

Corpus Christi

Preached June 18, 2017; St. Peter Catholic Church, The Dalles, Oregon

Two Sundays ago we celebrated Pentecost; last Sunday we celebrated the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity, and now, this Sunday, we celebrate the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

Beginning with Pentecost I have been insistent that the Holy Spirit is not just the Spirit of divine love, but also, according to the words of Jesus, the Spirit of truth who leads us to all truth. (cf. Jn 16:13) Truth and love are inseparable in God and should be inseparable in our life.

The Holy Spirit leads to the truth about the *deep things of God* (cf. 1 Cor 2:10), the most Holy Trinity; the Holy Spirit also bears witness to Jesus Christ (cf. Jn 15:16), not just the truth of his divine person and the truth of his death and resurrection, the sacrifice of our salvation, but the truth of the renewal of that self-same sacrifice through his abiding presence and gift in the Holy Eucharist, the Sacrament of his Body and Blood.

As we heard last Sunday, *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him might not perish, but might have eternal life.* (Jn 3:16) God's love is not merely some dream or fantasy; it is the highest truth and the deepest reality that lies at the origin of all that exists. The supreme expression and revelation of that love was in the gift of his Son, Jesus Christ, that gift continues every time and every place in the Holy Eucharist.

God's continuing gift of his Son in the Holy Eucharist, sacrifice, sacrament, and presence, is key to the whole divine economy, the whole plan of salvation.

The Gospels tell us of Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, his life, teaching, death, and resurrection. Why did the Son of God come into the world and become man? In his own words, *I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly.* (Jn 10:10) That abundant life is not just any sort of life, but the very life of the Son of God that we are called to share.

St. John tells us, *To those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name.* (Jn 1:12)

St. Paul writes, *For those he foreknew God also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.* (Rm 8:29) And, *I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me.* (Gal 2:19-20)

In brief, the life we see in Jesus in the Gospels is meant to become our life; we are meant to be transformed in Christ. The key link between the life of Jesus Christ and my life, the link that brings about the transformation, is the Holy Eucharist, the Sacrament of his Body and Blood.

In today's Gospel Jesus speaks very emphatically about the truth and importance of this Sacrament. In response to the question, *How can this man give us his flesh to eat*, he makes seven repetitive statements. The number seven is itself full of meaning; reminding us of the seven days of creation, it speaks of the new creation in Christ being brought about through the gift of his Body and Blood. For the Jewish mind the number seven is also the number of fullness, making the sevenfold repetition the most emphatic way possible for Jesus to make his point.

First Jesus makes negative statement: *Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life in you*. Without this eating, without this communion in the Body and Blood of Christ we cannot receive and be transformed by the divine life that Christ came to bring us.

Then Jesus restates the same thing in positive fashion: *Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day*. The repetition emphasizes the previous point and unfolds further the meaning of this life we are to receive. It is eternal life, which means sharing in the life of the eternal God, which begins here and now and is brought to completion on *the last day* when the whole of our lowly nature, including our body, will be transformed. As St. Paul writes, *He will change our lowly body to conform with his glorified body by the power that enables him also to bring all things into subjection to himself*. (Ph 3:21) Then, indeed, God will be *all in all*. (1 Cor 15:28)

Third, he emphasizes the truth and reality of what he has said, *For my flesh is true food, and my blood true drink*.

Fourth, he gives us a practical definition of the "communion" that results from this eating and drinking: *Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him*. Communion is a mutual indwelling; we are in Jesus through our shared humanity and he remains in us through the gift of his divine life.

Fifth, this communion with the Body and Blood of Christ nourishes us with the very divine life that comes from the Father, so lest there be any doubt, Jesus adds, *Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me*.

Sixth, he sums about the whole discourse, which began earlier in the chapter by reaffirming the heavenly origin of this 'bread': *This is the bread that came down from heaven*.

