

## 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time - August 18, 2024

### Deacon Jim Olshefski

We've been on quite a journey!!

Throughout the last four weeks, most of the readings have been about "food for the journey." Whether it was Elisha or Jesus feeding the multitudes, or God feeding the Israelites for forty years in the desert, or Elijah being fed by the Angel of the Lord on his journey to Mount Horeb, or, in today's first reading, Wisdom spreading her table and inviting those who hunger for understanding to "come, eat of my food," we've heard about "food for the journey."

During this same period, the Gospel readings have traveled through John, chapter 6, known as Jesus' "Bread of Life discourse." While next Sunday's Gospel concludes the discourse, today is when the climax is reached.

In the opening verse of today's Gospel, which is so important that it's repeated from the end of last week's Gospel, Jesus tells us:

"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."

This is the crux of the "Bread of Life discourse," Jesus is telling us that his flesh is true food and his blood is true drink! God is giving himself to us! That's the meaning of the Eucharist. This is what we believe! It isn't a metaphor; it's the doctrine of the REAL PRESENCE, which affirms that in the Holy Eucharist, Jesus is literally and wholly present—body and blood, soul and divinity—under the appearances of bread and wine. In the Eucharist, Jesus gives to us his entire person, the Word made flesh, so that we might have fullness of life through union with him; unlike our "ancestors (Elisha, the Israelites, and Elijah, for example) who ate and still died; whoever eats this Bread of Life will live forever."

This is what we receive each and every time we go to Mass, God's gift of himself to us. It's the greatest gift that we can possibly receive. BUT, as Paul Harvey—radio commentator from the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—would say, what we do with that gift "is...the rest of the story."

At the end of Mass, the priest's or deacon's last words are the dismissal, which can take various forms. Of the four alternatives, you'll (almost) always hear me choose the option "**Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life**" because that, to me, is the most expressive charge that I can give to each and every one of us.

Our charge is to share that gift, Our Lord Jesus Christ himself, with all we meet on the journey of our lives. While that gift of the Lord, the "food for the journey," sustains and nourishes us in life, we're wasting a golden opportunity to spread the joy of the Gospel if we don't pass that gift on; pay-it-forward, if you would.

Speaking of food for the journey, I am reminded of my four pilgrimages on El Camino de Santiago. As I reflect on those pilgrimages, I can now see parallels between those pilgrimages, the food for the journey and this charge to pass-on the gift of the Eucharist and the Joy of the Gospel:

El Camino de Santiago, the Way of St. James, which Mary and I have traveled four times is a journey of body, mind and soul. While walking up to 15 miles per day, I had ample opportunity to pray and discern God's will for my life. A great part of that discernment involved interaction with my fellow peregrinos, pilgrims with whom I trekked. Much of that interaction occurred during the evening pilgrim's meal when we all shared "food for the journey." During these meals, I had many thoughtful and challenging conversations on spiritual and religious topics with people from all over the world; conversations which opened my eyes to the many issues that people, regardless of country of origin, often face.

Just like those daily communal pilgrim's meals, the physical trials and those reflective interior moments that I experienced on the Camino would have meant nothing to me if I had not shared my journey with the others that I met along the Way.

So it is with the Holy Eucharist. If we solely internalize the communion that we have with Jesus when we receive his Body and Blood (and stop there), we're missing the opportunity to share the joy of the gospel.

And that is the challenge that Pope Francis has given to us in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, The Joy of the Gospel.

Of particular relevance to us here at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Pope Francis calls us to be an evangelizing community and take that next step to "move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast. (24)" We're challenged to get involved by word and deed in people's daily lives; we're challenged to take the initiative to bridge the distance between peoples, to embrace human life and touch the suffering flesh of Christ in others. To use a favorite phrase of Pope Francis: We're to take on the "smell of the sheep."

We all can positively affect another's life. Something as simple as a joyful greeting, lending an ear or a helping hand may be the difference between despair and hope for someone. We're the pebble in the water. Although we may never know the effects of the ripples sent out by our actions, we can try to stir-up the water as much as possible. To again quote Pope Francis, we should "make a mess, but then also help to tidy it up. A mess which gives us a free heart, a mess which gives us solidarity, a mess which gives us hope."

We, the parish community of the Cathedral, are on a pilgrimage, like my pilgrimages to Santiago de Compostela, that calls us to reach out to others, to evangelize, and joyfully spread the Gospel "to the ends of the earth."

So, as we continue life's journey, we're called to "go in peace, glorifying the Lord by our lives."