

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Flesh For Food

This language is shocking, but it isn't what shocked the crowd Jesus was teaching. *They* were devastated by his claim to have come down from heaven; this claim will eventually crucify him. It was quite sufficient to deserve the death-penalty in Jewish eyes: it was the ultimate blasphemy, a *folie de grandeur* which a crucified death itself would disprove (Deuteronomy calls such a death the sign of God's curse). The words of today's Gospel do not originally belong to the chapter on the Bread of Life, and we should make this point plain, so that their meaning can be protected from any distortion caused by being inserted.

The True Bread

Having said that, there is a reason for the relocation of these words in the sixth chapter of John, which has spoken of our being fed by the teaching of Jesus, which we receive in faith. The words of today's Gospel remind us that the gift of Jesus' doctrine cost him his life, so that the mystery of his teaching and the mystery of his going to the Cross are one thing. He died so that he could underline his truthfulness with the total witness of a martyr. It is from that generous acceptance of annihilation from the face of the earth that the "funding" for the Eucharist is drawn; because Jesus gave his life for his teaching, he can make us a gift of himself, in the Eucharistic sacrament. That this gift comes from the Father is vital to our understanding. Jesus hands over his life to the Father, saying: *I am coming to you!* The Father receives him with total love, and us with him. The communion that we share is therefore our coming to the Father in Christ; there is no longer any distance between Jesus and his Father, and he can say, *the Father is in me, and I am in the Father...the Father and I are one.* We have to see how the sacrifice of Jesus is linked to his "thirst for our faith"; it is because he wanted us to trust him totally, to understand him perfectly, that he was prepared to pour out the last drop of his earthly blood to seal his revelation to us.

Give Us That Bread

Jesus feeds us always with his teaching; but he also fed us once and for all with his life, laid down so that we should believe. Therefore, alongside our listening to him and our meditative receiving of the Gospel, we also receive the awesome gift of his Body and Blood. In the teaching, there is perfection; but our receiving and

understanding of it is imperfect. In the Eucharist, however, what we receive is the whole gift of Jesus. Our knowledge and understanding remain only partial. But the sacraments are total; we do not know what we hold in our hands at the Mass, but we worship in it the utter fullness of Christ. This will explain why the Catholic understanding of the Real Presence is so vital. We are like children in our need for salvation – only partly aware of the peril in which we stand. So God measures his grace to us not by our understanding, but by our need. We *understand* dimly and uncertainly, but *we need the whole Christ.* So the sacrament is there to cover our need, and is to be understood not by any measuring-line in us, but by the fullness of Jesus himself, who said: *I will not leave your orphans: I will come back to you; and your hearts will be full of joy.* The Real Presence is the place where we infallibly find the Christ who is greater than our ignorance, greater than our sins, and from whom nothing can separate us. It is vital for fleshly, mortal, timebound people that he should be accessible to us in physical, temporal modes, which (*1Jn*) *we can see with our own eyes, and watch, and touch with our own hands – the Word who is life!* In this way the mystery of the Word made flesh is truly present to us in our time, and what we must believe about Jesus (bread come down from heaven) comes home to us in the Church.
Fr Philip