

HOMILY 18B 2015

August already – where is the year going? But the Church has something special for us on the Sundays of August: we’re reading St John’s Gospel, and a most important part of St John’s Gospel, namely chapter 6. Chapter 6 began last Sunday with Our Lord feeding the 5000, and feeding them with just five loaves and two small fish. And from that Our Lord went on to promise the Holy Eucharist; went on to promise himself in the Blessed Sacrament.

I said last Sunday that I would take this opportunity during August, to speak about the Eucharist, and about different aspects of the Eucharist. And it might help if we start with something simple. Today, let’s try to see the *continuity* of the Mass. It’s a wonderful thing, the continuity of the Mass. It takes us right back in an unbroken line to the Last Supper.

You know, you come to Mass on Sunday and you pick up your Mass sheet as you come into church, and it says ‘18th Sunday of the Year’ or whatever. And you expect Mass to follow a certain pattern. And so it does. That pattern takes us back to the Last Supper.

At the Last Supper Jesus and his apostles shared the Passover meal. They listened to readings from the Scriptures. They sang hymns. And then Jesus took bread, and blessed and broke it, and gave it to the apostles. “Take, eat” he said. “This is my Body which will be given for you.” And with the cup “This is my Blood which will be poured out for you.”

The pattern of the Mass was set at that point. From then on, at the Christian Eucharist, there would be readings from the Scriptures, breaking the Word of God for us. And there would be the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the breaking of the Bread of God, Jesus Himself. And from that first Holy Week – the week of the Last Supper and of Good Friday and of Easter Sunday – from that first Holy Week, to be a Christian was to go to Mass.

That was true from the very first day of the New Covenant. On the same day that Jesus rose to life from the tomb he found his way to a table with two of his disciples. It happened at Emmaus. And there he took the bread and blessed it and gave it to them. “And their eyes were opened and they recognised him.” (Luke 24:30–35)

St Luke tells us how the first generation of Christians lived. You find it in the Acts of the Apostles (2:42). Luke tells us that “they devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles, to the fellowship, *to the breaking of bread*, and to the prayers.”

St Paul wrote to the first Christians in Corinth. And Paul took great care to quote the exact words Jesus used at the Last Supper, and how he told his followers to do all that in memory of him. And Paul stresses how Jesus is really present in the Eucharist.

Move on a couple of generations. Move on to about the year 100. We still have an important book written about that time. It’s called the *Didache*. Didache means ‘Teaching’, and this is the teaching of the apostles. Four times that little book uses the word ‘sacrifice’ to describe the Eucharist (the

Mass). It says, “This is the sacrifice spoken of by the Lord.” And it says, “On the Lord’s own day [that is of course on Sunday] assemble together and break bread and give thanks, first confessing your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure.”

And from those early days (again about 100AD) we have a letter from a bishop in Syria. We don’t think of Syria now as a Christian country, and we pray for our fellow Christians there who are suffering so much in these present times. But in those earlier years the Church was alive and very well in Syria. And that letter from the bishop in Syria (he was St Ignatius) tells us a lot about the Eucharist. Bishop Ignatius writes about the church as a ‘Place of sacrifice’. And he writes, “Take care to have only one Eucharist. For there is one flesh of Our Lord Jesus Christ and one cup to show the unity of his Blood; one altar as there is one bishop along with the priests and deacons. A proper Eucharist is that administered either by the bishop or by one to whom the bishop has entrusted it.” Already, by about the year 100, we can see how central the Eucharist (the Mass) is.

And how about this for a description of the Mass? St Justin Martyr wrote this to explain to the pagans what Christians got up to on Sundays. “On the day which is called Sunday we have a common assembly of all who live in the cities or outlying districts, and the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the Prophets are read, as long as there is time. Then when the reader has finished, the president of the assembly verbally admonishes and invites all to imitate such examples of virtue. Then we all stand up together and offer up prayers and at the end of the prayers we greet one another with a kiss. [After we finish our prayers] bread and wine and water are presented. He who

presides likewise offers up prayers and thanksgivings, to the best of his ability, and the people express their approval by saying 'Amen'. The Eucharistic elements are distributed and consumed by those present, and to those who are absent they are sent through the deacons. The wealthy, if they wish, contribute whatever they desire, and the collection is placed in the custody of the president ..." (*The First Apology* para.67)

When do you think St Justin Martyr wrote that? It was about the year 150, little more than 100 years after the Last Supper. We can already recognise Holy Mass in that description.

Move on a few more years to about the year 200. We still have a book from that time. It's called *The Apostolic Traditio* and it spells out the teaching of the apostles as the Church in Rome had kept it. One chapter of that book gives us the actual Rite of Ordination of Priests. In that chapter we can hear part of our Mass today. The Preface begins, 'The Lord be with you' and the answer 'And with your spirit'. 'Lift up your hearts'. 'We lift them up to the Lord'. 'Let us give thanks to the Lord our God'. 'It is right and just'. That same dialogue that we have today, and our prayers, goes way back almost to the Last Supper.

It's good that we take time to see this continuity of the Mass. We are part of a long and living tradition; a tradition that stretches right back to the Last Supper and that will go forward into the future. A tradition that puts us in living touch with Our Lord Himself. With Jesus, who says to us today, "I am the Bread of Life. He who comes to me will never hunger. He who believes in me will never thirst."