

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – August 19, 2018
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My first assignment as a priest was as associate pastor of the Church of the Incarnation in Collierville. A few months after I arrived, I was walking down the hall in the school building. Some of our Parents' Day Out students were sitting on the floor in the hallway, gathering their belongings and the art projects of the day before being dismissed. As I walked, I waved at the children and said hello. One little boy looked up at me and said, "Hi, God." Taken aback (talk about pressure!), I quickly realized that his parents probably brought him to church each Sunday to "see God." Because I was the one he saw each week doing most of the talking, he must have me confused with God. So I crouched down in front of the child and told him, "Oh, I am not God – I just work for him. And I hope some day you will think about working for him too." I remembered the innocence of that young child, of so many children and adolescents and young people this week when I heard the details of the Pennsylvania Grand Jury report on widespread child abuse and cover-ups in the six dioceses they investigated. Like many of you, I presume, I was heartbroken and angry and disillusioned. Coming on the heels of the investigation into Archbishop McCarrick, after what seems like decades of stories on this crisis, I could not believe that there was still more to be uncovered, still more to be processed and grieved over. And I could not believe that so many had escaped accountability for the actions they took or the actions they turned a blind eye toward. The president of the bishops' conference called this a "moral catastrophe." The bishops' program for child protection has long been called "To Protect and to Heal." It became clear once again this week that we need much more protection and much more healing.

Also this week, I concelebrated a funeral Mass. The celebrant reminded us that, according to the gospels, at the time of Jesus' death, there was an earthquake. He asked us to imagine what that would have been like. If we were standing on the hill of Calvary – on Golgotha – when the earth began to quake, what would we have done? How could we have kept ourselves safe? St. Padre Pio, he told us, said that the only way to keep safe in an earthquake on Calvary was to hold onto the Cross of Jesus Christ. In these days when we have heard again of widespread evil and deception – even within the Church, in these times when our faith in our civil, political, cultural and religious leaders seems horribly misplaced, in these times when it feels like the earth is moving under our feet, we do indeed need to hold onto the cross of Jesus Christ because he alone can save us.

Our readings today tell us much the same. Our first reading from the Book of Proverbs has Wisdom personified inviting those who lack understanding to eat of her food and drink of the wine she had mixed. Eating and drinking from Wisdom's table is the means, it would seem, of forsaking foolishness and advancing in the way of understanding. In his letter to the Church of Ephesus, St. Paul encourages us to live not as the foolish but as the wise – not through drinking wine, but by being filled with the Holy Spirit. And Jesus tells the assembled crowd once again that he is the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, our Lord tells us, and I will raise him on the last day. The crowd found his words astonishing, a stumbling block. They could not get past the concrete idea of flesh and blood. We twenty-first century Catholic Christians sit back and think how foolish that crowd was. If they had just hung around a little longer, we imagine, Jesus would have explained that he was talking about bread and wine that become His Body and Blood while still looking and tasting like bread and wine. No need for squeamishness, we want to shout out. But if the events of these days have reminded us of anything, I suggest to you, it is of our need to listen to the very words of Jesus, to hold onto them and to his cross.

If the words of this gospel mean anything to us it should be that the great gift of the Eucharist is supposed to change us. Receiving the Flesh and Blood of Jesus Christ should radically change our flesh and blood – not just our religious beliefs or our random thoughts – but the very core of our being, our heart, our mind, our soul, our very life. The Eucharist is supposed to transform us from broken and sinful human beings into healed and restored children of God. And yet, if these last days and years have taught us anything, it is that the Eucharist is not some magic potion. Those of us who eat and drink of the Eucharist – and sadly, even those priests and bishops who celebrate the Eucharist – are not automatically or suddenly or necessarily cured by the Eucharist. Evil, we have learned too painfully, can exist side-by-side with grace and unless we allow the grace to overtake the evil, unless we allow the Eucharist to be transformative, then the evil will never be eliminated or even diminished. As long as we safeguard and protect evil, then evil will flourish. Once again, we must hold fast to the Cross of Christ, we must allow the Body and Blood of Christ to change our entire selves – flesh and blood, heart and mind and soul. We must receive the flesh and blood of the Lord in order that we might – step-by-step, day-by-day – become the flesh and blood of the Lord.