

Wisdom and Scandal in the Eucharist

Twentieth Sunday of Ordinary Time

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Christ the King (8/18/18), Our Lady of Dallas (8/19/18)

Prv 9:1-6; Eph 5:15-20; Jn 6:51-58

There is great peace in the first reading, which promises us that our universe and life stand within the “house” of Wisdom. We, along with all things, belong to Wisdom – to harmony, meaning and beauty. Wisdom, manifest in the limitless intelligibility of the world (no matter how microscopically or astronomically we look, we see it everywhere), is everywhere set before us to enjoy. If there is one thing that science continues to confirm, it is that all things have been made in Wisdom: rationality is “explained” only by more rationality – the deeper we dive into space and the further back we go in time, we continue to journey on the immense ocean of rationality. I think one of the best ‘proofs’ for God’s existence is the insight expressed in Ps 104:24: “How many are your works, O Lord! In wisdom you have made them *all!*” Modern scientific atheism has nothing to do with what we discover and everything to do with what we can forget: the beauty, harmony and rationality of all existence cannot be taken for granted. They can only be accounted for by a beautiful mind transcending *all* things. God gave us reason to grasp everything that falls within the horizon of his creation; and he gave us faith to transcend those horizons and taste some insight into his uncreated life. The Wisdom behind all things invites us to possess it: “Come, eat of my food, and drink of the wine I have mixed! Forsake foolishness that you may live; advance in the way of understanding!” (Prv 9:1-6).

In the second reading, St. Paul encourages us to accept this invitation to live with Wisdom, “making the most of the opportunity” and understanding “the will of the Lord” (Eph 5:15-20). The beauty and rationality of existence extend not only to the natural world of law and instinct; they reach into our lives and the history of our freedom as individuals and as a community. Unique in all creation, we can participate freely in Wisdom. We can feed on it consciously. Our lives can be integrated into the comprehensive, beautiful meaning that underlies all existence. So, set aside every “drunkenness” and “debauchery” (cf. Eph 5:18) that would cloud your mind – such as incapacitating alcohol and substance abuse; the stubborn sophistry of our attempts to rationalize our vices; our stupid indifference to the matters of God and of our own spiritual hearts; our lazy efforts to understand our faith and the teachings of the Church; or our mind-numbing submission to the endless distractions from reality (from the precious person and moment before us), which plague us through our phones, clickbait, video games and dubious forms of entertainment. Let us set these things aside and feed on Wisdom.

In the gospel for today, Jesus again invites us to eat, to share in this Wisdom that he is, the Wisdom that spans “the world from end to end mightily” to govern all things well (Wis 8:1). In Christ Wisdom is most fully revealed. In him we see the beauty and rationality binding everything together. This Wisdom is the mystery of his Body “given up” in love for his Father and for all of us. The created world is meant to be a variegated participation in the incarnate Son – that is, in the bodily life and love of God. God created. Why? To share his life of love. “Godliness” involves such free and playful generosity. And in the incarnate Son of God (who has a real human body) the orders of natural law, animal instinct and human freedom are all filled in their own ways with divine life. Christ carried his physical elements, animal biology and human freedom to their apex on his cross of love. But this divine life of love was not meant to be locked up in the space and time of a single body – God provided for all time and space through the mystical extension of this Body in the Eucharist.

In the Eucharist, which we celebrate at mass, God draws us into himself, incorporating our lives into his Body and setting them within his comprehensive Wisdom. Our lives, every moment, find meaning here, as every Sunday we take our week and place it on the altar, praising God for the invitation of Wisdom and praying, ‘Take our joys and sorrows and graft them onto the mystery of your Body, a mystery of suffering and death leading to the delights of eternal love. Give us this food: let us live from the promise that our every day is beautiful and meaningful because it is part of the incarnate love of God.’

I would love to stop here, but I cannot. After the news this week, we need to address the report detailing the awful history of sexual abuse in six Pennsylvania dioceses. I don’t feel I have solutions (but I find the statements by Cardinal Daniel [DiNardo](#) and Bishop Robert [Barron](#) to be constructive, and I recommend looking them up on the internet especially if you need to channel your anger toward something positive). Nevertheless, I think it is important for us to face reality and to grieve together. When I read these articles, or whenever the reporter begins to descend into their horrifying details (which cannot be repeated here in an audience of such diverse age and temperament), I am tempted to stop. We cannot un-read or un-hear such things, and they remain in our memory, polluting our imagination and our experience of the world. But before I close the internet window or put down the paper, I hear Jesus asking me to “stay awake” with him for this hour in the garden of his agony (Mt 26:40). Let us not spare ourselves a participation in his pain, in the pain of his body – in all its members. Let us grieve and meditate together on this history in the light of the Eucharist.

