

THIS IS MY BODY, WHICH WILL BE GIVEN UP FOR YOU WORSHIP OF THE HOLY EUCHARIST, PART 1

“Jesus said to the crowd, ‘Amen, amen, I say to you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate the loaves and were filled. Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of man will give you. For on him the Father, God, has set his seal.’ So they said to him, ‘What can we do to accomplish the works of God?’ Jesus answered and said to them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in the one he sent.’ So they said to him, ‘What sign can you do, that we may see and believe in you? What can you do? Our ancestors ate manna in the desert, as it is written: He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’ So Jesus said to them, ‘Amen, amen, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave 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.’ So they said to him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’ Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst’” (John 6:26-35).

Together with the Gospel accounts of the Last Supper in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we find the Scriptural basis of our belief in Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist in the above passage from the Gospel of John. It forms the introduction to John’s much longer reflection on the Eucharist that we call the Bread of Life discourse. Taking place the day after Jesus had miraculously fed over 5000 people with only five loaves of bread and two fish, the crowd came after Jesus, hoping to continue cashing in on the new meal ticket they had found. Jesus immediately sets them straight. He didn’t feed them the miraculous bread and fish to satisfy their grumbling stomachs. He performed the miracle as a sign that he and he alone can satisfy our deepest hunger, our hunger for eternal life, and he does this, not by giving us bread and fish, but by giving us his very self, the true bread come down from heaven made present for us now and for all time in the Eucharist.

As Catholics, we believe that Jesus Christ is truly present for us in the Eucharist. The Eucharist is not merely a sign or representation of his life-giving presence, as the bread and fish in the Gospel story were. Christ himself becomes present for us, body, blood, soul, and divinity, in and through the Eucharist. That is why there is no more important or more powerful prayer that we can offer than our celebration and worship of the Eucharist. It is the source and summit of our lives as Christians, the font from which our new life as Christians flows and the fullness of that life toward which we aspire. The Eucharist is Christ.

The people in the Gospel story ask Jesus what they can do to accomplish the works of God. He replies, “This is the work of God, that you believe in the one he sent.” Many of those same people did not believe in him when he told them that he is the bread of life, without which they would not have life within them. They object, “This teaching is hard. Who can accept it?” And many left him that day, but not all. Some stayed, saying, “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” (John 6:68-69). May we join those faithful disciples in doing the work of God by believing in the one he sent and by believing ever-more fully in the living presence of the Holy One of God in the Eucharist.

In preparation for the upcoming Lenten season, this is the first segment in a series on our celebration and worship of the Eucharist. Tune in next week for part 2 of THIS IS MY BODY, WHICH WILL BE GIVEN UP FOR YOU!