

“I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall be ever in my mouth.”

Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

August 16, 2015

*Pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady of the Prairies
Carmelites Field Mass
Wahpeton, ND*

“I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall be ever in my mouth.” With these words of the psalmist, we give praise to God once again for the occasion of this annual pilgrimage. As you know, this pilgrimage to the Carmel of Mary is an occasion to honor our Blessed Mother on this Sunday after the Solemnity of her Assumption. During these last days of summer and the beginning of harvest season, it is also a moment of grace for us to thank God for his bounty and the fruits of his earth. And of course, it is also an occasion for us to express our support and love for our beloved Carmelite Sisters, who invite us to make this pilgrimage here at their beautiful monastery. This is a day to “taste and see the goodness of the Lord,” not only the good fruits of the land, but also the even greater goodness of sharing in God’s divine life.

A few weeks ago, we heard from the Gospel of John the miracle of the loaves and the fish. This was obviously a sign of Christ’s power to provide for his people, a sign of his compassion and the abundance of his love. Later, Jesus speaks to the multitude about what they’ve received, and he explains to them that he is the true bread of life, the bread that came down from heaven. He tells them, “I am the bread of life... Whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.”

But now, in the climax of this discourse, Jesus unfolds the full significance of this sign. He will give them bread from heaven, food from heaven that will always satisfy them, and the food he will give will be himself. Jesus foretells the gift of the Eucharist that he will give to the Church, and he makes clear how important this “living bread” will be. What he will give to them is no longer just bread, physical food that feeds the body. The bread he will give is his flesh for the life of the world. He even uses graphic terms to make sure they understand: he will give them his flesh to eat and his blood to drink.

One could find this image repulsive, and some people in the crowd did. Or, one could realize that Jesus is giving us his very life. To partake of his sacrifice is to partake of his divine life, and by partaking, consuming this flesh and blood of Jesus, under the appearances of bread and wine, we receive the gift of his life.

But why is this so important? Why did Jesus risk losing his followers over this? Jesus himself explains the meaning of what he will do. He makes clear that this gift has everything to do with our eternal destiny. He says, “Whoever eats this bread will live forever, and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.” This gift of his body and blood is the gift of life itself, and Jesus offers it to us. He offers himself, the supreme gift, the indispensable gift.

Because as he says, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day.” Jesus promises eternal life, and it comes from our partaking in his body and blood. He makes clear that we must partake in order to fully share in his life.

There are some who say the Eucharist is only a symbol that Jesus was using symbolic language as he described the gift that he would give. But there is nothing merely symbolic in the words that Jesus used. In fact, he became more challenging and emphatic as he continued, knowing that he would shock them and that some would not accept this. But Jesus does not soften his words or back away from what he has said. He says it again to drive the point home. The Eucharist is indispensable, and it is his real presence, the gift of his own life, his body and blood, soul and divinity. The truth that Jesus reveals in the Eucharist is so great that he will not retreat from it, even if some of his followers would leave him, and many did.

Perhaps the biggest mystery about the Eucharist is the mystery of divine love that moved Jesus to give such an intimate and effective gift to us. We certainly don’t deserve this gift. He opens heaven to us, and gives us the means to enter in. He does not leave us alone, because “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.” Through the Eucharist, we remain in him, we dwell in his presence, and he abides with us. What greater gift could we ask for? And all of this is because of God’s love for us. The Eucharist is truly and beautifully a sacrament of the love of God.

But this is a love that calls for a response. If Jesus gives himself to us in this way through the Eucharist, then we must give ourselves in love to him. If we truly do remain in him through the communion of the Eucharist, then how can we do anything but love him? So every time we receive this love in the Eucharist, we should ask what return we have made for this love. How do I love him back?

As always, this must mean a life of love and charity towards others, especially those in need, whether materially or spiritually. To the poor, the sick, the elderly, the homeless, the lonely, the neglected, Jesus sends us as apostles of love and compassion. To receive the Eucharist means we must share this love of Christ, this truth of Christ’s love with others. The Eucharist must send us out, in love, to our neighbor. It should move us to be of service and to give witness to our neighbor of the gift of life and mercy that we have received. So, today as we receive Christ in the Eucharist, may he strengthen us to live our Christian lives with fidelity and joy. May it enable us to love Jesus now so we can love him forever in eternity, just as he promised.