

Homily for Monday in the Third Week of Easter

April 27, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Acts 6:8–15; Psalm 27:10–14; John 6:22–29*

In the first years I was here at Saint Mary’s, I had many more contacts with Roman Catholic clergy than I would come to have as the years passed. Local priests retired; some were assigned to parishes away from the city. Jesuits move. And I was in touch with several Roman Catholic liturgical scholars. So, when on Maundy Thursday 2003, when Pope John Paul II issued what his church calls an “An Encyclical Letter,” its Latin title was *Ecclesia de Eucharistia—Church of the Eucharist*,¹ I looked forward to reading it.

I remember being surprised, as I read through it the first time. There were occasional references to spiritual food, but the word that’s used over and over again is not “food” but sacrifice. The score: Food 10, Sacrifice 64. And one has to read 2001 words in the document—“Word Count” is a favorite feature of mine—before coming to the first sentence referring to the Eucharist as “food.”

¹ http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_20030417_ecc-de-euch.html, (accessed 27 April 2020).

I would have liked to have been Rome a year and a half later when the Reverend Dr. Paul Bradshaw, then professor of liturgy at Notre Dame, now retired, gave a lecture at the Gregorian University in Rome that was drawn from his research and writing for his book that came out at about the same time *Eucharistic Origins*.² Let me say that I'm not recommending it for general reading. The first chapter, "The Last Supper and Institution Narratives," I confess I avoided for several years because of its careful, detailed analysis. What inspired me to do the work of reading that first chapter—the going gets easier after that—was coming across the lecture five years later, while I was on sabbatical in 2009. Its title: "The Eucharistic Sayings of Jesus"³—from which I've quoted many times over the years.⁴

These words are from its concluding paragraph: "It appears that there were a significant number of first- and second-century Christians who did not think of themselves as reproducing the actions of Jesus at the

² Paul F. Bradshaw, *Eucharistic Origins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³ Paul F. Bradshaw, "The Eucharistic Sayings of Jesus," *Studia Liturgica* 35 (2005), 1–11.

⁴ It was a reference to Bradshaw's work in *Eucharistic Origins* by the late Patrick Regan in an article published in 2007, "The Good Friday Communion Debate," *Worship* 81, January 2007, 2–23. I remain grateful to parishioner and librarian Mary Robison for getting a copy for me.

Last Supper when they celebrated the eucharist together . . . (and hence the omission of explicit reference to [breaking the bread] in the sources) or as recalling his death on the cross, but the focus of their ritual meal was instead on feeding on the life-giving Jesus. This dominant emphasis in turn explains why the reception of communion in separation from the eucharistic action proper whether by the faithful in their own homes or by the community assembled together for what we might call communion services--emerged so soon in the life of the church and became so widely established: they needed, not to celebrate the eucharist often, but to feed on Christ all the time.’⁵

Bradshaw went on to explain why communion was more important than presence at the worship of the gathered community. It accounts for the practice of the baptized having Bread from the Eucharist in their homes so that they could feed daily on the life-giving Jesus. I would have liked to have heard the responses, the questions and the answers that followed.

One might ask why a gospel text like John’s, with a very different approach to proclaiming Jesus Christ, than those of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, become a

⁵ Ibid., 11.

part of the New Testament. One answer might be that, what we would call its approach to questions of faith, reflected and undergirded the ongoing life a significant part of the wider Christian community in the last decades of the first century and into the future.

Since last Thursday we have been hearing the sixth chapter of John at the daily Eucharist. It began with Jesus feeding the five thousand. On Friday, he sent his disciples to Capernaum by boat and Jesus joined them by walking on the sea. On Saturday, five thousand were fed. Tomorrow we will hear Jesus say directly, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.”⁶

I close this homily with the last two verses of today’s gospel: “Then [the people] said to [Jesus], ‘What must we do, to be doing the works of God?’ Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you [should] believe in him whom he has sent.’ ”⁷

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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⁶ John 6:35. My literal translation.

⁷ John 6:29.