

Twelfth Sunday after Trinity
August 23, 2015
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
John 6:60-69

The Sacrament of Holy Matrimony is profoundly Eucharistic, and our lessons from Scripture today allow us to see how closely related are these two means by which the Lord bestows grace upon the faithful on a daily basis.

For the past several weeks we have been making our way through the Eucharistic discourse in the Gospel according to St. John, chapter six. Several times the people wonder how Jesus can give us His flesh to eat and His blood to drink, and today we receive an answer. Jesus says, "What if you were to see the Son of man ascending where he was before? It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh is of no avail." Jesus here makes reference to His ascension into heaven after His resurrection from the dead. In other words, the flesh and blood He will give us to consume are not of the temporal sort, but of an eternal nature. That is, when we receive our Lord's Body and Blood, we are receiving the resurrected Lord, the One who lives eternally, seated at the right hand of the Father. He can give us His flesh and blood to consume because He is God; and we will live forever, appropriating His life, because He lives forever.

We must remember, however, that the Holy Eucharist is not only a celebration of the life Jesus lives forever, interceding for us before the Throne of Grace. The Holy Eucharist is also a memorial of our Lord's death at the hands of sinful men. When we receive the Holy Eucharist, we simultaneously celebrate the life we live because our Lord rose from the dead, *and* we lament the sins we've committed, for which He died to redeem us. We receive Holy Communion in both joy and sorrow.

We see that in dying upon the cross for our salvation and in giving us His resurrected Body and Blood in Holy Communion, Jesus both gave a hundred per cent of Himself to us and continues to give a hundred per cent of Himself for us. What we see in the Holy Eucharistic is the complete donation of self that issues in life for the world. We are able to receive His all because Jesus gave His all; so we thank the Lord both for His life and His death.

How has the Church responded to the Lord's complete gift of self? Well, very simply, she has poured herself out for Him. The lives of the saints are the Church's witness that we have received with grateful hearts the Lord's gift of Himself, and we desire to requite that love with a holistic love of our own. Having been loved, we want to love in return.

St. Peter, our first Pope, is a prime example of this principle. When I was in Rome nearly eight years ago, I took the Scavi Tour beneath the world's most famous basilica, St. Peter's in Vatican City. There, in the midst of an ancient cemetery, I saw with my own eyes both St. Peter's grave and his bones. The only bones completely missing are those of his feet. In his great love for Jesus he did not think himself worthy of being crucified in the same manner as our Lord, so he asked to be crucified upside down when the time of his martyrdom had come under Emperor Nero. When the Christians of Rome went to recover his body, they had to steal it quickly from Nero's cross. Where normally to get a body down fast they would cut off the hands and let gravity do the rest, with St. Peter they cut off his feet; and to this day we have the relics that demonstrate his complete gift of self.

The Lord gives one hundred per cent. With St. Peter, we give one hundred per cent back. In our Epistle today, St. Paul says that this exchange is our model for our marriages. He says, “For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the Church.” Just as Jesus poured Himself out for His Bride, the Church, and the Church responds in kind by pouring herself out for her Bridegroom Jesus, so Christian husbands are to pour themselves out for their wives and their wives are to respond with the like gift of self. That the man stands in the place of Jesus, initiating love for the good of his bride, and the woman stands in the place of the Church, responding with love of her own—this is reflected in the marriage rite itself. At every Catholic wedding the man makes his vow first, and the woman responds with the same promises.

That one-flesh union begins with the uniting of the man’s and woman’s hearts and minds, a pledge to work in fidelity for the salvation of the other until they are parted by death. Indeed, husbands and wives may well be called to lay down their lives for each other, and countless members of our Lord’s Body have done just that over the past 2,000 years. This complete gift of self, however, finds its greatest and most sublime expression when spouses give their bodies to each other, from which new life proceeds, and “one flesh” is realized in a corporeal way. Jesus’ complete gift of self and the Church’s response, manifest every time we offer the Holy Mass, issues in life for the world. So, too, when a husband and wife offer themselves completely to each other, this issues in life for the world, as with God’s help they conceive children.

Jesus gave a hundred percent of Himself, and the Church responds in kind. If our marriages are to be even a faint approximation of the love between Christ and His Church, then Catholic spouses must give a hundred per cent of themselves to each other at all times, including, of course, within the context of a marriage’s corporeal expression, the marital act. To withhold one’s fertility from one’s spouse, to whom we’ve pledged our very lives, is to fall tremendously short of the model Jesus and the Church have provided us in the marriage supper of the lamb. To withhold one’s fertility is obviously failing to give one hundred per cent of oneself and thus does not then reflect the magnitude of the love Jesus has for the Church *or* that the Church has for Jesus.

Do you know who continues to uphold this teaching? Do you know what is the only institution on earth that continues to insist upon the reality that our marriages should always, in every way, be a reflection of the love between Christ and His Church? Only the Catholic Church.

Perhaps you know I’m a convert to the Faith. Eleven years ago when I finally realized at age thirty-three what marriage is supposed to represent, what I’ve briefly tried to explain here today, I looked around and found myself standing in the shoes of St. Peter. The Lord asked me, “Will you now at last come home to the Church of your ancestors—the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church?” No one else taught the whole truth anymore, so I could think of only one response: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.”