

The Body and Blood of Christ (CORPUS CHRISTI) June 18, 2017

Deuteronomy 8:2-3, 14-16; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17; John 6:51-52

Today, we are celebrating the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ. This special Feast is celebrated in remembrance of Jesus who gave His life for our salvation and commanded us to celebrate the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist in his memory. The Feast owes its existence to Blessed Juliana of Liege, who began devotion to the Blessed Sacrament in around 1230. Largely through her insistence, in 1264 Pope Urban 1V commanded its observance by the universal church. The Feast sums up three important confessions about our Faith. First is that God became physically present in the person of Christ, true God and true Man. Secondly, God continues to be present in His people as they form the Mystical Body of Christ in his church. Thirdly, the presence of God under the form of bread and wine is made available to us on the altar at Mass and preserved there for our nourishment and worship. Our liturgy today recalls the scriptural origins of this devotion. In the first reading of today Moses reminds his people of God's many gifts and particularly to remember the manna, the food that had been unknown to their ancestors, through which he fed them during their journey in the desert. St Paul in the second reading reminds us that we receive Christ under the form of bread and wine. Because we are joined to him, we are also united to one another, leading to the building of the mystical body of Christ. In the Gospel Jesus immediately after the miracle of the multiplication of loaves proclaims that he is the bread of life. Whoever eats his flesh and drinks his blood will have the eternal life.

Eucharist in the church can be understood as a communal sacrificial meal, offered by the community of believers along with the priest, to the heavenly Father together with Jesus for the remission of sins and as an offering of gratitude and thanksgiving. The Eucharist is essentially and of its very nature a community action in which every person present is expected to be an active participant and the priest presides over it. We are here, on the one hand, recalling what makes us Christians in the first place - our identification with the life, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. And that identification with Jesus is expressed not through a one-to-one relationship with him but in a community relationship with him present in all those who call themselves Christian. We relate to him through his Risen Body, which is the whole community bearing his name. Thus there is no place in Christianity for individualism. It is a horizontal faith: we go to God with and through those around us. That is the reason why Paul asks the community to

share the meal together because Jesus broke the bread and shared, saying that it is his body. Same thing he did with wine, saying it is his blood. Through this sharing we become one with him.

The Feast of Corpus Christi reminds us that we as Christians possess an immense treasure. Jesus himself, through the Eucharist, grants to us the most powerful experience of intimacy possible within our earthly existence. As Pope Benedict XVI explains: "That is what is really happening in Communion, that we allow ourselves to be drawn into him, into his inner communion and finally into a state of inner resemblance". In his teaching Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from Heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." With these words Jesus offered his own life for the sins of the humanity. At the Last Supper Jesus taught His followers the manner in which the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist should be celebrated. He also told them that he would be physically present in the Sacrament of the Eucharist and will be with them till the end of times. But his sacrifice was complete on Calvary when he shed his last drop of blood and water for the sake of humanity. The manna was not only material food giving physical life, but was a symbol of God's word, which was the means of a superior spiritual life: the life of communion with God through the covenant.

In today's first reading Moses reminds the Israelites of Yahweh's providence during their wilderness experience and tells them that they wandering in the desert could not have continued their journey without being sustained by God. He wants them to remember the special food, manna, God provided for them during their journey. The properties of the manna were intended to teach the people to trust in God. They had to trust that God would provide for them each day. If they tried to set some manna aside for the next day, it spoilt overnight. Saving the manna was a demonstration of self-reliance rather than trust in God. But on the day before Sabbath, God provided twice as much for each of them so that they could spend their Sabbath giving thanks to God for all the gifts they received. The book of Deuteronomy consists of Moses' farewell address to people who are about to enter Canaan. They are warned of coming temptation, the possibility of forgetting God, and are urged to remain faithful to the covenant. The people are reminded of Yahweh's leadership during the forty years of wandering, his protection from snakes and scorpions, and his supplying food and drink. As a result, they are to remember God's goodness, to be humble, and to prove their loyalty by obeying the laws of the covenant. Moses reminds the Israelites that as

their lives become more prosperous they are to remember their times of trial and struggle. He who was capable of nourishing their bodies in the wilderness was able to meet their spiritual needs as well.

