

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Am I Making Sense?

The Gospel today is a mysterious piece tacked on to the end of Jesus' discourse on bread. It's clearly an invader, for the chapter as a whole makes better sense without it. Most scholars think it is the lost account of the Eucharist from John's Last Supper account. But what, in the end, do these extraordinary words mean?

### Familiarity And Contempt

One of the effects of regular religious practice is to induce a kind of deafness to the impact of our faith. Just as the crucifix, dangling ignored on our walls, inures us to the outrageousness of building a religion round a barbaric execution, so the regular use of the phrase in the prayer before Communion in the Mass (*we eat your body and drink your blood*) can deafen us to the outrageousness of this talk. Where else, in all the compass of human language, could such words be spoken – let alone spoken as an act of supreme reverence? The familiar claim that *the liturgy is boring* bears witness to our power to grow up inured to the power of the words we speak.

### Learning To Listen

It's a constant struggle for us to keep our ideals fresh, to keep our relationships open and positive, and to keep our ears open to the wonder and horror of the Gospel. It is no distortion to speak of this: human life itself is alive with horror as well as wonder; that we so often experience it as routine and boredom only shows how inadequate we are to it. The Gospel has dimensions of graceful beauty, and pure power: but it also has tracts of shock and challenge which hold up a mirror to the drama of sin and the power of death which *wanders through the world for the ruin of souls*. I can't help feeling that when Jesus speaks of the gift of his own life to us, we come close to the awesome necessity of his death, and our participation in the Passion story. The Eucharist doesn't involve the devouring of the dead flesh of Jesus, as cannibalism might. But the dreadful language Jesus uses somehow demands his death as the condition for our being fed, and relates our hope for eternal life directly to the necessity of his death. This is where the foregoing teaching in the sermon comes into

play: his teaching *must* become our bread. If we try to feed off some substitute bread - the bread which the world can give, and which passes away - we can't simultaneously live on the bread of life. The seriousness of this choice is decisive: it is our final judgment: those who could not accept it *left him and stopped going with him*. Jesus lets it happen; he does not persuade or cajole or offer an alternative, more acceptable explanation. Jesus could never have concurred in their departure: but it is as if he is at least sure that they are leaving on the real issue, that they are not mistaking his meaning. I myself believe that his words can only be understood as spoken at the Last Supper, within the aura of intimacy and disclosure which surrounded that meal, and under the shadow of his oncoming death. Remember that his death, viewed as something he freely accepted, is his final act of uniting with us humans: he was determined to be what we are, down to the end, down to the grave. Perhaps only when we see the link between loving and dying, when we know what a loving death is, when we see death as our going to the Father, shall we begin to understand the words about giving us his flesh for food and his blood for drink. Such life-and-death generosity is rare, awesomely beautiful. Many people, grimed in the world of buying and selling, may never experience any part of it. But it is as much the heart of their humanity as of Jesus' - or Peter's, or John's - humanity. When Jesus says: *No-one can come to the Father except through me* he means just that. Our path to God, to meaning and to fulfilment, is not to be found except on this path of self-giving for the love of the Father. *Fr Philip*