

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

August 2018

The following series is **free, downloadable small-group materials** based on each week's Mass readings and taking into account the seasons of the liturgical year. Each study provides an introductory reflection on some aspect of the readings or on personal spirituality. Each of the readings is provided along with a few questions designed to engage the heart and stimulate the group's discussion. These small-group materials will be provided on a continuing basis in monthly segments.

We would suggest the following 60-to-90 minute format for the small group:

1. Open with a moment of quiet reflection and prayer.
2. Discuss the introductory reflection with a question or comment like, "What do you feel is important for us to grasp in this introduction?" or "What stood out to you from these opening paragraphs?" As the facilitator of the discussion be ready to share one or two things which were important to you from the introduction.
3. Have someone read the First Reading and ask several people to share their answers to the reflection questions. **Effective group-dynamic techniques should be used to further stimulate the discussion and affirm the participation.**
4. The Responsorial Psalm provides a reflective transition from the First Reading to the Gospel Reading, so have the Psalm read aloud. You may do this without additional comment, or you may want to draw their attention to something you feel is pertinent.
5. You can either read this week's Second Reading next and ask several people to share their answers to the reflection questions, or cover the Second Reading after you cover the Gospel Reading. The Second Reading does not always have a clear connection to the other Sunday Mass readings, **so do not feel like you need to force a connection.** However, you can provide an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to draw a connection by asking, "How do you see this passage tying into the theme of the readings?"
6. Move on to the Gospel Reading, repeating the process by asking several people to share their answers to the reflection questions.
7. Approximately equal time for discussion should be given to each of the sections: Introduction, First Reading, Gospel Reading, and the Second Reading. Obviously, if one section is especially stimulating, you should give some additional time to discussing it.
8. Close the discussion with group prayer, using various prayer formats.

We trust that God will use these materials to make His Word more meaningful to you, both within the small group environment and during Mass as you hear the Scripture is read and taught. **We would appreciate knowing if you are using the *Reflecting on Sunday's Readings*, and would welcome your feedback, either through the Emmaus Journey web page form, or by direct e-mail.**

Sincerely in Christ,

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Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—August 5, 2018

Introduction: If you have ever tried feeding a toddler who doesn't know what they want to eat you know how difficult it is to satisfy an unidentified desire. Though they are offered numerous and diverse lunch choices they push them away with dissatisfaction. Usually the issue is not one of hunger for food but of a general attitude of dissatisfaction and hunger of spirit.

The crowds who followed Jesus evidenced a similar hunger of spirit. Like a child's question, "Mom, what is there to eat?" those who followed Jesus were also asking legitimate questions due to their spiritual hunger. But in a similar way to a child's boredom and rejection of the choices, these seekers of Jesus rejected and were unwilling to receive the Bread of Life which the Father put before them to satisfy their hunger. Though in this week's Gospel reading they responded, "Lord give us this bread always," by the end of the day they abandoned Jesus and the Bread of Life which the Father sent from heaven.

Dissatisfaction of spirit is often manifest in many different ways. Some people have an uneasy restlessness that seeks satisfaction for spiritual hunger in the pursuit of one thing after another. This spiritual hunger often drives people to pursue the latest toy, the latest philosophy, or the latest experience. Like a universal remote control they are haphazardly flipping through the options of life but never able to settle on anything that fully satisfies their inner hunger. We would do well to heed Jesus' advice to them to reevaluate their lives and to not continue to expend their energies on things which do not satisfy.

Even as we cannot live without food, so the spirit of man cannot survive and thrive without the spiritual nourishment which is Jesus himself. In the subsequent three weeks the Gospel readings will explore John 6 and Jesus' discourse on the Bread of Life. We will read of the promise that by partaking of him we will receive real life. St. Thomas à Kempis said, "This most high and venerable Sacrament is the health of soul and body, the cure of every spiritual malady. By it our vices are cured, our passions restrained, temptations are lessened, grace is given in fuller measure, and virtue once established is fostered; faith is confirmed, hope is strengthened, and love kindled and deepened."¹ Jesus is the source of life and when he comes to us in the Eucharist he comes to make a difference in us.

