

Homily for August 2nd, 2020
18th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A

The Food that Satisfies

In the early 1970's, during the Vietnam War, the Archbishop of Saigon was a man named Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan. The Communists saw him as a threat. And on the feast of the Assumption, August 15, 1975, he was arrested. Without ever being tried, or even sentenced, he was shipped off to a prison in North Vietnam.

During his imprisonment, he could not celebrate mass, or receive the Eucharist. What he managed to do, though, was phenomenal—and reminds us, powerfully, just how vital the Eucharist is. The archbishop was allowed one luxury: to write letters to friends outside prison. When he did, he often asked them to send him what he called “his medicine.” They knew what he meant. They sent him cough medicine bottles, filled with wine, and small bits of bread. Sympathetic guards smuggled him some wood and wire, and from that he made a small cross, which he hid in a bar of soap.

He kept all this in a cardboard box. That box became his own private altar. Every day, at 3 pm, the hour of Christ's death, he would place drops of wine in the palm of his hand, mingled with water, to celebrate mass. At the ninth hour that cramped prison cell became a sanctuary and banquet room for this faithful bishop.

He did this for 13 years and was finally released in 1988. During the Jubilee Year, in 2000, he was invited to preach at the Vatican, and Pope St John Paul II presented him with a chalice – an immeasurable gift for a man whose only chalice, for so many years, had been the palm of his hand. That same year, he was named a cardinal. Two years later, he died. The Vatican is now pursuing his cause for sainthood.

Archbishop Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan understood with every fiber of his being how precious Holy Communion is. For you Anne Maria and Tristan (Khloe, Sophia, Gavin and Evan), today you are to share publicly what this fellow Catholic had to do in secret and he teaches us the Eucharist is precious because it is Jesus' gift of overwhelming love.¹

Now with this story in mind, listen again to the first part of our reading from Isaiah 55:

***Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.***

¹ <https://aleteia.org/blogs/deacon-greg-kandra/when-a-prison-cell-became-a-cathedral-a-lesson-on-eucharist-from-francis-xavier-nguyn-van-thuan/amp/>

One of the things that is important to know about this portion of Isaiah, is that it comes in chapter 55, and dates from the time when the people of Israel had been in captivity in Babylon for 3 generations. As people who had been born in Babylon journeyed to Jerusalem, they were coming to the city of the first time. There was much to do to rebuild the walls and the Temple, and the whole of the city's infrastructure. It was a huge undertaking. Here Isaiah poetically calls for the people to trust in the Lord and to allow for him to sustain them at a banquet not of human but divine origins. Think of how Archbishop Van Thuan was also sustained by this divine banquet, with the supernatural food and drink of the Eucharist.

Listen to what Isaiah says next:

***²Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.***

Here the Lord speaking to us through Isaiah underscores that we too need the medicine of the Eucharist that is anticipated in this Old Testament text.

August 1st is the Feast Day of St Alphonsus Liguori who lived from 1696 – 1787. He died, aged 91. At 19 he started to practise Law in Naples and was considered one of the best young lawyers in the city. As he became more successful, he also became more worldly and God took a back seat in his life. From 19-26 he never lost a trial. Then he had a case where he overlooked a key piece of evidence. Realizing he had lost he was overwhelmed. In vain those around him, even the judge on the bench tried to console him. He thought his mistake would be ascribed not to oversight but to deliberate deceit. He felt as if his career was ruined and he left the court almost despondent. For three days he refused all food. Then the storm subsided, and he began to see that his humiliation had been sent him by God to break down his pride and wean him from the world. Confident that some special sacrifice was required of him, though he did not yet know what, he did not return to his profession, but spent his days in prayer, seeking to know God's will. After a short interval--we do not know exactly how long--the answer came. On August 28th, 1723, the young advocate had gone to perform a favourite act of charity by visiting the sick in the Hospital for Incurables. Suddenly he found himself surrounded by a mysterious light; the house seemed to rock, and an interior voice said: "Leave the world and give thyself to Me."² From this he discovered what he wrote later in life:

If you wish to strengthen your confidence in God still more, often recall the loving way in which He has acted toward you, and how mercifully He has tried to bring you out of your sinful life, to break your attachment to the things of earth and draw you to His love.³

St Alphonsus through his professional setback was able to hear God speak to him and discover the food that can truly satisfy. A food referred to in the next verse from Isaiah:

³Incline your ear, and come to me;

² <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01334a.htm>

³ https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/alphonsus_liguori_358211

*listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.*

Here mention is made of this everlasting covenant made with David. In the Bible an everlasting covenant is a special promise God makes to be present with us. In the Old Testament one of the key signs of the everlasting covenant was the bread of the presence, as described in Leviticus 24:

“And you shall take fine flour, and bake twelve cakes of it; two tenths of an ephah (25 cups of flour) shall be in each cake. ⁶ And you shall set them in two rows, six in a row, upon the table of pure gold. Every sabbath day Aaron shall set it in order before the LORD continually on behalf of the sons of Israel as a covenant for ever⁴

So, do you see what Isaiah is doing here? The everlasting covenant is tied to the bread of the presence which in Matthew finds its fulfillment in the 12 baskets of bread left over after the feeding of the five thousand. What Matthew is doing here through his story is what Archbishop Van Thuan and Saint Alphonsus had discovered in their lives. Jesus is true to his covenant and in the Eucharist gives us that bread that truly satisfies. A bread that like the bread of the presence we are to share in weekly, and even more often if we are able.

May we come in our hunger to Jesus and discover how to sing with those who have lived before us the words of today’s psalm:

*¹⁵The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food in due season.
¹⁶You open your hand,
satisfying the desire of every living thing.
¹⁷The LORD is just in all his ways,
and kind in all his doings.
¹⁸The LORD is near to all who call on him,
to all who call on him in truth.*

⁴ [The Holy Bible](#). (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Le 24:5–9). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.