

Food for the Journey

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

August 12, 2018

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In the seminary, we were taught about the importance of the last rites. The last rites, of course, refer to the prayers that the priest does as someone nears death. Traditionally, the closer to death, the better. To do it too soon might give the person time to slide back into sin.

Part of last rites, after the anointing with oil, is giving them holy communion one last time. This is called *viaticum*, which is Latin for ‘provision for the journey.’ It is thought that Jesus will then be with them as they journey from this life to the next.

Honestly, in my three years of priesthood, I have done many last rites, but I have hardly ever given *viaticum*. This is sort of a letdown from what seminary led me to expect. Whenever I visit someone near death, it is highly probable they are unconscious, on some sort of breathing mask, or aren’t able to eat anything. In fact, most of the time I don’t even bother bringing communion with me.

Even though *viaticum* in the traditional sense is rare, I think the concept still has value. Perhaps we could think of *viaticum* as every time we receive communion, for it truly is our provision for the journey. It helps us through the journey of life.

In our First Reading from *1 Kings*, Elijah is exhausted on his journey. He is so worn out that he prays for death- ‘take me now, Lord.’ As he sat beneath a tree to rest, however, an angel kept prodding him to get up and eat... “get up and eat, else the journey will be too long for you.” Finally, he gets up, eats, and is strengthened by that food, so much so that he then walks 40 days and nights to the mountain of God. That food from the angel became his *viaticum*. Even though he was tired, it strengthened him for his journey.

In our Gospel from *John*, which continues from last weekend, Jesus continues to call himself the ‘Bread of Life.’ By identifying himself with bread, he is saying that he can nourish and strengthen us just like food. Every time we receive Jesus in Holy Communion, we are gaining strength for the journey of life.

In some sacristies, there is a sign as a reminder to the priest that says,
“Priest of God. Say this mass as if it were your first mass.
Say this mass as if it were last mass.
Say this mass as if it were your only mass.”

Knowing that this could be our last mass can motivate us to pay more attention to what we are doing each time we participate in communion. We never know when it will be the last time.

Every time we receive Holy Communion, we should be aware that we are receiving the food that strengthens us for our journey through life.

What goes on in my head and heart as I walk up here to receive communion? I know there is a lot that could distract us. But being fed by the bread of life is too important to just go through the motions for. We shouldn't wait until the end of life to take it seriously. Let us pray that every time we receive communion, we may truly be able to taste and see the goodness of the Lord.