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Some years ago, Franciscan Friar Scott Surrency composed a poem “Can you drink the cup?” and the opening verses pose the key question of today’s liturgy. Can you drink the cup?

Drink, not survey or analyze,

ponder or scrutinize –

from a distance.

But drink – imbibe, ingest,

take into you so that it becomes a piece of your inmost self.

Surrency’s poem creates a question from the challenge St. Augustine gave his people when he preached on the sacrament of the Eucharist in the fourth century. When Augustine spoke of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist, he said they “are called sacraments because in them one thing is seen, while another is grasped. ... what is grasped bears spiritual fruit.”

Today’s Liturgy of the Word guides us through the religious developments that led to our Eucharist. We begin as Moses leads his people in a spectacular liturgy of sacrifice. In what was almost participatory theater, the people renewed their covenant with the God who had led them out of Egypt and gave them commandments to assure a good life. The people listened and kept silence while Moses wrote. At the climax, he sprinkled them with blood representing the life they shared with God and would lose if they were unfaithful.

This celebration evolved into the Temple liturgies that kept Israel conscious of her covenant relationship with God. They provide the context for the portrayal of Christ as the final high priest in the Letter to the Hebrews, showing how he accomplished once for all what Moses and his successors celebrated with their people. Hebrews explains that the priests used animal blood to cleanse a defiled people, but Christ who shed his own blood, cleansed or transformed people’s consciences. Christ gave them new access to God whose reason for creation was to share life with them.

Mark's account of Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples brings this theology down to earth through a poignant story. When the disciples talk to Jesus about his [own] Passover, he reminds them that eating that meal together pledges them to share the same commitment and fate. While they were at supper, Jesus shockingly altered their ritual prayers. Instead of simply thanking God for the saving actions of the past, Jesus added his own name to the traditional litany of blessing. By doing so, he bade his friends to partake in his own self-giving.

When Jesus took the cup, a blessing cup they were accustomed to sharing, he gave it to them and they all drank of it. After they had drunk, he explained that it was the cup he had promised they would drink with him (Mark 10:39). It was their share in the cross he would take up, the symbol of losing their lives for him and the Gospel in such a way that by losing their life they would be saved. When they drank from that cup they signed a blank check of solidarity with him and his cause. They pledged themselves to full communion with him and he with them.

Today we are bidden to ponder Christ's question, "Can you drink the cup? Do you want this communion with me?" We are tempted to join Jesus' followers who too easily answer, "Yes! We want to see your glory!" Like the disciples who asked Jesus where they should prepare for him to go through his passover sacrifice, we facilely thank God for the eucharistic presence. We behave with reverence in our temples and pray, "I am not worthy ... but only say the word" before we process to the altar to receive the Eucharist. But Christ doesn't let his disciples off so easily. After he said, "Take and drink," he said, "This is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed for many." That was what they imbibed. That was what they took in so that it could become a part of their inmost self.

When Augustine taught about the Eucharist he offered these time-honored insights:

So now, if you want to understand the body of Christ, listen to the Apostle Paul speaking ... "You are the body of Christ, member for member" [1 Cor. 12:27]. ... You are saying "Amen" to what you are: your response is a personal signature, affirming your faith. ... Be a member of Christ's body, then, so that your "Amen" may ring true!

When we take our place in the Communion procession, Christ invites us not just to see and touch and taste. He calls us beyond our hymns of praise to where we can truly grasp what he offers and allow it to grasp us.

We cannot allow our marvel at the transformation of bread and wine to obscure how we are called to allow ourselves to be consecrated. Christ present in the Eucharist says to us, "Receive what you are and become what you receive; be flesh and blood given for the life of the world."

