

## Body and Blood of Christ

June 26, 2011

We shall do what the Lord commanded on this special feast called the Body and Blood of Christ: "Take and eat.... Take and drink." The basic truth was expressed, simply and profoundly, by Jesus himself: "This is my body... This is my blood." Incredible words, aren't they? Incredible from the first moment our Lord promised it. Do you remember that jolting sentence of Jesus to the Jews: "I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you?" For many of his disciples this was too much. "This is a hard saying. Who can listen to it?" And so they "drew back and no longer went about with him."

The question the Jews asked on that occasion has troubled much of the world ever since: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Theologians have argued the "how" down through the centuries. In the end we fall on our knees and worship humbly in the hymn of St. Thomas Aquinas:

Godhead here in hiding, whom I do adore  
Masked by these bare shadows, shape and nothing more:  
See, Lord, at thy service low lies here a heart  
Lost, all lost in wonder at the God thou art.

This is the truth St. Paul "received from the Lord." This is the tradition he "delivered" to the Christians of Corinth. This is the faith we express each time we proclaim: "The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." We call it the Real Presence. Jesus is present in the Eucharist, and his presence is real. Not that his presence in our hearts, in the gathered assembly, in the proclaimed word is not real. Rather because this presence is something special, unique. For it speaks a unique relation to Jesus' flesh and blood. "My flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed."

What does this basic truth, this Real Presence do to us? In a word, it gives us life. Unless you eat Jesus' flesh and drink his blood, "you have no life in you." I don't mean your heart stops beating. I'm not saying you cannot receive divine life without receiving Holy Communion. Many a noncommunicating Christian experiences Jesus' promise, "If you love me... my Father will love you, and we will

come to you and make our home in you.” The point is, here is a food which, in its potential for giving life, is unparalleled.

So, what does our Eucharist demand of us? The early Christian writers, the so-called Fathers of the Church, had a remarkable insight. They saw in the Eucharist the completion of the Incarnation. What the physical body of Christ began in Bethlehem, the sacramental body of Christ completes at the altar: the oneness of women and men with God and with one another in the humanity of Christ. Our oneness with God in Christ, initiated in the Incarnation, consummated in the Eucharist, must work itself out in a love that is limitless, a love that is all-inclusive, a love that is justified by the profoundly simple fact that “the other” is always and everywhere Christ.

First, the demand within Catholicism. The Bread of Life is not an individualistic thing, a solitary supper, my private party – something between “me and Jesus.” Its function is to form community. St. Paul phrased it beautifully: “Because the bread is one, we, though many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” Christ is not divided. Christ is not multiplied. There is one and the same body, one and the same Christ, for all. In his body we are one.

Which leads to a second issue: the world beyond our altars. A genuinely Eucharistic spirituality means that the Christ of Holy Thursday not only feeds me. He does with me today what he did that night with the bread: he takes me, and he blesses me, and he breaks me... and he gives me. Today’s feast of Corpus Christi should expand our horizons, force us to focus on the hungers of the human family. In that context – millions of men, women and children struggling desperately to live human lives, struggling even to live – talk about the Bread of Life can sound awfully empty, suspiciously hollow.

And it will be empty, will be hollow, unless we who feed on the Eucharistic Christ are ourselves eucharists for the life of the world. If I am to be a eucharist for the life of the world, my feeding on the flesh of Christ must take me from church to world. I must begin to be present to others, present where they are, present in ways that respond to their needs, to their hungers – for food or freedom, for peace or truth, for understanding or God. I must be really present. Is there anyone who is less hungry because I am there?