

Sunday, August 25, 2024

The Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist

11:00 am

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia, *Theologian in Residence*

on

John 6:56-69

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The Language of God

I belong to the generation of Italians who learnt French as foreign language at school and had very little exposure to English as a child. I did have English lessons in high school but was taught this language so poorly that I even developed a dislike for it at the time. So when I moved to Oxford in 1998 to start my doctoral studies I barely spoke a word of it. Thankfully, the lovely school of English I attended the first three months after I arrived in the UK changed all this. The teachers encouraged us to learn the language like a child does. We were not allowed to use a dictionary and were told not to translate words from our native languages. Instead, we played games, learnt songs, acted in plays, engaged in outdoor activities. The greatest temptation when you move to a new country is bond with people from your home country. I knew Italians living in the UK who even after years still struggled with English because they used to spend most of their time with each other! So I decided to stay away from my fellow Italians and make friends with English people – which given their proverbial reserved character is a challenge even when you have achieved fluency! It was hard but it worked. The idea is that rather than by toiling on dictionaries and grammars you learn by listening, watching, interacting with other people. It is what we call full-immersion.

Now I can say that more than the study of theology, it is this experience that helps me to understand the meaning of the word ‘sacramental’.

Usually when we say that the Eucharist is a ‘sacrament’ we refer to this curious thing we do every Sunday here at mass: shortly you will stand in a line, come to the front and receive a little piece of bread and a sip of wine. And yet as the priests hand them to you, they will not say to you “Here is a little piece of bread” or “here is a little sip of wine” – instead you will hear them saying: “The Body of Christ” and “The Blood of Christ”. And even if all you see with your eyes, feel in your hand, taste with your tongue is indeed bread and wine, you say “Amen”, that is “Yes, I do believe that what I am eating and drinking is the body and blood of Christ”.

Indeed, Jesus abides in us and we abide in him thanks to what we call ‘taking communion’ – by receiving that which establishes a ‘common union’: a *union* with God in *common* with each other. From this viewpoint, the Eucharist is a sacrament because it is the *means* through which this ‘common union’ comes about. For this reason in theology we talk about the eucharist as a ‘means of grace’.

This approach to the Eucharist is not wrong and yet it is a bit reductive and somehow utilitarian.

If all it takes to be united to God is ‘taking communion’ what sense should we make of the rest of the Eucharistic celebration, namely the gathering, the listening of the word of God, the homily, the singing, the thanksgiving, the blessing, the sending – are they purely ornamental, and therefore somehow optional?

Similarly, what sense should we make of Jesus’ own request during the last supper to “do this in memory of me”, that is again not just ‘taking communion’ but re-enacting a ceremonial meal of which the repetition of Jesus’ words, the eating of the bread, and the drinking of the cup only are a part?

In reality, what is ‘sacramental’ is not just the consecrated bread and wine, but the whole celebration of the Eucharist: the listening of the word of God, the homily, the singing, the thanksgiving, the blessing, the sending. All this is sacramental because it makes visible, strengthens, deepens what we become by receiving Christ.

In other words the sacrament is not just ‘taking communion’ but ‘becoming a communion’ that is visible, a communion in life and in action.

This difference might sound negligible but it has the potential to change the way we understand our participation to the Sunday celebration of mass.

As long as we see the Sunday mass simply as a means to something else, even as noble as ‘taking communion’, it will not be a big deal if we miss it now and again.

If however we realize that the sacrament, that which unites us to God, is ‘becoming a communion in life and in action’ then we understand that something crucial is missing in our lives if we are not at Sunday mass physically, if we do not experience it, if we do not engage our minds and bodies in it, if we do not let ourselves to be shaped by this experience.

What I said earlier about learning a language by full immersion might help us to flesh out this approach to sacramental life.

We do not learn God’s language on our own with our bibles at home (although of course this helps) but thanks to the full immersion of worship – because in the end worship too teaches us God’s language through playing games, learning songs, acting in plays, engaging in activities with our body – exactly as with the learning of a foreign language.

A lot of what happens in the celebration of the Eucharist is scripted like in a play. And just as in the case of a play simply reading the script is not enough: the play will truly impact your emotions, maybe even your life only when you assist to its performance in a theater.

Similarly, something as simple as singing together fosters a sense of unity, a collective experience of joy, sorrow, and reverence that deepens emotional connections. Without us being aware of it, the very synchronizing of rhythms, melodies, and breathing patterns involved in singing brings us into a

cohesive whole. Singing together happens in all sorts of gatherings – in sport, in politics, at a concert. In church we sing God's mercy and love, his praise, our trust in him and are comforted and strengthened by this.

Then this broader approach to the meaning of sacramental life helps us to appreciate the extent to which the Word of God proclaimed and meditated in worship also plays a decisive role. How is our faith awakened and nourished? How are our desire and hope sustained? How are we made aware of our need for God's mercy? How are we encouraged to care for each other, forgive those who have hurt us? It is thanks to the teaching, the warnings, the encouragement, the comfort revealed in the Prophets, the Psalms, the Gospels. Worship gives us such a familiarity with Scripture that it ends up shaping the way we think, speak and act in our lives.

True, we can worship on our own without ever going to church – but admitting that we find the time in our busy daily lives, solitary worship tends to focus on our personal needs, our individual relation to God. When we worship together our horizon is broadened: we are taught to pray for each other, for our nation, for the world. Worship also expands the way we pray – beyond the supplication for our needs, it teaches us the language of praise, of thanksgiving, of intercession, of blessing, of longing, of hope.

Those who live in a foreign country long enough, have been immersed in it, have been shaped by its language and culture, become different people. When they go back to their home country they bring with them a new energy, a new point of view, a larger perspective on reality. In the same way, the sacramental experience of communion in love and action in the celebration of the Eucharist, gradually makes us different people and changes the way we behave in our daily lives.

Becoming fluent in the language of God means that we learn the power of mercy, compassion, and forgiveness. It makes us people who learn to rely not on themselves but on God's grace in every aspect of their lives – people who know the profound impact of each single act of kindness and care for others, however small.

It is a language we might find difficult, even hard sometimes – as the disciples with Jesus in today's Gospel when they say: "This language is difficult. Who can understand it?". And yet with Peter we know that the only secret to keep learning it is the "common union" with Jesus we experience thanks to the full immersion of sacramental life:

Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? Only from you we can learn the language of eternal life – because by remaining with you so far we have experienced that indeed you alone are the Holy One of God."