

Daniel's reflection for week beginning 6th February – The Hungry Heart

(1st of two reflections on Eucharist given at retreats)

People grow in faith through their experiences - and our experiences belong to the flesh. think then, for instance, of your own favourite daily bread – the touch of it, the smell of it, the taste of it. Think of the real red wine, your favourite wine, swirling it, sniffing it, and savouring it. Think of human flesh, your own beloved flesh and that of others, and of all the experiences and sensations it brings you.

Bread, wine and flesh are very earthy words. They are carnal and physical. There is nothing ethereal or otherworldly about them. Yet wonderfully, these are precisely the substances and realities that God has become- first in creation, then in Jesus, and now in the Eucharist. In the great hunger Patrick Kavanagh wrote that, 'in a crumb of bread the whole mystery is.'

The utter humanising of God in flesh, bread and wine, sounds shocking. No other religion talks about its God in this incarnational and Eucharistic way. We are not saved by doctrines, scriptures, religions, pilgrimages and rituals. God comes to feed us- people of the flesh- in the earthy and unique intimacy of food. And we do not just look at it and adore it. We eat and drink and touch it.

Divine love takes the shape of the very stuff of our essential, sensual and rawest selves. Or rather it reveals that this was always its chosen shape. Somewhere deeply hidden with others we have always known that- the real name of our true self. But, because we congenitally forget our astonishing identity, we need constant and profound reminding of it.

The Mass is Incarnation in miniature. And when we sit at the table of truth, immediately after receiving Holy Communion, we hear the astonishing assurance: 'I am now the living food of your flesh. I am the vibrant wine of your energy, the power within you come. In me you are made complete, and you are invincible even in your darkest winter. My divinity has become flesh of your flesh, love of your love. And when your heart is full, it will overflow into the hearts of the hungry, bringing peace and hope.'

In his 'We Awaken In Christ's Body', Saint Simeon, the New Theologian, reflects on the miracle of communion, '... and to everything that is hurt in us, everything that seemed to us dark, harsh, shameful, maimed, ugly, irreparably damaged, is in Him transformed and recognised as whole, as lovely, and radiant in his light. We awaken as the beloved in every last part of our body.'

These infinitely, intimate experiences of our sacred senses are central. They purify and confirm our greatest potential for recognising God's bread in every bread, God's incarnate body in every human body, God's own need in every need. And we do not just receive the holy bread, Pope John Paul the second reminded us in *Ecclesia Eucharistia*, we become it. And we become it not just for ourselves- we become it for compassionate service of others. What is most personal is most universal for stop we could become it to light the way for others. 'Dear God, wrote St. John Henry Newman,' help me to spread your beauty everywhere I go today.'

That is why nothing or nobody has the power to stop us from receiving Holy Communion- once we hunger

for it. Countless Catholics, for one reason or another, consider themselves unworthy to receive at Mass. Or they are told they are unworthy. But the Gospels tell them a different story- that God is the freely offered food for everyone without exception; all we have to do is to provide the hunger. 'Christ is the bread', wrote Saint Augustine, 'awaiting hunger'.

When we make the Eucharistic meal into anything else, something, for example, to define membership, we are on the verge of sinning against the incarnation. 'Too often we use the Eucharist to separate who's in from who's out', writes Richard Rohr, 'who's worthy from who's unworthy, instead of to declare that all of us are radically unworthy, and worthiness is not even the issue. The issue is about surrender and hunger. And more often, surrendered sinners are much more hungry than "saints".'

We are all, in fact, forgiven sinners, hungry daughters and sons of a Mother-God who embraces us, nourishes us, gathers of around her open table of divine-human love and then, delightedly, offers herself to everyone of us without exception. God's extraordinary desire for us has never ever, because of a fall- original or personal, dimmed or faded in the intensity of its burning. It is in the ordinariness, accessibility and blessing of bread that this ravishing love Incarnate is experienced and celebrated.

And it is the *sacramentality* of the celebration that reveals a most comforting truth- in all our daily efforts to become human and loving Eucharistic grace is always surrounding us, enfolding us, empowering us and consecrating us.

RS. Thomas ended his poem *The Moor* with these sublime words

*... I walked on,
simple and poor, while the air crumbled
and broke on me generously as bread.'*