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“O TASTE AND SEE THE GOODNESS OF THE LORD” (Ps 34:8)

“I am the living bread. No one who comes to me shall ever be hungry.” These are the words of Jesus to His disciples and to us in John’s Gospel. Christ’s earlier words warn us, “You should not be working for perishable food. But for food that remains unto life eternal, food which the Son of Man will give you” (6:35, 27).

Jesus talks to us in wholly human terms, but what he offers us is so beyond our comprehension that he has to repeat it. “I am the bread of life...This is the bread that comes down from heaven, for one to eat and never die...Whoever eats this bread, will live forever. The bread I will give is my flesh for the life of the world. (48-51). Hearing these words, the Jews quarreled among themselves. And indeed there has been ongoing quarreling about what Jesus said in these passages ever since.

How can we understand Him when He tells us, “My flesh is real food”—not simply a symbol of food, but real food- “and my blood real drink” (55); the one who feeds on this bread shall live forever” (58)? How close is this union of my flesh with the flesh of Jesus? He tells me, “Just as the Father who has life, sent me and I have life because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will have life because of Me” (57).

Do we go over these words and try to unlock their meaning? Yes, we repeat them with wonder as we are drawn into their mystery. We think about the guarantees Jesus gives us—assurances that astonished his listeners. “I solemnly assure you my Father gives you the real heavenly bread... (which) gives life to the world “ (Jn 6: 32,33). Only faith can takes us into these regions where our understanding is overwhelmed. If it were all clear to our human vision, we would have no need of faith. When we believe in Jesus, we move into darkness, because what faith reaches out to is brightness so dazzling that it overcomes the capacities of our minds.

How many people want a God on their own terms? A God who functions in clear-cut ways where we nod our heads and say, “Well, that makes sense.” What kind of sense? Sense according to our judgment. The awesomeness is gone. Then we have a God whose measurements approximate our own. No challenge. No mystery. But the God we find in Jesus Christ leads us always into deeper wonder. We have a God in Jesus Christ Who makes us exclaim, “Ah!” because no human word can express our response. And in dealing with our God, this “Ah!” is always enlarging itself into a more marveling “Ah!”

I meet You, Jesus, as One who is inviting me to heights I cannot fathom as I look up to them from the solid earth I stand on. At the same time, I see that you have made a sure path for me to reach these transcendent peaks. Faith is that path. You come to me as food and drink. I could never have foreseen that God would choose such means to reach me.

And yet how truly, Jesus, You contact me on the human level when You touch me in my very physical nature. You promise me nourishment. Food keeps me alive. It helps my body develop, to maintain its vigor, to heal when sickness assails it. The heavenly food which You promise, food which is your very Self, gives me spiritual sustenance by way of bread baked with human hands and wine pressed from grapes. This food enables me to grow spiritually. It heals my sinfulness, energizes me for virtue, nurtures my awareness of God.

Transubstantiation may seem like a heavy term. This is a theological word that had its beginning in the twelfth century. It denotes what takes place in the priestly consecration of earthly elements that then take on a whole new being. The substance of bread and the substance of wine are changed in their very essence to become body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ. Our senses do not perceive the difference. Eyes see, fingers touch, our tongues taste only bread and wine. But the reality has been radically transformed. We eat this bread and drink from this cup, and our flesh is united to Christ's in His glorified body.

We enter into communion with the Incarnate Victim who became human, died for us, and rose in resurrection splendor. Teresa of Avila, a very down-to-earth mystic, declared, "Beneath that bread He is easy to deal with." She is telling us that we have a Savior who approaches us where we are. She says, "If when He went about in the world, the mere touch of His robes cured the sick, why doubt, if we have faith, that miracles will be worked while He is within us and that He will give what we ask of Him, since He is in our house." She urges us to use the time after communion to pay attention to our Guest and assures us Christ "is not accustomed to paying poorly for His lodging if the hospitality is good" (Way of Perfection, ch 34, #8,9).

Holy Communion gives us a pledge of eternal beatitude. We reach back to an earthly Redeemer who said, "Do this in memory of me." So we remember His past, the more than three decades of Jesus' short life. We stretch forward to the future, when even our physical nature will participate in the glory that awaits us.

We look ahead to the heavenly banquet and already taste sacramentally what awaits us in eternal fullness. We unite with all others who are part of the mystical body of Christ. Sharing His life, we share theirs. Time itself is transcended at the moment of eucharistic communion to allow us actually to take part in what was, what is, and what will be.

Jesus, Son of God and Son of Mary, what earthly taste can compare with the sweetness of the table you have prepared for me? In receiving this food which is Yourself, I am joined to the Father and newly empowered in the Holy Spirit. Let me go forth from this celestial feast to take on what the hours hold for me. I walk in the aura of the Three Divine Persons Who bend over my earthly passage. I meet each challenge with the nourishment you have provided for my lips in Holy Communion. I am strengthened to follow the path God has laid out for me in the luminous darkness of faith.

The Carmelite poet John of the Cross sings, **“The eternal source hides in the Living Bread/ That we with life eternal may be fed/ Though it be night./ Here to all creatures it is crying hark!/That they should drink their fill though in the dark,/For it is night./This living fount which is to me so dear/Within the bread of life I see it clear/Though it be night.”**

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