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## Our covenant unites us with God and with one another

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

I'm sure all of us are very familiar with this feast of Corpus Christi, which means, "Body of Christ," but which we now celebrate as the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ. Most of us probably wouldn't remember how we developed our spiritual life around the Blessed Sacrament, as we called it. When we celebrate the feast of Corpus Christi, the Body of Christ, we concentrated most of all on what we called the real presence. We had processions in the old days where we even went out into the streets to show Jesus present in the midst of all of us, all people.

The whole concentration of our celebration of the sacrament was on the presence. We developed devotions where we would kneel in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, sometimes exposed in what we called the monstrance, set above the tabernacle. That, of course, is a very important part of our sacrament of devotion, being aware that Jesus, son of God, is fully present: body, blood -- his whole being -- in the piece of bread, the host.

If we listen very carefully to our lessons today, I think we'll get another aspect of this sacrament of devotion, devotion to the Holy Eucharist, that I think in some ways is even more important than our concentration on the real presence. If you noticed in the Gospel lesson, Jesus says when he offers the cup to his disciples, "This is my blood, the blood of the new covenant." When we hear that word covenant, it reminds us about that first covenant that we heard about in the first lesson today.

That is a very important moment in the history of the chosen people. They were wandering through the desert. They were lost many times, as you recall how it took them so long to get through the desert to the

The Solemnity of the  
Most Holy Body and Blood  
of Christ

Exodus 24:3-8  
Psalms 116:12-13, 15-16, 17-18  
Hebrews 9:11-15

Mark 14:12-16, 22-26  
Full text of the readings

Promised Land. At this point in their journey, they stopped, and they had a very special ritual. It starts with Moses bringing all the people together. He told the people all the words of God and all God's laws. The people replied with one voice, "Everything that God has said, we shall do."

Then Moses, as we hear, wrote down all those words. Early in the morning the next day, Moses built an altar. This is all described in the first lesson. It was a very special altar that, for the Jewish people, symbolized the presence of God. They're all gathered there before the altar, and then they have a special ritual meal where they butcher some animals and share together the same food, a sign of their coming together as one. Then -- for the Jewish people, this is very important -- they took the blood from those animals.

For them, blood is a sign of life itself. In the primitive understanding of human life, everyone understood that if one lost his or her blood, you would die. You can't live without blood. So it's a very symbol of life. Now, the altar is a symbol of God, and the people are gathered there before it. Moses takes the blood and sprinkles some of it on the people, and then some on the altar, to show that they are united, God and the people. There is a bond of that gift of life, symbolized by blood.

They share God's life. God shares their life later in Jesus. So it's a sign of the covenant, and Moses tells them. With the other half of the blood, he sprinkles the altar and the book of the covenant and he read it in the hearing of the people. They said, "All that God said, we shall do and obey." Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people. "Here is the blood of the covenant God has made with you."

There are a couple of very important things to realize about that ritual. First of all, it's a coming together of the people and God, sharing life. God's life is shared with the people, symbolized by that blood. The people understand this and say, "We will be God's people. God will be our God." What's also so important is, before this whole ritual started, Moses read to them the Word of God. Then at the end of it, he reads that Word again. Both times, the people say, "All that God has told us, we shall do."

They commit themselves to carry out the Word of God. Now when we celebrate the Blessed Sacrament and celebrate the Eucharist as we're doing right now, there's a very important thing for us to be aware of, that this is the new covenant, not in the blood of animals, but in the very blood of Jesus that unites us with one another, but also with God in a very deep, profound way. We are God's people now, people of the new covenant, an agreement between God and God's people.

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Just as those chosen people, to live out that covenant, to show that they really were God's people, they had to live according to the word of God, that is true of us also. We hear this Word of God every week, and it's to form us, to shape us, to guide us to truly become God's people. The Jews in the desert understood that, and they committed themselves to live according to God's word. When we receive the Blessed Sacrament, especially when we drink from the cup of the new covenant, we should be acknowledging that we are God's people and we, too, will live according to God's word.

I would like to just offer a couple of examples of what that means for us, to live according to God's word. It will change our lives if we really do it because God's word is a word that converts us, changes us. One of the most important times where Jesus speaks the word of God and tells us by his example that we must follow it is right toward the end of his life, when he is challenged by some people as to who he is. He tells them about his suffering and death, and he assures them that he must go through this suffering and death that he will experience in a matter of a week or so.

Then Jesus says to them and to us, "I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself." Here is the meaning of the crucifixion, the death of Jesus that is made present in this Eucharist. Jesus pours forth his life, sheds his blood, in order to show us God's love. Sometimes we think of Jesus dying on the cross as paying for our sins. It's not that. God doesn't demand payment of the death of his son. No, what Jesus is showing us is that in the midst of hatred, in the midst of violence which is being perpetrated against him, he responds with love.

"I, when I am lifted up on that cross, shedding my blood, will pour forth my love and draw all people to myself." This is probably the hardest teaching of Jesus, if you think about it, because Jesus is urging us always, in the midst of violence, hatred or profound evil, not to respond in the same way, which would be our normal tendency, to return evil for evil, hate for hate or violence for violence. No, instead, return love. That's the word of Jesus.

I think that's the most important word of Jesus, that love is the way we will transform our world in the reign of God. So this morning, when we celebrate this Eucharist, and especially when we come forward to drink from the cup, we should remind ourselves this is the cup of the new covenant, the covenant that proclaims the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and the covenant that binds us to God as God's sons and daughters, but makes us other Christs in our world.

This is the cup of that new covenant, and as we drink it, we should commit ourselves to say yes, as those chosen people did in the desert. We will follow all God's word, especially that word of love, returning love for hate, good for evil, transforming our world by sharing with Jesus when he is lifted up, and draw all people to God, making the reign of God happen. That's what we commit ourselves to as we celebrate this Eucharist, and especially when we drink from the cup, the cup of the new covenant and the blood of Jesus.

[Homily given at St. Hilary, Redford, Mich. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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