One difference we can expect to see in our life is that our hunger of spirit will be satisfied. However, we would be remiss if we over-looked the corresponding truth of this week's second reading. Jesus fully intends to reveal himself to us through Sacred Scripture also. It is through the Scriptures that he brings about renewal of our mind, and enables us to know him; his values, his character, his nature, his truths in an intimate way, and so "learn Christ." It is this relationship of knowing him that removes the hunger of spirit.

In the coming weeks we will also hear afresh the invitation to believe and to receive him into our heart and life through the sacred Scriptures and in the Eucharist. We are invited to receive his Body and Blood as confirmation of our faith and commitment to follow him. St. Thomas à Kempis went on to say, "Blessed is the man who, whenever he celebrates the Eucharist or receives Communion, offers himself to Our Lord as a living sacrifice."

In the coming weeks we will learn both the right and the wrong way to respond to Jesus and the truth that he is the Bread of Life sent from the Father. How, in the future, will we respond to this invitation? May God help us to do so with an *active* faith which enables us to continually offer ourselves to him as a living sacrifice.

1. *The Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas à Kempis, "Book 4, Chapter 4".

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday's Readings please either consult your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website - <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/080518.cfm>

First Reading — Exodus 16:2-4, 12-15

1. How can we "gather their daily portion" of the nourishment God has provided for us?

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THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—August 12, 2018

Introduction: “It’s scandalous!” You can almost hear the whispered incredulity spread throughout the crowd. Looks of dismay and shock are interspersed by the flashing angry eyes of indignation. In their murmuring you can almost hear them asking, “How could one seemingly so good, doing such miracles and works of mercy, expound such blasphemous remarks?” Their murmuring was not unlike that of their Israelite ancestors in the wilderness when they too expressed their ingratitude by judging the ways of God’s salvation.

The responses of the Jews, and of the multitude of disciples who turned away from Jesus to no longer follow him, provide a commentary on the meaning of Jesus’ remarks in John 6. The scandal, in their minds, was that Jesus claimed to have previously been with God the Father in heaven. Since no man has seen God at any time, or could survive being in the Father’s presence, Jesus’ claim to have been with the Father, and to have spoken directly to him, put Jesus on a par with the great I AM of the Old Testament. Jesus further scandalized these Jewish minds by claiming that, “I am the living bread,” and suggesting that they must eat his flesh, the Bread of Life. We should make no mistake, in their minds Jesus was not speaking figuratively. It was the literalness of Jesus’ remarks that scandalized them. And it would be scandal, if it were not true, but it is true.

Instead of being scandalous, Jesus’ words were life-giving. People are wandering aimlessly in their sins in a way not dissimilar to the Jews wandering in the wilderness, starving for want of spiritual food and a living relationship with the Father. Even as the heavenly manna was sent to nourish the physical bodies of the Israelites, so the Father sent us his Son, the true heavenly food, to nourish our souls. Jesus is the Living Water, the Bread of Life, all that we need to sustain our spiritual life. He was sent from the Father to be freely received by those who believe. However, it requires of us, as it did for the Jews who were scandalized by Jesus’ claims, an abandonment of a salvation and a savior made in our image, one we can understand, and which comfortably meets our preconceived ideas. It also equally requires abandoning ourselves through faith to the mysteries of salvation, a salvation made in God’s image and likeness. And so we see sandwiched between Jesus’ statement that he came from the Father, and his statement that he is the Bread of Life, the requirement to believe, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life.”

It is purported that when Elizabeth I was a girl of sixteen, and England was going through the upheaval of religious conflict, she was asked about her belief in the Eucharist. Her reply was, “His was the Word who spoke it, He took the bread and broke it, and what that Word doth make it, I do believe and take it.” We too are confronted with Jesus’ Word, dare we not believe it.

