

The Authority of the Body

Fr. Paul D. Scalia
Sunday, August 25, 2024

Over the past three Sundays, we have heard our Lord's Bread of Life Discourse. Today the scene comes to a dramatic conclusion with the crowd's rejection of his teaching. (John 6:60-69) Their reaction touches on two timeless and therefore timely controversies: authority and the body.

First, **authority**. "Then many of his disciples who were listening said, 'This saying is hard; who can accept it?'" What makes Jesus' teaching hard is not any lack of clarity. There's no indication that the crowd didn't understand what he was teaching. Indeed, on several occasions **Jesus confirmed that they rightly understood that he was teaching that his flesh is real food and his blood real drink.**

They reject his teaching not because they don't know what it is or don't understand it but simply because it's hard to accept. As indeed it is. **It's the kind of thing we can know to be true only on the authority of the one teaching it. That's called faith.**

And that's what we find in **the Twelve. They accept our Lord's teaching on the Eucharist not because they have some superior understanding or hidden wisdom. They accept his teaching because they accept His authority. They believe in Him.** Simon Peter speaks on their behalf: "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God."

Our faith rests on the authority of the one who speaks to us. We don't believe because we've figured everything out. That's called opinion. It's not faith to

examine the Church's teachings and find that you approve of them. That's called agreement. The crowd in Capernaum lacked both agreement with Christ and the acceptance of His teaching authority. So, we hear the sad report that they "returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him."

The modern age lacks faith because it hates any teaching authority. It will not be told. We must be free to define our own meaning. Anyone holding authority must be authoritarian. And so on. Ironically, the rejection of a teaching authority ultimately leads to radical doubt about man's capacity to know truth at all. That's what Chesterton termed "the thought that stops all thought."

The eternal Word speaks authoritatively in human words. His authority is ordered towards our knowing Him and his truth. When we acknowledge and submit to that authority, we gain a participation in His own knowledge. So, He invites us to trust His words because we trust in Him. Those who mistrusted His authority wandered away from Him. Those who trusted grew closer and ultimately received the gift of the Eucharist He had spoken about in Capernaum.

Now, this issue of authority is brought to the fore by our Lord's discussion of the Eucharist, His Body. Which in turn engages the controversial issue: the human body itself. The crowd's discomfort with Christ's discussion of his flesh and blood points to a broader discomfort we have with the human body. What does it mean for us? Does it mean anything? Our alienation from the body because of Original Sin leads us to wonder whether the body has any meaning or significance at all.

Jesus' authoritative words in Capernaum both presume and confirm the meaning of the body. Because the body has meaning, His gift of His body in the Eucharist has significance. And, conversely, **God's gift of Himself by way of the human body confirms its dignity.** Indeed, His words in Capernaum

indicate that the body has an authority all its own. It tells us something specific and definitive about ourselves and enables us to give ourselves to others.

Saint Paul's hard sayings to the Ephesians that we hear in the second reading (see Ephesians 5:21-32) likewise rest on the meaning of the body. The Apostle presumes that there is significance to being a man and a woman, bridegroom and bride, an embodied male or female. Indeed, the union of man and woman has such significance that it reflects a divine mystery. "I speak in reference to Christ and the Church."

What the crowd says about the Eucharist, modernity says about the human body: "This saying is hard; who can accept it?" Man's perennial alienation from the body has become an ideology in our own day. Rather than see the body as something to be redeemed, we treat it as something to be used, manipulated, and then cast aside. In short, we are unwilling to accept the authority of the body, that it is not ours to do with as we will.

Jesus' authoritative teaching on the Eucharist redeems the meaning and authority of the human body. **God extends Himself to us in the likeness of sinful flesh and under the appearance of bread and wine. Nothing restores the dignity of the human body more than God's revealing and communicating His love to man by way of it. And that by the gift of His Body in the Eucharist He nourishes believers into His Body the Church.**

The Eucharist is the vindication of the body's meaning. If there's no significance to the human body, then the words *This is my Body* mean absolutely nothing. As it is, however, every time a priest takes bread in his hands, leans over the altar, and pronounces those words, the authority of the body is revealed.

Fr. Paul Scalia is a priest of the Diocese of Arlington, VA, where he serves as Episcopal Vicar for Clergy and Pastor of Saint James in Falls Church. He is the author of That Nothing May Be Lost: Reflections on Catholic Doctrine and

Devotion and the editor of Sermons in Times of Crisis: Twelve Homilies to Stir Your Soul.

Article printed from The Catholic Thing: <https://www.thecatholicthing.org>
URL to article: <https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2024/08/25/the-authority-of-the-body/>

URLs in this post:

[1]

Jesus Teaches the People by the Sea: https://www.thecatholicthing.org/wp-content/uploads/00.159.90_PS1-1.jpg

[Click here to print.](#)

Copyright © The Catholic Thing. All rights reserved.