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Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ

Thomas Gumbleton | May. 29, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

I'm sure that probably all of us here remember celebrating the Feast of Corpus Christi many times as we grew up and throughout our lives as Catholics. The emphasis always was on adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, recognizing the living presence of Jesus in the bread and the wine that were consecrated at Mass.

We believed, and still believe with great strength, that Jesus is truly present under those forms of bread and wine.

But there's another reality about the Blessed Sacrament that we perhaps have not given as much emphasis to as we should, because if we listen carefully to the scriptures, we discover that not only are those elements of bread and wine transformed into the body and blood of Christ, but also the community of disciples -- we, who are the church -- are transformed into the body and blood of Christ. We become the living Jesus, present in our world.

An extraordinary truth, isn't it, to think that all of us, the community of disciples of Jesus, are the living presence of Jesus, the son of God, in the world in which we live.

That's really what St. Paul was emphasizing, and as I mentioned in introducing this passage, in this letter to the church at Corinth, Paul, before any other writer of the scriptures, describes the institution, the time when Jesus at the Last Supper, changed that bread and wine into his body and blood. But for Paul the emphasis isn't just on the presence of Jesus in that bread and wine, it's the presence of Jesus in the community. That's why, when we listened to that passage today, Paul is reminding us, "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? And the bread that we break, is that not participation with the body of Christ?" Then look how he refers to us. "The bread is one, and so we, though many, are one."

See, what Paul is emphasizing there is that this body and blood of Jesus made present in the bread and wine is also made present in us. Paul was emphasizing that to that church at Corinth because it was a church that was very diverse and, as we read later in this letter to Corinth in the 12th chapter, Paul points out how they had so many different gifts and there's a danger that because they're so diverse, they are so gifted with many different kinds of gifts, that they could go off in all kinds of different directions.

So Paul is saying, "No, you must be one because you are the body and blood of Jesus." In the 11th chapter of this same letter, Paul makes it even more clear, how the community is the living presence of Jesus. The way he makes that clear is because, in this particular chapter, Paul is criticizing the people. He says, "You come together to celebrate the Eucharist and what do you do? You begin to split up among yourselves."

If you remember, the early Christians always came together for the Eucharist in homes and they would first

have a meal.

Paul says, "Look, when you have that meal, some of you who have a lot go apart by yourselves and you enjoy all that you have and don't pay any attention to the poor among you and that is very wrong." Paul says to them, "So then whenever you eat of this bread and drink from this cup, you are proclaiming the death of the Lord until he comes. Therefore, if anyone eats of the bread or drinks from the cup of the Lord unworthily, that one sins against the body and blood of the Lord. Let each one then examine yourself before eating of the bread and drinking from the cup. Otherwise, you eat and drink your own condemnation in not recognizing the body of Jesus."

What he was talking about was not the bread and wine, but the other people in the community. If you don't recognize them as being Jesus and honor them and reverence them and share with them whatever you have, then Paul says, "You are eating and drinking your own condemnation."

It's very plain what Paul is emphasizing, is that it's the community who is transformed into the body and blood of Jesus. That teaching comes to us very clearly from Jesus himself. In the gospel, as we heard, Jesus points out, "I am the living bread come down from heaven." That living bread that Jesus is, is the wisdom of God, the word of God.

In our first lesson today, Moses was exhorting to people (this is a sermon of Moses), and he was saying yes, when the people came through the desert, they came to that spot where they had no more food and no water, they were hungry and thirsty, but then he says, "In order to show you that you live not on bread alone, but that you live on all that proceeds from the mouth of God," and then God provides them with the manna -- something they had never experienced before.

In the Jewish tradition then, that manna becomes the word of God, the wisdom of God, so when Jesus says, "I am the living bread come down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna in the desert; they died, but I am the living bread." 'I am the living wisdom of God. I am the Word of God, so listen to me, follow my example," and then truly become the living body and blood of Jesus.

It's very important to notice that in the Gospel of John, which is where our lesson is from today, when we come to the Last Supper, John does not even mention how Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and said, "This is my body," and then took the cup of wine, blessed it and said, "This is the cup of my blood." That's not in John's gospel, but what is in John's gospel, and it's a very important incident in the gospel:

At that last supper, what Jesus showed the disciples more than anything else was that he had come among them to demonstrate God's love, God's wisdom, and that they were to follow him. The striking example he uses to show God's love is how he serves them by acting as a slave to them. You remember the incident, I'm sure; we celebrate it on Holy Thursday, when Jesus went to each disciple and washed his or her feet as a slave would do.

When he was finished he said, "What I have done, I have done as an example for you and you must do the same." So what Jesus is teaching us, and this is how we build up the body of Jesus, we who are the community of disciples, the church, by reaching out in love to one another, doing service, even extraordinary service as Jesus did as a slave.

So this living bread come down from heaven, this manna, which is the wisdom of God, is showing us that if we want to truly become the community of disciples of Jesus and be able to carry on the work of Jesus in our world, we must serve one another. We must come together as the living body of Christ in our world. We must set aside all divisions and be united. That's what Paul was pleading with the Corinthians to do and what he told them, 'If you don't do this, if you don't reverence one another, then you're eating and drinking to your own condemnation."

So today, as we celebrate this Feast of Corpus Christi, the Body of Christ, I hope we will understand it, not just as the Jesus of the Blessed Sacrament, whom we adore as son of God, but that we will understand Corpus Christi, the Body of Christ as all of us, and that we will reverence one another, serve one another, and be a living example of the love of God in our world.

We prayed in our opening prayer that we might serve the world by demonstrating God's love, and we will do that if we truly see each other as the living body and blood of Jesus.

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