## **EXODUS 24:3-8**

Exodus 24 presents us with a scene in which Moses reminds his people of where they have come from and where they are going. In effect, he's giving them a summary of covenant life. This is quite the extraordinary event. The author tells us that Moses began by reminding the people of all the words of the law. It was a Liturgy of the Word citing texts they had heard before, but now they listened in solemn assembly. When they had listened to it all, they responded "with one voice" and recommitted themselves individually and communally to fulfill their side of the covenant. We are told that after hearing their assent, Moses wrote down all the Lord's words, implying that everything was clear and unalterable by either partner to the agreement.

Then, because the human community needs ritual as well as words to express a solemn commitment, Moses led them in an impressive two-part ceremony. First, he arranged to build a worship space representing the 12 tribes and their God. He had young men offer holocausts and peace offerings: burnt offerings for God alone and also sacrificial food to be symbolically shared by the people and God. Then, stepping up the drama a few notches, Moses collected the blood of the sacrificed animals and splashed half on the altar in the sight of the people. After he read the words of the covenant, the people reiterated their commitment and Moses sprinkled the rest of the blood on them with the words, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you."

It was an unforgettable spectacle designed to allow every single person in attendance to be caught up in the ritual of commitment. While sprinkling blood may sound gruesome to modern ears, it was a holy and solemn sign to the participants. Blood, the symbol of life, communicated the sense that God shared existence with the people. When they shouted their assent, this people who had involuntarily belonged to the Pharaoh proclaimed that they desired to belong to the God who had freed them. Being sprinkled with blood that had also been sprinkled on the altar indicated that this

people belonged to God in a unique way. William Propp, author of the Anchor Bible Commentaries on Exodus, explains that in Exodus 19:6, God had promised to make Israel a holy nation, a kingdom of priests. The blood-sprinkling also fulfilled that promise, consecrating them as a priestly people who could enter God's presence as mediators between heaven and earth.

The ritual, in which Moses led his people, formalized their covenant and their identity as the people of God. Catholics would call it a sacrament because it affected what it signified. Israel's sacrificial practices were rituals with multiple purposes. They symbolically expressed awareness that everything belongs to God and they proclaimed the people's desire to draw near to God in communion. The people understood these rituals both as expressions of their sentiments and as sacred acts in themselves. The people participated in them to symbolize and deepen their individual and communal commitment to God. In sum, whatever words and gestures, physical signs and symbols they used, notwithstanding the magical elements that inevitably crept into the practice, sacrifices developed as rituals of love and commitment. They reminded the people of who they were and reinforced their relationship with God.

## **PSALMS 116:12-13, 15-16, 17-18**

As seems most appropriate, we pray the same verses of this psalm on both Holy Thursday and in today's liturgy. As we celebrate the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ, the first verse of our psalm takes us back to the scene with Moses as he and his people renewed their covenant with God. Scholars debate what the psalmist means by the "cup of salvation," but like the cups of wine shared at the Passover supper, it seems to be like a communal toast to God's goodness. Taking up this cup binds us to one another as we will see more clearly from the Gospel.

The second verse of the psalm reminds us of the value God puts on every life. As each person is precious to God, we pledge to regard others as treasured coheirs of divine life. The third verse promises that we will offer a "sacrifice of thanksgiving," a phrase that must have been vividly on the minds of those who began to call the Lord's Supper the "Eucharist," a word that means thanksgiving. In the last strophe, as we say, "My vows to the Lord I will pay," we are echoing the Israelites who shouted together, "We will do everything that the Lord has told us to do!" With those words, we renew our baptismal promises to serve God as priests, prophets and kings.

## **HEBREWS 9:11-15**

The Letter to the Hebrews is not as much a letter as a sermon that describes God's action in the world. Its guiding theme is that all the good God has done for Israel is surpassed and fulfilled in Christ. This selection from the letter describes Christ as the ultimate high priest who offers the eternally efficacious sacrifice. In order to understand this, we need to understand the role of the high priest in the glory days of Temple worship.

