

**ECHOING GOD'S WORD
IN
THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY
June 11, 2023
Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ**

SCRIPTURES:

Deuteronomy 8:2-3, 14-16
1 Corinthians 10:16-17
John 6:51-59

The Lord feeds his people with manna.
We are made one with God and with one another.
Eat and drink for everlasting life.

SCRIPTURE BACKGROUND:

John:

In John's Gospel, we have no institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. The Bread of Life discourse takes place in Chapter 6. In this discourse, Jesus *promises* the Eucharist and describes its reality and its effect in the lives of the disciples. Jesus makes clear that he is not talking about his physical body to be given as food. He disposes of the physical dimension in referring to the manna given in the desert. The bread of which he speaks is for *everlasting life*. The manna could not give life beyond the grave. The people of Israel ate a physical food in the desert for the life of the physical body. The food that Jesus will give has the power to give eternal life. It is therefore a food that has passed beyond the physical.

The problem we have today with this language is perhaps the very opposite from what much of early Christianity had in understanding the reality of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist. In the philosophy of Plato, which influenced much of early Christian understanding, that which is *real* is the *spiritual*. The *physical* is only a shadow of the real. Today, we have come all the way around: that which is *real* is *physical, concrete, visible, palpable*.

So, we struggle with the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist: How is Jesus Christ present to us when we celebrate the Eucharist? Surely, it is not his physical body that we eat and his physical blood that we drink. If it were a physical reality, we would be practicing cannibals. If it were merely a spiritual presence, we would not be in touch with the reality of the body and blood which were sacrificed on the cross for our salvation. We must not empty the Eucharist of its real content in order to avoid cannibalism.

There is another mode of presence through which Christ can be really present to us for our salvation: sacramental presence. God gives us a "sign" that truly communicates that which it signifies. The "sign" is food: bread and wine. That which is communicated is the body and blood of Christ. That which is "sacramental" is no less real than that which is physical. Jesus Christ is the new evidence given by God that God still loves the people; that God cares for them always; that God will provide for them into the life of the kingdom. His body and blood, the full sign of his total being, will be given to those who are in need of salvation.

In the imagery of the ancient world, humans were made up of body and *blood*, not body

and *soul*, as we would say today. The blood was the sign of life itself, the sign that God was present and active in that person. Blood was the sacred sign of the divine presence. Blood had to be completely drained from the flesh of any animal before it could be eaten, so as not to be *defiled with sacredness!*

Jesus speaks of *feeding on him*. It is the person of Christ, his whole being, that is communicated to us in the Eucharist. In other words, it is the living Christ that gives life to us even today, as a sign of God's faithfulness to the Covenant.

We cannot live the life of the New Covenant without a total involvement with the living Lord who is Jesus Christ. God shows faithfulness to the Church when we celebrate the Eucharist. We are not alone. God is still with us in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Deuteronomy:

The people of God in the desert for 40 years needed evidence that God was still with them, that God was still faithful to the Covenant he had made with them. He had promised to be with them always and to care for them. Where was he now when they were hungry and thirsty? Food and drink were going to be the proof of God's faithfulness. The *manna* found on the desert floor at dawn and the *water* gushing forth from the rock are only a sign that God is still with his people, with power to save, with a love intense enough to rescue from death. No wonder the Church will want to use this passage to speak about the Eucharist, the body and blood of Christ, the ultimate sign of God's Covenant, the new Covenant sealed in the blood of Christ.

1 Corinthians:

Written before any of the three Gospel accounts of the bread and wine scene at the Last Supper, and especially long before the Bread of Life Discourse in John's Gospel, the 1st Letter to the Corinthians gives early evidence of the practice of eucharistic celebrations in the Christian community. Already, by the year 40 of the Common Era, abuses had arisen in the way some communities celebrated the Supper of the Lord. Paul writes to issue warnings and corrections. He reminds the people that we are truly involved in the body and blood of Christ when we share this bread and wine. Notice that it is in the *action* of sharing and breaking that we come into contact with the blood and with the body of Christ. And the *effect* of that sharing and of that breaking is that we transcend the barriers that keep us apart: we become one. It is the unavoidable effect of the body and the blood upon us.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the value of family meals in terms of developing and maintaining the bonds of love and unity in the family. Does your family still have a family meal once a day? Once a week? Do you value that time for the love and unity which binds the family together? Is sharing food a sign of mutual faithfulness in your family and in your parish?
2. Do you see any connection between the Catholic tradition of frequent celebration of the Eucharist and our love of song, dance, and good food in many Catholic families? Do you see any connection between our Masses and our soup kitchens and food banks? During the Great Depression of the 1920s and 30s, Catholic neighborhoods took care of each other with assurances of food for every family. How do we do that today?
3. What sign of special reverence do you show to the body and blood of Christ as you approach the Eucharist at Sunday Mass? What reverence do you show toward the Blessed Sacrament reserved in the tabernacle in our churches? Do you sometimes spend time with the Lord in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament as a prolongation of the action of the Eucharist?

SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION

Most of our church buildings have to be locked all day when no staff person is present in the building because of insurance requirements. Discuss how it might be possible to assure security in your church and make the Blessed Sacrament available for personal prayer daily. Discuss your proposal with your pastor.

PRAYER

**Lord Jesus Christ,
you give us your body and blood in the Eucharist
as a sign that even now we share your life.
May we come to possess it completely in the kingdom
where you live forever and ever.**

(Prayer After Communion: Feast of Corpus Christi)

CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

Some remain not at all happy with the changes that have taken place in the Church since the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. Perhaps next to the changes in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, nothing gets these people more upset than the decline in knowledge of facts concerning religion and concerning the Catholic faith in particular. We see quoted time and time again some of the results of polls that show a surprising lack of disparity between knowledge of traditional Catholic doctrines and a willingness to continue calling themselves Catholics. Many people still consider themselves Catholics although they may not be able to articulate the articles of faith in the traditional way. When asked whether they thought Jesus Christ was truly present in the sacrament of the Eucharist, nearly half of the Catholics said, "No." No wonder some of us are concerned when we hear such reports.

I once held a discussion with some older people who had been formed in the methods of religious education in use before the Vatican Council. I asked them some of the same questions that younger people, educated more recently, apparently have difficulty with. "Is Jesus Christ God?" "Can the priest forgive sins in confession?" "Did Jesus physically rise from the dead after three days?" "Is marriage binding until the death of one of the spouses?" "Do Catholics worship the Blessed Virgin Mary?" "Was Mary still a virgin after the birth of Jesus?" When I allowed only a simple "Yes" or "No" answer, I got much the same results as the national surveys allegedly get! But, they wanted to explain that their beliefs are much more complex than can be conveyed with a one-word answer.

On the question of the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, those who answered "No" wanted to explain that Jesus was not present in a way that would lead to the host bleeding if you chewed it or broke it into pieces. They wanted to avoid saying that Jesus was "physically" present. They did not have the sophisticated language of theology to distinguish between *physical* and *sacramental* presence. One person was quite well-informed and had the words to express the faith of the Church concerning the sacramental presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. She said, "It is the risen and glorified Lord Jesus Christ who is present in the sacrament. He has passed *beyond the physical dimension*."

I suspect that Catholics have a much more accurate perception of what they believe. They may lack the traditional language for expressing their faith, but there is probably not much wrong with the faith itself. **"My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them."**