On a flight from Tel Aviv to Rome, [Pope Francis](#) said: *“When a priest commits abuse, he betrays the Lord’s body. A priest must guide children towards sainthood. And the child trusts him. But instead, he abuses him or her. This is very serious. It’s like celebrating a black mass! Instead of steering him or her towards the sainthood you create a problem that will stay with him or her for all of his or her life.”* When we read the details of this history of sexual abuse, we can easily see how right it is to compare it to a black mass. There is such a gross, outright and satanic

inversion at work here, as the men and the symbols in which we all – me too, by the way – place so much trust are twisted into their opposites: shepherds turned into wolves, instruments of prayer turned into weapons of psychological and physical torture. The details are so disgusting. The pain is unimaginable – unimaginable, of course, only by those among us who have not suffered it. Jesus exhorts us all to become open, curious, enthusiastic and trusting like children to enter the kingdom of God (cf. Mt 18:2-4). To open ourselves to the divine Wisdom that embraces all things we must be humble, brave and docile. And so, Jesus praises the Father for hiding his wisdom from the proudly learned and revealing it only to “the childlike” (Mt 11:25; Lk 10:21). But who wants to be trusting today? Is evangelical simplicity, openness and docility – the beautiful disposition of a child – still possible? Can we afford the price of faith? Is it safe to become like a child? Is anyone in control?

Could St. Paul have ever imagined the depth of “debauchery” he decries in our second reading (cf. Eph 5:15-20)? When he tells us to “watch carefully how you live” and to be “wise” in these days of “evil” – could he have seen just how perverted can be the foolishness that opposes itself to the divine Wisdom? When Jesus chided his disciples for preventing the children from approaching him (cf. Mt 19:13-15), could any of them have even imagined the kinds of obstacles some of their successors might become? I am sure that St. Paul and the disciples would be as appalled as we are at the depravity of this evil; and that it would test their faith as it tests our own. But I believe there is one who is not surprised, one who is not caught off guard by every new revelation in this sordid history of scandal. Jesus knew, and he still had the strength to carry out the will of his Father. Let us never forget that it was on the very “night that he was betrayed” that he took bread to give us his Body. No one more aware of evil ever made himself more vulnerable, as he handed his Body over to the Church. And he certainly suffered for his trust: betrayal, denial and abandonment by those he had chosen to be with him. And he continues to suffer through the betrayals of his mystical Body in history. But the Father did not leave him alone, and neither will he leave alone anyone else who trusts in him.

As I was reading the gospels this week, I realized something about the Parable of the Lost Sheep. We normally read it as a reflection of God’s love for the lost sinner. The divine shepherd leaves the ninety-nine righteous to search for that one lost sinner. For the first time, as I read the passage this week with the abuse crisis on my mind, I realized this parable is about something else (though it certainly admits the usual reading as well). It comes in connection with Jesus’ words about children. First, he tells the disciples that the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven is one who “humbles himself like this child” (Mt 18:4). Then he identifies himself with the child: “And whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me” (Mt 18:5).¹ Then he gives us a stern warning: “Whoever causes these *little ones* who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

¹ Just like we meet Christ in the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick and imprisoned (cf. Mt 25:31-46), we meet him also in children.

Woe to the world because of things that cause sin! Such things must come, but woe to the one through whom they come!” (Mt 18:6-7).

Only then does he introduce the Parable of the Lost Sheep, and he does so again by referring to the little ones: “See that you do not despise *one* of these *little ones*, for I say to you that their angels in heaven always look upon the face of my heavenly Father. What is your opinion? If a man has a hundred sheep and *one* of them goes astray...” (Mt 18:10-12). And he concludes the parable saying, “In just the same way, it is not the will of your heavenly Father that *one* of these *little ones* be lost.” (Mt 18:14).

This parable is about children, about the love the divine shepherd has for each *one* of them. And that God will search each *one* out should he or she become lost by our indifference and by our crimes. We can fail each other – so easily and often. And we can fail our children and every noble soul who still has the strength to become a child in faith. But God does not fail. God cannot fail. He searches for every *one* of us to be our true shepherd and bring us home no matter where the twists of life have brought us. That is the gift he promises in the Eucharist: his Body betrayed and broken will rise again to live forever, and the life of this Body – this expression of self-giving and eternal love – is meant to reach every *one* of his flock, from the ninety-nine to the one. His is a wounded body. Christ made no secret of that. He gave us this Body *on the night he was betrayed*. He put his mystical Body into the hands of those who betrayed and abandoned him. And when he rose again he still bore the wounds in his Body. But after the resurrection, his wounds – the awful marks of our shame – were shining with glory, with the victory of God. As we endure this abuse crisis and work for its resolution, let us do so in faith. Let us risk once again to live as children in this world. As we pray and work tirelessly for an end to the causes behind these scandals, let us continue to eat the flesh of the Son of Man, no matter how battered it becomes. Let us not balk at Christ’s suffering, as Peter once did before he rebuked him (cf. Mt 16:21-23). Our angels always look upon God, and no matter how wounded Christ becomes we have his promise: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. [...] Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so the man who feeds on me will have life because of me.” May God deliver the members of his Son who have suffered from abuse. And may he have mercy on us all.