



*Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you" (John 6:53)*

**Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ A**

**June 22, 2014**

## First Reading: Deuteronomy 8: 2-17

<sup>2</sup>Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. <sup>3</sup>He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. <sup>4</sup>The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years. <sup>5</sup>Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the Lord your God disciplines you. <sup>6</sup>Therefore keep the commandments of the Lord your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him. <sup>7</sup>For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, <sup>8</sup>a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, <sup>9</sup>a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. <sup>10</sup>You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you. <sup>11</sup>Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. <sup>12</sup>When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, <sup>13</sup>and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, <sup>14</sup>then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, <sup>15</sup>who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid waste-land with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, <sup>16</sup>and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good.

<sup>17</sup>Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth.'

## Responsorial Psalm: 147:12-20

**Lector:** <sup>12</sup> Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem!

**All:** Praise your God, O Zion!

**Lector:** <sup>13</sup> For he strengthens the bars of your gates;

**All:** he blesses your children within you.

**Lector:** <sup>14</sup> He grants peace within your borders;

**All:** he fills you with the finest of wheat.

**Lector:** <sup>15</sup> He sends out his command to the earth;

**All:** his word runs swiftly.

**Lector:** <sup>16</sup> He gives snow like wool;

**All:** he scatters frost like ashes.

**Lector:** <sup>17</sup> He hurls down hail like crumbs—

**All:** who can stand before his cold?

**Lector:** <sup>18</sup> He sends out his word, and melts them;

**All:** he makes his wind blow, and the waters flow.

**Lector:** <sup>19</sup> He declares his word to Jacob,

**All:** his statutes and ordinances to Israel.

**Lector:** <sup>20</sup> He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not  
know his ordinances.

**All:** Praise the Lord!

## Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 10:16-17

<sup>16</sup>The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?

<sup>17</sup>Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

## **Gospel: John 6: 48-58**

<sup>48</sup>*I am the bread of life.*

<sup>49</sup>*Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.*

<sup>50</sup>*This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.*

<sup>51</sup>*I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.'*

52 The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?'

<sup>53</sup>So Jesus said to them, *'Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.*

<sup>54</sup>*Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day;*

<sup>55</sup>*for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.*

<sup>56</sup>*Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.*

<sup>57</sup>*Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.*

<sup>58</sup>*This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.'*

## **Homily**

Today's celebration of the Body and Blood is probably one that leaves some of our protestant friends turned off as it seems too literal and "too catholic." And for skeptics, agnostics, or atheists, this seems like a repetition of a barbaric primitive rite, one that is repulsive and has no relevance to modern day life. I can appreciate both those perspectives because I've gone through them myself.

Why do we have this focus on the elements of the Eucharist? Or is that what this Solemnity is actually about? We've journeyed through Easter, the Ascension, the Pentecost, and the mystery of the Trinity, and now we come back down to earth to understand how we celebrate the Gospel. Now it is experienced with physical elements. Perhaps we human beings require a physical element, which is both symbolic and a thing-in-itself.

But that is not the end of the story: Indeed, we are called upon to re-experience this primal event for ourselves. Notice, I said 'primal,' not primitive. Please note the difference. I think that primal events are in a sense pan-cultural, and forever crucially embedded in the human psyche. Some in the post-modern era say there are no absolutes and no meta-narratives that can withstand critical analyses. We can get distracted and lost within this reasoning, but still, it is probably important that we each take that journey, to ascertain on what can we rely?

First, let us give respect how our Jewish and early Christian ancestors experienced their versions of this ritual, and then to recover for ourselves how it is -- still, and always was, and will be embedded in our existence -- but to be experienced in our own time. What is our alternative? We may throw away all of the traditional sources of wisdom, and start over to invent the wheel for ourselves. We can ignore those who came before us. Do we give up our concepts of "community," or "hospitality" or our obligation to feed others? If we do, we are discarding ancient Hebrew and Christian precepts. And if we think we can achieve a more sanitized version in a more idealistic or "humanist" world view that eliminates the role of suffering, we will fail. Suffering is part of our human reality, as it was for Jesus. The difference between him and us is that he did not flinch or run away from it.

