

October 3, 2004
Dionysius the Areopagite

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Few images in Holy Scripture are richer than that of the bread from heaven, by which the Israelites were daily nourished in the desert. In order to relish the wealth of this image, I suggest that it may usefully be examined under the aspect of the traditional "four senses" of biblical interpretation.

Even at the fundamental level of its historical, literal sense, that miraculous Manna was charged with a deeper significance. It was not only a fact, but also a metaphor. Eating it day by day, the Israelites learned that "man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord" (Deuteronomy 8:3). That is to say, already in its literal meaning, the Manna was symbolic of God's nourishing and sustaining Word. According to the Wisdom of Solomon (16:21), moreover, this miraculous food, identical for all, nonetheless was accommodated to the personal dispositions of those who shared it. Later on, the Talmud even speaks of the millstones in heaven, which "grind the Manna for the righteous."

Such symbolism, native to the Manna already, is what caused the Jews to anticipate its reappearance in the future, a theme found repeatedly in midrashic and apocalyptic literature. Here we read of the coming messianic days in which the wonders of the Exodus will be renewed, including the gift of the Manna. This last sign will indicate the arrival of the messianic reign.

We are hardly surprised, therefore, that Jesus' provision of miraculous bread for the Jews in the wilderness prompted their desire to crown Him as their king (John 6:13-15). In this we perceive what the Tradition calls the "type," or second sense of Holy Scripture. It is the Christian "allegory" (a term from Galatians 4:24, *allegoroumena*), the Manna's mystic reference to Christ and His presence to the Church in Word and Sacrament.

The Lord's own enemies, in fact, prompted Him to speak of the Manna in these terms: "What sign will you perform, then, that we may see it and believe You? What work will You do? Our fathers ate the Manna in the desert; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat'" (John 6:30-31).

In response to this challenge, the Lord compares and contrasts Himself with that deficient Manna consumed of old: "I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the Manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die" (6:48-50). "This is the bread which came down from heaven-not as your fathers ate the Manna and are dead. He who eats this bread will live forever" (6:58).

"I am the bread of life," He asserts (6:35,49); "I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever" (6:51). The ancient Manna was but type and prophecy, of which Jesus is the reality and fulfillment. He is the "true bread" (6:32), of which He declares, "he who feeds on Me will live because of Me" (6:57). Believers feed on Jesus in faith (6:35,47), in His Word (6:63), and in the Sacrament of His body and blood (6:53-56).

At the third level of its significance, which Tradition calls its moral sense, the Manna represents God's gracious, reliable care of those who daily put their trust in Him. The bread we ask of our Father "this day" is our "daily bread" (Matthew 6:11), and the prohibition against worrying about tomorrow (6:25,31) is the context in which we are commanded to request it. The Manna must be received from our Father's hand day-by-day. Indeed, the moral significance of the Manna is indicated in the judgment that Holy Scripture renders against those Israelites whose distrust of God's providence prompted them to store it up ahead of time (Exodus 16:20).

Fourth and finally, the Manna in its anagogical or eschatological sense signifies the eternal banquet, the life of heaven. This is indicated by the fact that even the Old Testament calls it the "bread from heaven" and "the food of angels" (Psalms 78 [77]:24-25; Wisdom of Solomon 16:20). The Manna, as it is fulfilled in Jesus, is the foretaste and guarantee of our resurrection at the end of time and the fulfillment of history: "Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:54). The Manna represents, then, that eternal joy of which Jesus says to John, "To him who overcomes, I will give to eat of the hidden Manna" (Revelation 2:17).

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