

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time – B

In our first reading today, Elijah is on a long journey from Israel to Mount Horeb which is hundreds of miles away, somewhere on the Sinai peninsula. And the journey is so wearisome that, as we heard, at one point he sits down and prays for death. This happens shortly after his defeat of the false prophets of the pagan god Baal. Although Elijah had triumphed over them, when Queen Jezebel heard that the prophets of the pagan god that she worshipped had been killed, she said to her henchmen: “Kill Elijah.” She was like a female Vladimir Putin of her time, and people like that always seem to have an endless supply of henchmen who will do their bidding. So Elijah had to flee far away for his life. And as we heard, he gets so exhausted from the journey and constant struggles he is facing for the Lord that he prays for death.

Sometimes life can be really hard, even when – perhaps especially when – we follow the Lord and try to do His will.

Although we may not have killers pursuing us like Elijah, life can be challenging in all sorts of ways, and it can be very easy to get exhausted and discouraged from the struggle. What can be especially discouraging is when we follow God's will, we work hard to produce many good fruits for him and then experience success for Him, and then we see it all destroyed. We have the example of Cardinal Francis Nguyen Van Thuan, who had been the archbishop of Saigon in Vietnam, where under his leadership the Catholic Church was thriving, until the city was captured by the Communists. The saintly cardinal spent nine years in solitary confinement while everything he had helped build up was crushed. Yet, in spite of all this, he did not lose his faith. No doubt he experienced moments of incredible darkness and sorrow, but he held onto his faith. This is only possible of course through God's grace, by staying close to the Lord. And this happened in the lifetimes of many of us here, and sadly this kind of thing continues to happen throughout the world even now, notably right now in

Nicaragua, where the Catholic Church is experiencing significant persecution from an extremely hostile government.

While we may not be experiencing challenging circumstances of this kind and to this degree, what life is free of challenges and trials and suffering? Yet, as with Elijah, the Lord encourages us not to give up but to continue our journey through this life. Elijah was journeying to Mount Horeb where he encountered the Lord. We are on a journey through life to our own encounter with the Lord after our death. And just as the Lord gave food to Elijah to strengthen him for his journey, He also gives us spiritual food for our own journey through this life. Only the food God gives us is not ordinary bread, it is His very own Body and Blood which we receive at every Mass in the Eucharist. And when Mass has ended, He remains present continuously in the tabernacles of our churches. When the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris burned five years ago, the Archbishop of Paris remarked that the whole purpose of that

magnificent cathedral was to house a piece of bread. Of course, he was speaking figuratively when referring to the Body of Christ as bread, since it was no longer bread but only retained the appearance of bread, while its substance had become Jesus' own flesh.

The Eucharist that Jesus gives us in the Mass is our spiritual food for the journey of this life, given to us for the purpose of uniting us with the Lord one day forever in heaven, as Jesus himself says in our Gospel reading today: "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." As we will hear next week, these words of Jesus will provoke an immediate controversy among his audience.

And the Eucharist that we receive at Mass is also a sacrificial offering that we make to our Father in heaven at each Mass, the same sacrificial offering that Jesus initiated at the Last Supper with his 12 apostles and which he completed on the Cross. He offers His

Body and Blood – his whole self – to His Father in heaven in atonement for the sins of humanity. The Jewish people throughout many centuries offered sacrificial offerings of their crops and of animals to God in atonement for their sins. They were instructed to do this by God Himself in the time of Moses. And they made these offerings over and over again, because these offerings could in and of themselves never completely atone for the sins of humanity. That's because all sin is ultimately an offense against God, who is worthy of all glory, honor, and praise – who is worthy of our obedience and our love. The sins we commit against one another – or even against ourselves – ultimately are an offense to God because they violate the order that He has established for His creation. So, to atone for sin against God, who is perfect, the only thing sufficient would be a perfect sacrificial offering. And because us regular, sinful human beings are not capable of doing that, in His infinite love for us, God sent us His divine Son to make that perfect offering – His own Body and Blood – for us.

That is what Jesus did on the Cross, and it is the same offering that we participate in. We do not make the sacrifice again – that is impossible – but in a mystical way we enter into Jesus’ same sacrifice. We unite ourselves with Jesus on the Cross to join in making this offering to the Father in heaven. And that is what happens at every Mass. The priest leads the people in making this offering to the Lord, and he does so through the Eucharistic Prayer.

