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The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ

Thomas Gumbleton | Jun. 18, 2009 The Peace Pulpit

You may remember last Sunday on the Feast of the Holy Trinity, our gospel lesson ended with the very last words of St. Matthew?s gospel, where Jesus promised his disciples and promised all of us, ?I will be with you always, even until the end of time.? Now many of us, I believe, when we hear that promise and reflect on it, think of Jesus being present with us; as he said, ?I will be with you, present to you,? and we think of what we call the real presence in the Blessed Sacrament, the presence of Jesus living, risen, truly his body and blood, the whole Jesus.

Today's Readings
Exodus 24:3-8
Psalm 116:12-13, 15-16, 17-18
Hewbrews 9:11-15
Mark 14:12-16, 22-26
Full text of the readings [1]

We put a lot of emphasis on that so-called (not so-called, but what it really is) real presence of Jesus. Many of us maybe even remember back in what we call the old days, when we were younger, having Corpus Christi processions where we walked outside and stopped at three different places and had benediction with the Blessed Sacrament, the raising of demonstrates and being blessed. We were emphasizing what we thought of as the real presence of Jesus, and it truly is; however, that?s not the main meaning of the body and blood of Jesus.

As we listen to today?s reading, we get a deeper, I think, and more complete understanding of the Blessed Sacrament. Jesus, at the Last Supper (and we repeat this at every celebration of the Eucharist), said about the wine, ?This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant, the cup of my blood, the everlasting and new covenant.? Now we understand this meaning of the Eucharist only if we go back to the first lesson today, when the chosen people entered into a covenant, a binding agreement between the people and God.

Moses had read to them all of the Law, the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Law that God had given. He read the whole thing and he said, ?Will you follow this law?? And the people said, ?Yes. Yes, we will. We are God?s people. God is our God. We are God?s people. We will follow God?s way.? But then they sealed that in the ceremony that we heard about in the first lesson today, a sacrifice, where Moses used blood.

All of us, I?m sure, understand, as those people did, the deepest meaning of blood. We can?t live without blood. When someone?s blood is poured out, the person dies, so for those people, that blood was the sign of life. So when Moses sprinkled part of the blood on the altar, which was the sign of God?s presence, and then the other part of the blood on the people, it was a sign that they were sharing a covenant in that blood, sharing the same life -- God?s life and their life. They had become God?s people through that bond of blood, which is a bond of life.

What does Jesus say at the Last Supper? ?This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new covenant.? So as we drink from the cup at every Eucharist, we are letting that blood of Jesus, the sign of his life, enter into us. We are bonded to Jesus through the sharing of that blood, and through Jesus we are bonded to God. We share the very life of God. We become God?s new people, and this new covenant binds us to God.

So just as the first covenant bound the people to God and they pledged, ?We will follow God?s ways,? so all of us, when we come forward and receive the Eucharist under the form of bread, but even more importantly, together with the cup, when we receive that Eucharist, we are receiving for ourselves this new covenant. We are saying, as the chosen people did of old, ?We will follow now the way of Jesus.? We?re making a commitment.

It isn?t just the presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament that?s important. What?s more important is this commitment that we make every time we receive the Eucharist. We are saying, ?Yes, I will follow the way of Jesus,? the beatitudes -- blessed are the poor, blessed are the gentle, blessed are those who suffer persecution, blessed are those who are peacemakers.

Also, that whole message that Jesus gave in what we call the Sermon on the Mount: ?You heard that it was said of old, ?Thou shalt not kill.? I say to you, you must not even be angry with your brother or sister. Even if you?re going to the altar to offer your gift, and there you remember your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift at the altar, go and be reconciled.?

See, for Jesus, the most important thing was brining about reconciliation among people, not holding grudges, no vengeance, nothing of that sort. That?s the way of Jesus. Or ?you heard that it was said of old, ?An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,? but I say to you, offer no resistance to violence, even to [violent evil 6:33], but if someone wants you go to one mile, go two. If they want your coat, give them your cloak. If they strike you on one cheek, turn the other,? the way of Jesus.?You have heard that it was said of old, ?Love your neighbor, hate your enemy.? I say love your enemy.? See, the way of Jesus.

