

As we all know, life can certainly have a lot of challenges in it, but in the midst of those troubles, what we remember as Christians is how Jesus is with us every step of the way, not just in Spirit, but in His Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity which we have been recalling these past few weeks hearing about the Bread of Life, where Jesus emphasizes His love for us wanting to be with us always. And though much is said on the Real Presence, what's worth remembering is that in this food for the journey, there can be such transformation in a soul.

Years ago Sandra Lauriello, who grew up in upstate New York and then moved to Alabama, found herself a bit adrift, like so many of us.

She grew up in an Italian-American family and went to St Michael's Church, the National Shrine of North American Martyrs, and Saint Kateri Tekakwitha's shrine. As she was growing up, she went to Mass but didn't understand much about her faith. In her house, they were told to go to Mass, but that was it. But since she was young, she says every time she went to a Catholic church or went to Mass, she got a strange feeling in her heart, but never told anyone about it.

Moving to Birmingham as an adult, she started visiting Our Lady of the Angels Chapel in Irondale. Each time she went into the chapel, she had that feeling again, and it was stronger than ever. It reached the point where she couldn't even drive by the chapel without feeling that tug to her heart.

Soon she met quite a few people that worked and volunteered at Our Lady of the Angels Chapel and EWTN, which is based near there. One day she was invited to join the Lay Missionaries of the Eternal Word founded by Mother Angelica. Each Sunday morning Mother Angelica and several priests from around the world taught her more about Catholicism. She was fascinated by her faith.

But she finally asked someone about the tugging feeling in her heart she experienced each time she went near the chapel. They explained that it was Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and that He was really there.

Learning that she says made her feel like a window had just opened for her.

She called her Catholic friends from childhood and said hey did you know Jesus is really there and present in the Eucharist. Many said they knew

that, and she said why didn't you tell me that growing up and they said well we thought you knew.

After this, she would often sit in the chapel and just stare at Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. Sometimes she would question the Real Presence, but that tugging feeling in her heart always told her different.

One day she was sitting in the chapel praying for strength because she was going through a very difficult time in her life. She was divorced, had 2 children to raise by herself, and was not receiving child support. Her burdens felt heavy. She sat there and asked Jesus to reveal Himself to her, to show her He was there listening to her prayers.

Suddenly she saw a beam of light come towards her and she looked up at the monstrance and saw Jesus' heart pulsating. It was His human heart just beating and beating, and there was a fire around it. She says she never felt such peace before in Her life. She knew in an instant that He was really there, He loved her, and that He would take care of her. She says it felt like time stood still, and she couldn't take her eyes off Jesus' heart. It seemed like this went on forever but it was just a few minutes.

She says she has been truly blessed and has shared her faith and this story to many, and she says people can tell the story is true by the peaceful expression on her face when she shares it.

But this love has also flowed through her to other people. For through the Eucharist, she says so many friends of hers have reverted as well and found the Catholic faith again. The love of God through the Eucharist also has helped her children become more prayerful and to spend time in front of the Blessed Sacrament, which Sandra has brought them to. As she closes her story, she says she knows without a doubt that Jesus is truly present in the Blessed Sacrament.

Sadly, so many Catholics out there don't. Some 70% don't understand or believe that Jesus is really present in the Eucharist, and all that entails. As Catholics it's important to remember we do not say the Eucharist is *like* the body and blood of Jesus, but that it *is* the body and blood of Jesus. The Eucharist is meant to reveal the love of God given to all people. It's a concrete encounter of the community with Jesus.

We continue through the sixth chapter of John's Gospel this week, and last week we changed gears a bit for the Assumption. We would have had the verses prior to where this week's Gospel picks up. When Jesus disciples say "***this saying is hard, who can accept it,***" they are referring to when Jesus said to them Jesus said to them, "***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. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever.***" Jesus is using some powerful language here; and his disciples are thinking maybe he should speak more metaphorically or symbolically. But instead he gets even more direct. Who on earth would think of eating someone's flesh?

But the reason Jesus is so direct here is because He wants to emphasize that His body His love that flows out to the world, through His real

presence. Jesus elsewhere speaks of ascending to heaven where He was before (as John's Gospel begins with the Word becoming Flesh). What this means is what God has said happens. It's not just an ordinary human speaking, but God himself. God coming to us. The question for ourselves is like Sandra, can we let ourselves be loved?

The meaning of this is it's so much more than an invisible kind of relationship. Think of a dad who leaves work early and drives a long way to another city to be at his son's college basketball game then drives home the same night. he comes home at 5, sleeps for an hour, then goes to work. He does this a lot. Maybe it would be enough to tell his son over the phone that he is thinking about him and cheering and praying for him. But think how much more it means to the child that his father is not just there in spirit, but there in the flesh. As we've all experienced through the darker days of the pandemic, looking at someone on a cell phone or computer is not the same thing as that person really being with you to break bread or share life with; think of that first meal maybe you had with a loved one after so much distancing. The dad is providing a real presence for his son, and what a difference that makes.