After a prayer of Thanksgiving in the prayer called the Preface, and after the acclamation of praise which we call the Sanctus or the Holy, Holy, Holy, which I talked about last week, the congregation kneels for the remainder of the Eucharistic prayer. Although in I believe most other countries, the congregation only kneels at the epiclesis. This is a Greek word meaning “to call upon”, in which the priest calls down the Holy Spirit upon the gifts of bread and wine. This is followed by the Institution Narrative and the Consecration of the bread and the wine. That is, the priest repeats the words of

Christ which he spoke at the Last Supper when he took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it his apostles saying, “Take this, all of you, and eat of it, for this is my body, which will be given up for you.” And then with the wine: “Take this, all of you, and drink from it, for this is the chalice of my blood, the blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be poured out for you and for many, for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in memory of me.” It’s very important that the priest say these words exactly as they are given to us by the Church; we cannot alter them or add to them in any way, because this is the prayer of Christ Himself which He has given to His Church. It’s not the priest’s prayer or the prayer of the congregation; it is the prayer of the whole Church. Changing the words of consecration would make it invalid. So we must say the prayer as it is given to us by the Church.

Perhaps some of you may recall that the wording of some of the prayers of the Masses changed about 12-13 years ago. So, for

example, while the priest now says, “which will be poured out for you and for many,” he used to say, “for all.” What is the purpose of this change? First, let me begin by saying that, in the first centuries of the Church, the Mass used to be prayed more or less in Greek. Around the 4th century under Pope Damasus, however, the Mass in the western Roman Empire began to be prayed in the vernacular, that is, in the common language of the people, which was at the time Latin. Over the centuries, however, as the Roman Empire fell apart and language changed, different regions spoke different dialects that diverged more and more from Latin. Eventually, Latin became just a liturgical language and was no longer spoken commonly, replaced by French, Spanish, Italian and so on. Latin remained the liturgical language of the Latin rite – our particular rite of the Catholic Church and the largest of the rites, of which by the way there are 22 others – until the late 1960s, when as I believe many of you are aware, during the liturgical reforms that followed the Second Vatican Council, the Church permitted that the Mass be

said in the vernacular, that is, the local language. So now the Mass is celebrated here in English and in multiple other languages around the world. The liturgical reforms of the late 1960's, based on what I have studied about the development of the liturgy, were the most dramatic changes to the liturgy in the history of the Church, and I think the Church has been struggling to adapt to and integrate these changes ever since, not always successfully, and certainly not without confusion. However, all of this is a digression to say that, when the liturgy was translated from Latin into English in the late '60s, it happened relatively quickly, especially compared to how the Church usually does things. So Pope John Paul II asked that a new translation be done that would adhere more closely to the original Latin. That is the reason for the change about 12 years ago. Saying "for many" instead of "for all" is a more accurate translation of the Latin "pro multis". The implication here is that, although salvation is open to all because of Jesus' sacrifice of himself, it is not automatic; it is not a mechanical process. Each

individual has to be open to this gift of salvation along with the conversion of heart that must go with it.

By the way, there are four main Eucharistic prayers. The first Eucharistic Prayer, also referred to as the Roman Canon, and also known as “the longest one”, “acquired its essential form under Pope Damasus” who I previously mentioned. This is the one that lists all the saints (“Linus, Cletus, Clement, Sixtus”, etc.). The Church recommends using this one on Sundays and on solemnities. I usually use this one for the big solemnities like Easter, Christmas, the Assumption of Mary, etc., plus on the feast days of the saints mentioned in the prayer. The second Eucharistic Prayer, also known as “the shortest one”, is the oldest of the four, and was written in the early 3rd century. This is most appropriate for daily Masses. The third Eucharistic Prayer is also considered most appropriate for Sunday Masses, and is the one that I usually pray. Finally, the 4th Eucharistic Prayer has its own Preface and is suitable

for Sunday Masses that don't have their own Preface. I call this one, "the forgotten one", because I usually forget about this one.

The institution of the Eucharist concludes with the Memorial Acclamation ("We proclaim your death O Lord...") We are remembering Jesus' Passion, death, and resurrection, just as he called us to when he said, "Do this in remembrance of me." This is followed by the oblation, in which the priest offers the sacrifice Jesus has made to God the Father, and he and the people likewise offer themselves to our Heavenly Father. Then there are intercessions contained within the Eucharistic Prayers, in which we pray for the whole Church. And it concludes with a prayer known as the Doxology ("Through him, with him, and in him..."), a word which comes from the Greek doxa, meaning praise or worship, and logos, meaning to speak. It is then a prayer of praise and worship, in which is summed up the Church's entire theology of worship. And

the people give their assent to this prayer of praise by saying,
“Amen”.

Bread and wine have become, through the power of the Holy Spirit and the words of this prayer Christ gave us, His Body and Blood, the Eucharist. It is Jesus’ one, perfect sacrifice of himself to our Heavenly Father in atonement for our sins, and at the same time, it is our spiritual food for our journey through this life. And as I have mentioned before, the word Eucharist means Thanksgiving. So let us give thanks to the Lord for this of himself, for feeding us with his body and blood, for our salvation.

- **August 11, 2024 at St. Mary’s, Spring Lake**