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Corpus Christi: A Reminder to Serve Others

Thomas Gumbleton | Jun. 10, 2010 The Peace Pulpit

I?m sure many of you remember, as I do, the Feast of Corpus Christi as we have celebrated over the years, with processions of the Blessed Sacrament carried out into the streets, stopping at two or three different altars and having benediction with the monstrance raised and blessing the people with it. We were trying to show our belief in the real presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, and that?s a very important part of the teaching about the Holy Eucharist, that Jesus really is truly present in his humanness and in his divinity, in the bread and wine that becomes the body and blood of Christ.

But there?s also a deeper meaning to this sacrament that perhaps we don?t always perceive as readily as we try to perceive and reverence the presence of Jesus under those forms of bread and wine. And if we listen very carefully to the readings today, I think we will begin to grasp that there?s more to the Blessed Sacrament than simply adoring God present in Jesus under those forms of bread and wine. If we listen to the very last part of the passage from Paul?s letter to the Corinthians today, Paul urges them, ?Let each one 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 and blood of the Lord.?

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ
Genesis 14:18-20
Psalm 110:1, 2, 3, 4
1 Corinthians 11:23-26
Luke 9:11b-17
Full text of the readings [1]

Now when we hear that, I think right away we?re thinking, well, Paul is afraid that we?re not going to recognize and reverence the presence of Jesus in the bread and wine that we receive, but that isn?t what Paul?s talking about, in fact, at this point. When we go back in this part of the letter to the Corinthians, at the beginning of the passage that starts before the part we heard today, we discover that Paul is writing to the church at Corinth with great anger. Here?s what he says, ?To continue with my advice, I cannot praise you, for your gatherings are not for the better, but for the worse.?

He was talking about when they gathered together, as we are doing here this morning, for the Eucharist. Paul says, ?Your gatherings are not for the better, they?re for the worse,? because, as Paul says, ?As I have heard, when you gather together, there are divisions among you. There are different groups so that it plainly appears who are approved among you, so your gatherings are no longer the supper of the Lord.? If we have an understanding of how this happened when they gathered in those first days of the church, we can see what Paul is upset about.

They were gathering in a home. There were no buildings like we have a building here as a church; it was always in a home. And in the city of Corinth, the homes were built, for the most part, in a Roman style because this was a very important Roman colony. In that Roman style there were, in the dining area, two sections?one a rather small section where people gathered together, a few, in a very intimate space; then a larger section where other people gathered. Paul says, ?Your gatherings are no longer the supper of the Lord, for each one eats at once his own food and while one is hungry, the other is getting drunk. Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or perhaps you despise the church of God and desire to humiliate those who have nothing? Shall I praise you? For this I cannot praise you.?

What was happening is that the smaller group is gathering together and they had plenty of food, ate and drank,

and the larger group would be the poor and the outcasts in some cases who would come for the Eucharist and they were being ignored. When you go back into the preceding chapter of this letter to Corinth, you find where Paul says, ?the cup of blessing that we bless, is it not communion with the blood of Christ, and the bread that we break, is it not in communion with the body of Christ? The bread is one and so we, though many, form one body sharing one bread.?

That?s what?s supposed to happen at the Eucharist. We come together, we share the one body, the one cup of the blood of Christ, under the form of bread and wine, and we become one body. Jesus is present in all of us. Paul was very upset because as he says, ?You do not deserve the body of Christ,? not the body of Christ in the tabernacle, but the body of Christ in each other person. We don?t have the reverence for one another that we should have because each of us becomes a part of the one body of Jesus.

So we have to make sure that in our gatherings, there?s no discrimination, that we become a very inclusive gathering of disciples of Jesus. We welcome everyone. As St. Paul says in the letter to the church at Galatia, ?Among the Christians there is neither male or female, rich or poor, slave or free, black or white; we?re all one,? and that?s what should be represented when we gather together for the Eucharist, that we reverence one another. And not just as we gather together in church, but back out in our homes and our neighborhoods, that we look upon each other person as one who is part of the body of Christ.

That?s how we discern the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. The Eucharist is more than the bread and wine that we keep in the tabernacle; it is the whole body of Christ, of which all of us are parts. When we begin to understand that more deeply, then we can also understand what Jesus is saying in the gospel lesson today because that gospel lesson, as we hear the words where Jesus takes the bread and the fish and he looks up to heaven and he prays, he blesses them and he asks the disciples to distribute them. Those, of course, are the words that we hear at the Eucharist. We take the bread and the wine, we look up to heaven, ask a blessing from God, and it becomes the body and blood of Jesus.

But in that incident that happened in that deserted place, the disciples were anxious to send the people away and Jesus says, ?No, you give to them. You give what they need.? So when we gather together for the Eucharist, Jesus is saying the same thing to us. As we receive the body and blood of Christ, it?s not for ourselves alone, but it?s so that we can give to others. ?This is my body given for you. This is my blood poured out for you. Do this in memory of me,? so in order to memorialize Jesus, to keep the memory of Jesus alive, we who become the body of Jesus must be the bread that we give for others, the blood that we pour out for others.

This is how we really do what Jesus said at the Last Supper, ?Do this in memory of me,? not just gather here around the altar, but take the body and blood of Jesus as it enlivens us, and share with one another in our world. So the Eucharist is something, and this feast of the body and blood of Jesus that we celebrate today, that reminds us of this. It?s not just something that we gather together here in church to do, but it?s something that changes each of us. We become more deeply and fully part of the body of Jesus, but then we are to pour out ourselves. ?This is my body given for you, my blood poured out for you.? We are to give ourselves and pour out ourselves for others.

And of course, if we begin to try to say, ?How do we do this?? all of us, I?m sure, can quickly come up in ways in the world in which we live, where there are those who need the blessings that we can give to them, in our community, in our families, in the wider world. There?s such a disproportion between those who have so much and those who have so little. If we really are the body and blood of Jesus for others, we will find a way that we can help, to make a reality what Jesus began when he sent his disciples out; to make a reality the reign of god where everyone has enough. This is what this feast day calls us to try to do, to make the reign of God happen by pouring out ourselves for others.

[This homily was preached at St. Hilary Parish, Redford, Mich.]

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[1] http://www.usccb.org/nab/readings/060610.shtml