

“Don’t talk with your mouth full.” “Don’t chew with your mouth open.” “Cover your mouth when you cough.” “Use a tissue.” “Wash your hands.” “Clean your finger nails.” These are all things we might have heard growing up or things we have had to say to our kids. People have taught us to adhere to certain norms so that we can function in society, and not offend one another. We’ve been taught all our lives to live the status quo, tow the line, and talk the talk. God forbid we live outside the box and disturb the norm. And yet Jesus ironically wants us to do that because so often what becomes the proverbial box or the norm is the problem.

As we continue to go through the Gospel of John’s Bread of Life discourse, Jesus’ language becomes far more graphic. We’ve moved with Jesus from the miracle of the loaves and fish to this moment now where John’s gospel tells us that Jesus says that people who “feed on” Jesus flesh and blood will have life because of him. The word Jesus uses literally means to chew or munch, or just plain gorge. It’s not an attractive image. Jesus doesn’t invite us to sit down, sit back, and be

neatly spoon fed. Jesus calls us to belly up, to stop worrying about what sinful and outdated standards are in place, and start imitating him – living as he does. We must be fully aware that while the flesh of humanity that Jesus shares can often be messy, there is redemption through it because he took it to the Cross (cf. 1 Peter 2 21-24).

Jesus also, as author Ron Rolheiser puts it, uses a particular word to describe his flesh in today's gospel. "Eat my flesh," Jesus says. But the word he uses implies the flesh that blemishes, that is wounded, that gets dirty, that dies and rots. Jesus is not speaking about the flesh of resurrection and glory. Jesus is speaking of the flesh that goes through life in this world – the flesh he assumes when he becomes one of us.

Yet we so often prefer things to be neat and clean, resurrected and glorious when it comes to our faith, the Church, and our various other institutions. Our actions sometimes reflect that. We organize. We plan. Even our procession to come up and receive the Eucharist is neat and tidy (usually). But life isn't always so neat and tidy, so black and white,

with a precise place and role for everyone, and an answer to every question. Jesus knows that. He knows where we are at.

This is particularly important to reflect on as we continue to hear and react to the news coming from the Churches in Pennsylvania. In trying to preserve the norm – or just plain save face – leaders in the Church have covered up, lied about, swept under the rug – however we want to say it – the terrible reality that ministers in the Church were allowed to abuse children and vulnerable adults, and at least 1000 victims that we know of were the result of this betrayal. Abuse of any kind is a crime and sin that directly affects the victim, but also affects many others around the situation (relatives, friends, co-workers, spouses, etc.). Denying the reality of any kind of abuse – especially the abuse of one's authority – further perpetuates it. But denial keeps things neat and tidy. In cases of abuse, speaking the messy truth – feeding upon the fleshy truth to use the gospel's image – is the only path to healing. That is why – as painful as the reports from Pennsylvania are to read and hear about, we need to hear this. Through the truth healing will come in time,

and with it justice for the victims of both the abusers and upon those who knew of the abuse and said nothing about it. In these and all of our dark moments, Jesus says to us, “Eat my flesh...drink my blood.”

In life – in the Church - when things aren't neat and tidy, when bodies are sick and harmed, when lives are torn apart, and when idealism is shattered, Jesus says, “Come and feed.” Don't give up. This is flesh-mess is part of who I am too. I have and I will redeem it. I have and I will take this flesh upon myself and through it I will free you. Don't give up. Through my cross there is hope in this flesh – my flesh – which is for the life of the world.

Eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood in the Eucharist is not about escaping reality. It's about committing ourselves more deeply to Jesus and letting him be more connected to us even when the messy wounds, scabs, and puss of his flesh are so obvious and we would rather just cover them up, try to make them go away, or simply walk away from the Table.

Jesus takes the imperfect, the mortal, the incomplete, the unsatisfying, and the sinful elements of our lives and of the Church, and makes it the way toward eternal life. In the abuse scandals we see what happens when Christians refuse to sink their teeth into the messiness of flesh. It festers. More wounds are created on the flesh of Jesus. But when we sink our teeth into the darkest and most infected realities of ourselves, our Church, our governments, and institutions, new life begins to be possible. Healing begins. Resurrection slowly becomes reality.

This is hard to stomach. This saying of Jesus hard – “Who can accept it,” the crowds in the next week’s gospel will say. Who can accept the Church – the Body of Christ, Jesus’ flesh presence in the world today – is so tainted by the scandal of abuse and cover up? Who can accept that sometimes people – in and out of the Church – know something terrible and criminal has occurred and say nothing? Who can accept that demeaning women, that bigotry about different races, about LGBT people, about immigrants, about those with physical or mental

challenges could be tolerated, accepted, and even endorsed by people? Who can accept that a lack of knowledge of civility and basic decorum is acceptable in today's world? Despite these things Jesus calls upon us to feed and to allow the fleshy mess that is part of life to transform our complacency into contemplative and concrete action rooted in charity and justice. When we make excuses, when we turn away, when we ignore the fleshy mess that the Incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ, chose to make his own, our eternal destiny has little hope. Heaven belongs to those who eat Jesus' flesh: who dive into the problems of humanity as Jesus did, and who seek compassionate and just solutions to bring our lives here on earth one step closer to heaven each day. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, remains in me, and I will raise them on the last day."

As today we feed on Jesus' Body and Blood, let us pray for those who have been victimized by complacency, fear, ignorance, and evil. Let us also pray for those who sinned by omission, those who knew of the pain and suffering of others and did nothing that God will

be merciful even toward them. And let us ask the Lord to help us to sink our teeth into the messiness and sinfulness of our lives and that of the whole human race, so that with Christ as our strength we may persevere in bringing his Gospel of healing and hope to the world always remembering that God is with us.