

Eleventh Sunday after Trinity
August 16, 2015
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
John 6:51-58

Yesterday we had a wedding here. Andrew and Marie Smith were married in Scranton, but they held their reception down in Monroe County at the Carpathian Village. At the reception, I met a Byzantine Catholic priest who told me about a time he was in Istanbul and a Muslim shopkeeper was able to identify him as a priest. While a relative stood watch for the police, the shopkeeper asked this priest to tell him about Jesus Christ. They had just twenty minutes.

The priest told the man about what we heard in today's Gospel, the part about us abiding in Jesus and Jesus abiding in us. Jesus says in the Eucharistic discourse of St. John's Gospel that to consume our Lord's Body and Blood is the very means by which we become more like God. This process is called divinization, and with only minutes to spare, it was what the Byzantine priest chose to focus on to leave the deepest impression upon a potential convert in a hostile environment.

He explained that most religions teach their adherents how to relate to the divine. God is transcendent, above mankind, and to properly relate to Him man must be taught how to act, what prayers to say, and so forth. Christianity is different and superior in that this divide between man and God has been broken down completely. True, God is still above us, He is still transcendent, but He is simultaneously also with us, He is also immanent. Even more than that, the Lord desires us to become like Him. This is the magnitude of God's love, that He desires to incorporate us, his human creatures, into the Godhead.

Islam, by contrast, keeps God at a distance. He is the lawgiver, and we are required to obey those laws simply by force of the will. Obedience is mandatory, but we get no help; so Muslim jurisprudence makes all kinds of exceptions as to when the law may be fudged. So, for example, under threat of persecution Muslims may pretend to adhere to a different religion while they continue to practice their own in secret. They are thus caught in an inescapable contradiction: to maintain their adherence to what they believe to be true, they are permitted to lie. Without the grace to remain steadfast, the grace that we get from Jesus in our midst, the Muslim must make the law of his transcendent God lax if he is to have any hope of standing firm. This inherent contradiction is why Islam will never triumph.

If we don't want to struggle with such internal inconsistencies, if we don't want to feel continually compromised by rationalizations that arise from fear or laziness, then we must leave behind this juvenile conception of God as a mere lawgiver who rewards us for doing good and punishes us for doing bad. Instead, we must understand ourselves to be in perpetual relationship with God, our Lord holding our hand and infusing us with His very life, to enable us to meet the challenges of a life devoted to the Truth.

You see, though our Byzantine brother was speaking to a Muslim, he knows well that they aren't the only ones with a juvenile understanding of the Divine. Many Americans conceive of God in the same way because five hundred years ago the Protestants who eventually founded this nation changed the Church's timeless teaching on the Holy Eucharist. In offering us His Body and Blood, Jesus has given us the medicine we need to cure our souls and the intimate companionship with God we all long for. In

making the sacrament a mere symbol with no objective power to heal or comfort, Protestantism deprived untold millions of the relationship with God that Jesus came among us to establish.

Jesus was reduced to a lawgiver who gave His followers a commandment to observe a memorial without any inherent meaning, without any inherent power, without any inherent purpose – other than perhaps to get us to remember all the other commands He gave us. No wonder so many Protestants only have communion three or four times a year; according to their own theology Jesus gave them a command to do something that doesn't make any sense! In the end, they all fudge the law in order to remain true to it. Why do Protestants now accept what the Scriptures and Tradition have so plainly prohibited? Because in dispensing with the Eucharist as it is described in today's Gospel, they lack the means to the divinization God wills for us. They lack the means to abide with Jesus, to be so close to Him that we have the strength to do what on our own we are too weak to accomplish. "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." We need God's life to be like God, and without it we'll eventually be reduced to making excuses for why we've failed to approximate our Lord's perfection. Indeed, without the Holy Eucharist we will be reduced to thinking perfection isn't even possible, and we'll have to imagine a god who makes excuses for us.

Moral laxity will increase in this country and across the globe until we recover our faith in the Holy Eucharist. Until people know that their destiny is to be like God, and Jesus has given us this capability in giving us His Body and Blood, we will settle for less. We'll settle for excuses. We'll settle for failure.

Don't settle. I was impressed by the courage of the Byzantine priest I met last night, who had the courage to share the Gospel in a nation where doing so could well have landed him in jail, or worse, if vigilantes had found what he was doing. This sort of threat doesn't hang over our heads, yet we are too often timid in confronting our neighbors' misconceptions about God and sharing the Good News that God loves us so much He wants to be one with us. The cure for this timidity is the same as what makes union with God possible. The Lord abides with us and we in Him. If you want to change the world, receive Holy Communion more often.