

20 Sunday B

August 19, 2018

St. Patrick's

Theme: "The center of our existence"—the Body of Christ we thus become, and on it we are fed

And they **"quarreled among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"....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."**

Here in the South we have great novelists from the past and the present, like William Faulkner, Harper Lee and Alice Walker. The list goes on. Still, great Southern novelists who wrote as Catholics—they are far fewer. One stands out, however, and her name is Flannery O'Connor. She is among my five favorite novelists.

Early in her life Flannery O'Connor was diagnosed with lupus, that debilitating disease that progressively sapped her energy. As a result, except for her schooling, Flannery O'Connor confined herself to her mother's dairy farm in Milledgeville, Georgia. She wrote as her strength permitted—just two hours in the morning—and took care of a menagerie of peacocks, ducks and swans with which she surrounded herself. Her illness ended in her death in 1964, at the age of 39.

O'Connor's short stories are gems, and the characters in them are a strange assortment of hillbilly fanatics and self-described "good country people." Her stories are usually placed in settings where God and the devil have at it, where God and the devil duke it out. Many times the endings are violent. Still, O'Connor lets the ray of hope shine through her characters—even when they are not willing to support the action of God's grace.

In her letters published after her death, there's one that I can't forget. It was a letter written to a friend in which Flannery O'Connor describes being at a dinner party with the novelist Mary McCarthy (who was also once a Catholic but had given up her faith) and some others. At the party the conversation turned to the Eucharist, and O'Connor writes this, including the profanity:

“Mary McCarthy said when she was a child and received the host she thought of it as the Holy Ghost—the Holy Ghost being the most ‘portable’ person of the Trinity. Now as an adult she thought of it as a symbol, and a pretty good one. I then said, in a very shaky voice, ‘Well, if it’s a symbol, to hell with it!’ That was all the defense I was capable of. But I realize now that this is all I will ever be able to say about it [the Eucharist], outside of a story, except that it is the center of existence for me. All the rest of life is expendable.”

Amazing, Flannery O’Connor can boldly call Holy Communion **“the center of existence for me. All the rest of life is expendable.”** Or, in Jesus’ own words: **“Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you.”**

Next Sunday, we’ll hear that when Jesus gave these words in today’s Gospel, **“many people”** gave up on him and **“no longer accompanied him.”** They quit him.

St. Patrick’s, I stand before the altar, and am amazed at what we believe. Our belief in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist is where we part company with most of our Protestant sisters and brothers who believe in merely a “symbolic presence.” We take Jesus on his word. Oh, I’ve been with people on the cusp of death, saying “Amen,” as they take Communion for the last time. What a precious moment I’ve been privileged to witness! How they, about to breathe their last, have strengthened my faith, even when questions nag me, like **“How *can* he give us his flesh to eat?”** We trust Jesus in his words of today’s Gospel. Like Flannery O’Connor, I too can say that the Eucharist is **“the center of my existence. All the rest of life is expendable.”**

This past week, another painful, horrific monsoon washed ashore over us about the ongoing clergy sex abuse scandal, and the “cover up” by church leaders. I am shaken and angry. What keeps us Catholic, and keeps us coming back? Fifty years ago Flannery O’Connor was unabashedly Catholic, and yet she could painfully acknowledge the many sins of the Church back then—they were terribly painful for her. In one of her letters she wrote this: **“The only thing that makes the Church enduring is that it is somehow the Body of Christ, and that on this we are fed.”**

We are fed on the Body of Christ, and somehow, *we* become that Body of Christ—broken as we are, as the Eucharistic bread is broken right before Communion—

within the world. Sometimes, on Sundays, as we feast on Christ's Body, we are joy-filled. Some Sundays, we are passionate. This Sunday, sharing the Eucharist might make the church simply "**endurable.**"

General Intercessions

August 18, 2018

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Grace us, your Church, to draw our strength for life's journey from feeding upon Christ's own flesh and blood; we pray to you, O Lord—

Console and heal victims of clergy sex abuse; bring to justice perpetrators of abuse, and those leaders who "cover up" these crimes; and give healing to all in the church; we pray to you, O Lord—

Reconcile divisions among Christians, and make us one body in Christ; we pray to you, O Lord—

Unite people of every faith in efforts to reach out to the poor, the immigrant, and the vulnerable; we pray to you, O Lord—

Grant peace and eternal life to those who have died, especially Charlie Gorham; we pray to you, O Lord—