Seventh, he renews the contrast between the bread that he gives, the bread of his Body, and the manna that was given to the people of Israel in the desert: *Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever.*

The Holy Spirit bears witness to this; the Holy Spirit leads us into all truth; the Holy Spirit persuades us to believe and accept the words of Jesus; the Holy Spirit teaches us that all of this is very true and very real, even though it exceeds the perception of our senses and the grasp of our mind.

Faith, according to the words of Scripture, *is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen.* (Heb 11:1) The Holy Eucharist is above all the mystery of faith; before we eat, we must believe and believing we must adore; otherwise we will not receive the life that is given us.

The reality of the Holy Eucharist is not seen by the eyes, which see only the appearance of bread and wine; the reality of the Holy Eucharist is not tasted by the tongue, which experiences only the taste of bread and wine; the reality of the Holy Eucharist is not grasped by the mind which cannot understand how what looks like bread and wine is really and truly the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus Christ. All we can do is believe because Jesus Christ the Son of God has told us it is so and what God tells us is so is within his power to accomplish. Then when we believe and we adore and we eat, the reality of our hope, the eternal life that belongs to God, already begins and grows in us.

A little more than 100 years ago, in 1916, the angel of Fatima prepared the three shepherd children, Lucia and St. Francisco and St. Jacinta, for the visit of the Blessed Virgin by teaching them this very thing.

He brought a host and chalice to them; he gave them an example by prostrating himself in adoration before the host and the chalice; he then taught them to pray, saying, "Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, I adore You profoundly, and I offer You the Most Precious Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ, present in all the tabernacles of the world, in reparation for the outrages, sacrileges and indifferences by which He is offended. And by the infinite merits of His most Sacred Heart and the Immaculate Heart of Mary, I beg the conversion of poor sinners."

Then he gave the children holy communion.

So the question each one must ask himself is, "Do I really believe?"

Do I accept and believe with all my heart that this is really, truly, and substantially the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus Christ the Son of God?

Do I act as if I really believe? Do I make Sunday Mass at least, the highest priority in my life, so that I will only miss Mass because of some circumstance beyond my

power to control, such as serious illness, severe weather, or a work schedule that is altogether beyond my control?

This is God we are speaking of here, God whom I am to love with my whole heart, my whole soul, my whole strength, and my whole mind. How can I profess to so love him when I am so little concerned to obey this least and easiest of his commands which leads us also to this greatest of his gifts?

Let us go on: Do I strive to live so as to never be deprived of this marvelous food, the bread of angels, in the reception of Holy Communion? Or do I readily fall into mortal sin due to carelessness, lack of vigilance, and lack of prayer? Do I regularly confess my sins so as to receive the Body and Blood of Christ with a lively faith and a pure heart?

Do I give thanks for the gift received? Do I allow the grace of this sacrament, the gift of holy communion, to shape the thoughts and desires of my heart and well as my outward words and actions? Does the grace of this sacrament bear fruit in my life in the fulfillment of Jesus commandment, *Love one another as I have loved you*? Or is the reception of Holy Communion for me like contraceptive sex, all pleasure and no fruit?

Do I show forth my faith in the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood by the reverence of my conduct inside the church building, by my silence, by gestures of adoration, such as kneeling or even bowing to the ground, and by attentive participation in the celebration of the Mass?

Do I recognize the abiding presence of Jesus Christ in this Sacrament, which is reserved day and night in the tabernacle, by visiting the church building to spend time in prayer and adoration in the presence of the Lord, especially when the Sacrament is exposed for adoration?

Do I teach my children about the importance of this Sacrament by word and by example and by my whole manner of life?

Returning now to the Angel of Fatima, does it seem strange that an angel should have prepared the children for a visit of the Blessed Virgin Mary by giving them holy communion? Why should that seem strange, for they received in the Sacrament the very same Body and Blood of Christ that she conceived and carried for nine months in her womb before giving birth to him in Bethlehem. She is the one who cared for Jesus in his infancy with unspeakable love, tenderness, and reverence. She is the one who will teach us how to receive the Body and Blood of her Son with faith and devotion and live worthily of him.