What God's presence does is to liberate us, and to change us. A true story is told of a baby who lost both parents in a fire. The child became so traumatized that he clung to himself, arms crossed over his chest, as stiff as a board. When rescuers took the child to the hospital he was placed in a crib just outside the nurses' station. Whenever the nurses and nurses's aids walked by, they would speak softly to the baby and gently caress him.

Over a period of time, the baby began to respond. First a finger loosened, then a hand, then an arm, then a leg, until the baby was completely relaxed and finally recovered from the shock. The relationship with the nurses gradually brought about the child's wellness. Again, it was the real presence of the nurses to the child. There is just no substitute for a real flesh-and-blood relationship.

And that is why for you and me as Catholics, we need to experience That love. Jesus wants a concrete relationship with us. We are like Sandra who is before that blessed Sacrament in pain; or like that baby in the nurses' station. We need that body-and-blood relationship with Jesus. We come as we are, and Jesus is saying "I love you" and I want to journey with you.

Like an infant in the womb of his mother, with the mother not thinking “my body is making sacrifices for the infant in my womb” but simply conscious of the human life, this is what it is like for you and me with God. It’s a bond, and God wants this body and blood relationship. We are God’s children and need that relationship; God desires us. It’s why He gives Himself for us. That relationship is real, not just a representation. Sandra’s vision was real, but the Eucharist was even more real. So first and foremost, my hope is that you find time to remember that. Hopefully you feel drawn to the Lord too which is why you are here. When you come up for Communion, when you pray before or after Communion, or when you spend time in front of the Blessed Sacrament. God loves you and me more than we could ever imagine. Bring Him your sins. Bring him your shortcomings. Bring Him your pain. Bring Him your anxiety. Bring Him your questions. Don’t feel the need to conceal anything. Let it free you, comfort you, forgive you, and set you free.

But with that, there’s a challenge. Note Sandra’s heart was touched, but the love of God flowed through her too. As put by Fr. Effie Cordeiro, a pastor of a parish in Montreal, in writing on the Eucharist as this real encounter, he says that in the encounter with our Lord, real reverence has to be for the

person of Christ and for all people for whom he died, and the two are inseparable.

And this is why we have to think always about how we treat people and what we do. Fr. Cordiero writes about an unpleasant incident a few years ago in his diocese regarding whether proper respect had been shown toward the Eucharist at a special youth Mass. Someone noticed that the Precious Blood remained on the credence table after Mass. The Precious Blood sat there during a lengthy youth function following Mass which involved clapping, shouting and a lot of carrying on. When the function was ended, a eucharistic minister took care of the consecrated wine. What happened was an unfortunate oversight.

The eucharistic ministers were unable to see that the chalices were still on the credence table after Mass. There was no deliberate disrespect or neglect. Some people though felt it their duty to write the bishop about the pastor's neglect. They made no bones about attacking the pastor, accusing the priest of sacrilege. They ripped him in front of the bishop and probably everyone else they knew. Fr. Cordiero says that he firmly believes the real sacrilege, the real irreverence was being done by those people in their

actions and attitude toward the pastor. Granted we treat consecrated elements with respect. But real reverence he says, includes how we treat one another preceding and following the Eucharist. For we cannot have reverence for the body and blood of Christ, the person of Christ, if we knock down those for whom he died out of love. It's for this reason people are the Body of Christ. So how do we do that is something we always need to ask ourselves. How do I treat my wife, my husband, my kids, my parents? In that second reading, Paul stresses mutual love between spouses which is so important. How do I treat people I don't like? What words do I use online or at the dinner table? We won't like everyone, and will often disagree. But sadly so often we tear one another down, and destroy through gossip, or we can just be indifferent to the plight of others. As Maria learned, she needed to journey with Jesus in the river to help the suffering members of His Body.

Yes, life is hard. But we are always connected to the God who lives among us and acts in our lives. A God that is real, and really present in our world which is why we are given this food for the journey. How sad that so many disciples leave our Lord because they don't understand the deeper meaning of it of how profound God's love is. How sad so many Catholics

think Mass is optional, or it's better to be entertained at a mega church with a praise band but no Sacramental Food in Jesus Himself. So when you hear those words "this saying is hard, who can accept it," we need to ask ourselves are we with our Lord or not? When He sees the disciples leave He turns to the 12 wondering will they leave me too, and Peter speaks up for the rest and says "Lord to Whom shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life?" The words of our Lord, "this is my body" and "this is my blood" given up for you, these words bring about His Real Presence in our lives. So let us open our eyes to that and all that it means. A love that is meant to transform us, but a love that is meant to flow through us so we can transform the world. Sandy was pulled to Church because even if she didn't fully know it, that was the incredible love of God reaching out to her. So, let yourselves be loved too as she did. For when we get down on ourselves or the world or want to give up, remember the Lord never gives up on us, so may our answer be that of Peter, and may we continually come to the Lord and be fed by Him so we can feed one another.