

The Infinite Abyss of Spiritual Longing

Homily for June 17 – 18

Feast of Corpus Christi

St Augustine, once famously prayed:

“O God, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you”.

Jesus said:

“Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life” (Jn 6: 27).

Augustine and Jesus are all saying the same thing. There is a hunger in the soul that can only be satiated by God. Just as the stomach is satisfied by food, thirst by water, loneliness by friendship, so too with the soul.

The French philosopher and scientist Blaise Pascal wrote of the soul’s longing this way:

“What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself”¹

The infinite abyss of spiritual longing can only be filled by God. Jesus, thousands of years before Pascal knew this and declared as much when he said in John 6:

“I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst ... (Jn 6: 35).

This is the Feast of Corpus Christi when we celebrate the amazing grace of Jesus’ gift of His Body and Blood offered to us so that infinite abyss can be filled with an infinite and immutable object, the very presence of Jesus Christ.

Today I want to think with you for a few minutes about what it is we are doing when we come to Mass. We are, like Augustine, bringing our restless hearts to the one whose very life alone can still them. We are, like Pascal, “Looking everywhere for that true happiness and life’s meaning and purpose”. We are like Peter, who later in John six declares:

“Lord to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life”

We too are discovering that we cannot live on bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.

And yet, we can approach Mass with a kind of indifference, distractibility and even apathy. This is due in part to the following experience. While we know instinctively hunger is satisfied by food, and thirst by water, we do not instinctively know that the longing of the soul can only be satisfied by Jesus. We might come to Mass regularly, but we continue to look for the soul’s

¹ <https://itsjustme.wordpress.com/2011/04/19/the-correct-quote-of-blaise-pascal/>

satisfaction in Pascal's words by "seeking in things that are not there the help we cannot find in those that are".

In other words we continue to look for the soul's satisfaction in all of those worldly pursuits and pleasures, that while even good in themselves, cannot ultimately content us if we make them our primary good. Or to take it a step further, we covet what is presented to us through advertising or we are caught in the enchantment of the celebrity world and wonder: "What would it be like to live their lives?" Don't many live in such a fantasy world as the magazines in the grocery checkout line; so many pages online beckon us to "seek things that are not"? That is, long for a world that can never be yours.....

How restless the heart until we take to heart Jesus' words in today's Gospel:

Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. (Jn 6:53).

Then later the Lord puts it this way:

"the one who eats this bread will live forever." (Jn 6:58)

Jesus, the God/Man tells us that only He can satisfy the soul's insatiable hunger. So much does Jesus want us to understand this that repeatedly he speaks of eating his flesh in today's passage. Six times in eight verses we have the verb: "eat". Now in order to grasp the full impact of what Jesus is saying in John six 6, it helps us to know something of the original Greek. When Jesus says "unless we eat of the flesh" the term that Jesus uses for "eat" is the expected word ***phagein***, invariably employed to suggest the way human beings eat. But then in verse 54 he uses another word. Instead of the usual word ***phagein***, he uses ***trogein***, which is customarily employed to describe an animal's manner of eating, something along the lines of "gnaw" or "munch." The subsequent four uses of the word "eat" in this passage it is the word ***"trogein"***.

Do you see what the Lord is saying to us here? We are to approach the Eucharist with the kind of enthusiasm with which a dog would approach a bone with meat on it, or a lion the carcass of the prey it had just felled.

Jesus gets increasingly explicit, making it clear that this food, his body and blood is what satisfies our soul. Indeed he says that if we do not eat him, we have no life in us.

So why is it, that it is this food alone that can truly satisfy? It is because the Body and Blood of Jesus is the spiritual food for the journey and the way we share in the life of Jesus through this earthly pilgrimage.

The reading from Deuteronomy explicitly speaks about the manna that was the heaven sent food that sustained the Israelites through the desert wandering. Once they entered the Promised Land there would no longer be need for the Manna. Moses speaks about how the Lord tested the hearts of his people to see if they would humble themselves and keep his commandments. We are to approach the true Manna on this Feast of Corpus Christi with an even greater humility. As the passage from Deuteronomy famously states:

in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.

The words of God are creative words. They bring what was not there before into being. This is what we read in Genesis 1. This is what we read repeatedly in the ministry of Jesus. His words transform reality and change it. This word creating power found its fullest expression when at the Last Supper Jesus said: “This is my body.... This is my blood...” These words are the ones said at every Mass as the Priest allows Jesus to speak through him and so effect the change in these sacred gifts so they become the very body and blood of Jesus – Corpus Christi. Jesus has given us this meal to be the food for the journey that feeds our soul and thereby satisfies our spiritual hunger.

But in order to receive the grace of the sacrament we need to approach it obediently and trustingly. This is because of what we read in Deuteronomy today:

who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, 16 and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good

The world we have to journey through is one fraught with dangers and an enemy that wants to destroy our souls. This is why in the wilderness of this world we need the spiritual sustenance that comes to us from Corpus Christi. Those who keep close to Jesus in the Eucharist will have a deepening trust and humility and thus discover ever more the goodness of the Lord.

Today I challenge you and call you to deepen your dependence upon Jesus through your full, active and conscious participation in the Mass. Your soul and my soul needs it! We have it on the highest authority. Jesus in John 6.

Not only is Corpus Christi food for the journey to satisfy the soul, it is, in the words of St. Paul from today’s Epistle, the way by which we participate in the life of Jesus. In heaven the soul’s hunger will be fully satisfied because we will be sharing fully in the life of Christ. This Feast gives to us a foretaste of what we will fully know when, by grace and purgation we enter into the Beatific Vision.

Back in the 17th century the English Poet and Anglican Clergyman George Herbert spoke of this participation in Christ this way. And with this I end.

***Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lacked any thing.***

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:

*Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?*

*Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.*