

# 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Year

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So far the Lord has invited us to reflect on the purpose for which he has given us the Bread of Life. It is manna – a spiritual food to sustain us on our pilgrim journey in faith until we see him face to face at the end of our lives. At that moment we shall no longer need sacramental signs because we shall be enfolded in the arms of the One to whom they point. Today and next week we are challenged to deepen our understanding of the way in which Our Lord comes to us. “If you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you will not have life in you. Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life and I shall raise him up on the last day.” How is this possible?

From earliest times the Christian community had to counter pagan claims that they were cannibals, as we know from a letter written by Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor, to the Emperor Trajan in 112 AD. Writing in the middle of the Second century, St Justin Martyr says: “For not as common bread or common drink do we receive these things but just as our Saviour Jesus Christ, being Incarnate through the word of God, took both flesh and blood for our salvation, so too we have been taught that the food over which thanks have been given through a word of prayer which is from him, from which our blood and flesh are fed by transformation, is both the flesh and blood of that incarnate Jesus.” From the outset the Church has taken at face value the words that Jesus speaks through the priest over the bread and wine, “This is my body...this is my blood.”

The first person to question this was a man called Berengarius in the Eleventh Century. It was this challenge that led theologians to reflect more deeply on what the Church believes and how it can be explained. This became even more of an issue at the time of the Reformation. Luther believed that the species of bread and wine were simultaneously bread and wine and the Body and Blood of Christ. The Swiss Reformers such as Calvin and Zwingli denied that there was any change. The bread and wine were simply reminders of what Jesus did at the Last Supper. The Church of England’s official position is that Christ becomes present subjectively in the heart of the believer rather than in an objective or lasting way through any change in the bread and wine, although there are many Anglicans who believe more or less what Catholics believe.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it in these words: “In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist “the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained. This presence is called 'real' - by which is not intended to exclude the other types of presence as if they could not be 'real' too, but because it is presence in the fullest sense: that is to say, it is a substantial presence by which Christ, God and man, makes himself wholly and entirely present. (1375) It is by the conversion of the bread and wine into Christ's body and blood that Christ becomes present in this sacrament. The Church Fathers strongly affirmed the faith of the Church in the efficacy of the Word of Christ and of the action of the Holy Spirit to bring about this conversion. Thus St. John Chrysostom declares:

It is not man that causes the things offered to become the Body and Blood of Christ, but he who was crucified for us, Christ himself. The priest, in the role of Christ, pronounces these words, but their power and grace are God's. This is my body, he says. This word transforms the things offered.”

St. Ambrose adds: “Could not Christ's word, which can make from nothing what did not exist, change existing things into what they were not before?”

The Council of Trent summarizes the Catholic faith by declaring: “By the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called transubstantiation. The Eucharistic presence of Christ begins at the moment of the consecration and endures as long as the Eucharistic species subsist. Christ is present whole and entire in each of the species and whole and entire in each of their parts, in such a way that the breaking of the bread does not divide Christ.”