In *Jesus The Forgiving Victim*, theologian James Alison describes the liturgy of the atonement as a drama in which everyone took part. The ancient Hebrews considered the Temple as the center of creation. The holy of holies in its center was God's dwelling, mystically outside the limits of creation. As the place from where God entered creation, it was concealed from the people by the veil of the Temple. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest would enter the Temple and emerge from the holy of holies. He was representing God who was coming to restore all of creation. The atonement that happened was God's work, carried out completely by divine initiative.

This understanding of the ritual opens a window to the message the Letter to the Hebrews is trying to convey. First, God is the primary actor in the drama of creation and redemption or atonement. The ritual is a divine gift, God's own way of drawing close to the people. Alison explains that in the Temple ceremonies, the high priest spent a day preparing himself before entering the holy of holies. Once inside, he spread the blood of a lamb, the symbolic blood of God, on "the Mercy Seat and other parts of the holy place ... [symbolizing] YHWH offering himself in self-sacrifice for the people as a priestly gesture." The Letter to the Hebrews explains that through Christ, the gestures that had been symbolic became real and eternal. The high priests used to spread sheep's blood which represented God's self-sacrifice, but Christ shed his own blood. Before he did so, Christ explained to his disciples that it was "for you and for all." Christ saw his sacrifice as for all people and all time.

This is what Hebrews means by calling Christ the "mediator of a new covenant." Christ's sacrifice is God's offer of self to humankind. The Gospel of Mark will lead us to contemplate this more deeply as it points out that Christ's once-for-all

covenant offer calls us to recommitment each time we celebrate the Eucharist.

## **MARK 14:12-16, 22-26**

As Mark tells the story of the preparations for the passion, Jesus is clearly in charge; even the people plotting against him are inadvertently advancing the goal he has in mind. Two small details reveal how Jesus prepared his own liturgy of Passover and Atonement and drew his disciples to participate in the drama.

First, as if the coming events were going to involve Jesus alone, the disciples asked where they should prepare for him to eat the Passover. When he gave them the instructions about the city and the man carrying a water jar, they realized that he already had everything planned. Then reminding them that he had predicted that “the cup that I drink, you will drink” (Mark 10:39), he told them to prepare the place where they would celebrate the Passover together. The new Passover was theirs — he would celebrate with them and for them.

At that supper, Jesus revised the traditional Passover ritual. The changes he made revealed how the Passover was being newly enacted, now not ritually or in remembrance, but concretely through the events that had begun to unfold. The traditional Passover meal celebrated the memory of the last meal the people of Israel ate as slaves. They ate it on the night that the blood of a lamb saved them from death and enabled them to escape into freedom. At the Last Supper, Jesus said the traditional prayer of thanksgiving as he broke the bread. But as he recited the ritual prayers and blessings recalling God’s saving actions in their history, he added himself to the story. In what had to be an unforgettable, shocking addition to the ceremony, he invited his disciples to eat the bread he had prayed over as communion with him. He was offering himself to them and inviting them to do the same.

When he took the cup, he reinforced his teaching as he again reinterpreted their traditional ritual. Jesus equated the cup with his blood poured out like the blood Moses sprinkled on the people when they ratified the covenant. It was like the blood the high priest would sprinkle on the people on the Day of Atonement, the blood which represented God’s offer of communion with the chosen people. And they drank that cup with him.

The Last Supper scene sums up the meaning and message of Jesus’ life. It revealed him as God’s self-offering to humanity and taught how humanity can accept divine life. Like many things he did, the words Jesus used at the Last Supper were shocking. In the minds of some, they were sacrilegious; in the hearts of others, they were sacramental. The shocking sacrilege some could not accept was that Jesus had equated himself with the God who reaches out to humanity in covenant love. The sacrament others perceived and received was his offer of Communion with that very God, Communion that comes through him, through his body and blood, through his life. Those who saw only sacrilege knew why his blood had to be poured out. Those who understood the invitation to Communion gradually understood that Communion called them as well to become his body. The readings for this celebration remind us that we are part of the whole Judeo-Christian salvation history. Most of all, as Augustine would tell us, they remind us that as a sacramental people we are called to be what we receive — the body of Christ.

