a close collaborator with John Paul, but he was scheduled to give a talk and celebrate Mass. But the first keynote speaker was Father Benedict Groeschel, was beginning on a Friday night. And unfortunately there was bad weather in the east coast. Benedict Groeschel couldn't get there and so Archbishop Rigali asked Cardinal Schotte if he could give a talk. And he's at first, he said, "No, no, I'm not prepared," but eventually he could see that Cardinal Rigali was in a bind, and so he agreed to do it. And he talked about how the first time that he ever carried the Eucharist was as a boy in Belgium, that the Nazis were about to overrun the village where he was. And the Belgian military resistance, to try to prevent them from gaining the advantage of the height of the bell tower, were going to blow up the parish church.

And the sacristan at the time asked this boy, Jan Schotte, to carry the Eucharist to this nuns' convent, where it would be hopefully protected. And so at 11 or 12 years old, he carries the Blessed Sacrament to this convent in the midst of this terrible ordeal of the Second World War. And he talked about how what a moving experience that was for him to be able to carry the Eucharist. Then he goes on to say, once he became a Cardinal, and he was working in the Curia, he gets a call from Pope John Paul one day. And Pope John Paul asked him, he said, "Jan, I want you to go to Siberia. And Cardinal Schotte goes, "Holy Father, what have I done?" But he told him, he said that he had ordained a Bishop for Siberia and this Bishop had told him that he was going to build a cathedral in Siberia.

When he came, he wanted the Holy Father to come and consecrate it. And he said, the Pope, because still now they're is this sensitivity with the Orthodox Russian patriarch, he could not go

to Russia. And so he sent Cardinal Schotte instead. And Cardinal Schotte was talking with this Bishop of Siberia, who had found over a million Catholics there. And he asked him, how did he do this? And he said in every city and town and village he would set up an adoration chapel. And he said that the people would come to that, this remembrance of the Eucharist. And the truth of the Eucharist was what drew these people out. That they had preserved this, even during times of great persecution of the faith.

I think that's just an example of the beauty of the Eucharist and the power that it has for those who open their hearts to its truth and the reality that the Lord is truly present in the Eucharist. Mother Teresa, in her dying days, she was fortunate enough in the hospital to have the Eucharist brought to the hospital room. And one of her biographers wrote this about her and said, "Mother had the grace in the latter years to have the blessed sacrament in her hospital room. And she always wanted it with her. She had another heart failure right before our eyes, the tube was put down into her lungs to assist her breathing and relieve the pressure upon her heart. Before the tubes were finally removed, the doctors said, Father, go home and bring that box to Mother. For a second, I wondered, what box? A shoebox? He said, that box, that temple they bring and put it in her room and Mother looks at it all the time. If you bring it and put it in the room, Mother will become so quiet."

I realized he meant the tabernacle with the Blessed Sacrament. He said to me, when that box is there in the room, she's just looking and looking and looking at that box. The Hindu doctor was an unknowing witness to the power of the Eucharist over our Mother. And of course, Mother Teresa, one of the things with her ardor was, and still today that the sisters, in addition to going to the Eucharist, but they spend at least one hour in Eucharistic adoration to empower them to go out and to be able to do the missionary work that they do. So if Mother Teresa needed this and John Paul himself had this tremendous devotion to the Eucharist and every day would spend way more than an hour in prayer before the Eucharist, this is something that's not just for the Saints, but it's for all of us.

And all of us, the sacrament is available to us. When Pope John Paul came to make a pastoral visit in St. Louis, and after he had left, it was in 1999, even then he was becoming frail. There was a press conference after he'd left, and Archbishop Rigali was asked by one of the reporters, "Where does Pope John Paul get his energy at his age?" And with some of his health, because he had celebrated this mass with 100,000 people, he had presided over this youth rally. He had gone to visit a hospital that takes care of children. He had this ecumenical service. I mean, it was amazing what he did in just a couple of days in St. Louis. And Archbishop Rigali says, "Well, he has a secret," and you could see the press was kind of interested in this.

They thought, "Well, maybe he has some special energy drink or something that he uses." But he said, "Yes." He said, "The Holy Father stayed at the Archbishop's residence." And he said, "He got up at three or four in the morning, went down into his chapel and was praying there for an hour and 45 minutes before he would go about the business of his day." So this is the same bread of life that's offered to us in the Eucharist. And if we understand this, that Jesus is really present in this Eucharist, that the Lord of Lords and King of Kings comes to us and wants to be

in communion with us, what could ever be more important? What could ever prevent us from being able to have this intimacy with the Lord? And where he actually unites himself with us, I mean, we're being offered something so much greater than those disciples before the Eucharist. They were physically in proximity to Jesus, but Jesus comes actually to dwell within us in the Eucharist.

So I hope this walk through the sixth chapter of Saint John's Gospel, the bread of life discourse has been helpful for you. We'll have one more episode, and that episode will be on the Gospel that's read on Holy Thursday night from John's Gospel from the 13th chapter. And so you don't want to miss the last episode, because John's Gospel is unique in how he presents the Holy Thursday events.

Well, thanks for listening. Let's all pray that we can have a deeper love, a deeper appreciation, and deeper faith in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist that we'll never take it for granted, that we'll seek to receive our Lord in this blessed sacrament as often as we can. And that we'll come to pray before his Eucharistic presence in adoration. Thanks for listening and God bless. (music)