

Commentary to the 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B –

And the World Became Eucharistic Bread

Introducción



Caress is a way of saying to the other: you are my confidant and I'm glad you trust me. But if the other draws back, you feel rejected or misunderstood. The handshake, the flowers, the lighted lamp to the patron saint express feelings, emotions, and moods that no words can tell. The blowing out of candles, followed by the friends' applause and song of greetings mark the climax of the birthday party.

Gestures alone are seemingly illogical. The ritual, even if different from the positivist reasoning, is loaded with meanings and messages.

How can friends manifest their joy at our birth, if they were not there when we gave out the first cry?

That day, long gone, cannot be reached, but it is possible to replay it ... through the ritual. The wind that blows out the candles cancels our years, brings us back to the time of birth, replays our first breath and offers the opportunity to celebrate our coming into the world. It would not make sense to just eat the birthday cake.

A human being is of the earth, is closely related to other living beings and material creatures with which he is called to build a growing harmony and feels a deep need to make the invisible and divine things concrete, perceptible by the senses.

The sacraments are God's answer to this need.

At the Last Supper, Jesus instituted the rite with which to make present his supreme act of love, the total gift of life. The Word of God, bread from heaven, now can really be assimilated, not only with the mind and heart but also through the sacrament. Even with this visible sign we, as long as we are pilgrims in this world, will always be hungry.

To internalize the message, we repeat:

“One does not live on bread alone, but also of the Word made bread.”

-----[First Reading](#) | [Second Reading](#) | [Gospel](#)-----

First Reading: Proverbs 9:1-6

Among the peoples of the ancient Middle East, more than the rich and the conquerors of empires, the wise were esteemed (Pro 24:5). They were those who, with experience constitute the “crown of the old” (Sir 25:6). They were able to suggest good advice, quote proverbs, propose riddles, and solve puzzles. Those who passed down stories designed to educate young people and teach correct social and religious behaviors were admired. The wise were mainly the experts of the law of the Lord because it is “the spring of wisdom” (Sir 24:25) and leads to bliss.

The author of the book of Proverbs is like a wise father who turns tenderly to his son and encourages him to follow the advice of wisdom, assuring him: “They will be your graceful crown, a precious chain around your neck” (Pro 1:8).

The first nine chapters of the book are the introduction to the whole collection of wise sayings, the result of several centuries of reflection of the sages of Israel.

Today's passage is taken from the last of these chapters. In it, two women were put on stage: a “princess” and a “prostitute,” representing: one, lady “Wisdom,” the other lady “Foolishness.” They compete with each other, they have laden two opposing banquets and both are aimed at the inexperienced, who is void of understanding (v. 4,16) to attract them to their party. The reading makes us contemplate only the first of the squares of the diptych, that in which Wisdom, acts, but to bring out the message, we will also refer to the behavior of “madness” (Pro 9:13-18).

Wisdom enters the scene. She builds a beautiful house with seven columns (v. 1). The column is the symbol of stability and the number seven of perfection.

The wisdom of God is the only trusted architect because she always designs solid, immovable buildings; the other wisdoms prove themselves fragile. An ideology is easily refuted by what follows her and to a system of philosophy, another one follows. Only God's wisdom is not worn by time or shaken by ideological earthquakes; the winds of fashion and the bad weather of new doctrines do not affect her. Who builds his life on it will not meet surprises, will need not fear the judgment of God, "will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain poured down, the rivers flooded, and the wind blew and struck that house; but it did not collapse because it was built on rock" (Mt 7:24-25).

Having built her palace, "Wisdom" sends her handmaids at strategic points of the city to invite everyone to her table (v. 2). She offers free bread that satisfies and wine that gives joy.

To the Christian, the care and diligence of "Wisdom" recall the apostolic concern of Christ who sent his disciples into the whole world and told them not to lose a moment along the road (Lk 10:4).

"Foolishness" does not build anything, "she sits at the door of her house," indolent and lazy (v. 14). She does not bother to go in search of guests. She knows they can be easily seduced by her misleading charm. She waits and lays traps to all those "who go straight on their way" (v. 15). With honeyed words she rouses them to the forbidden: "Stolen waters are sweet, and pilfered bread is the tastiest" (v. 17).

Hers is the lure of immediate pleasure that, we know, catches many with ease, but leads to ruin. Who is fascinated by it does realize that, in the house of Foolishness, "the shadow world lying there and its guests are heading towards the abyss of death" (v. 18).

The fate of who listens to Wisdom is life (v. 6).

Second Reading: Ephesians 5:15-20

It is not to recriminate on the present or to take refuge in regret and nostalgia of the past that the author of the Letter to the Ephesians reminds the Christians of his time: "These days are evil" (v. 16). He would like to warn them against the vices that he has just listed—the bitterness, indignation, anger, clamor, slander and all sorts of malice (Eph 4:31)—that characterize the behavior of the pagans and risk being spread even among the baptized. To avoid this danger, he suggests: "Do not live as the unwise do, but as responsible persons" (v. 15).

The present age of the world is evil—Paul wrote to the Galatians (Gal 1:4)—but the wise do not conform to current morality; he acknowledges that evil exists, but he knows how "to make good use of the present time" (v. 16) to do good.

The exhortation continues with a new call to wisdom: "Do not be foolish!" (v. 17) and with a call to temperance (v. 18). The excesses in the use of wine generate moral debauchery. The adherents to the

cult of Dionysus reached ecstasy using a strong drink. They convulsed and behaved like madmen. The Christian has nothing to do with such practices. He is full of the Holy Spirit received in baptism, is sober and rejects all forms of debauchery.

