



The Bread of Life

This column is adapted from a homily given in Merrill and Bonanza on 26 July.

Beginning today we interrupt this year's Sunday readings from the Gospel of St. Mark to hear the sixth chapter of the Gospel of St. John proclaimed for five weeks in succession. The change in style and content is thought-provoking.

St. Mark, St. Matthew, and St. Luke give vivid, detailed, and similar descriptions of the institution of the Holy Eucharist at the Last Supper, whereas St. John makes no mention of it at all. Instead, in his Gospel Jesus gives voice to his Eucharistic self-understanding in the aftermath of the feeding of the multitude in Chapter 6.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke portray the *event* of the Last Supper. They tell us what Jesus *did* that night, the *action* he performed in offering the first Mass. In contrast, John focusses on the *actor* at the center of the action, on *who it was* who did what Jesus did. For his words disclose who Jesus *is*: the Bread of Life who satisfies the hunger of anyone who comes to him in faith.

To understand the Bread of Life we need first to appreciate the significance of ordinary bread. The Offertory prayers at Mass remind us that bread is "the fruit of the earth" from which Adam was fashioned by the Creator. We ask our Maker to "*Give* us this day our daily bread" because we must eat to live; and what we eat is dependent on the interplay of sun and soil, seed and sower, wind and rain—dependent, that is to say, on the

fundamental forces of the universe which God designed and sustains for our good.

On the other hand, bread does not grow on trees. It is "the fruit of the earth" only when it has become "the work of human hands" through plowing and sowing, reaping and milling, kneading and baking. The production of our daily bread demands the sacrifice of time and energy in human labor. So does the production of the Bread of the Eucharist.

When Jesus "took" bread, he deliberately drew its essential human significance to himself and made it the work of *his* human hands. On Holy Thursday night, with bread in hand, he said, "*This* is my body, which will be given up" to the hard labor of carrying the Cross. The next day for three hours the blazing sun baked the Bread of Life to perfection in the oven of crucifixion. Actively emptying himself into the death of a slave, Jesus accomplished the *work* of our redemption. We feed on his complete surrender to the will of the Father when he comes to us in Communion as the Conqueror of death and the "Bread of God" which "gives life to the world."

"Do *this* in memory of me," Jesus tells us in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. To know what to *do* with our lives we must first know who we *are*; we must know what our lives are *for*. But this we can know only by faith in the God who made us for himself. "This is the work of God," Jesus says in the Gospel of John, "that you *believe* in him whom He has sent." When we feed on him in faith, we come to know who we are: the Father's beloved children for whom our Brother suffered death so we could live. And

knowing who we *are*, we know what to *do*
with our lives: hand ourselves over as bread
to feed the deep human hunger for life that is
stronger than death.