

The 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 2, 2009

Saint Anselm Abbey

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Survival

[Exodus 16:2-4,12-15; Ephesians 4:17,20-24; John 6:24-35]

I have two tales to tell you today. When I'm done, we'll tie the two tales together.

The first is about me: Last month I heard an inspiring talk about the Eucharist that caused me to grasp it in a new way. I'll summarize it for you; perhaps you will be inspired by it as well. Consider, if you will, the story of the people of Israel in the desert: the people were hungry and thirsty and afraid they might perish. So God miraculously sent them food: quail, we're told, and manna which is called bread from heaven. And for their drink, he told Moses to strike a rock, and water flowed from it so that they could drink. Eating and drinking. It was a simple question of survival.

Now consider the Mass: at its culmination, what do we do? We eat and we drink. Food and drink that God miraculously supplies for us. And here to, ultimately, it is a question of survival—survival beyond the merely physical. The survival of the soul.

Now, the body survives by our eating death—the death of an animal or a plant. So, too, in the Eucharist. For the survival of our souls, again we eat death: not of a plant or an animal, but the death of the Lord. We proclaim that death in the memorial acclamations that we sing: "Christ has died." or "When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim your death, Lord Jesus." or "Dying you destroyed our death, rising you restored our life." There's the second part: life restored. And we eat the death of the Lord so that our souls can survive beyond death.

OK. Here's the second tale: Once upon a time there was a soldier who lived a decadent and dissolute lifestyle. He got wounded in battle, and had to endure a long convalescence. He wanted to read while bed-ridden, but all they had were the lives of the saints, so that is what he read.

One day he made an important discovery. He noticed that whenever he began thinking about the way he used to live, he got some momentary pleasure out of it, but afterwards he felt empty and sad. But when he read the lives of the saints and reflected on the way they lived and the things they had done, and then thought about the things he might possibly do, his mind and heart and spirit were filled with joy. And peace. And spirit.

And so there he was, hanging suspended between his attachment to his past way of life on the one hand, and on the other hand the beginning of a serious yearning for something better than what he had known. The one left him empty and in turmoil. The other filled him with a joy and peace he had never known before.

We're often in the same position ourselves, hanging on to what the letter of the Ephesians calls *deceitful desires of our former way of life*—that is, life up until this very moment—and yet reaching out to the possibility that life might be different, that there might be a new way of acting and thinking that will lead to greater life than we have ever known. Again, beginning at this very moment. It's a scary thing, yearning for some unknown way of acting and thinking that we are being inspired and guided to attain, and it can be discouraging as well, knowing as we do

how, without help from outside of us, we are powerless to let go of the past, as the scripture says, *to put away the old self of our former way of life, corrupted through deceitful desires.*

Deceitful desires: a good way to put it. Franciscan Friar Albert Haase sums it up nicely. We begin to recognize, he says, *how we are still deluded into thinking that pleasure, praise, power, prestige, position, popularity, people, productivity, possessions and perfection will make us happy.*ⁱ Once we realize this, then we can be encouraged by the scriptures to “cast it all off and put on Christ.” Could it be that ultimately, this is a question of survival?

And here’s where the two tales are tied together:

Our survival depends on our conversion. And, we sometimes realize, that although our bodies be well fed, our souls are still hungry and thirsty and struggling for survival. Well, then, here at this altar, in just a few minutes, will be the food and drink we need for survival, survival in this life as we become more fully alive, and, ultimately, survival beyond death.

This transition has happened to us at other times, perhaps, and it’s happened to others as well, as you can read in the Scriptures and, yes, in the lives of the saints.

By the way, that soldier I told you about? Not only did he survive, but he went on to become one of the great saints of the Church, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. A real survivor. Consider that.

ⁱ Albert Haase, O.F.M. Coming home to your true self: leaving the emptiness of false attractions, p. 93.