St Paul provides us with the earliest detailed account of the Lord's Supper and the Institution of the Eucharist. He tells them how Lord Jesus at the Last Supper took bread and broke it and gave it to the disciples saying "This is my Body which is for you. Do it in remembrance of me." He did the same with the cup of wine telling them: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. As often you do this, do it in remembrance of me." Paul tells them that bread becomes the Body of Jesus and wine becomes his Blood. He advises them to make Eucharist as the centre of their lives because of practical reasons as the church at Corinth had problems with unity, mainly due to their economic status. When the church came together to celebrate the Eucharist they also had their meal together as a single community. The problem in Corinth was that the rich would go ahead and eat without waiting for others and not even making sure that the poor in the congregation had eaten or even brought food with them. The poor probably made up a large portion of the congregation, many of them slaves. By eating without the poor, the rich showed utter disdain for their brothers and sisters, an offence against Christian unity. Paul tells them that there is no division in Christ's Community as he shared one bread and one cup and formed a true community. We are truly united to Christ in his sacrifice.

In today's Gospel John picks up the theme of manna, and contrasts the bread the Israelites ate in the desert with the new bread of life given by Jesus. John says that, in the person of Jesus, there is a new Word of God and new bread from heaven. This Word of God has become flesh; and the new bread of heaven is the very life of Jesus himself. To eat this bread, says John, is to have a share in the life of God's own self, and to share eternal life. These verses contain the climax of Jesus' 'Bread of Life' discourse, which announced a bold promise of eternal life for all who believe in him and partake of his presence in the Eucharist. In unmistakable language, Jesus identifies himself with the elements of our Eucharistic sacrifice, namely, the bread and wine. We feed on Jesus by believing or "taking in" his Word and acting on it, and by believing in and "taking in" his divine presence in the bread and wine. Just as we and the substances we eat and drink become one, so Jesus and those who feed on him form an intimate union. Jesus tells the people and the disciples that unless they eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, they will have no life in them. He tells them solemnly:

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day: for 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.” The reading concludes with a contrast between the food that Jesus gives and the manna, which the Israelites received. Those who ate manna died; those who feed on Jesus will live forever.

The Gospel message comes to us saying that we are to eat his flesh and drink his blood in the sense that we are to appropriate, to assimilate totally into our very being all that he teaches, his vision, his values, his understanding of the meaning and purpose of life. We are to be able to say, with Paul, I live, not I, but Christ lives in me. This is the basic and fundamental meaning of eating the body and blood of Christ, to have a total union with him in our way of thinking and living. Secondly, if we truly belong to Christ, then we become consciously and actively participating members of that Body, loving, serving and caring for each other and corporately giving witness to the vision that Jesus gave us to be shared with people all over the world. Thirdly, by partaking in the Eucharist we become the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ sharing our life with others. The Eucharist is truly a sign and a good Eucharist is the sign of a living community. At the same time Eucharist is the participation in the divinity of Jesus who gives us his own self to be our food and drink.

Jesus gives his disciples the Eucharist. Eucharist means thanksgiving and blessing. We express our gratitude to God for all the gratuitous gifts God has given us in Jesus and we offer back to him the gratitude in the form of Bread and wine. Eucharist means a Blessing. Blessing actually means prayer of praise and glorification for all the Lord God has done for us in Jesus. It is a meal shared by the community in the name of Jesus. It is a sacrificial meal, meaning it is an offering to God as a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus uses here the symbol of a simple meal to show his presence to us and chooses to remain in the form of simple bread and wine, a poor person's meal. Here the emphasis is more the community dimension of the celebration of the Eucharist which is often missing. Our Eucharistic celebration often tends to be an individual participation. Eucharist indeed is a communal celebration where we share in the one bread and one cup. A priest as the leader of the group only presides and leads the community in the offering of the sacrifice.

