

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time, B – August 12, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
St. Stephen UAB Chapel, Birmingham, Alabama – 10am and 5pm Masses – 950 words

The Prophet Elijah had reached a breaking point in his life: he could not go on and he lost the will to live, even praying for death. Perhaps there have been moments in our own lives in which we have felt much the same way. But even if we have never reached that extreme point, there certainly have been times when life has just been so overwhelming, so exhausting. Our natural, personal resources are very limited; sometimes the circumstances of life are “bigger than we are”, more than we can handle. So Elijah reaches that point, but the Lord has a different perspective on things. He sees that there are yet tasks for Elijah to accomplish. So he provides him with the strength needed: he sends an angel with food to help him finish his journey.

“Food for the journey”: that is what the Holy Eucharist is for us. It is the food provided by God himself, “the living bread that came down from heaven”, as the Lord Jesus told us in the gospel. In every moment of our lives – including the high points and the very low points – Jesus comes to us not by means of an angel but in person; he gives us himself in the Holy Eucharist to be our spiritual food and so renew our strength so that we may continue on the journey that God has laid out for us. Those who have a living faith in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and who strive to receive him worthily – in the state of grace – each week, know the strength that these moments at Mass give – especially at the moment of Holy Communion.

The Most Holy Eucharist is not the only sacrament that the Lord gives us to strengthen us for the journey. Of course, our journey truly begins when we are baptized; before that point, we are on a very different path. After baptism, we are given additional strength through Confirmation. Confession is necessary many times along the way, when we wander off the path. Marriage or Holy Orders sets us on a particular route or trajectory toward God. And the Anointing of the Sick brings us healing and strength so that we may persevere in carrying our cross. The sacraments of the Church are thus ordered to helping us along our way to God according to the many different circumstances and situations of life.

But our journey in this world will come to an end, and there will be a day and an hour when we receive a sacrament for the last time. In the sacraments we have a real encounter with God, but his reality is hidden under a veil – under the sacramental signs or externals. When our journey in this world shall have come to an end, that veil will be lifted and we will see God and commune with him directly – no longer through the mediation of the sacraments. When will we make our last confession, our last Holy Communion? Will we be anointed? Will we be ready? These are important questions to ask. We must prepare to the extent that we can. We can do that, of course, by forming good habits and praying for the right things.

Good habits with regard to the sacraments mean things like regular confession – and also not delaying to go to confession when we need it. By “regular confession” I mean at least once a month, or more often if there is a need. Good habits thus also mean always receiving Holy Communion in the state of grace: never making a bad communion. A bad communion is like repeating the Kiss of Judas; it is a slap in the face to our Lord and helps us in no way. If we need to go to confession and have not gotten there yet, we should receive a blessing instead of communion. It is necessary to go to Mass on every Sunday and Holy Day, but it is not necessary to receive communion every time we go. Many Catholics are confused about that today.

Good habits with regard to the sacraments also mean calling the priest right away when a Catholic loved one begins to be in serious trouble with their health. So many families wait until the last minute, when their relative is now unconscious – almost at the point of death – and thus no longer able to consciously experience the peace that the sacraments bring. If someone is having a serious health problem, a family member should call immediately. Sometimes people

get worried in those moments: “I don’t want the priest to come; it will scare Grandma. I don’t want the priest to come; that’s like calling the angel of death.” All of that is the temptation of the devil. The priest can only help in those circumstances! Call the priest!

There are also, then, the habits of prayer that we should form. We must pray for a good and holy death. The traditional short prayer is: “From a sudden and unprovided death, deliver us, O Lord.” That’s a poetic way of saying, “spare me from being spiritual unready for death”. Many people also pray to St. Joseph for the grace of a good death; that would be a fine habit to form during this diocesan year of St. Joseph. Think about the holy death that he had, surrounded by Jesus and Mary. That is what we want, also. This Sunday the Church thus invites us to consider our journey to God and the strength he provides for it – and whether we are availing ourselves of that strength in the way that he intends, with good habits of prayer along the way.