

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time: Yr. A – 2020 [First Communion Mass]

[2 Kgs 4:8-11, 14-16A; Rom 6:3-4, 8-11; Mt 10:37-42]

The famous American patriot, Nathan Hale, was a soldier and spy for the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War. He was captured by the British in September of 1776 and sentenced to death. His final words echo to this day in our spirit of patriotism: *“I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country.”* Hale meant that his love of America was greater than his sacrifice; since he could only offer his life once. It is a different story when we examine the sacrifice of Jesus.

Jesus’ death was the perfect sacrifice, but it can become more powerful if we allow it to echo our life. How? Though Jesus gave his life only once on the Cross, he asked us to repeat his sacrifice by celebrating Mass when he said, *“Do this in memory of me.”* We answer Jesus’ call in three ways at Mass.

First, we must offer more than just bread and wine, we must offer our self. Just as multiple grains of wheat make up bread and clusters of grapes make up wine, so many souls are united to Jesus’ sacrifice through Holy Communion. In addition, wheat and grapes have to suffer to become bread and wine. Wheat is ground in a mill and fired into bread while grapes are crushed for their juice and become wine only over time. The same with us. Christ’s suffering and sacrifice echo in our life in some unique way and we must prayerfully lay it upon the altar.

Second, the Eucharist makes the face of God visible. It was no mistake that at the Last Supper Jesus gave himself to the Apostles under the appearance of bread and wine. Historically, when the Jews traveled with the Ark of the Covenant they built a tent of meeting around it called a Tabernacle. In front of the Ark sat an offering of bread and wine, called the Bread of Presence, next to a lampstand called a Menorah. They believed that this bread made present God’s face. Later when the temple was built to house the Ark, the priests would hold up the Bread of Presence to the worshipers and say, *“Behold, God’s love for you.”* In similar fashion, while kneeling at Mass the priest elevates the bread and wine that has become Jesus’ body and blood to show the loving face of God. For Venerable Archbishop Fulton Sheen said, *“In human love the beloved is always on the pedestal (or raised up), the lover always on his knees.”*

Lastly, the bread and wine are not the only items transformed at Mass. We have to be willing sacrifice our life out of love like Nathan Hale and Jesus. Watch the two-step process in St. Paul who said, *“I have been crucified with Christ (this is the sacrifice); it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me (this is the transformation)”* (Gal 2:20). The sacrifice happens when we put aside our will or plans and pick up God’s agenda. The transformation is completed when we receive Holy Communion. We become like walking tabernacles, or a place that others can meet God. Fulton Sheen spelled out this transformation: *“In Holy Communion, we surrender our humanity; we get back His divinity. We give up time; He gives us His eternity. We give up our sin; ... He gives us His grace. We surrender our self-will and receive His divine will.”*

Just as the Jews wanted to know of God’s presence so they kept a Bread of Presence, so we keep the Eucharist in the tabernacle so that Jesus’ presence remains in our church and community. The red sanctuary lamp reminds us who is present and waiting to meet us – the very face of God. Without the Eucharist, Fulton Sheen said, *“We would almost feel we were standing alongside of the empty tomb of Easter morn and an angel was saying, ‘He is not here.’ Thanks to the real presence of our Lord in our churches, the Eucharist is the window between heaven and earth. Thanks to the real presence, we look [up] to heaven, and heaven looks down to us. We can pray better there before our Lord, who is truly present in the blessed Sacrament; ... [this] is the Christ, our Savior, our Redeemer, and our love.”*

The Eucharist is as close as we can come to our God in this lifetime while the act of Communion is the most palatable way that we can receive our God. For Pope Benedict said, *“We need a God who is close, a God who puts himself in our hands and who loves us.”*