

FEAST OF MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST B/2009

We all need food in order to live, to grow up and maintain ourselves in good health. Without food we lose strength and energy, and we will eventually perish. This is true for human life, but it is also true for spiritual life as well. As a matter of fact, as we need physical food in order to live, we need spiritual food in order to nourish our faith.

Today's feast of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ reminds us of the importance of the spiritual food that gives the Son of God on our pilgrimage on earth and without which we will spiritually perish.

This feast is grounded in what God did in the past as he chose the people of Israel to be his own and made a Covenant with them. At that time, as the first reading describes, God enjoined Moses to slay the lamb of the holocaust and to use its blood for the sealing of the covenant. The splashing of half of the blood on the altar and the sprinkling of the other half on the people consecrated the bond between God and his people. Both, God and Israel, became allies, sharing in the same blood and united by the covenant.

In order to keep that covenant alive and, thereby, to receive the forgiveness of sins, the sacrifice had to be repeated every year by the priest in the temple. However, in spite of the many times the sacrifice was offered, it did not put the people straight before God. That is the reason why, in his bounty and grace, God decided to send his Son, Jesus, to be the expiation for the sin of the world.

As the Letter to the Hebrews tells us, Christ is the true and eternal priests of God's blessing who offered his life on the cross for our salvation. By shedding his blood on the cross, he became a high priest of the new covenant offering God a sacrifice of atonement similar to that of the ancient covenant, but superior to it. He entered once and for all into the sanctuary of his body, not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own blood, thus obtaining us eternal redemption.

If the blood of animals had the virtue of sanctifying those who were separated from God because of the sins, how much more would the blood of Christ, who offered himself unblemished to God? The superiority of the sacrifice of Christ lays in the fact that, while the worship of the ancient covenant tried repeatedly to bring men into the presence of God, with the incarnation of Jesus and his death on the cross, God himself took human destiny into his hands. He entered human history in order to bring to the world, once and for all, the redemption that the blood of animals could not obtain.

In that sense, the sacrifice of Jesus cleans not only our body, but also our souls. Jesus takes away the guilt of our conscience and gives us the peace of his Father. He makes us God's children. That is why he is the mediator of a new covenant sealed in the blood of his death on the cross.

All this helps us understand the importance of today's Gospel as it recalls the last Supper Jesus had with his disciples and in which he gave himself as the lamb of sacrifice for the salvation of the world. At the last Supper, indeed, Jesus uses exactly the same words, as in the alliance between God and Israel, to explain the sense of his death as the establishment of a New Covenant between God and humanity. Most significantly, by taking the bread and giving it as his body, and by offering the cup as his blood, Jesus identifies himself with the holocausts of the sacrifice by means of which the old covenant was established. His body and his blood present on the altar under the signs of bread and wine signify the total immolation of his life for the salvation of the world.

When the bread and wine are consecrated during the celebration of the holy Eucharist,

they become the body and the blood of Christ in response to his commandment: *“Do this in memory of me”*. As the Gospel says, *“While they were eating, Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it, gave it to his disciples, and said, “Take it; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, and they all drank from it. He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed for many”*. Although the external appearance of consecrated bread is not different from the bread we share at our tables in our homes, there is, however, more than simple bread. Although the external color and the taste of the consecrated wine are not different from various wines we savor at our tables, there is more than mere wine. It is Jesus himself who gives his life to us under these species.

In the consecrated bread and wine, Jesus nourishes and waters us spiritually. There is here a mysterious exchange and transformation that makes the species of bread and wine the sacramental body and blood of Christ. It means that when the bread and the wine are consecrated, their material reality goes beyond mere matter and refers spiritually to the upper reality of Christ's body and blood. In this perspective, the bread and wine become an external sign of the hidden presence of the body and the blood of Jesus.

What we receive at the table of the altar as bread and wine is an outward sign of the inner and mysterious activity of Jesus operating within them, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to give life to the world. The consecrated bread and wine are sign and reality at the same time; they are a remembrance of the past, but also the making present today of what Jesus has done. Because Christ is “the same today as he was yesterday and will be tomorrow”, his giving himself in the Eucharist is continuous and relevant to all times and ages; it is perpetual to all the generations. Whenever the Eucharist is celebrated in remembrance of Jesus, Christ offers his body and blood through the signs of bread and wine as he did with his disciples two thousands years ago.

To eat and drink at the table of the Eucharist is to receive Christ and to be united with Him. But, it means also to be united with our brothers and sisters with whom we live. That is why the feast of the body and blood of Christ challenges us in the way we live the reality of community. The Eucharist reminds us also that every good and change in the world comes out of sacrifice, and some times out of shedding blood. Those who toil to improve the living conditions of their fellow human beings, those who provide a better living standard for their families and their children by working hard, giving up all human satisfactions, these are the people who shed their own “blood” for the love of their brothers and sisters. By doing so, they resemble Christ and imitate his love. Let us pray for one another so that we come to understand how the Eucharist makes us one with Christ and with one another. May God bless each of us, and through the reception of the Blessed Sacrament, help us to be reunited with Christ, our peace and our hope, and our brothers and sisters.

Exodus 24, 3-8; Hebrews 9, 11-15; Mk 14, 123-16. 22-26



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