Every time we come forward and receive the Eucharist, we are renewing this covenant where we say, ?I will follow Jesus,? so the Blessed Sacrament is a very important part of our lives, not just the real presence of Jesus that we might adore and watch; no, it?s much more. It?s an action on our part, where we make a commitment, and it?s a commitment that?s very profound, and in another way also that is highlighted by St. Paul when he gave what is the oldest account of the Eucharist in the first letter to the church at Corinth.

Paul was writing to that community around the year 50, so this is the first account of the Last Supper, where Jesus gave himself under the form of bread and wine. When Paul describes what is happening there, he says, ?To continue with my advice, I cannot praise you for your gatherings,? when they gather for the Eucharist, ?for these are not for the better, but for the worse.?

Then he goes on to tell them why he can?t praise them when they come together for the Eucharist. He says, ?Look,? and they always did this in conjunction with a meal, he says, ?you separate yourselves the rich from the poor, and the rich eat the most and all the best and leave the rest for the poor.? He said, ?That?s not how you should gather for the Eucharist. Everyone comes together -- poor and rich -- everyone equal at the Eucharist.?

And then Paul goes on even more to explain to them why that?s so important, because he says, ?If anyone eats of the bread or drinks from the cup of the Lord unworthily, he sins against the body and blood of the Lord.? What he?s talking about ?unworthily? is when you discriminate against the poor and you don?t hold the poor in high regard and lift them up to be with you. If you don?t reach out to the poor and invite them to be part of the family and to share in all the goods, then you are not deserving, as Paul says, ?the very body of Jesus,? because the presence of Jesus is not just under that bread and wine; it?s in every person, and especially the poor.

So as we celebrate this feast of Corpus Christi today, the feast of the body and blood of Jesus, we must try to make sure that we understand its deepest meaning, that Jesus is giving us an opportunity to enter into a new covenant with God, a covenant where we promise to follow the way of Jesus faithfully, and a promise where we try to reach out in every way possible to the poor so we draw them in to the community so that everyone has an opportunity to share the goods of the earth that God has given for all.

There are some very practical ways in which we can live out this commitment, this covenant that we make when we receive the Eucharist, and that we can show respect for Jesus living especially in the poor. Just the other day, on Thursday of this week, the United Nations published what they call a ?Development Report,? and this report indicated that during this current recession that?s going on throughout the world, in the first half of 2009 (fiscal 2009), 104 million more people were among the hungry of the world, those who lack the barest necessities.

That?s four million every week. Now once more, after we?ve made some progress, there are more than a billion people on the planet who don?t have enough to eat -- they?re starving. Some of them are in the United States, people who have to make a choice between buying medication or buying food, people who are losing their homes. They have to double up or triple up, even, with two or three families in one small home. This poverty is extending. The United Nations report makes it clear how drastic is the situation. We will be developing new policies in our country, policies about healthcare, policies about reaching out to the poor, policies about employment, policies about immigration.

If we take seriously the covenant that we make in this Eucharist as we celebrate it today, and when we receive the body and blood of Jesus, we will try to enter into any discussion about those policies, and any decisions we make about how we?re going to support this or that, based on the commitment that we make in this Eucharist, to follow the way of Jesus, for whom the poor are the most important: ?Blessed are the poor,? the ones that Jesus thought of first when he was sharing himself and his life, and all that he had as he does in every Eucharist.

I hope that when we come forward and receive the Eucharist this morning, and the minister says, ?The body of Christ,? or, ?The blood of Christ,? and we say, ?Amen,? (which means yes), our amen will be a renewal of the commitment that we made to follow this new covenant, the covenant of Jesus, which is the covenant of love for all people, especially for the poor.

[This homily was preached at St. Hilary Parish, Redford, Mi.]

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