“Let us submit to God in all things and not contradict Him, even if what He says seems contrary to our reason and intellect; rather let His words prevail over our reason and intellect. Let us act in this way with regard to the (eucharistic) mysteries, looking not only at what falls under our senses but holding on to His words. For His word cannot lead us astray,”*

* *Mystery of Faith*, by Pope Paul VI, (page 9).

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First Reading — 1 Kings 19:4-8

1. How does this passage contribute to our understanding of the Eucharist?

Responsorial Reading — Psalms 34:2-9

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—August 19, 2018

Introduction: This week's Gospel reading continues the passage which was introduced in last week's Gospel reading, in which we saw the Jews' incredulity directly linked to Jesus' statement about eating his flesh. It is interesting to note that their question isn't, "Can this be?" but rather "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Throughout the history of Christianity, the debate has more often taken place about the "how" of the Eucharist than about the reality of Jesus' promise. It is also instructive to note that Jesus does not answer their question as to how it can be, but rather he simply reiterates that it must be. Jesus knew and emphasized previously in this discourse that belief is the issue. Besides if he were to explain it to them they could not have comprehended it, for after all, they were mere men. How could they begin to comprehend the mysteries of God?

My ability to accept this mystery was enhanced by another equally astonishing mystery. One December as I was doing my daily Scripture reading and contemplating the Incarnation, when the Holy Spirit impressed on my heart and mind the awesomeness of Jesus' birth. The Spirit showed me that when the Holy Spirit came upon Mary and she became pregnant with the child Jesus, that within the infinitesimally small seed implanted within Mary's womb there was contained all the fullness of God, a seemingly impossible but true reality. Simultaneously, He enabled me to grasp the concept that if God could be contained within the small, implanted seed within Mary, why is it so outlandish to think that he also could be fully present in the host? The same loving Father is the author of both miracles.

We also see Jesus mentioning in this passage the words "live," "life," "living," and "abide," ten times. Jesus emphasizes that life, real life, eternal life comes through him, through his body and blood. There is real substantial benefit in believing and partaking of him. Jesus truly meant the statements he made elsewhere in John 6 that the person who doesn't eat his flesh has "no life," and that the person who eats will "live because of me." The Jews, had no doubt as to what Jesus meant, even though they had no heart to believe him. We too, like these Jews, can ask in unbelief, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" or we can in faith believe and accept this sacrament which is a mystery that we cannot explain—because of the One who said it to us.

Irenaeus explains, "Our opinion is in accordance with the Eucharist, and, in turn, the Eucharist establishes our opinion. For we offer to Him His own, announcing consistently the fellowship and union of the flesh and spirit. For the bread which is produced from the earth, when it receives the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist, consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly... ."

Peter and the disciples' response to this seemingly scandalous message was, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:68) The disciples had been with Jesus long enough to observe his life, and to hear and meditate on his words. They knew he was Truth, and spoke the truth. They knew that if they walked away in disbelief, or in apprehension about accepting a mystery they could not understand that they would be walking away from some unbelievably strong promises and more importantly from a lifelong relationship with Jesus. Just listen to the promises of this week's recorded words of Jesus; "if any one eats of this bread he will live for ever,"—"has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day,"—"abides in me, and I in him,"—"will live because of me," and "he who eats this bread will live for ever." As we spend time with Jesus meditating on his words and listening to him we too will experience the growing conviction that Jesus is the Holy One of God and embrace the truth of his presence in the Eucharist.

* *Adversus Haereses*, by St. Irenaeus of Lyons.

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First Reading — Proverbs 9:1-6

1. How would you feel to be known as "naive" in your faith?

Responsorial Reading — Psalms 34:2-7

Second Reading — Ephesians 5:15-20

2. What is the difference between wisdom and knowledge?

3. What are the characteristics of wisdom according to the first and second reading?

Gospel Reading — John 6:51-58

4. What impresses you most from this passage?

5. What has been your journey of understanding the Eucharist?

6. Jesus' intention is that the reality of his presence would enable us to abide in him and enable him to abide in us. How should this relationship of abiding be seen in our lives?

