

Homily for the Patronal Feast of Saint John Vianney Parish

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 5, 2018

Saint John Vianney Catholic Church

Sherman, Illinois

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois

Father Nellikunnell, Father Koopman, Deacon Hoefler, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: It is good for us to be here as we celebrate the feast of Saint John Vianney, the patron saint of this parish. Saint John Vianney wrote a beautiful catechetical instruction that gets right to the heart of key to happiness. He wrote, "My little children, reflect on these words: the Christian's treasure is not on earth but in heaven. Our thoughts, then ought to be directed to where our treasure is. This is the glorious duty of man: to pray and to love. If you pray and love, that is where a man's happiness lies."¹

Given the truth of this statement, we can see why so many people are unhappy: they neither pray nor truly love. Some do not pray out of sloth or apathy. Sometimes, however, people who want to pray are not permitted to do so, including right here in our own country in our public schools.

In one such case, a five-year-old bowed her head to say grace before eating her school lunch. But she was reprimanded by the school's lunchroom supervisor and told she must stop and get on with her meal. "It's good to pray," the young girl said, but the supervisor retorted, "No, it's not good." The girl's parents were outraged when they heard about it, for they had taught their daughter to say grace before every meal, and so they removed her from the school. The incident happened in a Florida school, and it mushroomed into accusations of religious discrimination. The parents felt that in offering thanks to God before meals they were showing that they did not take their food and their lives for granted. The girl was being helped to develop an understanding of herself as a human being placed in a world of gifts from God.

This family felt that saying grace at mealtimes is important because eating is among the most intimate ways we know for joining our lives with others as well as with God, who is the source of life. Amidst the whirl and speed of life, saying grace before meals is a patient and focused time in which we become mindful of our place in the world. Eating is not simply a physical act. It is also a spiritual practice, whereby the deep and sacramental significance of life is learned daily.

M.F.K. Fisher, a prominent American food writer, is credited with having said, "First we eat, then we do everything else." These words accurately reflect the important role that food plays in our lives. Human history shows that food is one of the central aspects of our lives.

Indeed, human life has always centered around food. The flourishing of ancient civilizations depended on establishing, maintaining, and controlling a food source. Whether one lived in the desert, the plains, the coast or the mountains, how they found, cultivated, cooked and chose their food determined much of their lifestyle.

Food is also central to culture, heritage and family traditions in today's modern world. Indeed, if you explore the important place of food in our lives a bit further, it becomes apparent that what we eat tells a lot about who we are. Our food choices communicate how we are sustained, what resources we have available, where we come from, and even our choices and priorities.

In today's Gospel Jesus uses the staple food of bread to point His followers to something more. He suggests that the crowd is following Him to get a free meal - as they did last week in the story of the feeding of the five thousand - but they should be looking to Him for so much more. Jesus refers to himself as the "bread of life." This is an extraordinary statement.

First, by equating himself with bread – a staple food in the Middle East – Jesus is saying that He is essential for life. Second, the life Jesus is referring to is not physical life, but eternal life. Ordinary bread goes stale or moldy very quickly in a hot climate. Jesus refers to himself as the bread that lasts forever and always gives life.

Jesus is urging His followers to think not only of the physical, but of the spiritual realm as well. Jesus has provided food for their bodies, but He also feeds us spiritually with love, hope, grace and forgiveness. This is the true manna from heaven, which points beyond itself. As the source of all life, God meets us here and now as divine love made food, as life for humanity.

In today's world, it is not all that common and might even be considered countercultural to claim that we need God, and that God is the source of our life. However, in our first reading today, we hear the story of the Israelite people who wholly depended on God for their very survival. We see, in our Gospel today, Jesus drawing the crowd's attention to the very story that we heard in our first reading. He reminds them of how the Israelites wandered in the wilderness and how, when the food ran out and their lives were on the line, God came through and gave them bread from heaven.

My dear brothers and sister in Christ, today, in our lives, God still comes through for us. For He gave us His only son, Jesus, who is the Bread of Life, and sustains us each day on our journey as His disciples.

Just as Jesus invited the crowds in today's Gospel into a new way of experiencing Him and themselves, so too does Christ invite us to cast off our old ways of thinking and living and, in this way, to shed our habits of working for perishable things. Saint Augustine commented on this, saying, "How many people there are who seek Jesus solely for worldly goods. ... Rarely does someone look for Jesus for the sake of Jesus."² Our Lord asks us to let go of the things that we often make the center of our lives: things like success, power, money, and honor, so that we might really, truly focus on Him. Then, as we claim Jesus as the source and center of our lives, we are given the strength to put away our old selves and our former way of life and put on the new self of being a disciple of our Lord.

Jesus Christ is the true food which transforms us and gives us strength to live our Christian vocation, as Pope Saint John Paul II pointed out in this regard:

It is only by means of the Eucharist that we are able to live the heroic virtues of Christianity, such as charity to pardon one's enemies, the love which enables us to suffer, the capacity to give one's life for another; chastity at all times of life and in all situations; patience in the face of suffering and the apparent silence of God in human history or our very own existence. Therefore, strive to always be eucharistic souls so as to be authentic Christians.³

So, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, may we always seek to find our nourishment at this Eucharistic banquet where our Lord gives us His Body and Blood as true food and drink so that we might not hunger and thirst. For, if we make Christ the center of our lives and draw our strength from Him, we will be sustained for living as His disciples in the midst of the world today. As Saint John Vianney taught, if we pray and love in this way, we will be truly happy!

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ From the Catechetical Instructions by Saint John Mary Vianney, priest (*Catechisme sur la prière*: A. Monnin, Paris 1899, pp. 87-89); quoted in the *Liturgy of the Hours*, Office of Readings for the Proper of Saints, August 4.

² Saint Augustine, *Commentary on St. John's Gospel*, 25, 10.

³ Pope Saint John Paul II, *Homily*, August 19, 1979.