

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 2/09

Introduction

One of the first things Tony Blair did after he became Prime Minister of England several years ago was to apologize to the people of Ireland for the way their British masters treated them during the great potato famine of the 19th century. That Irish famine lasted from 1845 until 1849. A blight on the crop, aggravated by bad weather, was the immediate cause, but uncaring landlords and a callous British parliament contributed to the many thousands of deaths that resulted. During this time, many Irish people were offered food if they would renounce their Catholic faith. Some of them took up the offer, and came to be known as “Potato Irish”. These people sacrificed a great spiritual good, their Catholic faith, for the sake of a material good, bodily food.

The *readings* today, which speak of food, raise the question: What food am I seeking in life? What is most important to me? When I pray: “Give us this day our daily bread”, what am I really asking for? Some people today use the word “bread” to mean “money”. Is that all we want from life: money, or the material benefits that money can buy? There is no doubt that is a great temptation for us in our culture. By way of contrast, some of the Jewish teachers of Our Lord’s day spoke of the Mosaic Law as the real bread. Jesus says in today’s *Gospel* that *He* is the Bread of Life. How can we make sure we are seeking the true Bread in our own life? Here are a few suggestions.

Deepen Our Awareness of the Primacy of Persons over Things

Ever since Dolly, the first cloned sheep appeared, there has been a debate over the ethics of cloning. Isn’t it interesting though that *God* did not choose to clone people? Instead *God makes* each of us distinct, with our own gifts, our own abilities and our own personal history. From all eternity *God* gave each one of us our unique place in his Plan. Each one of us has been personally *forgiven* by *God*. So it is clear that each of us is dearly *loved* by *God*. In fact each of us has value precisely because we are loved and so valued, by *God*. Many deeply religious people in prison camps and concentration camps during the Second World War experienced this truth; it is what kept them going in those terrible places. Reflection on this truth helps us to see that *God* is the only true good of any human person. It also helps us understand why, in the words of Pope John Paul II, we must pursue “the primacy of the human person in the productive process, the primacy of people over things.” This principle needs to guide all our economic policies and activity, as individual persons and as a society.

Be Conscious of the Attachments that We Substitute for God

In a famous passage, the Scottish poet, Robbie Burns, observes what a wonderful grace it would be if we could see ourselves as others see us. If we could, we would realize that what prevents us from recognizing Christ as the true bread of life is our attachments. We may be too attached to certain *things* or to particular *persons*. Sometimes we are too attached to *ourselves*, and are so self-centered that our *God* is

really our own self. Again, we may be too attached to our own *will*, even to the point of seeking to dominate situations and to manipulate other people. All these attachments prevent us from acquiring a “taste” for God. In a capitalist economy like our own, the most seductive of those attachments for most of us continues to be money. We need constant vigilance and a great spirit of generosity to combat it.

Strengthen Our Commitment to God’s Will

One of the great moments of conversion for many people is when they realize and accept the fact that we live in God’s world. So ultimately all that matters is that God’s will be done. What is important is that we be at God’s disposal, and that we ask ourselves regularly: “What does God want of me?” That question should determine our attitude to everything else. Our Catholic Social Teaching reminds us of this truth when it warns us of the danger of letting our work become just a “job” or even a “career” instead of seeing it as our “calling”. Having a real sense of “calling” helps us stay focused on seeking the true “Bread” in life.

The question, “What does God want of me?” also assists us in taking a proper and balanced approach to money and possessions. Let me illustrate this with a true story. When St. Francis Xavier, the great 16th century missionary, first went to Japan, he wore old clothes that had seen many years of use. As a man whose concern was simply to do God’s will, he had no interest in possessing flashy clothes. But when he appeared this way in the Japanese court, people laughed at him and treated him scornfully instead of listening to his message about Christ. So the next time he went to the Japanese court he wore the rich regalia of an ambassador, and this time he was well-received and given a hearing. Here is a perfect example of treating everything in our life simply as a means of doing the will of God and seeking the Lord as our only true “Bread”.

Conclusion

Each week at Mass we profess our faith. But we must never forget that what our faith is really about is not just accepting a number of truths with our mind. It is even more a matter of being truly, personally, committed to a Person, Jesus Christ. Have you noticed that so many people today seem to feel they have to write their autobiography – sports figures, movie stars, broadcasters and others. They all want to leave us a record of what *they did in life*. However when the great St. Augustine wrote his famous book, *The Confessions*, it was not about what he had done, but about what God had done in his life, and about what God continues to do. How truly appropriate this is. After all, it is Jesus who is the Bread of Life!