Every Eucharist is a unique celebration. When the celebrant takes a little piece of unleavened bread and repeats the words that Jesus spoke at the Last Supper,

"This is my body", and when he takes a small amount of wine in a chalice and says, "This is my blood", the bread is no longer bread and the wine is no longer wine. At every Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, we participate in a marvelous miracle, the miracle called Transubstantiation. This is truly God's gift to us. Thus Eucharist is a gift, not just to be adored and revered, but also to be consumed, digested and lived by every Christian. What were once the simple gifts of bread and wine truly become transformed into the Body and Blood of our Saviour - the new covenant between God and mankind. It is not a private gift, but a communal one. When the priest holds up the consecrated Host and the cup of Wine and says, " This is My Body - this is My Blood ", he is also saying, for Jesus, "you are my body... you are my blood." Jesus gives us His Body and Blood so that He might live in us and so that we, then, might become life for the world. But God is always new, always challenging. Each new circumstance of our life should lead us to a new understanding of His goodness and love. As we grow older, God should become younger for us.

In this Communal Sacrificial Meal celebrated by the Community, we have the presence of Jesus who is the victim, the altar and the priest. He offers himself to the Father as a special offering for the reconciliation of the world. It is offered and shared in a community with no difference of caste and creed and language as a fulfilment of the final mission of Jesus to save the world. Therefore everyone is called upon to prepare themselves to receive the Lord worthily. As we break the bread at the Eucharistic table we ask the grace to be worthy of the Lord's mystery and be his instruments to bring his unity and charity in the world. As we continue with the celebration of the Holy Mass, let us be thankful to the Lord Jesus for His Body and Blood that assures us our salvation. Let us also remember throughout the week that as new creations, we are called to feed on the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist so the Body and Blood of Christ may transform us in His likeness. The feast invites us to remember the connection between communion and community.

Today we are reminded of a miracle that took place in 1263. A German priest, Peter of Prague, stopped at Bolsena while on a pilgrimage to Rome. He is described as being a pious priest, but one who found it difficult to believe in Transubstantiation. While celebrating Mass at the tomb of St. Christina, located in Bolsena, Italy, he had barely spoken the words of Consecration when blood started to seep from the consecrated Host and trickle over his hands onto the altar and the corporal. The priest was immediately confused. At first he

attempted to hide the blood, but then he interrupted the Mass and asked to be taken to the neighboring city of Orvieto, the city where Pope Urban IV was then residing. The Pope listened to the priest's story and gave him absolution for his lack of faith. He then sent emissaries for an immediate investigation. When all the facts were ascertained, he ordered the Bishop of the diocese to bring to Orvieto the Host and the linen cloth bearing the stains of blood. With archbishops, cardinals and other Church dignitaries in attendance, the Pope met the procession and, amid great pomp, had the relics placed in the cathedral. The linen corporal bearing the spots of blood is still reverently enshrined and exhibited in the Cathedral of Orvieto, Italy. Pope Urban IV was prompted by this miracle to commission St. Thomas Aquinas to compose the liturgical prayers in honor of the Eucharist. One year after the miracle, in August of 1264, Pope Urban IV introduced the saint's compositions, and by means of a papal bull instituted the feast of Corpus Christi.

Many years ago, at a hospital, there was a little girl named Liz who was suffering from a rare & serious disease. Her only chance of recovery appeared to be a blood transfusion from her 5-year old brother, who had miraculously survived the same disease and had developed the antibodies needed to combat the illness.. The doctor explained the situation to her little brother, and asked the little boy if he would be willing to give his blood to his sister. He hesitated for only a moment before taking a deep breath and saying, 'Yes I'll do it if it will save her.' As the transfusion progressed, he lay in bed next to his sister and smiled, as all did, seeing the colour returning to her cheek. Then his face grew pale and his smile faded. He looked up at the doctor and asked with a trembling voice, 'Will I start to die right away'. Being young, the little boy had misunderstood the doctor; he thought he was going to have to give his sister all of his blood in order to save her. He said No child. You have saved her and you will be as strong as before if not more. You will have all the blood back into you in no time. But you have given a new life to your sister.

Fr. Eugene Lobo S.J. Bangalore, India