The precursor of the Eucharist can be seen in the story of how the Israelites were nourished out on the desert, in their 40 year sojourn. The rock from which the water came and the manna from heaven are thought of as prototypes of two of our Christian sacraments, that of Baptism and Eucharist. The Roman lectionary cuts out verses 4-13 in this reading but I have reinserted them because we really lose the full context and connection to our NT reading. The reading depicts Moses reminding Israel of how they were cared for 40 years. Remembering the symbolism of numbers in the Bible, we recall that this time epoch reflects a time of completion of a stage of life.<sup>1</sup> The Israelite wandered for 40 years, grumbling and complaining, and only slowly learned the lesson of dependence upon God for meeting of their needs. This too is the meaning of the Eucharist as was the meaning of the manna on the desert. The writer of the Gospel of Matthew has Jesus quoting Deuteronomy, contrasting "bread alone" and "every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord," referring to a more lasting form of nurturance to be found in God's commands and boundaries on Israel's behavior. The theme is continued in other passages, such as "You gave them bread from heaven to eat...providing in itself every pleasurable taste" (Wisdom 16:20) which also talks about the "bread of angels." Commentators again suggest that the shortened, truncated reading in the lectionary obscures the fact that Canaan was a very rich land with many resources; likewise, our own world is one to give thanks for the myriad of blessings and resources available to us.

In our 1 Corinthians Reading, the context is Paul dealing with the church holding a more individualistic attitude toward the Eucharist, as a vertical exchange between God and the communicant, and an expression of individual salvation. For Paul, the Eucharist was not just a private encounter with the Holy, but the Holy as experienced *in our neighbors*, including a horizontal, *shared reality*. St. Augustine wrote in response to this reading: "If you wish to understand the body of Christ, hear the Apostle speaking to the faithful: Now you are the body and members of Christ." If you, then, are the body and members of Christ, your mystery is laid on the Table of the Lord, your mystery you receive (Letter 272).

Paul is using a traditional Eucharistic formula in verse 16. The words, "the cup of blessing" and "we bless" [*berakah* from the Hebrew] are Jewish expressions. Paul usually prefers the Greek equivalent [*eucharistein*] to give thanks. Paul emphasizes a concept of "participation" or *koinonia*, which is not merely symbolic but real sharing.

And we might also remember that drinking blood was forbidden in the Hebrew world: so, why on earth would Jesus use a phrase like "drink my blood"? The confrontation here pushes us to overcome revulsion and to think about what he is saying. I continue to dig deeply to fathom for even a millisecond what this meant to Jesus and what it means for me now. I cannot answer this for you: you must answer it for yourselves. We know that he countered many Hebrew legal precepts, going for a higher principle, such as working and healing on the Sabbath, touching women and other untouchables, eating with prostitutes and other undesirables.

Ancient eastern cultural expert, John Pilch, from Georgetown University sheds additional light on the Johannine text, stating that they were in shock when "excommunicated" from the Temple, an event that resulted in their being transformed into what he terms an "antisocial group." This doesn't mean the same thing as it does in our day and time; it is actually a technical term, referring to "a group that sets itself up in a society as a conscious alternative to the larger group."<sup>2</sup> Dr. Pilch says that such a posture is "always transitional" even if the time taken to be reintegrated takes a few hundred years.

