The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi)

June 2, 2013

Seventeen hundred years ago, a bishop in Jerusalem addressed the newly baptized gathered on Easter Sunday. And when the bishop spoke of Communion he described the rite in these words: “You hear the cantor inviting you to communion, ‘O taste and see that the Lord is good.’ When you come up to receive, make your left hand a throne for the right (for it is about to receive a King), cup your palm, and so receive the body of Christ. Then answer, Amen. After partaking of the body of Christ, approach also the chalice of his blood, bowing low in a posture of worship and reverence as you say, Amen. Then wait for the prayer and give thanks to God.”

Sixteen centuries later, we gather here to do what the Christians of Jerusalem did and what the apostles did in Jerusalem three centuries before that. On this special feast called the Body and Blood of Christ, we shall do what the Lord commanded: “Take and eat. Take and drink.” Today, in this church, the first century and the fourth and the twenty-first come together. The details differ but the reality is the same. The reality is expressed, simply and profoundly, by Jesus himself: “This is my body. This is my blood.” We call it the Real Presence. In the Eucharist Jesus is present 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 unique: “My flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.”

The Real Presence gives us life. Unless you eat Jesus’ flesh and drink his blood, “you have no life in you.” I am not saying you cannot receive divine life without receiving Holy Communion. We know the promise of Jesus: “If you love me, my Father will love you, and we will come to you and make our home with you.” The point is, here is food and drink which, in its potential for giving life, is unparalleled. So much so that we can cry out with St. Paul: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.” You are what you receive. You are Christ! And if we have been transformed into Christ, we should expect to live the life of Jesus. And that life moves to resurrection only through crucifixion.

The Body and Blood of Christ is not primarily a 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.” The Lord who locks himself in the tabernacle of my body is none other than the Lord who nourishes my next-door neighbor and the pope in Rome. The same Christ who feeds the African, the Asian, the European, and the Latin American. Christ is not divided. Christ is not multiplied. There is one and the same body, one and the same Christ, for all. In his flesh we are one.

Which leads us to the world beyond our church doors. A genuine liturgical spirituality means that the Christ of Holy Eucharist not only feeds me. He does with me 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 and force us to focus on the hungers of the human family. If I am to be 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, because as a Christian, as Christ, my life is love and only love can bring life, can light dulled eyes with hope, can promise somebody somewhere that tomorrow will be worth living.

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