

FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY: 19TH SUNDAY B

'Elijah got up and ate and drank [the food and drink provided by God], and strengthened by that food walked for forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.'

People of God, you and I are familiar with Holy Communion. We receive it when we are physically healthy. We receive it when we are physically sick. Today, in the light of the Scripture readings, and especially the sentence just quoted from the First Reading, I would like to speak to you about receiving Holy Communion when we are dying. This is to speak of receiving Christ as viaticum, i.e. as food for the journey to the other side of life, as food that will empower us to reach that mountain of God which we call '*heaven*'.

The term '*viaticum*' means '*food for the journey*' (literally and exactly, it means '*on the way with you*'). Originally, viaticum was not a Christian word. In the ancient pagan world of the Greeks and the Romans, it was either a farewell banquet or money given for a journey. It came to be applied to the last journey of dying persons. For that journey, a coin was placed in their mouths to pay the fare to the ferryman Charon for rowing the deceased across the river Styx to the company of gods and heroes. The early Christians adapted these pagan ideas and practices. For believers, the Eucharist became a farewell nourishment for the journey to heaven, a pledge of eternal life, and an assurance of resurrection.

In the Middle Ages and up to Vatican II, confession and forgiveness of sins, viaticum, and anointing (as extreme unction or last anointing) were given in a continuous ritual for the dying. Since the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, the Church no longer speaks of '*extreme unction*'. The emphasis in the Church today is on viaticum as the sacrament for the dying. The Church's prayer-book for the sick and the dying insists: '*The sacrament of the anointing of the sick should be celebrated at the beginning of a serious illness. Viaticum, celebrated when death is close, will then be understood as the last sacrament of Christian life*' (#175). Viaticum is the ultimate provision for Christians on their way to their eternal destiny, their homecoming. The Church says it signifies '*that the Christian follows the Lord to eternal glory and the banquet of the heavenly kingdom*'. Since the Eucharist is a pledge of the resurrection, the words used after giving viaticum are these: '*May the Lord Jesus Christ protect you and lead you to eternal life.*'

The value of viaticum for the dying Christian is illustrated in words of Jesus in today's gospel: '*I am the living bread which has come down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live forever...*' Those words of Jesus are echoed by St Ignatius of Antioch calling the Eucharist '*the medicine of immortality, that antidote that results not in dying, but in living forever in Jesus Christ*'.

Many indications in the Church's revised official prayer book for the sick and dying suggest that viaticum should be given some time before the final agony of death, when the dying are in full possession of their senses. The preferred setting is within the full celebration of the Eucharist, which is to include the renewal of the promises of baptism, the sign of peace, in

which all who have come together embrace the dying Christian, and then Holy Communion under the signs of both bread and wine. Viaticum may be repeated as long as the danger of death continues. The most appropriate time for viaticum may well be when the dying Christian has reached that stage which Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, expert on the stages of dying, has called the stage of '*acceptance*'.

In revising its celebration of the sacraments for the sick and the dying the Church has shown a double concern: - 1. to ensure the presence to the dying of the praying Church, and 2. to help the dying person complete the Christian life on earth.

It helps to remember that Jesus was frightened by the nearness of his death. He asked for the comfort of his friends to watch one hour with him. He prayed with a certain desperation: '*My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want*' (Mt 26:39). It's a Christian responsibility to help a dying brother or sister through the loneliness of their last days and moments on earth. This is particularly true of family, relatives, and close friends.

When my mother was dying in Melbourne in 1991, the biggest consolation I received was the news that my brother Passionist Tom McDonough had rushed from his home to Mum's death-bed, and gave her viaticum, and the news of how Mum struggled to respond to all the Church's prayers as she was passing over to eternal life.

When the time comes for my last moments on earth, will I be wanting viaticum as food for my journey to God? You bet I will. When the time comes for your last moments on earth, will you be wanting viaticum as food for your journey to God? I certainly hope so.

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