# **Planning: Body and Blood of Christ**

**By: Lawrence Mick**

Today’s readings confront us with an interesting challenge. On this Solemnity of the Body and Blood of the Lord, the first reading recounts a time when Moses conveyed the commands of the Lord to the people of Israel. And their response was unconditional: “We will do everything that the Lord has told us.” Will we? Most Catholics, I suspect, would be willing to echo such a commitment.

Then the Gospel of the day recounts the events of the Last Supper, within which Jesus gives us three commands: Take and eat, take and drink, and do this in memory of me. Mark’s account does not actually contain all three commands, but we all recognize them from other Christian Scripture accounts and Mark’s version implies them. And we repeat these commands in every Mass.

Yet we continue to see many parishioners obeying Jesus' first command to eat his body but defying the second to drink his blood. Most of them, I assume, have no intention of defying the Lord, but they don't take seriously the importance of this command at the Last Supper.

We have inherited the problem, of course, from centuries of practice. For hundreds of years, the clergy restricted access to the cup to themselves, offering the laity only the body of Christ (and often denied that except on rare occasions). It was only in the 20th century that regular reception of communion on a weekly basis was restored, and that took decades after Pope St. Pius X urged it. Most Catholics today would rise up in revolt if the clergy tried to deny them access to the body of Christ, but many have no objection to the denial of the cup.

How did we move from a pattern of only annual Communion to weekly or even daily Communion? It took years of repeated catechesis to help parishioners understand that participating in Communion was an integral part of participating in the Mass. It took generations, and if church leaders and catechists had not taught this insight over and over again, it would not have taken hold in the church as a whole.

The same process is needed to help parishioners understand the value of sharing in the blood of Christ. Today's readings offer a good opportunity for preachers and planners to offer such catechesis to the faithful. Beyond the points we have already noted, our second reading revolves around the meaning of blood in the Jewish sacrifices and in Christ's sacrifice. And the first reading recounts Moses sprinkling the blood of the sacrifice on the altar and on the people, thus signifying communion of the people with God. Communion with God and with one another is the purpose of the Eucharist. Sharing the cup is a strong symbol of that unity.

## **Prayers: Body and Blood of Christ**

By: Joan DeMerchant

### **Introduction**

Something unique happened at the Last Supper and happens whenever we share in the Eucharist. Jesus instituted a new covenant, sealed in his Body and Blood. The covenant between God and us means that we are deeply connected not only to God, but to one another. Our connections, and the commitments they imply, extend to all people everywhere. Participating in the Eucharist may be the most challenging thing we are invited to do.

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, You established a new covenant at the Last Supper: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, You sealed the covenant in your body and blood: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, You call us into this covenant whenever we partake of the Eucharist: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** We pray now for all people, to whom we are connected by our participation in the Eucharist.

**Minister** For the whole church that we may appreciate the commitment we make to God and to one another as a eucharistic people ... we pray,

- For nations and individuals across the earth who feel alienated from one another because of fear, misunderstanding, politics or religious beliefs ... we pray,
- For our children and youth who are being formed in their understanding of the Eucharist; and for those responsible for teaching them, including parents, teachers and communities ... we pray,
- For all those who are denied access to the Eucharist; and for those who do not appreciate its meaning or who minimize its power and implications ... we pray,

- For those in this parish who cannot participate in the Eucharist for whatever reason; for our eucharistic ministers; and for all who need to be served more deeply by this eucharistic community ... we pray,

**Presider** God of the covenant, we are grateful that you have called us to be your people, in deep connection with you and with one another. Our participation in the Eucharist confirms this calling and our commitment to live it daily. Help us to remember this each time we approach the eucharistic table. We ask this in the name of your Son, in whose body and blood we partake. Amen.

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