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Poetic vs. Literal Third Week of Easter Friday, May 9, 2014 8:15 AM Acts 9:1-20; **Jn 6:52-59** (Jesus' whole teaching was full of parables and figures of speech, and his actions were full of symbolic gestures that speak volumes, but they have to be interpreted.)

“The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

Of course the quarrel had to do with the literal meaning of the words. And much of the disputes, many of the **disputes**, between Jesus and the rabbis **were about the literal meaning of things.**

Early Christianity never interpreted anything literally. They couldn't. This whole text is really meant in a metaphorical sense. **It is referring to the Eucharist, the body and the blood, but in the form of bread and wine, not in the form of animal flesh and animal blood,** so to speak. So this requires already something going on within one's consciousness. It is a process that is similar to the writing or reading of poetry, and religion has always had this kind of work within it. Myths are of their very nature poetic expressions. Narratives are never intended really literally. They are full of allusions and metaphors and ways of saying things in figures of speech. **Jesus' whole teaching was full of parables and figures of speech, and his actions were full of symbolic gestures that speak volumes, but they have to be interpreted.**

So **the early church was never literal in its understand of anything.** And, in fact, that was the way things remained for a long time. In the Middle Ages, doctors of the faith spoke of, I believe, five or six **different levels of meaning in Scripture:** metaphorical, allegorical, prophetic, symbolic, and on and on. So what changed? Well, what changed was that actually **culture changed,** and all came to a head around the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when there was a **new burst of literalism** that was marked by such things as the invention of

the printing press. With the greater availability of books, with more and **more people learning how to read, there was actually a decline in the depths of understanding**, because learning how to read is great and wonderful, but it's only the first step to understanding anything. One cannot understand things just because one can read.

Now at this time, in a sort of coincidence, there erupted the **Protestant Reformation** with its attendant interest in reading the Bible, and not just the leaders, but **everybody was supposed to get into the act of reading the Bible and supposedly understanding what it meant**. This phenomenon was followed by the **Enlightenment**, which oddly was a turning one's back on the whole world of analogy and poetry and metaphor and symbol and **going for the literal, which was now the basis for new sciences**. Scientists expressed their discoveries in literal words and were understood by everyone in the same way. This is actually a problem.

People have grown up with the idea that everything is always progressing and evolving. Well, yes and no. In a way, yes, but not exactly improving and deepening, not necessarily. In a certain way, the last several hundred years have produced a **shallowing out of what was originally a very deep mystical understanding of life and reality**. We see the results all around us. We hear the results when we hear people who are educated and supposedly intelligent, and even leaders: academic leaders, political leaders, even church leaders, speak in ways that are not very deep, but just take everything for granted that see the surface of everything, and that's about it.

So this is the challenge for our day to **come back to texts like this and to really think deeply about them**. What gift are they really trying to offer?