



WHY YOU NEED SPIRITUAL FOOD

by [Bishop Robert Barron](#) · August 04, 2015

Every third summer, the Catholic lectionary provides a series of readings for Sunday Mass from the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John. This is the magnificently crafted chapter in which the evangelist's Eucharistic theology is most fully presented. It is a curiosity of John's Gospel that the Last Supper scene includes no "institution narrative," which is to say, the account of what Jesus did with the bread and cup the night before he died. But as many scholars have indicated, the Eucharist is a theme that runs right through the entirety of the Gospel and which finds richest expression in the famous chapter six.

I won't focus in this essay on the great issue of the real presence—"My flesh is real food and my blood real drink"—but rather on the more general matter of spiritual nourishment. A few months ago, I spent a week in the hospital recovering from surgery, and for about three days, I was not permitted to eat any solid food. What amazed me was how rapidly my body shrank. The muscles of my arms and legs began quickly—and rather alarmingly—to atrophy, and it proved difficult even to cross the room and sit up in a chair. Almost twenty years ago, I undertook, with a good friend of mine, a bicycle trip from Paris to Rome, covering about seventy miles a day. We really pushed ourselves to the limit. One day, somewhere in the south of France, after about five hours of pedaling, I hit the wall. Though I had heard of this phenomenon, I had never experienced it before. When you hit the wall, you don't gradually slow down or calmly realize that you have to take a rest; you just stop, your body simply unable to go on.

May I suggest that these examples are very exact analogies to spiritual health and spiritual nourishment? Without food, the body quickly collapses; without spiritual food, the soul atrophies. It really is as simple as that. Though materialists of all stripes want to deny it, there is a dimension of the human person that goes beyond the merely physical, a dynamism that connects him or her with God. Classically, this link to the eternal is called the soul. (We oughtn't to construe this, by the way, in the Cartesian manner, as though the soul is imprisoned by the body. Rather, we ought to follow Thomas Aquinas who said, "the soul is in the body, not as contained by it, but containing it.")

What the soul requires for nourishment is the divine life or what the spiritual masters call "grace." It is of this sustenance that Jesus speaks in John 6: "Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life." Most people are at least inchoately aware of the soul and its hunger, but they feed it with insufficient food: wealth, pleasure, power, and honor. All of these are good in themselves, but none of them is designed to satisfy the longing of the soul. And this is precisely why some of the wealthiest, most famous, and accomplished people in our society are dying of spiritual starvation.

So where and how do we find the divine life? First, I would suggest, through prayer. The soul wants to pray every day, to speak to God and to listen to him. So we should spend time before the Blessed Sacrament, pray the rosary, do the Stations of the Cross, read the Bible in a meditative spirit, confess our sins, and above all, go to Mass. A second way in which we encounter grace is through serious spiritual reading. One of the principal marks of an engaged Catholic is the faithful reading of spiritual and theological books. Most of us fill our minds with junk; but the mind, the soul, wants to be filled with the lofty things of God. Why have so many Catholic bookstores faded away? Because Catholics have stopped taking spiritual reading seriously. A third way to feed the soul is to practice the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. If you are spiritually hungry, feed the physically hungry, give drink to the thirsty, counsel the doubtful, visit the sick and imprisoned, pray for the living and the dead. You'll find that the more you empty yourself in love, the more satisfied your soul will feel.

Finally, and most importantly, you can receive the Eucharist regularly. In his discourse on the Eucharist in John 6, Jesus says, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst." The divine life is found, *par excellence*, in the transfigured bread and wine of the Eucharist. Aquinas said that the other sacraments contain the *virtus Christi* (the power of Christ) but that the Eucharist contains *ipse Christus* (Christ himself). What the soul is hungry for, finally, is the person of Jesus, the body and blood of Christ. Without feeding regularly on that food, the soul will atrophy.

Why are so many Catholics feeling lost today? Well, 75% of them stay away from the Mass and the Eucharist on a regular basis. This is not rocket science: if you want to be healthy spiritually, you've got to eat!

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James Orange · 3 years ago

Thank you for this article Bishop-elect Barron. I am 24 years old, and I can honestly say people of my generation (whether you want to call us "generation z," "millennials," or I've even heard "The selfie generation") struggle with understanding the true intimacy of the body and blood of Christ. I know I grew up thinking "Well, even if this truly is the Body and Blood of Christ, why does it matter? Jesus is all around and can hear my prayer any time." It wasn't until a couple of months ago I truly began to understand how significant the sacrament is to God's people. The more reading I've done, the more I've begun to understand. Although it's nice to receive a phone call or Skype call from my dad, there is something missing. There is a physical element to a phone call making it almost unnatural. When I am struggling with hard decisions in life, or I make a mistake, a hug from my dad telling me in person everything will be okay is much more gratifying than a phone call where the same message is expressed. There is something incredibly intimate about the Eucharist we miss in just praying to Jesus whenever we feel it suits our schedule. It's not enough to pray throughout the day to our Heavenly Father, but we must also have a physical relationship with Him to nourish us spiritually. My generation has never had to struggle to be connected to anyone in their lives. We've grown up with AOL Instant Messenger and the internet connecting us to everyone we desire instantly. I believe this issue of never having to work to be connected causes my generation problems with fully understanding the meaning and value of the sacrament of the Eucharist. Thank you Bishop-Elect Barron.

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