

## **John 6:51-58**<sup>vii viii</sup>

Jesus said to the crowds: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."

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### **<sup>vii</sup> About John 6:51-58**

This final part of the discourse on the bread of life centers on the meaning and the effect of eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood. "Flesh and blood" is a Semitic idiom for "the whole human person" (Matthew 16:17), thus the phrase may be taken to refer to the reception of the whole living Christ. Taken separately, however, each term had a strongly negative impact in Jewish thought.

This passage is strongly eucharistic and is perhaps only comprehensible in that context. Indeed, some scholars suggest that verses 51-58 may have been originally set in the narrative of the last supper (chap. 13). John has no account of the institution of the eucharist. It is the flesh and blood of the "Son of man" who unites heaven and earth (1:51, 6:62) and who was glorified by his crucifixion (3:13-15, 8:23) that gives life now and at the last day.

The word for eat in verses 54-58 is a crude term (Matthew 24:38), usually used for animals. It is often translated 'feed, munch, gnaw'. The only other use of this word in John is in the Last Supper account where it is put into an Old Testament quotation (13:18), again probably with eucharistic significance. Here in chapter 6 it probably stresses the reality of Jesus' presence

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in the Eucharist and/or the reality of his humanity (against early heretics).

Structurally, verses 51-58 are a duplicate of verses 35-50, repeating in explicitly eucharistic terms what is, in the earlier section, primarily related to wisdom and only implicitly to eucharist. Whereas in verses 35-50, the emphasis was on believing in Jesus and thus receiving eternal life, now it is on eating and drinking Jesus to receive life. To eat and to drink is to incorporate and assimilate Jesus and thus to abide in him. As Jesus shares in the life of the Father, so he gives to humankind God's own life.

### <sup>viii</sup> **Reflection and Response**

Jesus' words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood shocked even his disciples. Early in the Old Testament, blood was identified with life and deemed sacred because God is the source of life. The spilling of human blood was considered an outrage against God.

Eating flesh containing blood was prohibited in the Pentateuch. The penalty for doing so was expulsion from God's people. Blood was removed from use as food and reserved for sacramental purposes. In the rites of atonement, blood symbolized the yielding up of the worshiper's life to God and the atoning communion of worshipers with God.

But in John's gospel, Jesus tells the people, enigmatically, that he is the fulfillment of this sacrificial atonement. In the light of the age-long prohibition against eating flesh containing blood, his words, heard in a literal sense, were quite offensive. But they brought a promise of eternal life.

Not only the atonement, finished on the cross, but also the living instrument of its communication—the Eucharist—transcends our ability to understand. In some unseen, incomprehensible way, the energy of redeeming love is transmitted, and we receive food for eternal life. By faith, we allow Christ's life to penetrate our being and nourish our life. God's own life comes to us through the natural and temporal elements of bread and wine, so that we, natural and temporal creatures, may become vehicles of God's supernatural grace.

Eating and drinking are of symbolic significance in most religions, especially in Christianity. Natural life depends on our giving and taking these necessities. The Eucharist reminds us of the self-offering of our Lord and our dependence on him for our soul's life. It provides us with a continuous supernatural apprehension of eternity. It suffuses our little lives with the creative spirit of Christ and fits us for our vocation to transform the world.

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