The final recommendation concerns prayer (vv. 19-20). The brothers and sisters of the community come together to pray, sing, meditate together on the Word of God. It is thus that they avoid foolishness and gain the wisdom that leads to life.

Gospel: John 6:51-58

Today's Gospel takes up the last verse of last Sunday's. It is an important verse because it marks the passage in the speech of Jesus, from the "bread of heaven," understood as Word, as the wisdom of God, to the theme of the Eucharist.

The Jews understood that, when he spoke of the bread of heaven, Jesus referred to his Gospel, the divine message he brought to this earth and, in the face of this unprecedented claim, they reacted, raising questions and concerns. The statement that begins today's passage is even more disconcerting: the bread to eat is not only his teaching but "his own flesh."

We explained last Sunday that for a Semitic "meat" does not mean the muscles, but "the whole person," considered in his weak and fragile aspects. Man is flesh because he is an ephemeral, a vulnerable creature destined to death. So it is clear to the audience that Jesus is not making a cannibalistic proposal, however, the appearance of his outrageous demand remains and the reaction of those present is understandable and justified. They discuss among themselves, "How can this man give us flesh to eat?" (v. 52). They understand that he no longer refers only to the spiritual assimilation of God's revelation, but also to a "concrete eating," not metaphorical. They wait for an explanation.

Jesus does not care about their embarrassment and, instead of softening his words, he confirms what has already been said, adding an even more crude, insistently repeated demand: it is necessary to drink his blood (vv. 53-56).

This is something repulsive for a Jew. Many biblical texts strictly prohibit this practice (Lev 7:26-27), "for the life of the flesh is in the blood" (Lev 17:10-11), and life does not belong to man, but to God. Even today, when they kill an animal to eat them, the Jews bleed it to death in the most accurate way, so as not to appropriate its life. They pour the blood on the ground to return it to God.

The belief that vital force resides in the blood explains the use that was done in the Old Testament, in the rites of consecration and purification. The way in which the covenant between God and the people at the foot of Sinai was celebrated, with the blood is significant. There was a solemn sacrifice of communion, then Moses took the blood of the victims and poured half on the altar, a symbol of the Lord, and half on the people, saying, "Here is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you" (Ex 24:6-8). With this gesture, the communion of life between God and Israel was established and their mutual belongingness sealed. It was as if between God and the people relations of consanguinity were established.

It is this mindset that Jesus puts his speech on the need of eating his flesh and drinking his blood, to

enter into communion of life with him and with the Father.

In the passage from the first to the second part of his discourse, we may have gotten confused. He promised: “Whoever believes has eternal life” (v. 47) and now he says: “The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives eternal life” (v. 54). If in order to have eternal life, faith in his word is enough, the acceptance of his proposal, his Gospel, what need is there to approach also the sacrament of the Eucharist?

In today’s world, with the absence of priests, most of the Christian communities, on Sundays, do not have at their disposition the Eucharistic bread, but only the bread of the Word. We are confident that, by this single food, they get an abundance of life. Why then the Eucharist? Is not the Word enough?

Let’s assume that this sacrament—that really makes Christ present—does not replace faith in his Gospel. This is fundamental and indispensable. Communion is not a ritual magic, as it were the rites performed by the initiates in the pagan mysteries. It is not a drug that acts automatically and gets the healing of the sick even if he or she is unconscious. It is not correct to think that to receive the grace of the Lord, it is enough to make many communions. Jesus did not recommend to do many communions, but to “eat his flesh and drink his blood.”

The Eucharist has no effect if it is not received with faith, that is if it is not an expression of the inner decision to accept Christ and to allow him to animate the entire life. Before receiving the Eucharistic bread it is always necessary to read and meditate on a passage of the Word of God. Those who agree to become one person with Christ in the sacrament must first know his proposal for life. A contract is not stipulated without having attentively read and evaluated all the terms.

We have introduced the theme of this Sunday with the reference to the meaning of the rite. Now we resume it for a better understanding of the discourse on the Eucharist.

Immediately after Easter, Christians have felt the need to celebrate the founding event of their faith, the death, and resurrection of Christ. They did not have to invent a ritual to reproduce the event because Jesus himself had set it up. Prior to his passion, while he sat at table with his disciples, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to them saying, “This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me” (Lk 22:19).

Faithful to this order of the Lord, Christians began to come together to celebrate the Eucharist on the first day of every week. Moving in this regard is the credible testimony of Pliny, from Bithynia. He wrote to Emperor Trajan: Christians “have the habit of meeting on a fixed day before the rising of the sun, singing among them alternately a hymn to Christ as to a god, to engage with an oath not to commit crimes, robbery or brigandage, nor adulteries, to live up to his word, not to deny a deposit demanded by justice. Having performed these rites, they have a habit to separate and come together again to take their food, whatever they say, is ordinary and harmless” (Pliny, Ep. X).

It is a feature of the rite to be repetitive, to follow a fixed pattern. Woe to us if, every time we greet each other, instead of “good morning” and the handshake, we had to invent always new formulas and gestures. The rituals are repetitive, but not useless because they create what they mean. The greeting not only shows that there is an agreement between two persons but produces and enhances mutual

harmony. The gift of a rose makes a relationship of love bloom, manifests it and nourishes it. The roar of the fans shows sympathy for a team and keeps alive the passion for sports. The military parade celebrates and inculcates patriotic love.

This is the strength, the effectiveness of the rite.

The early Christians had only one Eucharistic celebration per week. Today we can attend mass every day. If repeated with faith, this sacrament which means union with the Lord of life makes this union more solid and deeper.

[There is a video by Fr. Fernando Armellini in English](#)

Fr. Fernando Armellini