

THURSDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK OF EASTER

Both of today's readings are very rich, the first because of the magnificent way it illustrates how the members of the early Church mined the Hebrew scriptures to help them understand what had happened to Jesus, and the second reading, from John's Gospel, because of its clear statement of what is surely the most revered of all the sacraments, the Eucharist: "The bread that I will give is my Flesh for the life of the world" (Jn 6:51). This is so starkly put that some of the earliest opponents of the Church charged Christians with cannibalism, but it is one of our most precious truths. Even we might at times be tempted to water down the meaning of those words, but that should be resisted. When I was an undergraduate at Georgetown there was in residence a very fine theologian from England, Fr. Martin D'Arcy, who writes in one of his books that there have been attempts time and time again to speak of the Eucharist exclusively in terms of spiritual reality, but to do so, he said, "is to underrate all that Scripture has to say on the reality of Christ's living body and blood" (*Facing the Truth*, p. 50). As the great novelist and short-story writer Flannery O'Connor once said of the Eucharist in rather shocking but utterly honest words, "If it's just a symbol, to hell with it."

In the rest of this brief homily, all I want to do is show how our belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist is not some late medieval development, possibly encouraged by visionaries residing in cloistered convents, but rather goes right back to the early Church. One of the greatest saints of that era was St. Ignatius of Antioch, arrested around the year 100 in one of the Roman persecutions and taken by an escort of ten soldiers across Asia Minor to his death in the Coliseum in Rome. On the way, he wrote letters of both encouragement and admonition to various Christian communities in that part of the world, including one to the church at Smyrna

(modern day Izmir, in Turkey). Like Flannery O'Connor, he pulled no punches, as when he wrote:

Let no one be under any delusion. There is judgment in store even for the hosts of heaven ... if they have no faith in the blood of Christ. Let him who can, absorb this truth. High position is no excuse for pride; it is faith and love that are everything, and these must come before all else. Just look at those men who have perverted notions about the grace of Jesus Christ which has come down to us, and see how contrary to the mind of God they are. They have no care for love, no thought for the widow and orphan, none at all for the afflicted, the captive, the hungry or the thirsty. They even absent themselves from the Eucharist and the public prayers, because they will not admit that the Eucharist is the self-same body of our Savior Jesus Christ, who suffered for our sins and whom the Father in his goodness afterwards raised up again. (*To the Smyrnaeans*, no. 6-7).

Two things in particular are especially noteworthy in what Ignatius said there: not only his full and utter acceptance of what Jesus says in the Fourth Gospel--"the bread that I will give is my Flesh for the life of the world"--but how intimately he relates that to the way we are called to act: caring for the widow and orphan, the afflicted and the captive, the hungry and the thirsty. To live this out is what later theologians called, in Latin, the *res tantum*, meaning the spiritual effect of the sacrament, which is nothing other than the fact of being bound to Christ and to one another in love. If we are really mindful of this truth and approach the sacrament in this spirit, we will put on more and more the mind of Christ. To conclude with one more sentence from Fr. D'Arcy, "Without the real presence, we would not be able to live by the divine life [even] as newborn infants feed at their mothers' breasts."