

August 19, Ordinary 20B (John 6:51-58)

Communion is not the only time we seek Jesus like a hungry baby.

by [Alma Tinoco Ruiz](#) in the [August 1, 2018](#) issue

The first time my six-year-old son saw me breastfeeding his baby sister, he was amazed at the fact that food was coming out of my flesh. He was also impressed to see how desperately his baby sister looked for me when she was hungry, which was very often. One day he said, “It seems that all she wants to do is to eat from your body.”

This is the kind of relationship that Jesus wants us to have with him. He wants us to seek him like a hungry baby seeks her mama’s breast. “My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink,” Jesus says in this week’s Gospel reading. “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.”

When Jesus talks in the Bible about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, we tend to think about the Lord’s Supper. In the sacrament, the ordinary elements of bread and juice are transformed by the invocation of the Holy Spirit over them into sacred symbols and instruments of God’s salvific plan. The words and images used in the communion liturgy teach us that this is not an ordinary meal; it has an eschatological meaning. By linking it with the name and story of Jesus, this meal becomes the Lord’s Supper, the heavenly banquet.

However, this is not the only time we eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man. Every time we come with open and humble hearts before Jesus, believing that he is our Lord and Savior, we are eating of his flesh and drinking of his blood. Jesus has given himself to us through his incarnation, his life and ministry on earth, and his death on the cross. Jesus’ flesh and blood is the spiritual food we need to survive in this world, and it is all we need to live forever in God’s presence.

We receive this spiritual food because of God’s grace, not our own worthiness. Years ago during a service at my church—while my husband was officiating the Lord’s

Supper—a woman came to me in tears. “I cannot partake of Holy Communion, because I am not worthy,” she told me. In her previous church she was told she was a sinner because she and her husband of 40 years had never been married by the church. “I have never eaten of the body of Christ,” she told me, “and I don’t think I will ever do it.”

But no matter what a human institution says, each time this woman dwells in Jesus’ presence, she eats the flesh and drinks the blood of the Son of Man. She is spiritually fed. For whoever comes to Jesus will never be hungry, and whoever believes in him will never be thirsty (John 6:35). This heavenly food, Jesus’ flesh and blood, is like the bread and fish Jesus gives the crowd of 5,000: it never ends (6:1-14).

Read in isolation, John 6:22-71 might suggest that Jesus’ only mission on earth is to offer people spiritual bread from heaven that gives eternal life. But the rest of chapter 6 makes it clear that Jesus is concerned with the physical food people need as well. As John Wesley affirms, Jesus offers a holistic salvation—his mission is to save people from both spiritual and physical hunger. Thus his ministry to people’s temporal and physical needs is an integral part of his saving work.

One of the biggest mistakes we make in the church is when we believe that the only bread God commands us to share with people is the spiritual bread from heaven, which we think of as somehow separate from their physical needs. But God cares for our physical needs, and so God has given us enough material resources for all of God’s creation. The problem is that we have not administered them wisely, according to God’s will.

In his sermon in January 1980, Óscar Romero spoke of the great poverty most people in El Salvador were experiencing. “There is hunger not because the land has not produced enough food,” said the archbishop, “but because some people have monopolized the fruits of the land, thus leaving others hungry.” Romero knew that the church, in the effort to announce the kingdom of God and establish signs of its present reality, could never restrict its mission to people’s spiritual problems and dissociate itself from their temporal ones.

The church’s priority is always to share with people the bread from heaven, the bread that gives eternal life, while at the same time responding to their physical needs. Doing this should not be a burden for us. When we eat from the flesh and drink from the blood of the Son of Man, when we abide in him, we are naturally moved to love God and our neighbors in words and deeds.