

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time: What Makes a Person a Christian?

We continue today with our five week study of the sixth chapter of John. It began last week with the multiplication of loaves and fish with all its Eucharistic implications. Today's Gospel takes place the next day as the people came looking for Jesus. Jesus and his disciples were on the other side of the lake. The disciples crossed over by themselves, but Jesus met up with them walking on the water. That's why the Gospel for this Sunday begins with the crowds saying, "Rabbi, when did you get here?"

Jesus responds that they are only looking for him because they ate loaves and fish yesterday and want more today. They were not concerned with the sign that He performed. They were just concerned with free food.

That reminds me of the man I met at a social function a number of years ago. He told me that he goes to my parish, but he doesn't go to Mass. I said to myself, "Well, this is going to be good." So I asked, "What do you mean that you go to my parish but you don't go to Mass?"

He said, "Well, I don't go to Church. But I go to the picnic every year." Too good to be made up.

What makes a person a member of a parish? Deeper than this, what makes a person a Christian? What makes a person a Catholic? Does baptism do it? Perhaps theologically, but if the person does not reaffirm his or her faith with his or her life, then baptism is an act lost in the forgotten past, theologically something that took place, but a life that no longer exists due to the person's refusal to live this life. The Life of God cannot be taken from us, but it can be surrendered by us, given away by us. That is the reason why people feel empty when they commit serious sin. They may fill their lives with all sorts of experiences, or all sorts of things, but they still feel so empty. They sense that they have given away the Life of God within them.

Back to the question: What makes a person a member of a parish, a Christian, a Catholic? Does filling out paperwork make a person a member of a parish? That's easy enough to do. People can download the registration form from the top menu of the parish website. But does that really make a person a member of the parish if that person has no intention of worshiping with the community? We and every parish certainly have plenty of people who register into the parish, people who fill out paperwork to get their children in religious education, or Catholic school, or to have a child baptized. Sadly some of these people have no intention on coming to Church in any sort of a regular basis.

So, then does attendance in Church do it? No, there are plenty of people who wish they could come to Church but who can't due to sickness or age or both. The fragments left over that I spoke about last week refers to the preservation of the Eucharist so we can bring the Eucharistic meal to those unable to attend. Although not

in Church, these people are certainly active members of the parish. They pray daily for the parish and for sick members of the parish. On the opposite side of the spectrum, there are some people who attend Church but who do not live a Christian life outside of the building. We are all sinners, no doubt, but most of us want to be better, want to fight sin. But those few who are mean, cruel, who cheat others continually and who firmly intend to keep living this way, are they Christians simply because they attend Mass? What makes a person in reality, not in name, a Christian, a Catholic, an active member of a parish?

The answer is simple: Jesus Christ. Everything that matters is about Jesus. All else is bogus. Those who seek Jesus and who worship Him in their daily lives as well as with the community of believers are members of the parish, members of the Church. They, we, are Christians. They, we, are Catholic.

In the second part of today's Gospel, the people who sought Jesus looking for free food, took a step away from their greed and began considering the history of their ancestor's relationship with God. They spoke about the manna that the ancient Hebrews ate in the desert. The first reading tells the story about the Jews crying out to God for food. Manna had been called the bread of angels. It appeared in the morning on the ground, as though it came down from the sky.

Jesus says that the heavenly Father is providing a bread greater than the manna. Manna was seen as the food of the law of Sinai. Jesus tells the people that God is providing a food greater than manna, a gift infinitely greater than the Law. The people had to be thinking, "How could anything be greater than the Law? How could the people eat any food greater than the manna?" Jesus responds that He is the gift that is greater than the Law. He is the New Manna, the food that gives eternal life. He is the Bread of Life.

That's where the Gospel for this week ends. That's far enough.

Who is this Jesus? He is the Eternal Word of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, became flesh on Christmas Day. He came so He could set the world on fire with the Love of God. In the Gospel of Luke 12:49 Jesus says, "I came to throw fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were set ablaze." "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?" (Luke 24:32). The disciples on the road to Emmaus asked this after their encounter with the Risen Lord.

Encounters with Jesus are experiences of His life burning within our lives. These encounters might result from great spiritual experiences like a parish mission or a retreat, or the encounter may come simply from recognizing the touch of the Lord in an everyday experience. Mothers and fathers often have an encounter with the Lord the first time they hold their newborn baby.

There is a great story about three businessmen who ran through a train station

knowing that they only had two or three minutes before their train would depart. In the process they accidentally tipped over an apple stand. They kept running, but then one of the men felt a twinge of conscience and turned around and ran back to the stand. The apples were all over the place and a child was crying. The man started picking up the apples. He then realized that the crying child was a little boy who had been selling the apples. The little boy was blind. The man put the apples he could save back on the table. He then said to the little boy, "I'm so sorry. I'm placing a twenty dollar bill in your hand to make up for the apples that had been lost. The little boy held the money and asked, "Are you Jesus?" The man was Jesus for the little boy. And the little boy was Jesus for the man. They each had an experience of Christ.

What is the food that we need? The food is Jesus Christ. The Eucharist is the sacramental expression of this food. The Eucharist is our union with the Lord loving us to death on the cross. The Eucharist is the most significant of the many ways that we receive the Bread of Life.

I began this homily by asking, "What makes a person a member of a parish, a member of the Church, a Catholic?" The question was phrased incorrectly. It is not the what, it is the Who that unites a person to God's intimate love. The Who is Jesus Christ, the One who gives life by dying, and has set us on fire with the Love of God and who has filled us with the only food we will ever need, Himself.