

## Scandals

August 20, 2006

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliott, Jr.

It has been said that Christianity was built upon *scandals*. I never gave it much thought in those terms, but I could imagine three events which might qualify for that definition. First, Christianity began with the *scandal of the crib*, or the scandal of Christmas. That is, in the newborn sharing the straw with the sleepy animals and two worn-out peasant parents we find the *enfleshment* of God, the humanization of God. Or, as Paul wrote, Jesus as the *image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation* (Col. 1:15). Add to this *scandal* that Jesus was “fathered” by the Holy Spirit (Lk. 1:35), not by Joseph.

Next, of course, is the *scandal of the Cross*. In this scandal, Christians proclaim Christ crucified, what Paul aptly called *a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles* (I Cor.1:23). This contradiction in terms centers on the belief that the all-powerful, all supreme God, in this Jesus, chooses to suffer and die as a condemned criminal to liberate the

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world from the power of evil. To somehow make the cornerstone of our belief that the *Righteous One* drinks to the dregs the most humiliating, ignominious form of capital punishment imaginable in the crucifixion of Jesus requires a whole new way of thinking. To affirm that the Holy God, above suffering and beyond mortality, experiences the depths of human suffering and the sting of death is almost hard to swallow.

As if those two scandals were not enough, in the Gospel reading for this Sunday we find another *scandal* foundational to Christianity. We might call it the *scandal of the Sacrament*. It occurs in Jesus' sermon in the synagogue, which has centered on the Bread of Life discourse. The reading starts off, fittingly, with **Very truly I tell you**. Whenever Jesus begins a teaching with those words, it means, literally, **listen up**, pay attention; something very important is about to be said.

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As you read this, you can see that Jesus is building one segment upon another. What started out with the bold assertion, *I am the bread of life* (Jn. 6:35) has led to *Whoever eats of this bread will live forever* (v. 51b) which now becomes even more specific in the words *unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drinks his blood, you have no life in you* (v.53) In each of the segments, a little more of the scandal of the sacrament has been disclosed.

Up to this point Jesus has never used, and never will use, the word *sacrament* in the Gospels. Furthermore, he is not delineating between the *outward and visible sign* of the Eucharist as *the bread and the wine* and the *inward and spiritual grace* of Holy Communion as the *body and blood* of the Lord. He merely says to his listeners, that *you are what you eat*, and if you swallow the Lord of Life, you will have the life of the Lord in you. It's as simple and as complicated as that.

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One wonders why Jesus couldn't have been a little less vulgar about the whole thing, and have been, well, more *spiritual* about it, like, *if you read the right Scripture you will have life in you; or if you keep the right ten-fold plan of salvation, you will have life in you; or, if you perform the right religious rituals, you will have life in you.*

But he didn't. He *did* say to eat his flesh and swallow his blood with whatever faith and thanksgiving we have. Jesus calls us to devour him into ourselves, our souls and bodies, and to feed on him with our whole hearts. In **The Imitation of Christ**, remarks attributed to Thomas a' Kempis urge *this: As Christ offered himself unto God on the Cross, in like manner ought we offer ourselves willingly unto him in the Holy Communion, as a pure and sacred oblation with all our strength and affection* (World Publishing ed., Book Four, Chapter III, p269) And for two thousand

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years, Christians have lined up, day after day, week after week, to do just that. Whether it's the old gentleman on two canes, or the sullen seventh grader, whether it's Kings and Queens, whether it's the President or the Pope, or a pauper off the street, we come; we come to swallow the *scandal of the Sacrament*.

What happens when the flesh and blood of our Lord Jesus are received into our lives? What takes place within our bodies? It might be this: the bodily food we take is changed into us, but the spiritual food we receive changes us into itself and therefore divine love takes us into itself and we are one with it.

It shall ever be so.

AMEN.