Their use of the word, "the world," exemplifies their position, because it is used 79 times in the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel but only 9 times in Matthew and 3 times each in Mark and Luke. It suggests an "us vs. them" bunker mentality of sorts. Dr. Pilch says that one way such groups protested was to use a language reversal or an "anti-language," where the same term is used but means the opposite of its literal meaning. American youth, for example, may say something is "bad," when they mean that it is good. Recall the Michael Jackson album, "Bad." And in their era, verbal repartee, punning, word play, in a confrontative way was very common, a skill that Jesus very often evidences but at times we see in the gospels others interpreted his words more literally. He constantly nudges his listeners to interpret more symbolically rather than literally. Well-known Catholic scholar Raymond Brown says that such language could lead to retreat from the world or result in a naïve social strategy out in the world. In essence, believers have to come to terms with ambiguity, disagreement, and tension.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus' comments about his body and blood led to violent disputes among his listeners because he is resorting to "anti-language" in order to jar them into new meanings for his words. Dr. Pilch notes that it may be useful to consider the context in which these words were said, e.g. while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. So one possible interpretation is that the words are part of a "midrashic homily." Such discourses were intended to explain a biblical text and bring it to life for the listeners in their current context. He refers to the manna during the Exile. Another biblical researcher, Bruce Malina, says that the sermon in John's text "appears to reflect a Palestinian *Targum* [paraphrases of the Hebrew Scriptures into Aramaic, as was normally done in the Temple because most of the listeners could no longer understand Hebrew and had adopted Aramaic]. The *Targum* was a Palestinian discourse referring to Joshua 5:5-6:1 and Numbers 21:6-9, both dealing with the manna tradition. So Jesus did something that was very controversial: he explained the scripture in light of his own mission rather than explaining the Bible by use of the Bible. Such a shock was intended to deepen the listener's understanding of what it means to be dependent on God for one's spiritual nurturance.

Some theologians such as Rudolf Bultmann think the verses 51-58 were an interpolation [later insertion] by an ecclesiastical editor /redactor, because it seems so literal. Fr. Fuller says he thinks that the preceding verses which were omitted in the Roman lectionary tie it all together such that a hypothesis of insertion to explain them is not necessary. We see that in previous verses, Jesus describes himself as the Bread of Life and ties this idea back to the manna given the Israelites on the desert. Christ becomes the bread from heaven analogous to the manna, but in a living Person, coming into the world in the Incarnation [verses 26-51]. He surrenders himself in death [verse 51c], and now his surrendered life is nourishment for us in the Eucharist [verses 53-58]. Fr. Fuller says that whole chapter gives an understanding of the early church celebrating Eucharist in the context of a meal.<sup>3</sup> The writer of the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel does not detach the sacrament from the continuing salvation offered us in the life of the church. The readings "...set forth saving events rather than doctrines." We can get hung up and lose the forest for the trees of doctrinal hair-splitting and miss the real Meal that is here for us.

The Eucharist is simultaneously past, present, and future. It is this participation in the ongoing life of the church that was lost on me as a child, at least partially because of the form of the ritual in the Southern Baptist Church and also because in those days, in the 1950's, their teaching was prone to ridicule a more literal interpretation of the Eucharist as they understood Catholic teaching. They emphasized that it was only a memorial to the saving grace that occurred one time. Yes -- and no. There was a one-time event which still effects continuing grace for us; it is

timeless which is a more mystical understanding.

And remembering, in the Hebrew sense is a living experience that continues, not something dead and gone. In the Jewish ritual at Passover, the child asks, "Why *IS* this night different from all other nights?" It is not why *WAS* this night different? This story tells us how sacred ritual and liturgy work. The Jews refer to this as "making *zikkaron*" while Christians call it "making memorial" but the idea is that in the ritual, a past event *becomes present again here and now* and we can participate in it. When we tell Jesus' story of sacrifice in the Mass, there is a present reality, a "real presence." And the word, "remembering" can be viewed as "re-membering" in that we member ourselves among our fellow Christians in this rite. Augustine at the Eucharist would say: "Be what you see, receive what you are." We are the Body of Christ, where Fr. Ron Rolheiser<sup>4</sup> says in this sacrifice we are asked "...to become the bread of brokenness and the chalice of vulnerability."

I am reminded of a story about a great banquet, a table groaning with the weight of delicious foods. The same banquet was available both in heaven and hell. There was only one requirement, that two foot length chopsticks must be used to eat. As a result, those in hell starved, despite the bounteous provisions of food. They simply couldn't think outside the box, thinking they had to *feed themselves* which was a physical impossibility! In heaven, the chopsticks were used to *feed one another*.

However our individual preferences play out within our various faith traditions, today, let us today celebrate the bounteous banquet.

***Jesus,  
be choice food.  
Course through our veins.  
Make paths in our hearts and minds.  
We want to "be what we eat."  
We need you so much that we  
starve without  
you. Amen***