

Homily
St. Ann Novena, Day 7
Tuesday of the 15th Week in OT
July 23, 2024

The philosophy students came to class prepared for their in-class, open-book, open-notes final exam. The professor set a simple wooden chair on his desk and said, "Prove to me this chair doesn't exist." The students were ready with their blank pages and raised pencils when they noticed one student already packing his bag with his paper in hand. He handed his paper to the professor and exited the room. They were all astonished and assumed he had just given up. A week later, the grades were posted and they noticed he received the only "A" with his two-word answer, "What chair?"

Hi! I'm Scott. I'm still at St. Paul Parish in Florence and this is the eighth time I've had the honor of presenting at the St. Ann Novena. I was very excited when Fr. Aby gave me tonight's topic, "Real Presence vs Symbolism." I'm passionate about the Eucharist and all that our Lord and Savior has done and is doing for us. At the same time, I realize what a serious topic this is, especially given so many Christians, including many Catholics, don't believe in the Real Presence.

We often say, "seeing is believing." We can justify in our minds that what we can't see doesn't exist, but is that logical? We can't see air, but we all breathe. We can't see gravity, but we all stay grounded. I can't see what my wife is thinking, but I know whatever it is, she's right and I'm wrong.

And sometimes we refuse to see what is right in front of us, as our philosophy student suggests to his professor. Whether we close our eyes or ignore what is right there, we allow our prejudices and biases to cloud or block our judgement.

We come to Mass to be with Jesus. We listen to His Word proclaimed in Sacred Scripture. We come forward to receive Jesus, Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity in the Holy Eucharist. We become one with Jesus and one with each other, then we are sent into the world to be Christ for the world, proclaiming the Good News of Salvation, by what we say, how we act, and even with our smile.

But is Jesus truly present in the Blessed Sacrament or is this just a symbol of Jesus? Do we 'symbolically' receive Jesus and 'symbolically' become one with each other? Is that little piece of bread truly the flesh of Jesus? Is that cup of wine truly the blood of Jesus? Are we deluding ourselves or can we trust in the Word of God?

A symbol is a representation of something we know, such as a picture of a loved one, which isn't actually our loved one, or our flag, which symbolizes our unity as individual states remembering the original thirteen colonies and how far we've come. A symbol isn't the actual thing that it represents. But it does remind us of that thing.

The crucifix isn't actually Jesus, but it reminds us of His Passion, His giving of Himself to His Father for all our sins, destroying death and restoring life. These statues all around us aren't actually the people they resemble but help us remember those we honor and venerate. These stained-glass windows tell us stories, but aren't the actual story come to life.

What about the Eucharist? Is this truly Jesus or is it just a symbol? If it is only a symbol, why do we worship it? If it only represents Jesus, why do we take such great care of even the crumbs in the sacred vessels?

If it is truly Jesus, how do we know? Jesus says so. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus says, "this is my body" (Mark 14:22b) and "This is my blood" (Mark 14:24b). In His Bread of Life Discourse, He also said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world." John 6:51. He doubles and then triples down, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him." John 6:54-56.

Jesus didn't stutter; Jesus didn't mumble; Jesus said in direct terms that we must eat His Flesh. The verb used in these verses is not the classical Greek verb used for a human eating a little piece of meat, but that of an animal ripping and tearing flesh; to munch or gnaw. There's nothing symbolic about this method of eating; we are meant to devour the Flesh of Jesus. Just as Jesus hungers to be with us, just as He gave His flesh for our salvation, just as a bridegroom craves to be with his bride on their wedding night, we, the Body of Christ, the Bride, are to devour our Bridegroom, our Lord and Savior. This is the consummation of the Wedding Feast of the Lamb!

And what of His Blood? In Jewish culture, drinking blood was taboo because blood was considered the essence of life and belonged to God. The Book of Leviticus states, "You shall not drink the blood of any animal or any creature." Blood was also carefully disposed of and physical contact with it was restricted. So Jesus in telling us to drink His Blood was for us to take His life essence. Jesus freely offers to us His divinity, His divine life essence. We truly do eat and drink the Body and Blood of our fully human and fully divine Lord. We become one with Him, one with His Body and Blood, one with His Soul and Divinity.

In the Old Testament, God instructed Moses to build the Arc of the Covenant and keep it in the Holy of Holies. The very Word of God was hidden, veiled, and only accessible to the high priest, and then only once a year on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Everyone knew it was there, but it was not open to just anyone. Jesus, the Word of God, in His incarnation, in His becoming one of us, flesh and blood, became the new Holy of Holies, the new and everlasting Covenant. Jesus, through the Sacraments, gives all of us a share in His priesthood, giving us access to that which is veiled, hidden, in the appearance of simple bread and wine, but not bread and wine at all; the very Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

We have many symbols to direct us to God. We have the crucifix that helps us remember the Passion of our Lord. We have the Easter Candle that is a symbol of the Light of Christ. We have the lamb, which symbolizes Christ's innocence and sacrifice. We have the dove, which symbolizes the Holy Spirit, representing peace and humility.

In today's Gospel, Jesus gives us the perfect example of true unity and true family. His mother and brothers are waiting for Him outside, yet He tells the crowd that all who do the will of His heavenly Father are His mother, brothers, and sisters; His family. This is only available through communion, through the authentic Sacramental reception of His Flesh and Blood as He commanded us. Will we accept this invitation?

Jesus meant no symbolism when He told His disciples to eat His Flesh and drink His Blood. Otherwise, He would have stopped those who left in disgust. He would have said, "Wait! I was just being symbolic." At the Last Supper, Jesus actually gives us His Body and Blood, forever commemorated at every Mass on every altar throughout the world, throughout all time, bringing us to that one event, that same sacrifice remembered right here, in a few moments, on this very altar. Jesus, veiled in the appearance of bread and wine, but truly and in every way, His sacrifice on Calvary, made present to us. His flesh, freely given; His blood poured out for us.

Our human senses betray us. Our eyes, ears, nose, fingers and tongue fail us. We sense bread, with its taste, texture, odor and sound. It looks like bread, but it isn't bread at all. St. Catherine of Siena, in *The Dialogue*, helps us understand what Jesus wants us to know. She says, "The eye can only see, the hand only touch, the white substance of the bread, and the taste can only taste the savor of the bread, so that the bodily sentiments are deceived; but the soul cannot be deceived in her sentiments unless she wish to be – that is, unless she let the light of the most holy faith be taken away from her by infidelity."

It is in faith that we believe. It is in faith that we know Jesus is truly present in this Holy Sacrament. It is Jesus that comes to us, out of His infinite love, with His adamant passion for us, coming only so far as we allow. He will not enter us without our permission. All we have to do is say, "No," and Jesus will respect our decision. Yet, if we say, "Amen," then our yes opens us to all of Jesus; His perfect humanity and His holy divinity. All this is ours, if only we have faith, if only we trust and believe. Jesus, I trust in You. Jesus, I believe in You. Jesus, I love You.