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—August 26, 2018

Introduction: Decision making is difficult, so difficult that bookstore shelves are bursting with management books offering tools on how to make necessary decisions in a timely manner. Some have built an entire career on helping others move through the decision-making process. Yet with all this help, when it comes to making spiritual decisions that have life shaping magnitude there is really very little available, except spiritually reworked secular tools. Perhaps this is so because these life-changing decisions are more a decision of the heart than of the head. After all, how reasonable is it, humanly speaking, to decide to follow Jesus if it is going to require your life? And whether we are called to be actual martyrs or not, Jesus asks nothing less than our life.

On July 17, 1794, sixteen innocent Carmelite nuns were asked to make just such a decision. Instructed by the terrorists of the French Revolution's Reign of Terror, to abandon their religious habits and religious calling they decided, not to do so, but to follow their Lord. This unwillingness to abandon their faith and deny their Lord resulted in these nuns being declared enemies of society, arrested, tried, and led to the guillotine to be sacrificed on the altar of political correctness. It is reported that they went to their deaths singing Psalm 117, "Extol Him all you people! For great is His steadfast love toward us and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. Praise the Lord!" Theirs was not a spur of the moment decision but the natural, or rather supernatural, outworking of an earlier decision in their lives to give themselves to Jesus, heart and soul.

The disciples are faced with a similar decision in this week's Gospel reading. As we have seen in the last two weeks, Jesus confronted those who were following him with just two alternatives; either he is God living among them, Emmanuel, or he isn't; either he is the only means of salvation, or he isn't; either they believe and receive him, as demonstrated by their receiving his flesh and blood, or they totally reject him. Jesus offered no third choice, it was either/or. Do not be deceived, the people knew that acceptance of Jesus in this way meant a total break from the religious norm and that for many it would result in ostracism, persecution, and martyrdom. Though at this time we live in a country where the results of choosing to be Jesus' follower are less severe for most of us, the decision is no less demanding. We don't have a third choice of simply choosing to be a morally good religious person. The decision Jesus calls for is still total identification with him and abandonment to him as our only God, our only means of salvation, and our only source of life. This is a decision which does not simply deal with ideas, but with the outworking of these truths in sacrificial living.

Some foolishly put off making this decision, planning to make this necessary decision later in life. In the meantime, they plan on being their own god, calling the shots in their life, and living as they please. Bishop Sheen tells of just such a man who lived as he wanted, claiming that on his death bed he could cry three magic words, "Lord have mercy!" and be saved in the end. Well, he did get his three last words, but they were different than he supposed, for as his horse threw him over a cliff to his death he was heard to proclaim, "I'll be damned!"¹ This is the hour of decision, as Joshua said, "Choose this day whom you will serve."

"From the outset, conversion is expressed in faith which is total and radical, and which neither limits nor hinders God's gift. At the same time, it gives rise to a dynamic and lifelong process which demands a continual turning away from the 'life according to the flesh' to 'life according to the Spirit,' (cf Rom. 8:3-13). Conversion means accepting by a personal decision the saving sovereignty of Christ and becoming his disciple."²

¹ *On Being Human*, by Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, (page 234).

² *Mission of the Redeemer*, by Pope John Paul II, (46).

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday's Readings please either consult your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website - <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/082618.cfm>

First Reading — Joshua 24:1-2, 15-18

1. How do you feel about Joshua's challenge?

Responsorial Reading — Psalms 34: 2-3, 16-23

Second Reading — Ephesians 5:21-32

2. What does this passage about husbands and wives teach us about relating to Christ?

Gospel Reading — John 6:60-69

3. What does “this saying is hard” refer to?
4. What reasons do you know which would cause a person to draw back from following Jesus?
5. How would you describe this struggle?