

I don't think so much about my first year of college, but today's Gospel reminded me. At no other time in my life have I been both so hungry and so gluttonous. The university required all freshmen to sign up for a meal plan that was overkill for almost everybody. I did my best to not let the plan go to waste, but let me tell you, scarfing down two grilled cheese sandwiches, half a plate of fries, and a chocolate shake in the wee hours of a Tuesday morning is not going to do anyone any favors in the long run. It wasn't so much the bread of life as the grease of death that was transforming me. The only way it could have been worse would have been if a dietary fanatic had come up to me and scolded, "you are what you eat."

The hunger was more insidious. Like most college students, I experimented with many things, including not going to church. But I thought I had my spiritual life covered, as I was going to meetings of a Christian student group during the week. It felt great at first. They were very welcoming and I made a lot of good friends there. But as time went on, something just didn't feel right. I couldn't put my finger on it at the time. I gradually identified points of intellectual disagreement with the group, but I don't expect to agree with every single thing a group, or an individual believes. It took me much longer to identify the spiritual issue that was making me feel unfulfilled: the group had a tragic lack of sacramentality.

On the most basic level, this was a failure to celebrate any of the sacraments. But they weren't trying to be a church, so I can't fault them for that. Lying deeper, however, was the attitude, the mindset, the outlook, if you will. There was no engagement with mystery, no sense of the holy permeating the material world. They might have talked about God being active in their lives and in the world, but they dwelt in the old false dichotomy between matter and spirit. Tragically, they did not embrace the gift of our heritage of matter made holy, matter used by a God who calls creation good. There were words and opinions and feelings, but precious little transcendence or grace. Bread, in this worldview, was little more than raw material for so many grilled cheese sandwiches. And yet, sacramentality was so very near.

There's nothing new about being oblivious to sacramentality; it's an ancient and popular tradition. At least as old as the feeding of the great crowd and their utter failure to grasp the significance of what had happened, as we see in today's Gospel. Jesus had miraculously fed a great crowd that had gathered to hear him, on the strength of his reputation as a healer. By this miracle, Jesus had stepped into the role of Moses, the greatest Hebrew prophet, who had led the Israelites during their four-decade sojourn in the desert, interceding with God on their behalf, in order that all might be fed. Jesus had established himself as an apocalyptic figure, for according to prophecy, such a miraculous feeding would be a sign of the end times approaching. In feeding the people

Jesus had foreshadowed the institution of the Eucharist and his own death and resurrection. He had reminded them of who God is, what God had done for their ancestors, and what the Kingdom of God is like. But was anyone thinking of this at the time? No. They simply wanted another free meal.

So while Jesus wanted to clear up the people's understanding of his identity, and lead them to look beyond the literal food, he understood the urgency and distraction of simply not knowing where one's next meal will come from. When we see him eating in the Gospels, Jesus was more often a guest than a host. And so he knows exactly why the crowd continues to follow him. He has compassion for their insecurity. "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves."

He also had compassion for their mistaken mindset and saw an opportunity, a teachable moment. Jesus pointed out a few key differences between the manna in the desert and the feeding of the crowd. First, the manna came from God, not Moses. Obvious, but easy to overlook. Second, the manna fed some people, for a time, who died anyway before reaching the promised land, but God gives — present tense — something more substantial, something truly powerful, "bread" which gives life not to a limited group, but "to the world." Now Jesus really had their attention. They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."

Still they focused on the food, not the strange man who offers it, not the strange God he claims to work for. Jesus was undeterred. Perhaps his strategy was to say something so mysterious, so baffling, so clearly spiritual that there could be no possible literal reading of the text, which would only confuse his audience. Or perhaps Jesus realized that he was simply not meant to be widely understood during his public ministry. Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Only Jesus can satisfy our deepest hunger, the place in each of us that cannot be filled with money, power, or French fries. Encounter with Jesus, not just talking about Jesus. Only he can sustain us every moment of every day, every high and every low. Only his death redeems us. Only his resurrection gives us eternal life. Only his presence before Creation makes all Creation worthy to contain his grace.

It is indeed God's will that we come, see, believe, and yes, eat. When we do so in the Eucharist, we act with both humility and boldness. Humility, because we recognize our need for God's grace and we come to accept whatever God gives us. And boldness, because although God veils his presence in the Eucharist to our senses, God has

revealed the fullness of his glory and power and love for us in Jesus.

For just as Jesus was taken, blessed, broken, and shared once for all humanity, so also does every priest take, bless, break, and give the bread that becomes the Bread of Life, the same body of Christ. And just as the body of Christ was restored to life, so too does the food of communion give life to the world. It gives more sustenance, carries more weight, than even the heaviest college cafeteria food. I wanted to say, the secret ingredient is Jesus, but it's no secret — he told us plainly that this bread *is* his body, this wine *is* his blood.

All the sacraments sustain the whole church, and transform the individuals who receive them. The Eucharist gives us the grace of Christ whenever we receive it. Just being within sight of the Eucharist gives us a precious opportunity to focus on Jesus and reconnect with him in deep prayer. That's another reason, besides simply honoring Jesus, why I suggest standing or kneeling during the distribution of communion: when I'm in the pews, I find it helps me stay in the right mindset.

God has chosen to use earthly materials to convey a spiritual gift, and renew the gift of Christ to the church. The spiritual renewal we receive through the Eucharist will be the bread for our journey of spreading the good news of God's boundless love in both word and deed. The grace we receive in the Eucharist reminds us that we are beloved and ought to love one another. Its power transforms us from within. Christians can thank God that we are what we eat.

In college, I learned the hard way that what we consume changes us. I invite you to consider, and pray about, how Jesus might change you, for the Eucharist makes us like the Christ we receive.