

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

Thomas Gumbleton | Jun. 23, 2006 The Peace Pulpit

During this past week, as some of you may know, the Catholic bishops of the United States gathered for our semi-annual meeting. One of the topics on the agenda was a report from the committee on that very divisive question that arose almost two years ago during the election about denying Holy Communion to people, determining that some people are not worthy to come forward and accept the Body and Blood of Jesus. Thankfully, the report came to a moderate conclusion, and there is going to be a very real attempt that we won't be trying to exclude people from coming forward to receive the Eucharist.

But if we listen closely to the Scriptures today and try to get a deep understanding of what the Holy Eucharist really is, we will understand, I think. The scriptures today reflect the idea that the Eucharist is most of all the living presence of Jesus. To think of the Eucharist as a kind of prize that you earn, that you make yourself worthy to receive the Body and Blood of Jesus -- that's a very wrong approach, a wrong understanding of the Eucharist. It leads us to the idea that we put Jesus in the tabernacle and we worship him and that's the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Jesus.

But, again, if we really listen to the Scriptures today, we'll understand that what we celebrate today is not simply the living presence of Jesus under the form of bread and wine, as marvelous as that is. What this feast really is and what we must do today is make it this -- it's an action. The Eucharist isn't a thing; it's an action. We have to come, to gather together as we do on Sundays, as a community of disciples of Jesus and do an action.

That's what those people were doing at Sinai in our first lesson today. When you listen carefully to this account you will immediately see that the very words that are used here are the words that Jesus uses when he celebrates the Passover meal for the last time with his disciples. Moses came and told the people all the words of Yahweh and his law. Moses read all the message that God had given. The people listened and replied with

one voice, "Everything that Yahweh has said, we shall do." We come together to celebrate the Eucharist and the first thing we do is try to listen to God's Word, and we should be responding just as those people did -- "Everything that God says, we shall do." We make a commitment to listen, to commit ourselves to follow what God has said. And then after they had done that, they had the sacrifice and gathered together the blood of the slaughtered animals.

To us, this probably not a very helpful sign, but if we put ourselves in the perspective of those people of thousands and thousands of years ago, blood was actually for them life. Because they could see that when someone bled, lost his or her blood, the person died -- the life went out of the person. For them this was a very clear image of life, and so when Moses took that blood and sprinkled part of it on the altar they had built, which was a sign of God's presence, and the other part on the people, Moses was saying, "We're making a covenant. The life of God is our life; our life is the life of God. We are bound together through the same life." I'm sure that was a very powerful experience for those people, to think that God's life was sprinkled upon them -- the life which was sprinkled on the altar which was God. The same life was given to them. "And then Moses took the book and read again, in the hearing of all the people, and they said again, "All that Yahweh said we shall do and obey." Then Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people saying, "Here is the blood of the covenant that God has made with you in accordance with all these words." And so they had entered into a powerful, life-giving covenant with God.

At the Last Supper, Jesus does the very same thing. Passover meal, part of it was to read the scripture, and then Jesus performed the ritual of taking the cup of wine, and the words that we hear every time we come together to celebrate the Eucharist, "This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all." What should be our response? When we come forward to receive the Eucharist, what do we say? "Amen!" Maybe many times we say that without a deep awareness of what we're saying. That word means "yes." So we are saying in effect what those chosen people said. "Everything that God says, we will do." We make a commitment; we enter into a covenant with God. It's an action.

Obviously we don't come forward only when we're perfect; when we have no faults or failures or sin, because then we would never enter into that covenant. And so we come forward as we are. But we also make the commitment that we're going to try to listen to God's Word and follow it; be committed, enter into a covenant with God through Jesus. A very important part of this covenant is the fact that Jesus offers it to all. "This is the cup of my blood, given for all."

Also at the Last Supper, Jesus took his own cup. Ordinarily at the Passover meal, every person would have a cup in front of them, and each one would drink from his or her own cup, but Jesus said, "This is the cup of my blood," and he passed it around -- everybody drank from the same cup. It's a way of showing how we become one in Jesus. This has a very important significance I think, and it came up in a way, again during the bishops' meeting. If we consider ourselves made one with Christ, with God in Jesus, through the Eucharist, then we are one with all people of all times of all places. There are no geographical limitations, no temporal limitations. Jesus is the same today, yesterday and forever. It is the same Body of Jesus now and always.

How that came up in the bishop's meeting was connected with the terrible tragedy within our church -- the sex scandal. I was at a meeting with one group of bishops who were responsible for trying to oversee our response to this. As often happens, and maybe you thought this too, some were saying, "Well, it's unjust if we have to offer extraordinary compensation. People today have to pay for the sins from the past." But that's only if you think of the church as kind of a corporation, and we're the current stockholders, other people were stockholders before. If you think of the church as the Body of Christ, doesn't that make everything different? We're the same Body of Christ -- of a generation ago or 10 generations ago. Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever. And so we, as the Body of Christ, should be deeply involved in trying to resolve the crisis that still exists in our church, and understand that even if it takes extra effort and sacrifice for us to repair the harm that was done decades ago, because we are the Body of Jesus, and we made this covenant with God in Jesus, it would be just and right for us to make that compensation in so far as we can.

Another thing that we need to think about when we say our "Amen," when we come forward to receive the Eucharist, is that we are saying "yes" to the Word of God. What a striking example those chosen people were in the desert -- "Everything that God says, we will do." How does God speak to us? The Word of God is Jesus. And so every time we receive the Eucharist we say, "Amen." We are saying "yes" to Jesus, to all that Jesus preaches, to all that Jesus is, the very Word of God. And we don't come forward only when we're fully healed, we come forward when we need to be drawn more deeply into the way of Jesus. We don't say "Yes, I've done it." We say, "Yes, I will try to listen to the Word of God in Jesus and follow Jesus as faithfully as possible."

My hope this morning is that as we celebrate this Feast of the Body and Blood of Jesus we will remember, yes, it is the living presence of God in Jesus, under the form of bread and wine, and we will have profound respect

and reverence, but even more, we will remind ourselves that as we receive the Body and Blood of Jesus, we are saying "Amen" -- "Yes, we want to enter into this covenant where God is our God, we are God's people." Where we are willing to say "yes" to everything God tells us in Jesus. It's a very important and extraordinary commitment that we make. And yes we ought not to just casually jump forward and receive the Eucharist. No we must come forward to receive it with a determination to make our "yes" authentic and real so that we leave our church building, go back into our daily lives, ready to live according to every Word that God's speaks, all of it contained in Jesus.

Amen! I hope everyone will say that with determination and conviction this morning as we come forward to receive the Eucharist -- the Body of Christ, the Blood of Christ. Amen. [Congregation says, "Amen!"]

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